



THE PICK OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

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The Bats of Millfield Elizabeth A Roberts

Not all the important residents along the Great North Road are human. The old Millfield Bridge was inhabited by a colony of threatened species of micro bats. The species *Myotis macropus* was commonly known as the fishing bat or large-footed mouse-eared bat. They are now called Southern Myotis or Large-footed Myotis (*Myotis macropus adversus*).

The original broad area inhabited by these little bats was Victoria and south eastern NSW. Within this area they have a narrow habitat living only close to still, or nearly still, permanent fresh water. They used to live in hollow logs and crevices in Forest and Floodplain Woodland Riparian areas but with the coming of Europeans who built wooden bridges and cleared the land near the water, timber bridges became their favourite habitat. Although a threatened species state-wide, given the ideal locations around Millfield and Paxton with Ellalong lagoon and the wetlands, there is a concentration of these little bats around Millfield. These bats have only recently been identified as a separate species, and little is known about them.

These bats are sedentary colonising bats. A typical colony consists of between ten and thirty individuals, consisting of a dormant male and a harem of females. In larger roost sites like Millfield Bridge there could be more than one breeding colony and a bachelor group of up to fifty bats. The dominant male defends his territories against other males, even outside the breeding season. While a typical colony usually consists of ten to fifteen bats, sometimes up to a hundred bats will roost together in a colony. While bats can often use small hollows for roosting, maternity hollows need to be large enough to house the congregations of females and their suckling young. The maternity hollows are used exclusively by females in which they give birth and nurse their young. The breeding season is October – March inclusive. Females usually breed once a year producing a single baby, sometimes they can breed twice within a year. The mother bats nurse their babies for eight weeks in the maternity hollows. After weaning, the young bat forms a strong bond with its mother for at least four weeks, when it is probably taught how to catch food.

The large-footed Myotis stay within their roots during daylight hours venturing out to feed at dusk. These little bats can fly great distances to forage. Their diet consists of aquatic insects and small fish. They fly close to the surface of the nearly still water. To catch their prey, they rake the water



with the curved claws on their large feet. In general bats are very voracious feeders, and play an important part in insect control.

It is not known how long these bats live but it is known they reach sexual maturity between one and two years of age. An adult's body is approximately fifty four millimetres long and it has large feet about one fifth of their body length, ten to fourteen millimetres. Adult bats weigh between ten and fourteen grams. Young bats are smoky grey in colour turning grey or reddish brown as they mature. Bats can hibernate during winter and should not be disturbed during hibernation. Classified as vulnerable in NSW they had to be moved from their cosy home in the old Millfield Bridge. To encourage this, artificial roosts were placed under the new bridge and at appropriate times the old roosts closed off. It appears not all the bats were happy with the artificial roosts, only one colony tried to make their new home in a local house and had their moment of fame being mentioned in State Parliament. (1)



References:

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Gosford Council Website sited 13 July 2005

RTA: Bat Fact Sheet. Part of Removal of Millfield Bridge and Associated Works

Image from The Museum of Victoria website

1 Costa Michael, Hansard Question Time NSW Parliament and Newcastle Sunday Herald, 26 June 2005

