



This Greater Glider was discovered in the author's garden after the tree that had been its home crashed to the ground during a storm.

GREATER GLIDER

Petauroides volans

This stunningly beautiful nocturnal animal is rarely seen by human eyes. It glides silently through the darkness from one tree to another and, if the need arises, it can change direction abruptly while in

flight, and it does so with the greatest of ease, thanks to the strong flaps of skin that connect its front and hind legs, and that act like wings to allow this agile aviator to move secretively through its lofty realm.

The woodlands and eucalypt forests of eastern Australia, from northern Queensland to central Victoria, are the

Greater Gliders' domain, and what they require for their survival are large trees with hollows in which they can spend each day in the land of nod.

They are the largest of Australia's arboreal gliders and have thick dark grey or brown fur covering much of the body, a light brown face, creamy-white throat and chest, long furry tail and large furry ears.

Populations vary considerably across their range with conspicuous variations in colour and size. In 2020 researchers analysed the DNA of several animals and discovered that the Greater Glider was, in fact, not one species but three. The newly named *Petauroides minor*, the species that inhabits the forests of northern Queensland, is the size of a small Ringtail Possum, while *Petauroides volans*, the cat-sized species that's illustrated here, is found south of the Tropic of Capricorn. The third species, *Petauroides armillatus*, inhabits the forests of the Great Dividing Range to the west of the Queensland city of Mackay and north to Townsville.

Greater Gliders feed almost exclusively on the leaves of a few species of eucalyptus trees, but will also eat the trees' flowers and buds, and when they opt for a change of taste they'll nibble on the leaves of acacias and on the parasitic mistletoe that often drapes itself across the limbs of eucalyptus trees.

For much of the year they live a solitary existence, but each is content to share its

treetop accommodation with a mate when the breeding season arrives. Females give birth to a single young that travels with its mother, in the comfort and security of her pouch, for the first 3–4 months of its life. As it savours independence, it waits in a treetop hollow or clings to its mother's back while she forages for food, but the youngster draws the line at hanging on tight while its mother flies through the air. At about 10 months of age it takes a great leap of confidence and soars through the forest on its first courageous flight.

In the Greater Gliders' habitat there's keen competition for tree hollows, with other gliders, possums and many species of birds all requiring similar accommodation. They'll fiercely defend their home range and any hollows to which they claim ownership, but there's little they can do other than flee for their lives when a large owl, goanna, snake or other hungry predator arrives on the scene.

Populations of Greater Gliders have been in decline for many years with habitat loss from bushfires, land clearing and the logging of old-growth forests creating a very real threat to their long-term survival. Since the beginning of the 21st century populations have declined by 80 per cent. Despite being listed as 'vulnerable' in 2016, habitat destruction continued unabated, and in 2022 its classification was changed to 'endangered'.