

Bats Of The Wombat Forest

By Tanya Loos

This article introduces some of the common bat species of the Wombat Forest, and their roosting and foraging behaviour. I haven't gone into their fascinating reproductive habits; another article perhaps!



Large Forest Bat (photo by Lindy Lumsden)

Large Forest Bat *Vespadelus darlingtoni*

The Large Forest Bat gets its name from the fact that it is the largest of a group of very small bats, the *Vespadelus* genus. When held in the hand, these bats barely cover your palm! Large Forest Bats have dark brown to rusty brown fur all over, and very dark skinned ears and wings. Forest bats are difficult to identify, especially the females. Like some other bats species, the most reliable tool for identification is by examining variations in penis shape. For the record, the Large Forest Bat penis is "small and has a distinctly angular shape, the tip is not swollen" (Australian Bats, Sue Churchill).

The Large Forest Bat roosts in colonies of up to 60 individuals in tree hollows, but more commonly in groups of 5-6 females, or as solitary males. They will also roost in buildings, sometimes with other bat species.

These bats are adapted for cool climate living, and can be observed foraging on mild winter nights when other bats species are still in hibernation. They forage mainly under the forest canopy, in the spaces between the trees. The Large Forest Bat roosts

most often in hollows and fissures (splits in dead or damaged trees) in large old eucalypt trees.

Lesser Long-eared Bat

Nyctophilus geoffroyi

The Lesser Long-eared Bat is one of Australia's most common species. They roost in crevices, under peeling bark, in tree hollows and buildings. This is the species most commonly found roosting in clothing such as coats hanging on verandas and in piles of firewood. This bat is small with very long ears. The ears are folded away when the bat is sleeping, or in torpor during cold periods.

Lesser Long-eared Bats are slow fliers, and have short rounded wings which enable a very fluttery flight that is highly manoeuvrable, enabling the bats to capture food in the air, from the surface of vegetation, and off the ground. Moths are the most common prey species; they also eat ants, cricket nymphs, beetles, spiders, and bugs. These adaptable little guys use echolocation to find prey in the air and on the ground, like most bats, but they

also use their extraordinary ears to listen for prey, and their quite good eyesight to locate prey visually. This means that they can capture many of the insects that avoid bats when they hear echolocation calls.

Lesser Long-eared Bats can be found roosting under loose ribbon bark, but require substantial hollows in big dead old trees as maternity roosts.



Lesser Long-eared Bat (photo by Lindy Lumsden)

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White-striped Freetail Bat

Tadarida australis

A large, distinctive species with large squat ears that appear fused together at the front, and an endearing little bulldog mastiff face. They also have a white stripe on either side of the belly and onto the wings.

White-striped Freetail Bats are specialised fast fliers, capable of sustained flight for many hours. They feed primarily on beetles and moths, and often forage over 50m above the canopy. Their dense, velvety fur is very smooth to the touch, probably streamlined for efficient aerodynamics!

White-striped Freetails roost in tree hollows alone, or in groups of up to 20. They also occasionally roost with other bat species, such as Gould's Wattled Bat.

The echolocation calls of these bats are relatively low frequency, thus most people can hear them. Their calls sound like a metallic ting... ting...ting..., and are heard in Victoria from September to May. White-striped Freetails are not known to hibernate, so it has been suggested that they migrate north during the winter period.

Gould's Wattled Bat

Chalinolobus gouldi

Gould's Wattled Bats are found in a wide range of habitats throughout Australia, including forests, deserts, and urban areas. These bats are easy to identify if you can see one up close, as they have dark blackish fur on the head and shoulders, and contrasting light brown fur on their back and belly. The wattles referred to in their name are lobes of skin at the corner of the mouth that extend to the back edge of the ear.

Gould's Wattled Bats roost in tree hollows, but also within leafy cover in the canopy, and in buildings such as old churches and farmhouses. Females form colonies of 8 – 40 in tree hollows, and up to 80 in buildings. Males generally roost alone, or sometimes with other bat species such as White-striped Freetail, and even Feathertail Gliders.

These bats eat mainly bugs and moths, as well as some beetles, flies and ants. Gould's Wattled Bats have a relatively fast flight speed (not as fast as the Freetail!) and tend to fly in a straight line, with sudden changes of course as they hunt their mostly aerial prey. Gould's Wattled Bats are often seen just after sunset when it is still quite light, hunting over dams, or along forest tracks.



White-striped Freetail Bat (photo by Lindy Lumsden)

This behaviour means they can catch a lot of insects that are active at dusk on still summer or autumn evenings, but it also means they are very vulnerable to predators. They are taken by Pied Butcherbirds, Brown Falcons, Boobook Owls, Barn Owls and feral Cats.

These are the most common or noticeable species around Victoria and in the Wombat Forest, but there are more bats recorded in the Wombat Forest, including:

Eastern Falsistrelle, *Falsistrellus tasmaniensis*
Gould's Long-eared Bat, *Nyctophilus gouldi*
Chocolate Wattled Bat, *Chalinolobus morio*

The photos in this article were all taken by Lindy Lumsden (Arthur Rylah Institute), bat ecologist extraordinaire. Thank you Lindy.

For further reading: Australian Bats by Sue Churchill, Published by Allen and Unwin ISBN 9781741754612 ■