

Mammals might have flown before birds, scientists claim

by World Science

The first flying mammals may have taken to the skies much earlier than has been thought, a paper in this week's issue of the research journal *Nature* suggests. Jin Meng of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and colleagues analysed fossil remains of a small, squirrel-sized mammal that lived in Inner Mongolia around 125 million years ago, during the so-called Mesozoic era. Artist's concept of the flying mammal (courtesy Chuang Zhao and Lida Xing) The unusual beast had sharp teeth, elongated limbs and tail, and a fur-covered fold of skin membrane that was probably used for gliding, according to the researchers. The earliest confirmed record of bats is 51 million years old, suggesting that the mammal flirted with flight at the same time as, if not earlier than, birds, according to Meng. The researchers added that the mammal, which was probably nocturnal and dined on insects, was about the size of modern flying squirrels. But they said the animal, dubbed *Volaticotherium* or "oceanic gliding beast," is unique enough to qualify for its own order.

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