

Building a Nestbox for Gliders

This wildlife friendly information is sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice, and research. We hope you find the information below useful, and it helps to answer your questions on this subject. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us by clicking this link: <http://www.tvwc.org.au/contact.php>

Sugar Gliders and Squirrel Gliders

The Sugar Glider and Squirrel Glider are a small arboreal marsupials that belong to the Petaurinae family of possums. These animals are known as wrist-winged gliders as their patagium, or gliding membrane, extends from the wrist to the ankle.

With the aid of their patagium, they can glide about 50 metres.

Sugar Gliders (pictured below) are found in wet and dry eucalypt forests, usually where acacias are found. Their diet includes nectar and pollen; the sap of certain eucalypts and gum from acacias, licked from gashes in tree trunks made with their lower incisors; and insects.

Sugar Gliders are social animal with a group usually consisting of 3–4 females, 2–3 males, and their young from the current season. Usually two joeys are born, occasionally three, after 16 days gestation. These remain in the pouch for 40 days, after which they are left in a nest for another 50 days, remaining with their mother until 7–10 months old.

The Squirrel Glider (shown on the right) usually lives in dryer, sclerophyll forest but in the northern regions of NSW are also found in coastal and wet forests, bordering on rainforest.

The Squirrel Glider's diet is similar to that of the Sugar Glider.

Both live in tree hollows, where they huddle together in their family group.

Apart from being a larger animal than the Sugar Glider (190–300g compared to 95–150g), the Squirrel Glider has a longer, more pointed face; ears that are longer and more narrow; and a much bushier, softly-furred tail.

They live in family groups made up one mature male and one or more females, and this season's offspring, with their breeding and joey growth characteristics being similar to those for Sugar Gliders.

However, the Squirrel Glider is a threatened species.

Feathertail Gliders

The world's smallest gliding mammal, the Feathertail glider only weighs between 10 and 14g. It is characterised by the arrangement of long, stiff hairs on both sides of the tail, forming a feather-like structure. It also has a gliding membrane, like the Sugar and Squirrel Gliders, but this only extends from the elbow to the knee. However, it gets assistance in flights by its feathery tail.

These animals may live in groups of up to 20 individuals, often matrilineal groups comprised of mothers and their offspring.



They may give birth to 1–4 young, although 2–3 is usual. They are in the pouch for 60–65 days, and then in the nest until weaned, independent at 95–100 days.

Living in wet and dry sclerophyll forests, especially where there are tall, mature trees. They build round little nests in hollows, boxes and nests of other animals, although they are often found in rather odd places, such as in telephone junction and power boxes, because of competition for hollows.

The Feathertail Glider eats pollen, nectar and insects.

The need for nestboxes

Natural tree hollows form when fungus and termites eat out the dead centre of old trees. Most Eucalypt species do not form these hollows until they are at least 100 years old. Although there are vast tracts of native plantation timber, particularly on the East Coast, they are typically harvested at around 60-80 years of age. So, of course, hollows do not form.

Since European settlement, literally millions of trees and hollows have been lost to urbanisation, industry, roads, and agriculture. As if that isn't bad enough, our struggling native animals have to compete with introduced Honey Bees and Indian Mynas, which aggressively colonise hollows.

These factors have led to some pretty desperate little critters trying to live in somewhat 'B grade' accommodation. Some examples are Sugar Gliders trying to live in the fronds of banana trees; Feathertail Gliders turning up in the electricity boxes on top of power poles; and Microbats trying to sleep in mailboxes.

Far from ideal ... and is it any wonder that they end up living in house roofs!

Benefits of nestboxes

As a result of the loss of natural hollows, and the growth of cities where there was once bush, there is an awful lot of displaced wildlife competing for an ever-decreasing amount of this prized real estate. This is where we can all really make a difference; in our suburban gardens, and rural properties.

A single well-placed nestbox, which survives, say ten years, can see a pair of Rosellas raise ten generations of chicks. A slightly different box could provide a secure home to a family of Sugar Gliders. A different shape again could provide a luxury home to that 'trouble-some' possum in your roof, whilst yet another shape provides five-star accommodation for up to 50 Microbats. And, when you consider that a single Microbat can consume one half it's own weight in insects a night, that's an awful lot less crawlies in your veggie patch. And, they provide this service completely free.

Nestboxes are fun, easy and cheap to make and, once up, will provide a secure home for many years to come.

However, be aware that putting up nestboxes which attract birds and mammals to your garden is a recipe for disaster if you own a cat.

Construction

A Glider nestbox that you can make is shown here.

<i>Height:</i>	40cms or more
<i>Width and depth:</i>	20cms for Sugar and Squirrel Gliders 15cms for Feathertail Gliders
<i>Diameter of hole:</i>	4cm for Sugar and Squirrel Gliders 3cm for Feathertail Gliders
<i>Lid:</i>	Needs to have at least 4cm overlap at sides and 8–10cms at the front.

The best material for construction is 1.5cm thick plantation pine or structural or external pine plywood. Rough-sawn or even secondhand timber is ideal, although you must make sure it is free of nails and paint.

Your box is best screwed, rather than nailed together. If using softwood, you will need to fill gaps, apply a coat of primer, undercoat and a dull acrylic finish.

The roof should be hinged, to allow opening and closing. It can either be hinged conventionally, or make an outside hinge out of a piece of old rubber tyre, run along the length of the hinged end. This also helps to make it weatherproof.

It is recommended that you screw a couple of off-cuts on the inside of the roof so that it sits snugly.



Because the nestbox is quite tall and must allow these tiny animals and their offspring to climb in and out, it is recommended that either a mesh ladder or a few thin strips of off-cut baton are installed on the inside front, as shown here.

It is important to drill a few 5mm drainage holes in the base.

Lastly, throw a handful or two of wood shavings or leaf litter in the bottom.

Installation

So you're now the proud owner of a new Glider nestbox. Where to place it?

Choose your position carefully. Think about which side of your house takes the brunt of cold wind and driving rain. Face the nestbox entrance away from prevailing winds and make sure that the box will have plenty of shade during the hottest part of the day.

Hang the box from the chosen tree by a piece of wire threaded through a scrap piece of garden hose, so that it doesn't cut into the tree. Alternatively, nail the box to the tree using two strips of galvanised steel. The strips need only go halfway round the tree to allow for growth and to prevent ringbarking.

You will need to position the box at least 2 metres above the ground for Feathertails and 4 metres for Sugar Gliders, but preferably higher.

Cat-proof installation

Cats are a major predator of gliders. Once your nestbox has been installed, it is recommended that a collar of smooth metal or plastic is installed around the base of the tree to prevent cats from climbing up.

A final word

Once your new box is occupied, please resist disturbing these animals or feeding the occupants. Feeding native wildlife is not a good idea. It fosters familiarity with humans and domestic animals. It encourages a dependency on an artificial food source, which will stop if you go on holiday, get sick or move away.

Also, local cats and dogs will cotton on to your feeding routine and this will put your native animals at risk. Animals are at their most vulnerable while feeding and are particularly at risk when they are encouraged down to your level to feed, rather than up in the canopy. You just don't know who is watching from the bushes.

Please don't encourage your new residents to become cat-bait!

