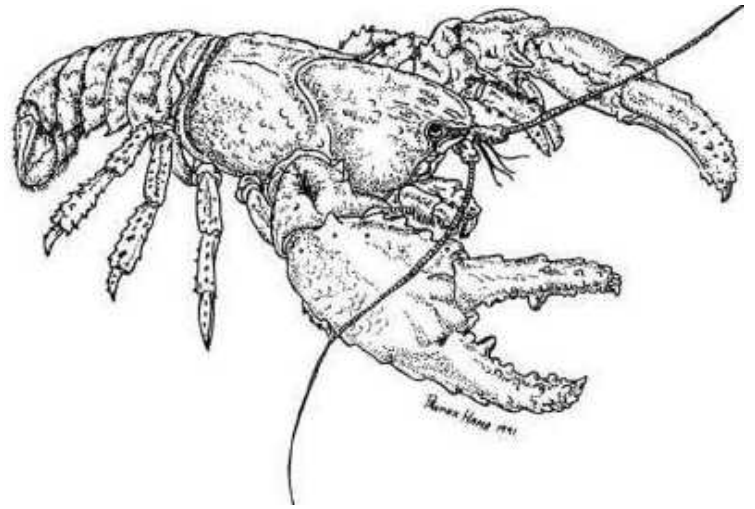


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Sugar Gliders

by Sarah Lloyd



Sugar Glider (*Petaurus breviceps*) Photo credit: L. Nicklason

In 2015 researchers using remote camera technology 'captured' Sugar Gliders eating females, eggs and chicks of Swift Parrot and Orange-bellied Parrot and filmed one inspecting the nest of recently fledged Forty-spotted Pardalote. The small marsupials have also been photographed feeding on more common cavity nesters including Blue-winged Parrot, Green Rosella, Tree Martin and Striated Pardalote.

The Sugar Glider is/was widespread in the eastern parts of mainland Australia with some debate as to its status in Tasmania. In his book *The Furred animals of Australia* written in 1957 Ellis Troughton curator of mammals at the Australian Museum in Sydney writes that its 'wide distribution [in Tasmania] suggests that it may have been indigenous, and possibly overlooked because of its habits' but goes on to write that the 'absence of other gliders supports the early view that they spread from animals brought from Port Phillip.' The lack of skeletal remains in subfossil deposits and lack of an Aboriginal name for the animal is regarded as further evidence for their introduction. Recent DNA analyses of Tasmanian Sugar Gliders suggest that the Tasmanian population is a recent introduction with all Tasmanian sequences being identical to each other. Tasmanian sequences showed little to no genetic variation from sequences originating from Victoria and South Australia.

Whether indigenous or introduced, Sugar Gliders are now common in forests and woodlands where their repeated 'yap' and other vocalisations are heard in the bush at night. Their common names comes from the abundance of honey, sugar and jam eaten by captive animals and their ability to glide distances of over 50 meters using the membrane that joins their front and back limbs. In their natural habitat they are omnivorous and opportunistic and eat a wide range of foods depending on the season and availability. They have been recorded feeding on invertebrates, acacia gum, the sap of eucalypts, lizards and small birds, nectar, acacia seeds, bird eggs, pollen, fungi and native fruits.

Their long front incisors may be for tearing young branches to get at the juicy wood, or they may be for cutting bark to initiate a sap flow. Wild Sugar Gliders exhibit a 'spit-fire temper' with biting and scratching- certainly not the temperament of the 'excellent pets' they are reputed to be.

Sugar Gliders live in family groups consisting of an adult pair plus several young—offspring that might stay around for several seasons. They retreat during the day to tree hollows in which they make a nest of leaves.

The Sugar Glider is now implicated in sending threatened species ever closer to the brink of extinction. But should the blame be apportioned instead to those responsible for land management practices that have caused such a reduction in old growth hollow-bearing trees that all cavity nesters are being forced into ever smaller patches of forest?

References

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- Vine, S 2015 'Swift Exit' in *Australian Birdlife* Vol 4 No. 2. Birdlife Australia, Melbourne.

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- [Pestsmart](#) (viewed 12 September 2015)

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