

Bats are thriving with some help from humans, as **BARRY KENNEDY** reports



Bats about boxes



Lisa Evans checks a roosting box used by microbats.
Pictures: DENNIS MANKTELOW N30SR400

FIVE species of minuscule microbats at Organ Pipes won't return to their preferred cool, safe homes found in native tree hollows for 50 years.

Instead the adaptable mammals are finding their niche in man-made roosts. The colonies of butterfly-sized bats were in trouble 16 years ago as the newly declared national park had few trees mature enough to boast hollows.

But shrewd researchers and dedicated volunteers from the Friends of Organ Pipes turned their fortunes around with one of the world's first artificial roosting programs.

Robert Irvine was among the group that set up the roosts then and still helps co-ordinate volunteers who go out monthly to count, weigh and measure the bats. "We set up the roosting boxes because at the time there was not enough natural places for them to live, so we really wanted to see if this would work," he said. Since then the popu-

lations of all five native bats found at Organ Pipes has grown.

There are now 38 roosting boxes supporting a summer population of between 300 and 350 bats, co-ordinator of the bat count and PhD student Lisa Evans said.

Ms Evans said the consistency of volunteer record-keeping had proved a bonus for researchers, giving scientists the chance to observe the shy animals in controlled conditions.

"My study is on the roosting behaviour of the bats and how they have adapted to the nesting boxes, especially around parasites," she said. "Because the boxes have been there so long, we can see how the bats respond to changes like cleaning up boxes or adding parasites to their roost."

Ms Evans said the 15g bats had responded well to the fragmentation of their natural environment.

"It seems that bats are responding well

to human and climate changes as they can fly and because they eat insects, which are also on the increase," she said.

The bats are urban dwellers as well. During January they teem to the MCG and the Rod Laver Arena in search of insects drawn to the light.

Unlike the mega bats - such as those found in Kew - microbats rely on inbuilt sonar abilities to locate their prey.

They go into semi-hibernation by slowing their metabolism when the weather is cool. This allows them to live up to nine years.

Parks Victoria supported the bat monitoring program, now believed to be the longest-running in the southern hemisphere, Ms Evans said.

For more information about the monthly bat counts and other volunteer activities at Organ Pipes, call Robert Irvine on 9744 6395.