

2020 Wildlife Rehabilitation Award

The Wildlife Rehabilitation Award is awarded to an individual or a conservation group contributing to the preservation of Australia's wildlife. Many people find the experience of rehabilitating native wildlife rewarding; however, it is time-consuming and can be very expensive. The award is intended to acknowledge and commemorate the individuals or conservation groups working tirelessly to support, rehabilitate, and conserve Australia's native wildlife on behalf of the whole community.

The award for 2020 was presented to Meg Churches of Camperdown, New South Wales.

Inside Meg Churches' household in inner Sydney, New South Wales, there are many dummies, baby wipes, and colourful hand-sewn blankets. Meg Churches is a dedicated, eccentric wildlife rescuer who specialises in Australia's bats. Meg has been engaged with the rescue and rehabilitation of Australia's bats for the past fourteen years, especially the Vulnerable grey-headed flying-fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*).



Suzanne Medway AM and Minister Matthew Kean MP presenting Meg Churches the 2020 Wildlife Rehabilitation Award.

Meg is an active Wildlife Information, Rescue, and Education Service (WIRES) volunteer and is currently the bat co-ordinator for the inner-west branch. The inner-west branch is located in Sydney and covers approximately one hundred suburbs (some shared with other branches) and cares for more than four thousand native animals each year. Meg also joined the Wolli Creek Preservation Society to help count the flying-fox population (via fly-out counts) at Turrella and Wolli Creek and shared her knowledge and insights on these beautiful animals.

Meg carries out many and sometimes quite tricky rescues of injured bats or bats that are in trouble – both microbats and flying-foxes. She rescues both adults and juveniles (or pups). Meg will travel widely around Sydney in her car, at short notice, at various times, and in varied weather and traffic conditions to carry out these rescues. Meg is very skilled, calm, compassionate, and quite inventive when carrying out wildlife rescues. Furthermore, Meg films her rescues and posts the videos on her YouTube channel. She uses her YouTube channel as a creative way to educate and inform people about Australia's bats.

During flying-fox pup season, Meg is involved in many rescues of pups who have come to grief or whose mum has come to grief through entanglement, electrocution on powerlines, or injuries from feeding on introduced trees, to name a few. Meg cares for the pups at her home and may have multiple pups in care at any one time. Caring for pups is an around-the-clock task, and there is a significant commitment of time, energy, and resources involved. Meg will administer several bottle feeds per day when the pups require bottle feeding and will prepare fruit for them once they have been weaned.

The products she makes for flying-foxes and microbats include fabric pouches and wraps, latex dummies, and teats for bottles. Meg's personal parking space also doubles as a storage or transit area for more oversized items related to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. For example, sometimes young juveniles or rescued adults may need extra acute care post-rescue, and Meg has two incubators to fulfil that need.

Wildlife rehabilitators such as Meg play a vital role in conserving Australia's native wildlife for future generations. The Society is delighted to present Meg with the prestigious Wildlife Rehabilitation Award for 2020.

Acceptance Speech from Meg Churches

Thank you for the award and for acknowledging the wildlife rehabilitation work I have implemented for more than a decade of my life.

As with most positive things in my life, my fascination with bats came about quite accidentally. I was at the vet with one of my birds, and a wildlife carer arrived to collect a crested pigeon chick (*Ocyphaps lophotes*), and I thought that caring for native wildlife was something I could do. So, I decided to join Wildlife Information, Rescue, and Education Service to care for parrot chicks in the busy chick season. However, the vet said to me, "you do not want to rescue birds; your birds might get sick from wild birds. You should rescue possum joeys". This comment prompted me to change my mind. I thought, "I'll care for possum joeys instead. They will be cute, fluffy, cuddly, and they will love me." I was slightly naive and unrealistic back then.

At the Wildlife Information, Rescue, and Education Service introductory wildlife rescue course, I was informed that you feed possums, change them, and put them back. You do not play with them or humanise them because they are solitary animals that need to remain solitary to survive in the wild. The next section of the course introduced Australia's bats, an animal that never entered my mind as requiring rescue or care. With flying-foxes, I was informed that not only are you allowed to love them, but you need to love them. You have to be their mum, and you have to cuddle them, play with them, and interact with them because they are social animals that live in roosts (also known as a colony). Their mums are very tactile with them; therefore, they require hands-on love and care. They are intelligent, funny, and curious and need emotional and social stimulation. This information was music to my ears. I had a lot of love to give, and so I decided to become a bat carer.

Juvenile bats expect to be with their human mum as much as possible. They are pretty comfortable hanging on you and urinating on you, if possible. A clean shirt is always an invitation to be urinated on within seconds. If their biological mum was urinated on, they would lick it all up to clean themselves, but I draw the line at that. That is what baby wipes are for.

Although I instantly loved the juveniles, I learned to love the adults, who were a little more challenging. At first, I was scared of the adults, but now I am more than comfortable rescuing them. I often say, "Yes, I love your large wings, and you have very impressive teeth, but I am bigger and scarier than you are, and I have opposable thumbs, so yell all you like, but you are coming with me."

I started rescuing bats because I wanted to raise the juveniles, but my reason for rescuing and rehabilitating them now is much different – I love and appreciate them as a species. I rescue bats because, unfortunately, they need rescuing in this day and age. More than two hundred bat species in sixty countries worldwide are considered threatened (Critically Endangered, Endangered, or Vulnerable), and there are so few bat rescuers overall – most wildlife rescuers are afraid of them.

Caring for bats is an enormously satisfying thing to do because you see the direct and immediate consequences of your work. For example, if you rescue a bat from a dire situation, and they are okay in a few days, you get to release them back into the colony. You get to watch them fly home, which is the best feeling ever. If I have a terrible week with several injured bats coming into care that do not make it to the point of release, one successful release of a rehabilitated bat, back to its colony, keeps me going for weeks. I dance around with a silly grin on my face watching it power itself back up into the tree.

I love to do a tricky bat rescue. The more challenging the bat rescue is, the more satisfying it is. For example, I enjoy the challenge of lateral thinking and figuring out creative ways to rescue a bat that is seven metres up a tree and five metres out from the bank of a river, hanging from its wrist tangled in a fishing line. I am not afraid of acquiring the upper body strength of passing males to achieve things I cannot physically do or seeking the assistance of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service and their reliable equipment and resources. I have bought and made a lot of equipment over the years to fish injured or juvenile bats up to twelve metres high in the canopy of trees with poles and nets, and there is always duct tape to jury rig or tweak what I have to adapt to the situation. Duct tape is my go-to fix for pretty much everything. Needless to say, I am committed to obtaining my bat successfully.

Although I was aware that I had been nominated for the Wildlife Rehabilitation Award, I did not expect to receive this prestigious award. Upon receiving the letter informing me that I had been accorded this honour, it was a delightful surprise. The award acknowledges fourteen years of dedication and commitment to protecting Australia's bats and gives profile and acknowledgement to the people I work with and the importance of preserving Australia's precious bats for future generations.

Bats have a terrible reputation for being disease-ridden vermin or flying rats, but they are neither. With the onset of COVID-19, I cannot help but think that bats' reputation has lost more ground with the general public. An encounter with bats is mostly purely and simply a result of human interference. Unfortunately, land clearing, habitat loss, and overdevelopment drive bats and other native wildlife into urban areas. They are losing their homes and food sources that they depend on for survival at an alarming rate. We need to ensure that we protect the natural spaces we have left and restore the areas that have been damaged.

In the tradition of good things in my life happening without conscious planning, I accidentally created a YouTube channel when I was learning to edit a video during a course at the Apple Store, "So what do I do with it now?" I asked. When I had edited my first video, the trainer said, "you make a YouTube channel, of course," and so I did. It took four years before I became an instant overnight success with a viral video, and since then, I have built up the most successful bat YouTube channel in the world. I use video glasses to record the wildlife rescues from my point of view. I do hundreds of wildlife rescues per year which gives me plenty of footage for my YouTube channel. My YouTube channel reflects real life, and I publish the video whether or not the bat survives. People must know that Australia's bats are not just cute and fluffy, but that rescues of bats are an uncompromising labour of love, with a variably low survival rate. Bat rescues are not for the fainthearted.

I have added a lot of education into my video descriptions, and I am available to my viewers if they ask questions. My YouTube channel has grown to 220,000 subscribers and ninety-three million views. Comfortingly, I have had many viewers commenting on my videos that I have changed their opinions about bats. The YouTube channel provides me with a platform to show people how adorable these animals are and how necessary they are for the environment and the health of our rainforest ecosystems. To visit my YouTube channel, please visit <https://www.youtube.com/c/Megabattie/videos>

I believe that the grey-headed flying-fox, the main species of flying-fox found in my area, will be functionally extinct in my lifetime, which is terrifying. They are currently listed as Vulnerable to extinction nationally, and therefore we must do what we can to protect them and secure a safe and successful future for them.