

Gliders: Our furry Barton Highway friends



Sugar glider

Operation Glider Identification a success at the Barton Highway upgrade project

Sugar gliders can be elusive creatures, so when the Barton Highway upgrade team found a colony near its project zone, a glider expert was called in to carry out further investigations.

Why is Transport investigating gliders?

Early environmental investigations for the Barton Highway upgrade flagged the possibility of squirrel gliders living near the site of the first stage of duplication on the ACT-NSW border.

The squirrel glider is a

vulnerable species in NSW and has never been recorded in the ACT, while its cousin the sugar glider is considered common.

With the possibility of squirrel gliders being present and impacted by work, environmental scientist and glider expert Dr David Sharpe was called

in. After spotlighting, trapping and taking measurements and samples, Dr Sharpe has confirmed no squirrel gliders are present on or near the Barton Highway construction site.

However, he has determined the site is the home for a number of sugar glider families.

Sugar gliders v squirrel gliders: What's the difference?

The squirrel glider is considered a vulnerable species in NSW.

A vulnerable species is categorised as likely to become endangered unless circumstances that are threatening its survival improve.

The sugar glider, meanwhile, is considered a common species in NSW and the ACT. However, the sugar glider was recently split into three species and one or more of these may require a status review.

A common species is categorised as being at low risk of extinction due to prolific numbers.

“They’re very, very similar looking animals and a non-expert would probably have a hard time telling them apart,” glider expert Dr David Sharpe said.

“The squirrels are a distinctly larger species, about 80 per cent heavier than sugars.

“They tend to have furrier tails and a broader tail base, with a stronger taper towards the tail tip.

“They are also regarded as having a longer and more pointed muzzle and that’s something you can actually measure with their skulls to confirm,” Dr Sharpe said.



Dr David Sharpe measures a trapped sugar glider near the Barton Highway, before releasing the animal back into its habitat.



Above: Dr Sharpe setting traps in the Hall Travelling Stock Reserve (TSR).

Confirming sugar gliders in TSR

Glider expert David Sharpe initially carried out spotlighting near the NSW-ACT border to identify possible squirrel gliders.

With the project team keen to ensure they weren't impacting a vulnerable species, David followed up with trapping, going on to measure and take samples of trapped animals.

A total of 23 sugar gliders were trapped and released back into the wild, confirming no presence of squirrel gliders.

Did you know? A mixture of rolled oats, peanut butter and honey is used to lure gliders into the traps, while honeyed water is sprayed around the trap to really get their attention.



Sugar gliders matter, too!

Sugar gliders are considered a common species in the ACT and NSW.

But that doesn't mean we aren't committed to ensuring the safety of the species and their population habitats on the Barton Highway.

"Transport has already installed some nest boxes to limit impacts on gliders and other wildlife," Dr Sharpe said.

"We've also mapped out all the hollow-bearing trees to ensure there are enough homes for these animals going forward.

"I think we've mapped about 140 habitable trees in about 20 hectares.

"The other thing would be to possibly look at glider poles in the central medians of the highway to facilitate movement across the duplicated lanes.

"There's already a two-lane road here but it's going to four lanes. Often gliders can get across two-lane roads but four lanes become very challenging for them, so we'll keep an eye on that," he said.

“Appreciate the uniqueness of our native animals”



What can I do to help protect gliders?

While Transport is doing everything it can to protect our local wildlife and mitigate construction impacts, the community can also play a role in helping these cute Petaurids thrive.

"Firstly, appreciate the uniqueness of our native animals and support their conservation in general," Dr Sharpe said.

"Join a local Landcare group or similar and help to replant native trees.

"Gliders often use hollows in standing dead trees, so don't take dead trees for firewood as you might be destroying someone's home.

"Install some nest boxes, especially where the trees are not mature enough for hollows."

David also suggests introducing more trees

into the environment benefits every living creature.

"Planting trees to reconnect habitat patches increases the size and connectivity of populations," he said.

"Even planting a line of trees along a fenceline at 20-metre spacing can restore connectivity. This might only require a few trees if the gaps aren't too wide.

"Consolidating habitat patches will also help with tree dieback, which is prevalent in many highly fragmented areas," Dr Sharpe said.

Dieback leads to a progressive loss of tree cover and as an added bonus, gliders help to control the insects that contribute to dieback, proving the multiple reasons to protect this species.

Get to know our glider expert

So David, why do you love gliders so much?

“My PhD was on the squirrel glider and I’ve published 14 papers on various aspects of its ecology, behaviour and conservation. I’ve been working with them for over 25 years.



Dr David Sharpe

“I’ve done monitoring studies for Hume Highway upgrades, radio-tracked squirrel gliders as part of the Pacific Highway upgrade and have done numerous studies for Brisbane City Council on the squirrel gliders living in urban bushland patches. I’ve probably worked with them over a greater proportion of their range than anyone else.

“I think they are unique mammals and gliding is a very cool way to get around.

“When I started research, the squirrel glider was a very poorly known species that was (and still is) listed as threatened.

“It is now one of the best known gliders due to my work and that of a few others. Turns out they are much more interesting than I ever imagined!”

Is there anything that makes it difficult when studying gliders?

“All the traps are up trees, meaning a ladder is required to get to them. I’ve walked many kilometres through the bush with an extension ladder on my shoulder! Gliders are active at night, so lots of late nights (and early mornings if also trapping). Gliders are some of the most active animals in the world. Highly active animals that can leap up to 50 metres can be a challenge to keep up with when doing radio-tracking.”



Above: This male sugar glider was one of 38 sugar gliders trapped and released during David’s recent investigations.

Below: No squirrel gliders were found in the Hall TSR.



Contact us

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