

Mammals might have flown before birds, scientists claim

by World Science

The first fly^{ing} mam^{als} may have tak^{en} to the skies much ear^{lier} than has been thought, a pa^{per} in this week^{'s} is^{sue} of the re^{search} jour^{nal} Na^{ture} sug^{gests}. Jin Meng of the Amer^{ican} Mu^{seum} of Na^{tural} His^{tory} in New York and col^{leagues} an^{alyzed} fos^{sils} re^{mains} of a small, squirrel-sized mam^{mal} that lived in In^{ner} Mon^{go}lia around 125 mil^{lion} years ago, dur^{ing} the so-called Mes^{ozo}ic era. Artist's con^{cept} of the fly^{ing} mam^{mal} (cour^{tesy} Chuang Zhao and Lida Xing)The un^{usual} beast had sharp teeth, elon^{gated} limbs and tail, and a fur-covered fold of skin mem^{brane} that was prob^{ably} used for glid^{ing}, ac^{cording} to the re^{search}ers. The ear^{liest} con^{firmed} fos^{sils} rec^{ord} of bats is 51 mil^{lion} years old, sug^{gesting} that the mam^{mal} flirted with flight at the same time as, if not ear^{lier} than, birds ac^{cording} to Meng. The researchers added that the mam^{mal}, which was prob^{ably} noc^{turnal} and dined on in^{sects}, was about the size of mod^{ern} fly^{ing} squir^{rels}. But they said the an^{imal}, dubbed Vo^{laticotherium} an^{ti}quus or "œcean^{ic} glid^{ing} beast," is un^{ique} enough to qual^{ify} for its own or^{der}.

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