**Fruit Bats**

At almost the same moment every night it happens. Hundreds or even thousands of flying foxes rise from their roosting trees in a tropical forest. They fuss and quarrel and scream at one another as they fly.

The colony flaps about in a tightly packed bunch above the home roost, or "camp" as it is called in Australia. Then the colony suddenly flies off in a wide, uneven column toward a feeding ground. This may be 5 to 10 miles (8 to 16 km.) — a whole hours flight—away from the roosting area.

Flying foxes are not foxes with wings. They really are big bats with foxy-looking faces. Slowly, steadily they beat their great dark wings against the tropical air. Male and female, old and young, all fly off together. They quarrel with one another as they go. Tiny babies and fair sized youngsters cling tightly to their mothers' fur. The extra weight slows the mothers' flying. Now and again a little one shifts position. Mother loses her balance in her flight, regains it and flies on.

The colony first goes to water. The dark column bends in the sky and flows down to a lake, river, or pond. Head down, each flying fox laps up a drink with its tongue as it skims just above the water's surface. And each flying fox watches for crocodiles which lie in wait to snap them from the air. Here, if a baby shifts about, both mother and baby are likely to fall into the water and drown. Or both may be quickly gobbled up by one of the large, lumpy reptiles.

But crocodiles are not their only enemies. Eagles may snatch them in the early flying hours, and owls may hunt them all night long. Monitor lizards and tree-climbing snakes prey upon them while they sleep during the daylight hours.

People also eat flying foxes. Those who do say they are delicious and taste like chicken or rabbit. However, the odor of a flying fox colony is very bad. So not many people are able to get past the smell to capture the flying mammals.

Like all bats, flying foxes have thin sheets of skin for wings. Their arm, leg, and finger bones stretch the skin tight, like sticks in a kite.

Flying foxes "swim" through the air with great strokes. They raise their half-folded wings above their backs. They then sweep them downward and forward, upward and back.

The flying foxes of Australia have wingspans as wide as 36 inches (90 cm). The wings of flying foxes of India and the East Indies may reach wider across than you are tall! They are the largest bats in the world.

Flying foxes belong to a group called fruit bats -- they eat fruits and flowers, not insects. They have to have lots of fruits and flowers to eat all year round, so they live only in the tropics or the subtropics. Unlike insect eating bats, flying foxes find their way around by sight, even on the darkest nights. They don't use radar or echolocation (ek-o-lo-KAY-shun), as other bats do.

Flying foxes like their fruit soft and ripe. Bananas, plums, mangoes, and guavas are favorites. On their great feeding flights they find areas of ripe fruit by smell. Once there they swoop down and begin feasting. They crush the fruit against the roofs of their mouths, then swallow the juice and a little of the pulp. They press most of the pulp and small seeds into soft "pellets" and spit them out.