

Come alooong

The Ben Ricketts Environmental Preserve Newsletter

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Special edition - Bats & Batts

By Nancy Pallin

Last summer, a colony of microbats was found to be roosting in the roof of Cabin 3.

About microbats

These tiny native mammals weigh about 5 grams with a wingspan of about 200mm. At dusk they fly out to feed on small insects such as moths and mosquitoes in the surrounding forest. They are agile fliers, and catch their prey as they fly by scooping the insect with a wing or tail membrane to their mouth. They will land on trees to eat larger prey. They are an important part of the ecology of the forest, controlling insect numbers. Microbats use echo-location to catch their prey. Their ultra-high frequency calls are reflected back from insects in the air and picked up by their sensitive ears.

During the day, they roost, hanging by their tiny feet. Bats groom often, combing their fur with their claws and licking the skin of their wings and tail. They chatter to each other during grooming and when preparing to go out to feed at dusk. Some of those social calls are within human hearing range. In cold weather, when insects are scarce, they go into torpor to conserve energy by slowing their heart rate and dropping their temperature to that of their surroundings.

Nearly all bats give birth to one young per year. Young are born at the beginning of the warmer months (November-December) when sufficient insects are available. Newborn microbats are hairless and drink milk from their mother. In their first weeks they cling to their mother while she feeds. Later they remain in the roost and she returns during the night to feed her own baby. The young are fully furred and flying by 6 weeks of age. Soon after this they are weaned.

Bats found in roof of Cabin 3

In January this year Hylene reported that hundreds of bats were seen flying out of the roof of Cabin 3. Further investigation confirmed that a colony of microbats was roosting on the roof beams and from the quantity of droppings on top of the insulation batts, they had been living there for many years. Nancy sent a report to the Natural Areas Committee and the Board. An interim information sheet was prepared for visitors wishing to book Cabin 3.

The roof space was checked on 17th June by Keren and James and no bats could be seen. This suggested that they had moved out to a colder roost to hibernate during winter. On 6 & 7 August, Jane and Steve, Keren and Nancy removed the old insulation batts from the roof of cabin three as well as about 5 buckets of dry microbat droppings. The batts were put into plastic bags and were taken to the tip by Peter Bock along with the old sofa beds. After vacuuming the remaining dust, we laid new glasswool insulation batts which were 70% recycled materials and insulation rating 3.5. We had turned off the electricity and worked with torches. Then we laid plastic sheets over the insulation and across each gable so it will be easy to remove the guano if the bats return. This project took 19.5 person hours plus the purchasing of insulation batts, overalls, face masks, garbages

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etc. To complete the project, we propose to fill the holes between the corrugated iron and beam above the veranda wall to prevent the bats from entering and exiting on that side of the building.

When the bats return Nancy will arrange for a bat researcher to come to identify them from their echo-location calls. "Bats in your roof don't do any harm and often use the roof for only part of the year anyway" [Sue Churchill 'Australian Bats' second edition 2008 Allen & Unwin]

This colony provides a wonderful chance for Ben Ricketts Environmental Preserve to educate people about the bush and an example of its wondrous critters. It provides a chance to reduce apprehensions and fears as well as educate people about Ben Ricketts.