



# Controlled Flight of a Microrobot Powered by Soft Artificial Muscles

## Citation

Chen, Yufeng, Huichan Zhao, Jie Mao, Pakpong Chirarattananon, E Farrell Helbling, Nak-Seung Patrick Hyun, David R. Clarke, and Robert J. Wood. 2019. Controlled Flight of a Microrobot Powered by Soft Artificial Muscles. *Nature* 575, no. 7782: 324-29.

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# The first controlled flight of a microrobot powered by soft artificial muscles

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1 **Flying insects capable of navigating in highly cluttered natural environments can withstand in-**  
2 **flight collisions because of the combination of their low inertia<sup>1</sup> and the resilience of their wings<sup>2</sup>,**  
3 **exoskeletons<sup>1</sup>, and muscles. Current insect-scale (<10 cm, <5 g) aerial robots<sup>3-6</sup> use rigid microscale**  
4 **actuators, which are typically fragile under external impact. Biomimetic artificial muscles<sup>7-10</sup>**  
5 **capable of large deformation offer a promising alternative for actuation because they can endure**  
6 **the stresses caused by such impacts. However, existing soft actuators<sup>11-13</sup> have not yet demonstrated**  
7 **sufficient power density for liftoff, and their actuation nonlinearity and limited bandwidth further**  
8 **create challenges for achieving closed-loop flight control. Here we develop the first heavier-than-air**  
9 **aerial robots powered by soft artificial muscles that demonstrate open-loop, passively stable**  
10 **ascending flight as well as closed-loop, hovering flight. The robots are driven by 100 mg, multi-**  
11 **layered dielectric elastomer actuators (DEA) that have a resonant frequency and power density of**  
12 **500 Hz and 600 W/kg, respectively. To increase actuator output mechanical power and to**  
13 **demonstrate flight control, we present strategies to overcome challenges unique to soft actuators,**  
14 **such as nonlinear transduction and dynamic buckling. These robots can sense, and withstand,**  
15 **collisions with surrounding obstacles, and can recover from in-flight collisions by exploiting**  
16 **material robustness and vehicle passive stability. We further perform a simultaneous flight with**

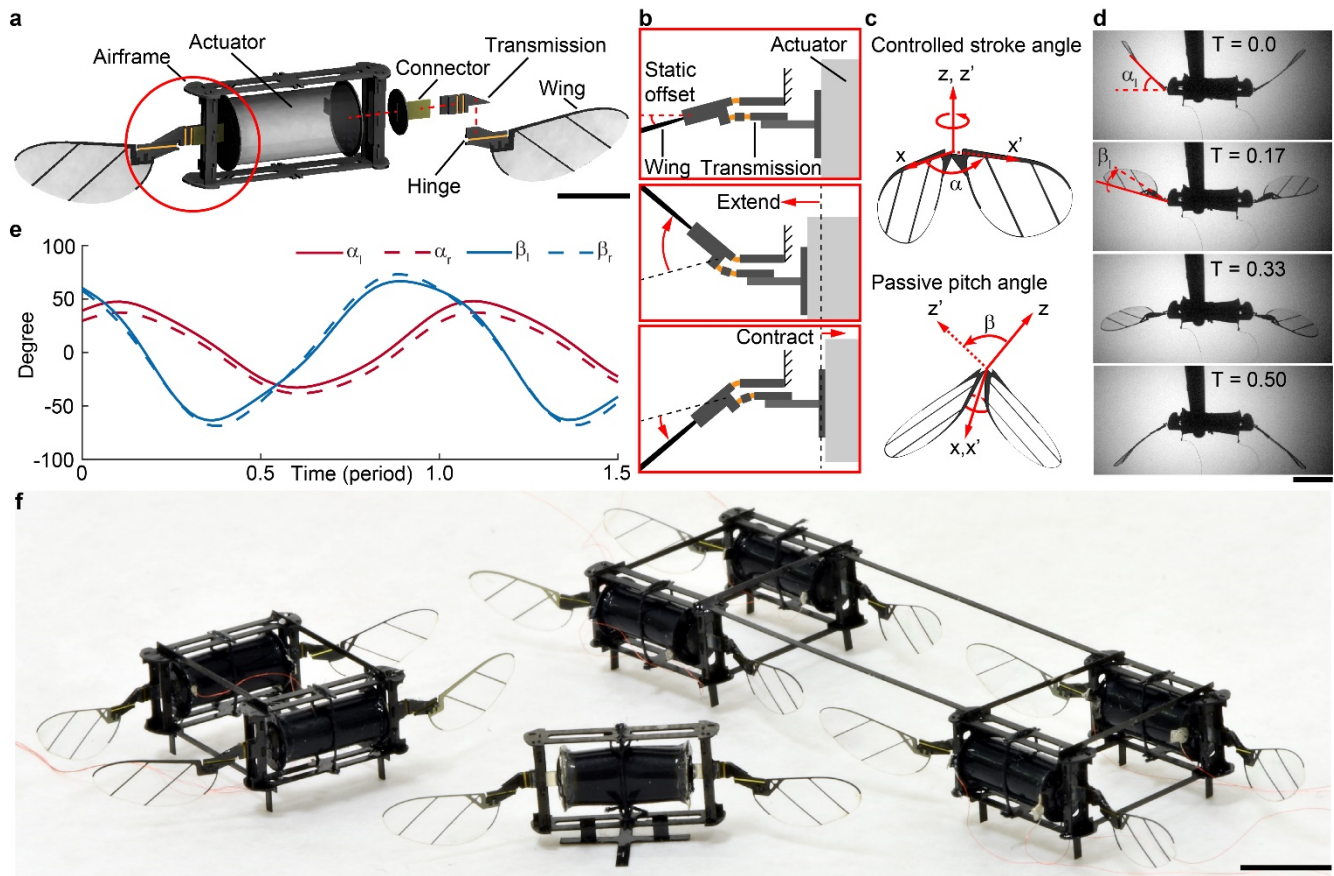
17 **two micro-aerial-vehicles (MAV) in cluttered environments. These robots rely on offboard**  
18 **amplifiers and an external motion capture system to provide power to the DEAs and control flights.**  
19 **Our work demonstrates how soft actuators can achieve sufficient power density and bandwidth to**  
20 **enable controlled flight, illustrating the vast potential of developing next-generation agile soft robots.**

21 Soft robotics<sup>14-16</sup> is an emerging field aiming to develop versatile systems that can safely interact with  
22 humans and manipulate delicate objects in unstructured environments. A major challenge in building soft-  
23 actuated mobile robots involves developing muscle-like actuators that have high energy density,  
24 bandwidth, robustness, and lifetime. Previous studies have described soft actuators that can be actuated  
25 chemically<sup>17</sup>, pneumatically<sup>18,19</sup>, hydraulically<sup>20</sup>, thermally<sup>21,22</sup>, or electrically<sup>7,23</sup>. Among these soft  
26 transducers, DEAs have shown a combination of muscle-like energy density and bandwidth<sup>8</sup>, enabling the  
27 development of biomimetic robots capable of terrestrial<sup>11,24,25</sup> and aquatic locomotion<sup>26,27</sup>. However, while  
28 there is growing interest in developing heavier-than-air, soft-actuated aerial robots, existing soft robots<sup>11-</sup>  
29 <sup>13</sup> have been unable to achieve liftoff due to limited actuator power density (<200 W/kg), bandwidth (<20  
30 Hz), and difficulties of integration with rigid robotic structures such as transmission and wings.

31 To enable controlled hovering flight of a soft-actuated robot, we identify and address two major  
32 challenges: developing a soft actuator with sufficient power density (>200 W/kg) and designing driving  
33 and control strategies to account for actuation nonlinearity (see Methods section 1 for details on vehicle  
34 design and DEA performance requirements). First, we develop a multi-layered, compact DEA that has a  
35 power density of 600 W/kg without requiring pre-strain. Second, we integrate the DEA into a light-weight,  
36 flapping wing mechanism and utilize system resonance to remove higher harmonics induced by the  
37 nonlinear transduction. In combination, we design a 155 mg flapping-wing module that can be assembled  
38 into several configurations. Using these modules, we are able to construct vehicles that not only  
39 demonstrate passively stable ascending flight but also controlled hovering flight.

40 Our robot is driven by a multi-layered DEA rolled into a cylindrical shell to generate linear actuation

41 (see Methods section 2 for details on DEA fabrication). The DEA is mounted in a light-weight airframe  
42 (Fig. 1a), with the two ends of the DEA attached to planar four-bar transmissions. This design allows one  
43 DEA to simultaneously actuate two wings in an analogous manner as the indirect flight muscles in  
44 neopteran flying insects<sup>28</sup>. By using the planar four-bar transmissions, the DEA's axial extension and  
45 contraction are converted into the wing's rotational stroke motion (Fig. 1b). In quasi-static operation, the  
46 actuation is unidirectional because DEA strain is proportional to the square of the applied electric field.  
47 In dynamic operation, the DEA extends and contracts due to its intrinsic inertia and stiffness, yet its  
48 elongation amplitude is larger than the retraction amplitude. To ensure the mean wing stroke ( $\alpha$ ) motion  
49 is symmetric with respect to the robot body, the resting wing stroke plane is offset by approximately  $15^\circ$   
50 (Fig. 1b) during robot assembly. The DEA is pre-strained by 2% when it is attached to the robot  
51 transmissions, and this pre-strain loads the elastic four-bar transmissions to introduce the wing stroke bias.  
52 This small pre-strain does not noticeably change the DEA performance, and this design is advantageous  
53 compared to artificial flight muscles with a large pre-strain<sup>11</sup> (>100%) because it does not require a rigid  
54 and heavy supporting structure. In this way, the robot wing stroke ( $\alpha$ ) motion is fully controlled by the  
55 actuator, whereas the wing pitch ( $\beta$ ) rotation is passively mediated by the compliant wing hinge (Fig. 1c).  
56 Figure 1d and Supplementary Video 1 show a half flapping period actuated at 280 Hz. The tracked wing  
57 stroke and pitch motion for the same experiment are shown in figure 1e. Based on an aerodynamic model  
58 developed in a previous study<sup>29</sup>, we estimate that this flapping motion will generate a net lift force of  
59 approximately 1.8 mN, corresponding to 1.2 times the robot weight. This modular robot can be assembled  
60 into several configurations to demonstrate different flight capabilities. For instance, figure 1f shows micro-  
61 aerial vehicles driven by one (center), two (left), and four DEAs (right). These vehicles exhibit open loop  
62 liftoff (one DEA), stable ascending flight (two DEAs), and hovering flight through feedback control (four  
63 DEAs), respectively.



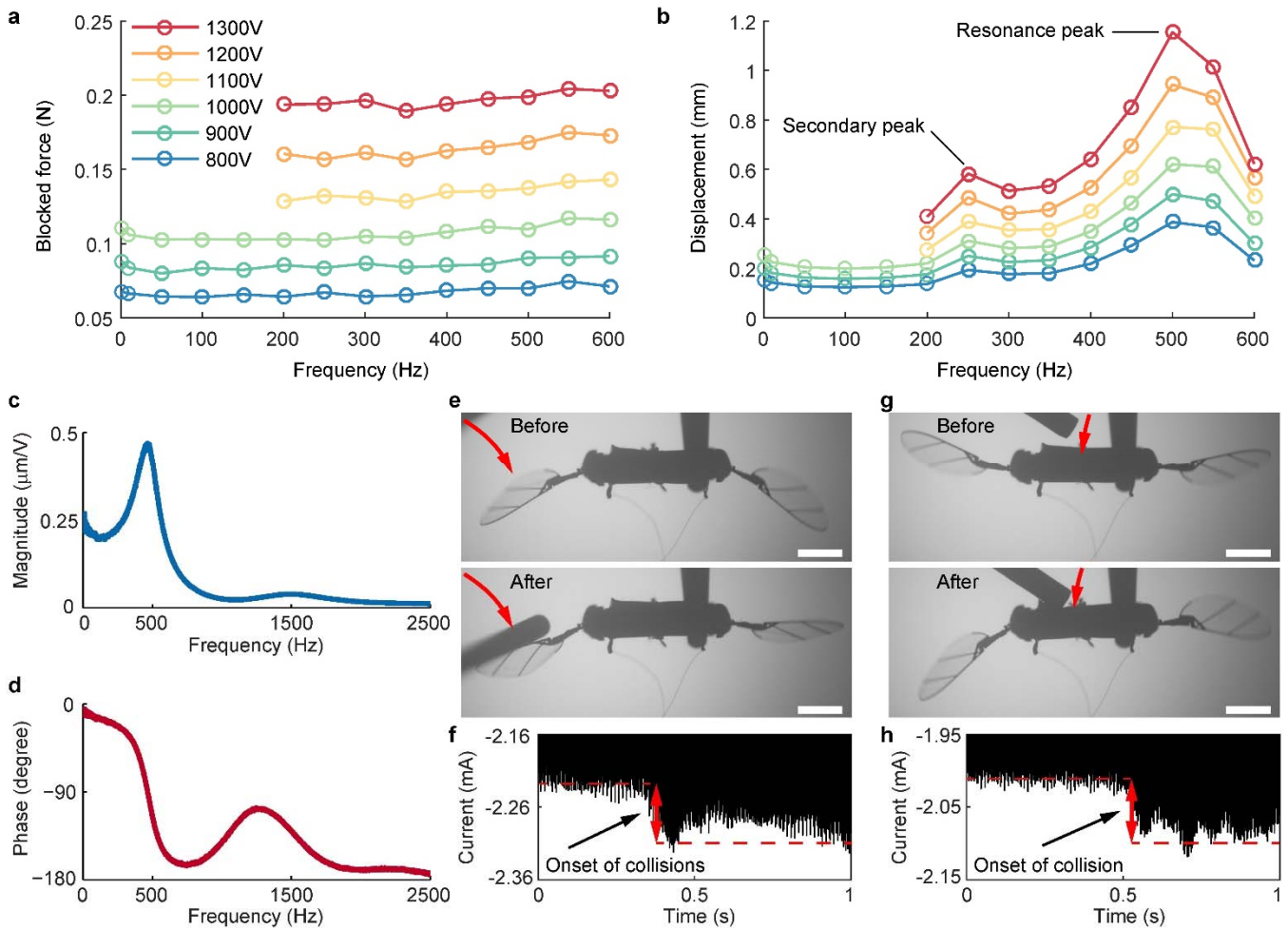
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65 **Figure 1 | Robot design and flapping wing kinematics.** **a**, A CAD model of a 155 mg flapping wing robot driven by a  
 66 dielectric elastomer actuator (DEA). The exploded view of the robot's right half shows the actuator, connector, four-bar  
 67 transmission, wing, and wing hinge. The circled region of the robot's left transmission is magnified in **b**. **b**, Enlarged top view  
 68 of the robot's actuator-transmission-wing assembly. The DEA is pre-strained by 2% when it is attached to the robot's  
 69 transmissions, which induces a static stroke angle bias of approximately 15°. The linear DEA actuation is translated into the  
 70 rotational wing stroke motion. **c**, Illustrations of the actively controlled wing stroke ( $\alpha$ ) motion and the passive wing pitch ( $\beta$ )  
 71 motion. **d**, An image sequence of the flapping wing motion operated at 280 Hz. The time is normalized to a flapping period.  
 72 The wing stroke rotation ( $\alpha_l$ ) induces passive wing pitch rotation ( $\beta_l$ ). **e**, Tracked flapping wing kinematics that correspond to  
 73 the experiment shown in **d**. The wing stroke (red) amplitudes of the left (solid line) and the right (dotted line) wings are 42 and  
 74 41 degrees, respectively. The wing pitch (blue) amplitudes of the left (solid line) and the right (dotted line) wings are 57 and  
 75 61 degrees, respectively. **f**, Image of flapping wing microrobots driven by a single actuator, two actuators, and four actuators.  
 76 Scale bars (**a**, **d**, **f**) represent 5 mm.

77 To achieve flight of a soft-actuated robot, the DEA must have sufficient power density and the robot  
 78 transmissions and wings must be designed around the actuator's output force, displacement, and  
 79 bandwidth. In contrast to previous studies<sup>11</sup> that developed pre-strained acrylic DEAs to achieve large  
 80 deformation (>30%) and high energy density (>4 J/kg) but low bandwidth (<30 Hz), we use a silicone  
 81 elastomer as the dielectric material for the flight muscles to achieve higher bandwidth (>400 Hz),  
 82 combined with moderate strain (10-15%) and energy density (1.13 J/kg). For driving frequencies lower  
 83 than 600 Hz, our DEA's blocked force (Fig. 2a) is independent of frequency because its electrical

84 properties are tuned to have a small RC time constant of 0.18 ms. The DEA's free displacement (Fig. 2b)  
85 peaks at 15% strain when it is driven at 500 Hz. The free displacement amplitude includes the contribution  
86 from the first and higher order harmonics in response to a sinusoidal driving signal. We observe a  
87 secondary peak of free displacement (Fig. 2b) when the driving frequency is 250 Hz, due to exciting the  
88 second order harmonic that is near the resonant frequency (500 Hz). Our robot design utilizes the first  
89 harmonic to drive the flapping wing motion. By computing the Fast Fourier Transform (FFT) of the DEA's  
90 response to a white noise, we quantify the magnitude (Fig. 2c) and phase (Fig. 2d) of the linear part of its  
91 response. When operated at the takeoff condition (300 Hz, 1300 V), the DEA has a power density of 300  
92 W/kg and a lifetime of over 600,000 cycles. (see Methods section 3 for details on actuator characterization).

93 Powering MAVs using soft actuators shows an advantage over the state-of-the-art flapping wing  
94 microrobots (< 10 cm, < 5 g) driven by rigid actuators such as piezoelectric bimorphs<sup>3</sup> and electromagnetic  
95 motors<sup>5</sup>. Although microrobotic components, such as the airframe, transmissions, and wings, are robust  
96 to collisions (because inertial contributions diminish at the millimeter scale), rigid micro-actuators are  
97 fragile — particularly the piezoceramic actuators (fracture strength and failure strain are 120 MPa and  
98 0.3%, respectively) used in many similarly sized devices<sup>3,4</sup>. In contrast, this DEA driven microrobot is  
99 robust to collisions. For instance, when one wing collides with an obstacle (Fig. 2e and Supplementary  
100 Video 2), the impact is absorbed by the DEA because of its high compliance and resilience. In addition,  
101 the DEA can detect collisions (Fig. 2f) through concomitant actuation and sensing under similar principles  
102 to that of electromagnetic motors<sup>30</sup> and piezoelectric actuators<sup>31</sup>. Similarly, if an obstacle directly hits the  
103 DEA during its actuation (Fig. 2g and Supplementary Video 2), the DEA deformation can also be detected  
104 by monitoring the current (Fig. 2h). These experiments show that DEA is not only robust to collisions,  
105 but also is capable of sensing collisions with the environment (see Supplementary Information S1 for more  
106 experimental results on collision sensing).



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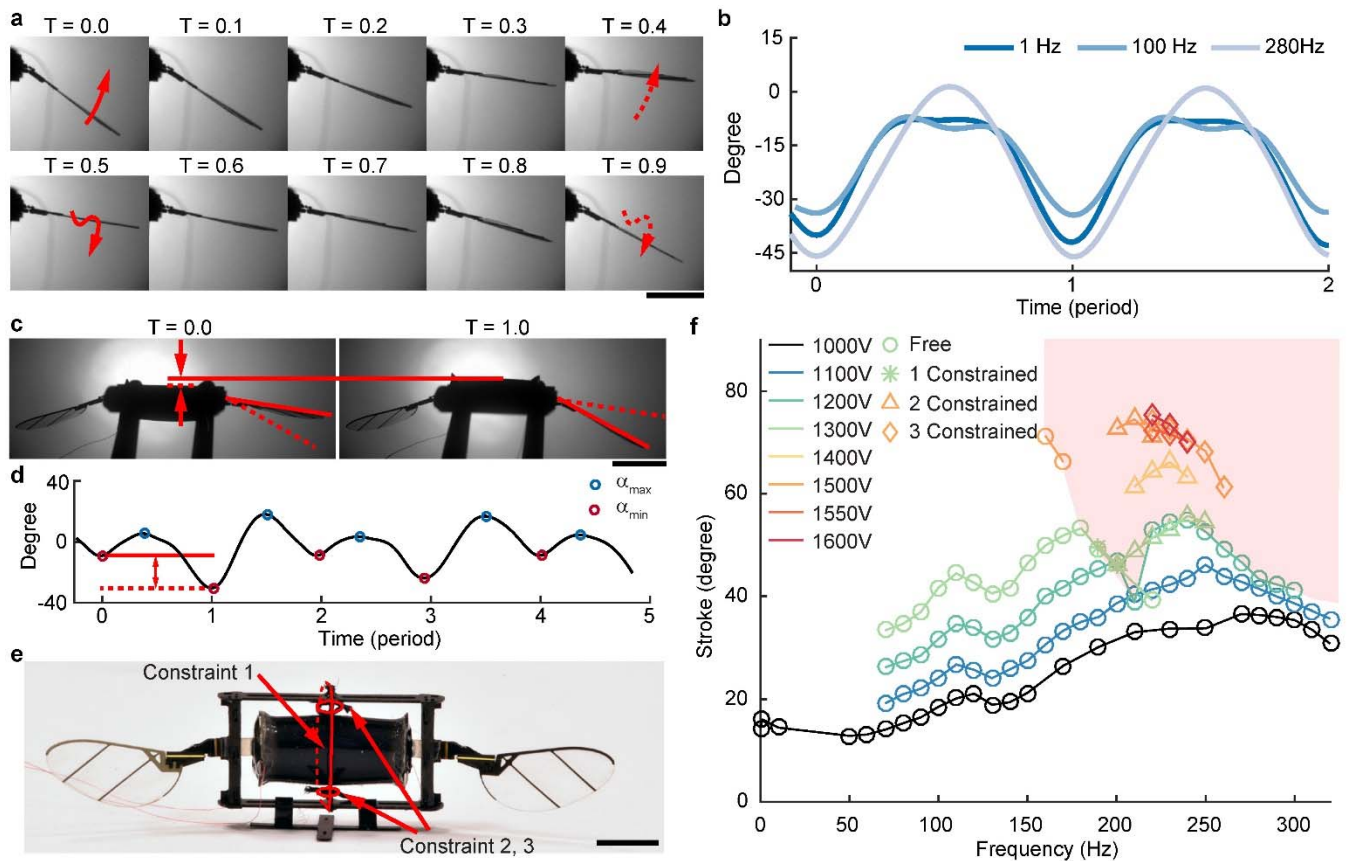
109 **Figure 2 | DEA performance, robustness, and collision sensing.** **a, b,** Measured DEA blocked force **(a)** and free displacement **(b)** as functions of operating frequency and voltage amplitude. In **a** and **b**, there are no experiments conducted for the cases combining low frequency ( $<200$  Hz) and high voltage ( $>1000$  V) because the elastomer cannot endure a large electric field at low frequencies. **c, d,** Frequency response of the DEA free displacement under an input voltage of 600 V. **c** and **d** show the magnitude and phase of the frequency response, respectively. **e,** A flapping wing repeatedly collides with an obstacle when the DEA is operated at 320 Hz and 1350V. **f,** Measured DEA current as a function of time. The jump in the DEA current indicates the onset of the wing-obstacle collisions. **g,** A rigid object presses down on the DEA that is operating at 320 Hz and 1300 V. **h,** The jump in the measured DEA current indicates the time that the object makes contact with the DEA. Scale bars **(e, g)** are 5 mm.

118 Despite having favorable properties such as robustness and self-sensing, DEAs present challenges for  
 119 achieving flight due to their inherent nonlinearity. The strain in a DEA is proportional to the square of the  
 120 applied electric field<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, a sinusoidal driving signal does not result in symmetric up stroke  
 121 and down stroke motion (Fig. 3a and Supplementary Video 3) due to the influence of higher order  
 122 harmonics (see Supplementary Information S2 for details on nonlinear actuation and higher harmonics).  
 123 For example, when operated at 100 Hz, the wing down stroke exhibits a slow reversal from  $T = 0.5$  to  $T$   
 124  $= 0.7$  (Fig. 3a and Supplementary Video 3). According to a previous aerodynamic study<sup>29</sup>, this slow wing

125 reversal can result in a substantial reduction in lift force. To mitigate the up stroke and down stroke  
126 asymmetry, we drive the DEA near the resonant frequency of the DEA-transmission-wing system to  
127 amplify the fundamental harmonic and attenuate higher harmonics. This asymmetry is substantially  
128 reduced when the DEA is driven at a frequency that is higher than half its resonance. Compared to flapping  
129 motion at 1 Hz or 100 Hz, the slow wing reversal is negligible when the driving frequency increases to  
130 280 Hz (Fig. 3b and Supplementary Video 3).

131 In addition to exhibiting nonlinear transduction, the DEA can undergo dynamic buckling that  
132 substantially affects flapping motion and reduces the lift force. When operated near the system resonance,  
133 the DEA experiences a large compressive load due to the drag force from the robot wing. This normal  
134 load causes the DEA to buckle along a direction perpendicular to its actuation axis. The actuator returns  
135 to its nominal configuration as this compressive load is reduced during wing reversal. In the next flapping  
136 period, the DEA buckles in the opposite direction due to the momentum of the restoring motion. Dynamic  
137 buckling substantially reduces the wing stroke amplitude (Fig. 3c-d and Supplementary Video 3), and it  
138 occurs at half the flapping frequency (Fig. 3d and Supplementary Video 3). Further, the large DEA  
139 deformation causes excessive electrode self-clearing and substantially reduces DEA performance and  
140 lifetime. Dynamic buckling can be inhibited by using circumferential constraints (in this case strings) to  
141 limit the DEA's off-axis motion at its mid-plane (Fig. 3e). Figure 3f shows the left-wing stroke amplitude  
142 as a function of driving frequency and voltage. The kinks of the green lines indicate stroke amplitude  
143 reduction due to dynamic buckling. Constraining the DEA's off-axis motion enables higher driving  
144 voltages and frequencies, which correspond to higher wing stroke amplitudes. The red shaded region  
145 indicates operating conditions that are inaccessible without constraining the DEA. Adding constraints  
146 increases the wing stroke peak-to-peak amplitude by approximately  $25^\circ$ , leading to a 1.6 times increase in  
147 lift force.





148

149 **Figure 3 | DEA nonlinearity and dynamic buckling.** **a**, Image sequence of the robot flapping motion at 100 Hz for one  
 150 flapping period. The up stroke and down stroke are asymmetric. **b**, Tracked wing stroke motion at 1 Hz, 100 Hz, and 280 Hz.  
 151 The wing stroke motion is asymmetric at low flapping frequencies. The nonlinear high frequency modes are reduced by post-  
 152 resonant inertial effects. **c**, Images that illustrate the DEA dynamic buckling. The red lines indicate that the DEA buckles and  
 153 the wing stroke amplitude reduces. **d**, Tracked wing stroke motion that corresponds to the experiment shown in **c**. The wing  
 154 stroke amplitude reduces and the flapping period halves. **e**, Three pieces of thread circumferentially constrain the DEA to the  
 155 robot airframe to eliminate out-of-plane motion and inhibit dynamic buckling. **f**, Stroke amplitude as a function of driving  
 156 voltage and frequency. The shaded region (red) represents the stroke amplitudes and flapping frequencies that are unachievable  
 157 without constraining the DEA. Scale bars (**a**, **c**, **e**) represent 5 mm.

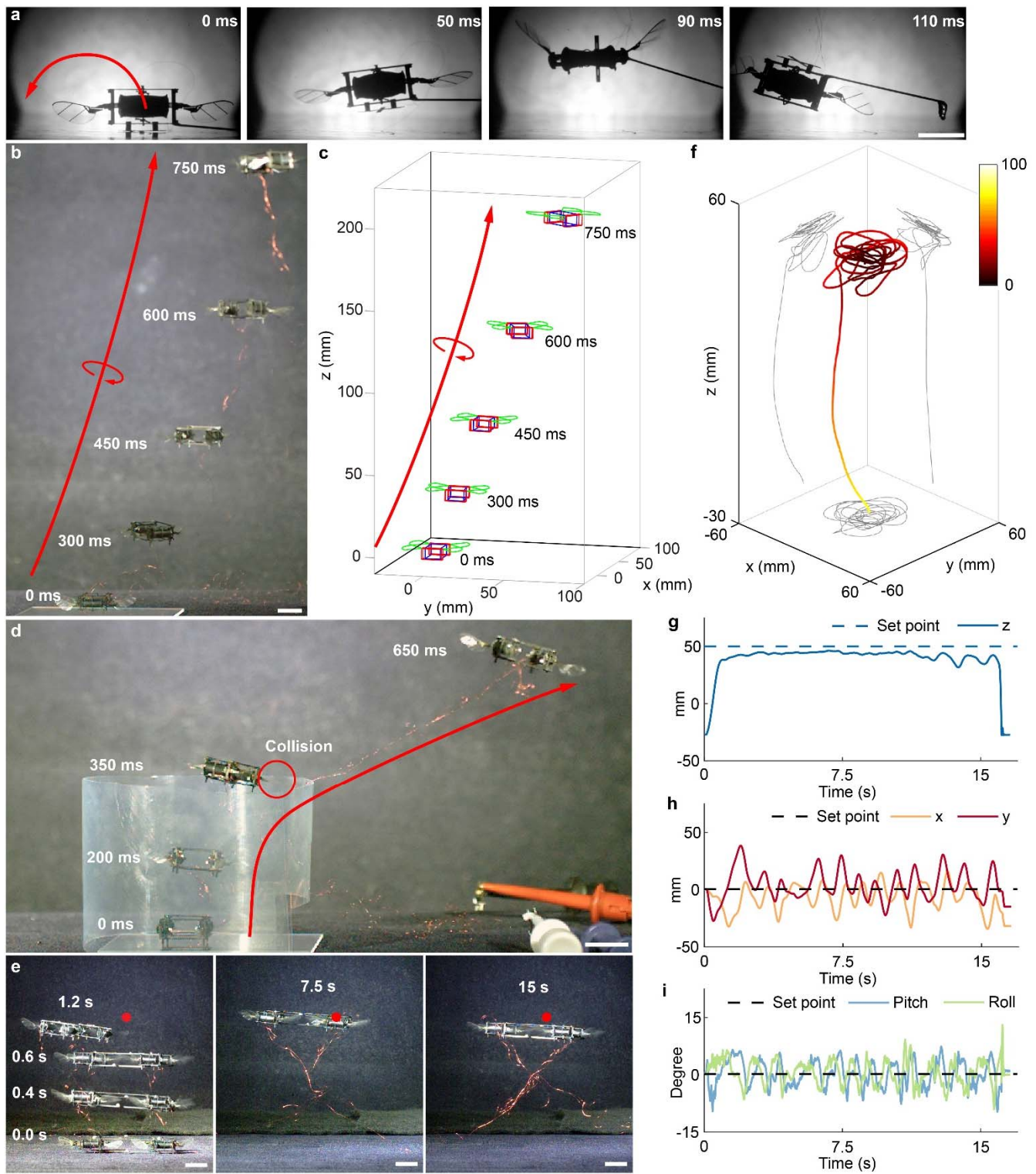
158 Addressing the challenges of nonlinear actuation enables flight demonstrations of the DEA-driven,  
 159 flapping-wing microrobots. While all flight demonstrations are unconstrained, the robots carry a thin  
 160 tether for offboard power supply and control. Driven by a single DEA, the 155 mg robot demonstrates  
 161 open-loop liftoff. The net lift generated by this MAV is approximately 1.8 mN, and it reaches a maximum  
 162 height of 1.5 cm in 90 ms (Fig. 4a and Supplementary Video 4). To mitigate aerodynamic torque  
 163 imbalances due to fabrication and assembly imprecision, a carbon fiber rod with a point mass is attached  
 164 to the robot's airframe to adjust its center of mass position. However, without attitude and position control  
 165 authority, this intrinsically unstable robot flips over within 110 ms of liftoff.

166 To demonstrate stable ascending flight, we build a two actuator, four-winged robot (Fig. 1e) that utilizes  
167 precession around the body z-axis to achieve passive stability. We bias the resting wing pitch angle during  
168 robot assembly to induce a net yaw torque around the robot's body z-axis. The body z-component of the  
169 angular momentum induced by precession rejects the robot's pitch and roll torque imbalances. In an open  
170 loop takeoff experiment, we demonstrate that the robot reaches a height of 23.5 cm within 0.83 seconds  
171 of open-loop takeoff (Fig. 4b and Supplementary Video 5). We also construct a dynamical model and use  
172 numerical simulation to confirm the experimental observation on passive upright stability. Our simulation  
173 (Fig. 4c) shows the robot ascends 22.7 cm in 0.83 seconds with a yaw rate of 17.2 rev/s. This passive  
174 stability property further enables us to operate more than one robot in a confined space without the need  
175 of motion tracking and feedback control. We demonstrate simultaneous takeoff flights of two robots  
176 (Supplementary Video 6) and show that they are robust against collisions with the surroundings and each  
177 other. In addition, passive stability and collision robustness can provide the ability to recover from in-  
178 flight collisions or disturbances. Figure 4d and Supplementary Video 6 show a collision recovery flight in  
179 which the robot takes off from the center of a cylindrical shell, collides with the shell wall during its ascent,  
180 and continues to fly upward after making the collision. However, passive in-flight collision recovery is a  
181 probabilistic event that depends on the robot's flight speed and the collision impact. Without any robot  
182 attitude sensing and feedback control, the robot may be destabilized after experiencing one or multiple  
183 collisions (see Supplementary Information S3 for a detailed discussion on passive stability, collision  
184 recovery, and additional flight results).

185 To demonstrate controlled hovering flight, we design a four actuator, eight-winged robot (Fig. 1e) and  
186 use a motion tracking system<sup>3</sup> and off-board computation for sensing and control (see Supplementary  
187 Information S4 for details on the controller design, implementation, experimental validation, and  
188 repeatability). Figure 4e shows composite images of a 16-second hovering flight, and the red dot indicates  
189 the desired setpoint. Figure 4f shows the corresponding trajectory of the same flight (Supplementary Video

190 7), and the color scale represents the distance from the current position to the setpoint. For this 16-second  
191 flight, the maximum deviation of altitude, lateral position, and body angles are 12 mm (0.2 body length  
192 (BL)), 36 mm (0.6 BL), and 9°, respectively (Fig. 4g-i).

193



194

195 **Figure 4 | Robot flight demonstrations.** **a**, Unstable liftoff of a 155 mg robot driven by one DEA. The robot reaches a height  
 196 of 1.5 cm and then flips upside down due to unstable body pitch rotation. **b**, **c**, Passively stable ascending flight of a 320 mg  
 197 robot driven by two DEAs. Both the experiment (**b**) and the dynamical simulation (**c**) show the robot reaches approximately  
 198 23 cm within 0.75 s of open-loop takeoff. The simulation shows the robot precesses at a yaw rate of 17.2 rev/s. **d**, The 320 mg  
 199 robot remains passively upright stable after colliding with an obstacle and continues to fly upward. **e**, Composite images of a  
 200 16-second controlled hovering flight that is demonstrated by a 660 mg robot driven by four DEAs. **f**, The tracked flight  
 201 trajectory corresponding to the experiment in **e**. The color scale denotes the distance between the robot position and the set  
 202 point. (**g-i**), Robot altitude (**g**), x and y positions (**h**), and attitude (**i**) as functions of time. Scale bars (**a**, **b**, **d**, **e**) are 1 cm.

203 To summarize, these flight demonstrations show the first time that soft artificial muscles have sufficient  
204 power density to enable liftoff and have adequate bandwidth for flight control. Compared to the state-of-  
205 the-art MAVs driven by microscale rigid actuators (<500 mg), these soft actuator robots show advantages  
206 such as in-flight robustness to collisions and self-sensing. A feature of the DEA's fabrication scalability  
207 is that it enables efficient production of robotic modules that can be assembled in different configurations  
208 for different functions. These properties will be important for enabling swarm flight of MAVs in highly  
209 cluttered environments where collisions are difficult to avoid. However, compared to a recent  
210 piezoelectric-actuator-driven MAV<sup>32</sup> that can demonstrate power-autonomous takeoff flights, this robot  
211 consumes 15 times more input power and requires a drive voltage 6.5 times higher. The robot's weight  
212 and net lift are 170% and 75% that of the state-of-the-art piezoelectric-driven vehicle. To enable power  
213 autonomous flight in soft aerial robots, future studies need to reduce a soft actuator's operating voltage,  
214 improve its power efficiency, and further increase its power density. Reducing actuation voltage is crucial  
215 because up to 75% of the input electrical power can be dissipated by compact high-voltage boost and drive  
216 circuitry (as in a recent power autonomous MAV<sup>32</sup>). This challenge of lowering driving voltage can be  
217 tackled by refining DEA multi-layering techniques to further reduce the elastomer layer's thickness.  
218 Towards improving transduction efficiency, future studies can incorporate new architectures of  
219 electrically actuated soft actuators such as the electrohydraulic Peano-HASEL<sup>33</sup> actuators that can use  
220 flexible metallic electrodes to reduce resistive losses. To increase power density, new electroactive  
221 polymers with higher dielectric strengths and lower viscoelasticity should be explored and incorporated  
222 into future soft artificial flight muscles. From a robot design perspective, scaling the vehicle size up can  
223 substantially mitigate the challenges associated with achieving power autonomy. A larger vehicle size can  
224 provide a larger net payload, which allows the robot to carry a larger and more efficient boost circuit. In  
225 addition, scaling up the wing size corresponds to a reduction of operating frequency, and leads to a linear  
226 increase in the DEA's power efficiency (see Methods section 3 and Supplementary Information S5 for a  
227 detailed discussion on future directions to achieve power autonomous flights). More broadly and

228 significantly, our work demonstrates that soft-actuated robots can be agile, robust, and controllable. These  
229 characteristics are important for developing future generations of soft robots for diverse applications such  
230 as environmental exploration and manipulation.

231

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308

### 309 **Acknowledgement**

310 We thank Yishan Zhu for comments and discussions. This work is supported by the National Science  
311 Foundation (award #CMMI-1830291) and the Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering. In  
312 addition, the prototypes were enabled by equipment supported by the Army Research Office DURIP  
313 program (award no. W911NF-13-1-0311). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations  
314 expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National  
315 Science Foundation.

316 **Author Contribution**

317 Y.C., H.Z., and R.J.W proposed and designed the research; Y.C., H.Z., and J.M. built the robot; Y.C.,  
318 H.Z., J.M., P.C., and E.H. conducted the experimental work; Y.C., H.Z., P.C., N.P.H., D.C., and R.J.W  
319 contributed to modelling and data analysis; Y.C. wrote the paper. All authors provided feedback.

320 **Data Availability**

321 All data generated or analyzed for this paper are included in the published article, its Methods, and  
322 Supplementary Information. Original videos, computer code, and sensor data are available from the  
323 corresponding author on reasonable request.

324



## 325 **Methods**

### 326 **1. Conceptual design of a DEA-powered aerial robot**

327 The DEA-powered robot consists of five major components: an actuator, an airframe, transmission, two  
328 wing hinges, and two wings. The two ends of the DEA are connected to the robot transmission, and the  
329 DEA's linear actuation is converted to the flapping motion of both wings. The structural design of this  
330 robot is similar to that of a microrobot powered by piezoelectric actuators presented in a previous study<sup>34</sup>.  
331 However, we need to redesign each component to accommodate the soft actuator. In the following, we  
332 describe the design process to determine key robot parameters and present the requirements on DEA  
333 performance.

334 To achieve takeoff, the DEA must satisfy requirements for blocked force, resonant frequency, free  
335 displacement, and power density. Specifically, the actuator needs to meet two conditions. First, the robot  
336 wings need to flap at sufficient frequency with adequate amplitude to generate a lift force that balances  
337 the robot weight. This condition places requirements on the DEA's operating frequency and displacement.  
338 Rearranging the equation that imposes the lift force and robot weight balance leads to the relationship:

$$339 \quad f\delta = \frac{1}{2\pi\hat{r}_2 R^2 T} \sqrt{\frac{AR W f_m}{\overline{C}_L \rho}}, \quad (1)$$

340 where  $f$  is the robot's operating frequency,  $\delta$  is half of the DEA's free displacement at the frequency  $f$ ,  
341  $\hat{r}_2$  is the wing's second area moment,  $R$  is the wing span,  $T$  is the transmission ratio,  $AR$  is the wing's  
342 aspect ratio,  $W$  is the robot weight,  $\overline{C}_L$  is the mean lift coefficient,  $\rho$  is the air density, and  $f_m$  is a scaling  
343 ratio such that the extra lift force can be used for flight control. In addition to satisfying this kinematic  
344 condition, the DEA needs to overcome the aerodynamic drag force during flight, and this imposes a  
345 requirement on the DEA's blocked force:

$$346 \quad F_B = 2\sqrt{2}T r_{cp} W f_m \frac{\overline{C}_D}{\overline{C}_L}, \quad (2)$$

347 where  $F_B$  is the DEA's blocked force,  $r_{cp}$  is the wing's spanwise center of pressure, and  $\overline{C_D}$  is the time  
 348 averaged drag coefficient. The derivation of equations (1) and (2) closely follows from equations (1-14)  
 349 in a previous work<sup>34</sup>. In equations (1) and (2), we assume that the DEA's blocked force is independent of  
 350 its actuation frequency. This assumption is validated in the next section on DEA characterization.  
 351 Multiplying equations (1) and (2) gives a requirement for the DEA's output mechanical power.

352 The design of a DEA-powered aerial robot also needs to satisfy an additional condition because the  
 353 DEA's actuation is nonlinear with respect to input voltage. With a sinusoidal input, the DEA's actuation  
 354 contains higher order harmonics that can adversely affect flapping wing kinematics. As discussed in the  
 355 main text, we attenuate higher order harmonics by setting the robot operating frequency close to the natural  
 356 frequency of the DEA-transmission-wing system. A previous study<sup>34</sup> shows the actuator-transmission-  
 357 wing system can be described by a lumped-parameter model. The system resonant frequency is given by:

$$358 \quad f = 2\pi \sqrt{\frac{k_m + k_h T^2}{m_a + 2T^2 I_{zz}}}, \quad (3)$$

359 where  $k_m$  is the DEA's intrinsic stiffness,  $m_a$  is the DEA mass,  $k_h$  is the transmission's torsional  
 360 stiffness, and  $I_{zz}$  is the wing's moment of inertia relative to the stroke rotational axis. For our robot, the  
 361 transmission stiffness is much lower than the DEA's effective stiffness. To obtain a higher operating  
 362 frequency, this condition requires a smaller wing moment of inertia. The wing moment of inertia can be  
 363 decreased by reducing wing size. Using equations (1) - (3), we select values for the transmission ratio and  
 364 the wing size while satisfying constraints imposed by our fabrication methods (i.e., minimum feature size,  
 365 wing inertia, etc). The values of these design parameters are reported in Extended Data Table 1. Using  
 366 these parameters, we obtain the following requirements for a 100 mg DEA:  $F_B = 0.2$  N,  $f = 290$  Hz, and  
 367  $\delta = 0.3$  mm. Multiplying these parameters shows that the DEA needs to have a minimum output power  
 368 density of 200 W/kg. This requirement is similar to that of the MAVs powered by piezoelectric actuators<sup>3</sup>  
 369 and to the power density values estimated for flying insects.

## 370 2. Fabrication of robot components

371 The robot airframe, transmission, wings, and wing hinges are made using an existing multi-scale, multi-  
372 material fabrication method<sup>35</sup>. The airframe consists of eight pieces of 160  $\mu\text{m}$  carbon fiber laminates  
373 assembled manually and reinforced with Loctite 495 (Extended Data Figure 1a). The robot transmission  
374 is a planar four-bar mechanism. The transmission ratio is approximated as  $T = l_3^{-1}$ , where the link length  
375  $l_3$  is marked in Extended Data Figure 1b. The robot transmission is attached to the DEA via a fiber glass  
376 connector, which insulates the robot structure from the DEA's driving signals. Further, the transmission  
377 connects the airframe and the wing hinge. A wing is attached onto the robot's wing hinge. The wing hinge  
378 and wing are designed based on an existing method<sup>36</sup>, and their geometries are illustrated in Extended  
379 Data Figure 1c and d.

380 The DEA takes the form of a cylindrical shell, whose height and radius determine the actuation  
381 frequency, blocked force, and free displacement. The DEA is made of a multi-layering process<sup>9</sup>, and it is  
382 rolled from a rectangular elastomer sheet that has embedded electrodes. Since the DEA drives two wings  
383 simultaneously, its free displacement needs to be larger than 600  $\mu\text{m}$  (twice the value of the design  
384 parameter  $\delta$ ). Based on the values of DEA free displacement, peak loading, and elastomer stiffness, we  
385 set the actuator length to 8 mm. To obtain a blocked force over 0.2 N, the elastomer sheet (prior to roll  
386 up) width is set to 5 cm. This elastomer sheet is approximately 220  $\mu\text{m}$  thick, and it is manually rolled  
387 into a cylindrical shell whose inner and outer diameters are 1.5 mm and 4.5 mm, respectively.

388 The elastomer is a 5:4 mixture of Ecoflex 0030 (Smooth-On) and Sylgard 184 (Dow Corning). The ratio  
389 of crosslinker in Sylgard 184 is 1:40. We put a thin layer of CNT (from Nano-C Inc, Westwood, MA) on  
390 the elastomer and use it as the DEA's compliant electrode. For coating the electrode, we use 150  $\mu\text{L}$  of  
391 CNT solution over a 90 mm diameter PTFE filter (Satorius 7022P). The procedures for elastomer  
392 preparation, spin coating, and electrode patterning are adopted from a previous study<sup>9</sup>.

393 We made several modifications to the fabrication process to increase DEA power density and endurance.  
394 First, DEA power density can be increased by having an even number of CNT layers. Extended Data  
395 Figure 1e shows the rolling process of a multi-layered DEA. We use grey colored regions to denote the  
396 elastomer layers. The positive and negative electrodes are represented by red and black lines, respectively.  
397 We represent the bottom elastomer layer with a darker grey color. When the elastomer sheet is rolled into  
398 a cylindrical shell, the DEA's bottom layer is put into contact with its top layer. This is illustrated by the  
399 inset shown in Extended Data Figure 1f. The region highlighted by blue lines further shows that a new  
400 layer is formed by the DEA's top and bottom elastomer layers and electrodes. If the top and bottom  
401 electrodes are oppositely charged (as illustrated in Extended Data Figure 1f), then this effective layer  
402 develops an electric field and contributes to actuation. We must have an even number of electrode layers  
403 to ensure the bottom and top electrodes are oppositely charged. In this work, our DEA design has six CNT  
404 and seven elastomer layers. Further, if the top and bottom elastomer layers have the same thickness as all  
405 other layers, then the electric field in this new layer is only half that of other layers because the effective  
406 layer thickness is  $t_{top} + t_{bottom}$  (Extended Data Figure 1g). Hence, reducing the top and bottom layer  
407 thickness increases the electric field in the additional layer, and this results in an increase in DEA output  
408 power. We use a faster spin coating speed (2700 rpm) for the top and bottom layer and slower speed (1700  
409 rpm) for the middle layers. Through reducing the top and bottom elastomer layer thickness by  
410 approximately 35% (Extended Data Figure 1h), we obtain an 11% mass reduction and a 9% increase in  
411 output power relative to a DEA with constant elastomer layer thickness. After making the elastomer layers  
412 and transferring the electrodes, we cut out the DEA from the elastomer substrate and roll it into a  
413 cylindrical shell. In the previous study<sup>9</sup>, the DEA is cut out manually with a razor blade. Our application  
414 requires higher accuracy, so we program a digital cutter (Silhouette Cameo) to cut out the DEA. The  
415 DEA's length is set to 8.6 mm including the exposed CNT tabs for electrical connection. With this  
416 modification, variation in the DEA length is reduced to within 150  $\mu\text{m}$ . Having a precise DEA length is  
417 crucial for attaching the DEA to the robot transmission during assembly.

418 In addition, the DEA's bandwidth depends on several factors such as elastomer mechanical  
419 viscoelasticity ( $\tan\delta$ ), DEA geometry, and electrode conductivity. Here, we improve the fabrication  
420 process relative to a previous study<sup>9</sup> to ensure good conductivity during DEA actuation (Extended Data  
421 Figure 1i). After the DEA is rolled into a shell, carbon conductive adhesive (Electron Microscopy  
422 Sciences) is applied to the exposed electrodes and carbon fiber endcaps are glued to each end. For driving  
423 our flapping wing robot, the DEA needs to overcome aerodynamic drag during both elongation and  
424 retraction phases. During DEA retraction, aerodynamic drag opposes the DEA motion and applies a tensile  
425 stress on the DEA connections. At peak loading, this tensile stress weakens the bonding between the  
426 elastomer and the endcap, and it can create local tears and further lead to delamination. This delamination  
427 reduces electrical conductivity, which increases the DEA's time constant and reduces its bandwidth. We  
428 overcome this problem by modifying the fabrication process to increase the end cap adhesion strength.  
429 During fabrication, Loctite 416 is applied to the outer perimeter of the elastomer shell and the endcaps.  
430 The DEA is compressed with a mass of 18 g and then baked at 72 °C for 4 hours. The glue cures in this  
431 process and holds the electrical connections in compression. The preload is removed after the glue cures,  
432 and other regions of the DEA return to a neutral state. A photograph of the DEA is shown in Extended  
433 Data Figure 1j. With this procedure, we obtain an increase in DEA conductivity of approximately four  
434 times compared to those made using previous methods<sup>9</sup>.

### 435 **3. DEA performance characterization**

436 Here we describe the experimental characterization of the DEA's blocked force, free displacement,  
437 bandwidth, power consumption, and efficiency. To measure the DEA's blocked force, we place the DEA  
438 under a force sensor (Nano 17 Titanium). The sensor is mounted on a two-axis stage and is lowered until  
439 it touches the DEA's top cap (Extended Data Figure 2a). To ensure the DEA remains securely affixed  
440 under the sensor during its retraction phase, we continue lowering the sensor to induce a preload of  
441 approximately 0.05 N. The sensor resolution and the resonant frequency are 1.5 mN and 3000 Hz,  
442 respectively. We sample the sensor reading at 10 kHz and apply a 1500 Hz non-causal low pass filter to

443 post-process the data. To measure the DEA's free displacement, we place a DEA under a laser vibrometer  
444 (Polytec PSV-500). The vibrometer measures the instantaneous velocity of the DEA's oscillatory motion  
445 (Extended Data Figure 2b) approximately 40 times per period. For time sequence measurements, the  
446 vibrometer averages over five cycles to reduce measurement noise. The measured velocity is integrated  
447 numerically to calculate the DEA displacement. In addition, the vibrometer can measure the DEA's  
448 frequency response by driving the DEA with white noise and computing the Fast Fourier Transform (FFT)  
449 of the displacement. This measurement gives a linear approximation of the device frequency response. It  
450 quantifies the DEA's resonant modes and phase shift (Figure 2c-d). This information is useful for robot  
451 design because the DEA's motion is approximated as linear around system resonance at flight conditions.

452 Sample experimental measurements of blocked force and free displacement are shown in Extended Data  
453 Figure 2c and d, respectively. In these experiments, the DEA is driven at 350 Hz and 1300 V. The  
454 amplitude of the DEA's blocked force is calculated as the maximum value of the measured force and it  
455 does not include the preload force (the range is labelled by the red arrows in Extended Data Figure 2c). In  
456 our experiments, we vary the preload in the range of 0.025 N to 0.1N and find that the magnitude of  
457 preload has a negligible effect on the blocked force measurement. The amplitude of the DEA's free  
458 displacement is calculated as the difference between the maximum and the minimum value (as indicated  
459 by the red arrows in Extended Data Figure 2d). We report the peak-to-peak displacement value because  
460 the DEA does mechanical work during both elongation and retraction. To characterize DEA performance  
461 for different operating conditions (Figure 2a-b), we vary input voltage amplitudes and driving frequencies  
462 from 800 V to 1300 V, and from 1 Hz to 600 Hz. Based on the force and displacement measurements, the  
463 actuator energy and power density are calculated as:

$$464 \quad e = \frac{1}{2m_a} F_B \delta, \quad (4)$$

$$465 \quad p = \frac{1}{2m_a} F_B \delta f. \quad (5)$$

466 Equations 4 and 5 assume the elastomer's stress-strain relationship is approximately linear. Through  
467 conducting tensile tests using an Instron materials testing machine, we find the elastomer exhibits a linear  
468 response for a strain less than 20%. The elastomer Young's modulus is measured to be 140 kPa. The  
469 maximum measured energy density (Extended Data Figure 2e) and power density (Extended Data Figure  
470 2f) are 1.13 J/kg and 563 W/kg, respectively (at 500 Hz, 1300 V). These values satisfy the criteria for  
471 robot takeoff (Supplementary Information S1). The DEA's driving voltage can be further increased to  
472 1500 V in controlled hovering flight demonstrations, so the DEA's peak power density is estimated to be  
473 15% higher than the reported value. The DEA experiences dielectric breakdown for a driving voltage  
474 higher than 1500 V.

475 In our flight experiments, the robot is driven by an external power source through a thin tether. Here we  
476 quantify the DEA's resistance, capacitance, power consumption, and efficiency. These parameters are  
477 important for achieving power autonomous flights in future studies. To quantify the DEA's power  
478 consumption, we measure the DEA's input voltage ( $V$ ) and corresponding current ( $I$ ) at flight conditions.  
479 The average electrical power input is:

$$480 \quad \bar{P}_{in} = \frac{1}{T} \int_0^T V(t)I(t)dt. \quad (6)$$

481 A sample measurement of instantaneous power is shown in Extended Data Figure 2g, in which the average  
482 power consumption is 450 mW. We further measure the DEA's resistance and capacitance by sending a  
483 step input and measuring the corresponding current response. The system is modelled as a RC circuit, and  
484 parameters such as series resistance, capacitance, and time constant can be obtained by fitting a first order  
485 system to the current response. The DEA's resistance, capacitance, and time constant are 170 k $\Omega$ , 1.04  
486 nF, and 178  $\mu$ s, respectively. Having calculated the DEA's resistance, we further compute the power  
487 dissipated due to electrical resistance:

$$488 \quad \bar{P}_{ele} = \frac{R}{T} \int_0^T I^2(t)dt. \quad (7)$$

489 The DEA electrode dissipates 330 mW of power at flight conditions. The mechanical power output at this  
490 operating condition is calculated as  $P = \frac{1}{2}F_B\delta f$ , where the values of  $F_B$ ,  $\delta$ , and  $f$  are 0.19 N, 0.89 mm,  
491 and 300 Hz, respectively. The estimated power output is 25 mW, which implies the DEA efficiency is  
492 5.6%. Over 73% of the power is dissipated by the electrode resistance, and the rest of the power dissipation  
493 is contributed by the elastomer's viscoelastic damping.

494 This power dissipation leads to substantial heating of the DEA. The system can be described by a first  
495 order conduction model:

$$496 \quad \frac{dT}{dt} = -K(T - T_a) + \frac{Q}{C}, \quad (8)$$

497 where  $T$  is the DEA temperature,  $T_a$  is the ambient temperature,  $K$  is the dissipation rate,  $Q$  is the heat  
498 inflow, and  $C$  is the DEA's heat capacity. This first order differential equation has a closed form solution.  
499 The solutions for the rising and the cooling phases are:

$$500 \quad T_{rise} = T_a + \frac{Q}{cK_1}(1 - e^{-K_1t}), \quad (9)$$

$$501 \quad T_{cool} = T_a + (T_i - T_a)e^{-K_2t}, \quad (10)$$

502 where  $T_i$  is the initial temperature at the onset of cool down. The dissipation coefficients ( $K_1$  and  $K_2$ ) in  
503 the heating and the cooling phases are different because the flapping motion during the heating phase  
504 induces an airflow that facilitates convective cooling. The values of these modeling parameters are  
505 reported in Extended Data Table 1.

506 We use a FLIR T440 thermal camera to measure the DEA temperature when the robot operates under  
507 takeoff conditions (Extended Data Figure 2h). The DEA temperature increases from 28 °C to 70 °C in 90  
508 seconds. An analytical fit is superimposed on the same graph (Extended Data Figure 2h). Snapshots of a  
509 thermal video are shown in Extended Data Figure 2i. The maximum DEA temperature reaches 70.0 °C  
510 before cool down. This experiment shows most of the input electrical power is dissipated in the form of



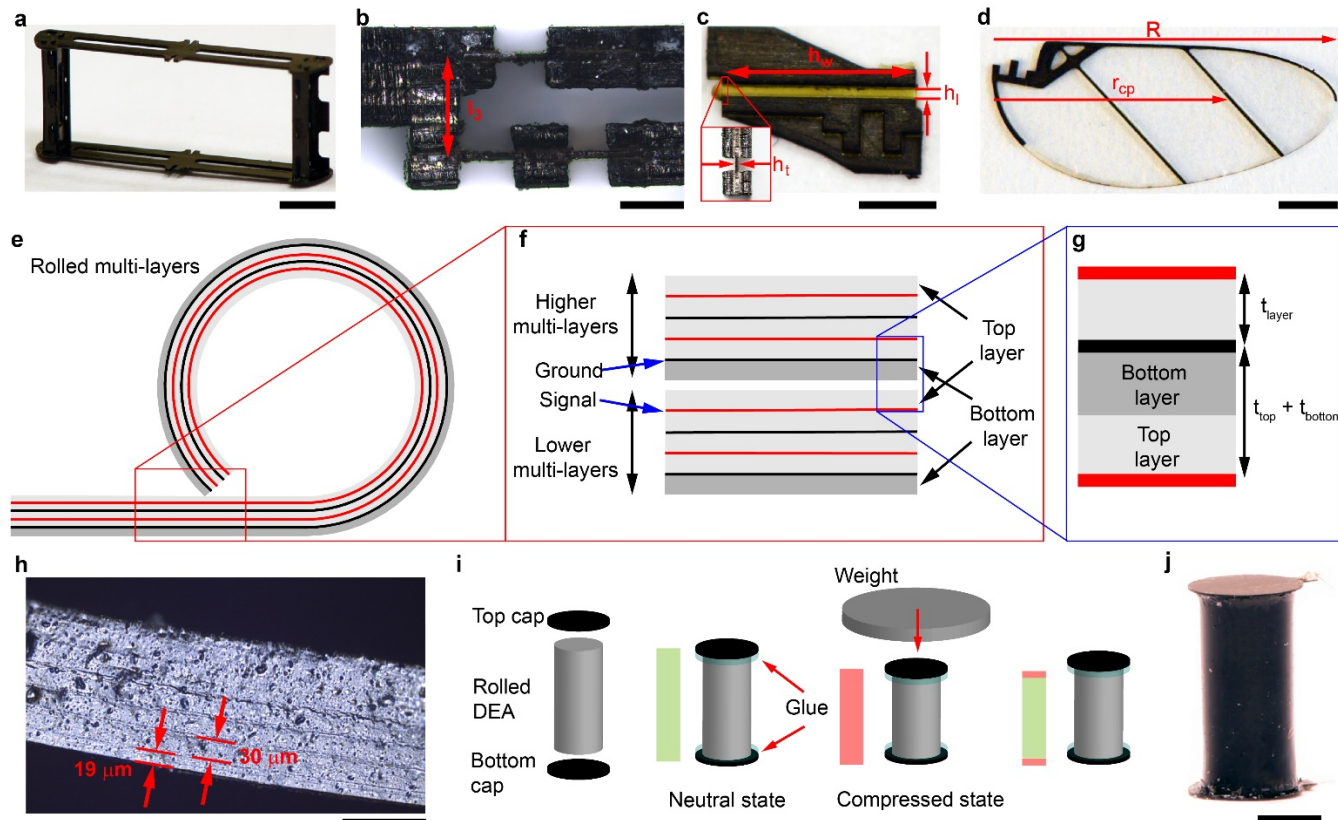
511 heat. Generating excessive amount of heat can lead to thermal failure and reduce actuator lifetime.  
512 Through our experiments, we find our DEA can operate for over 600,000 cycles under takeoff conditions,  
513 equivalent to 33 minutes of flight time.

514 In this study, our DEA has a low transduction efficiency of 5.6%. This low transduction efficiency would  
515 not be conducive to power autonomous flights. In addition, it requires a 1300 V driving signal to achieve  
516 takeoff, which creates challenges for developing high efficiency boost circuitry. While this study does not  
517 aim to achieve power autonomous flight, it is important to identify major challenges and potential  
518 solutions. Future studies should focus on increasing the DEA electrode's conductivity, reducing elastomer  
519 layer thickness to reduce the driving voltage, and redesigning the DEA geometry and robot wings to  
520 reduce the flapping frequency. First, increasing electrode conductivity will lead to a reduction of resistive  
521 power loss. This can be done by exploring new electrode materials such as a hybrid network of carbon  
522 nanotubes, graphene and silver nanowires<sup>37</sup> or intrinsically stretchable electrodes such as conductive  
523 hydrogels<sup>38</sup> or liquid metal. Second, reducing elastomer thickness will reduce the operating voltage. We  
524 can achieve this by increasing the spin coating speed or exploring alternative method such as using an  
525 automatic thin film applicator. Further, the spin coating and the electrode transfer process can be done in  
526 a clean room environment to reduce the number of particulates in the elastomer and on the electrodes.  
527 Third, new electroactive materials such as bottlebrush elastomers<sup>39</sup> can be explored to further increase the  
528 actuator's energy density. In addition, our experiments show that DEA power consumption is linearly  
529 proportional to its operating frequency. To reduce power expenditure, future studies can redesign the DEA  
530 geometry and robot transmission to reduce system resonant frequency. Alternatively, nonlinear controllers  
531 can be developed so that the DEA motion does not need to be linearized around its resonance. Beyond  
532 improving the DEAs, we can apply a new class of electrostatic actuators named Peano-HASEL<sup>33,40</sup> that  
533 have shown promise for achieving very high energy density and moderate bandwidth. For that class of  
534 actuators, it would be important to work on device miniaturization to reduce the driving voltage.

536 **Methods Reference**

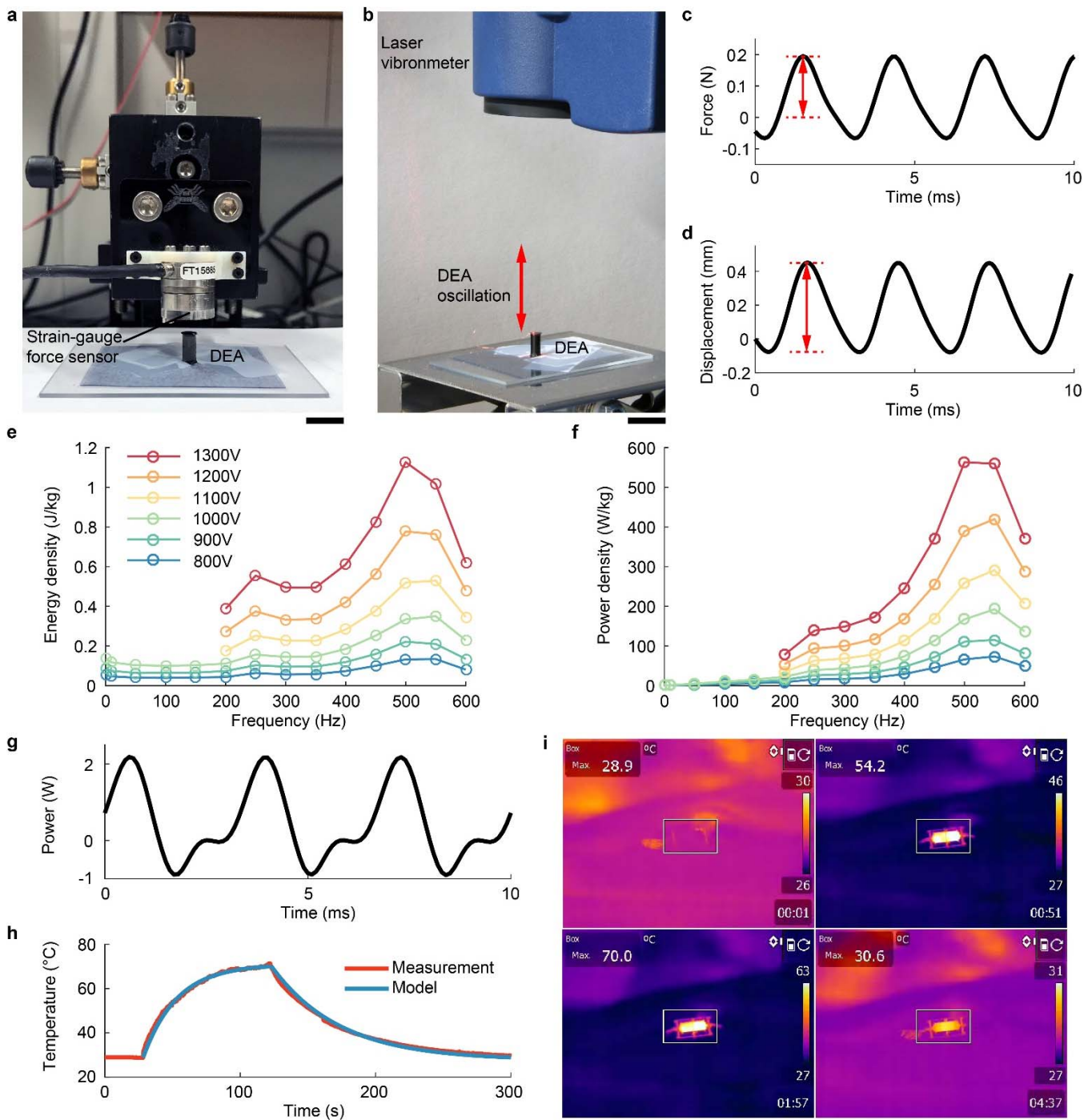
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## Extended Data Figures and Tables



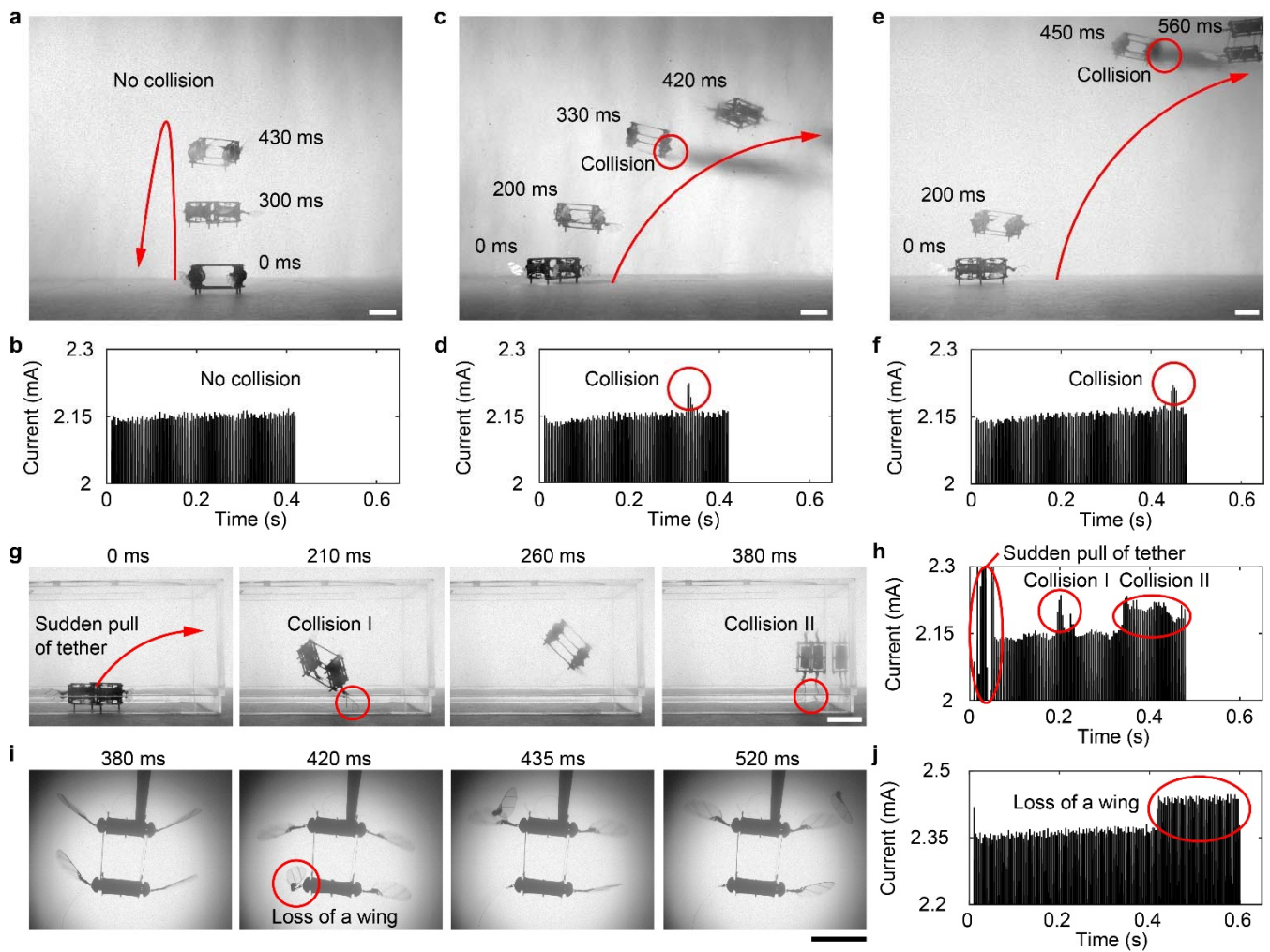
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557 **Extended Data Figure 1 | Design and fabrication of robot components.** **a**, A 40 mg airframe made of  
 558 eight pieces of carbon fiber composites. Scale bar represents 2 mm. **b**, Top view of the planar four-bar  
 559 transmission. The red arrow marks  $l_3$ , which is the inverse of the transmission ratio  $T$ . Scale bar represents  
 560 200  $\mu\text{m}$ . **c**, Front view of the wing hinge. The hinge width ( $h_w$ ), length ( $h_l$ ), and thickness ( $h_t$ ) determine  
 561 its torsional stiffness. Scale bar represents 1 mm. **d**, Front view of a robot wing whose wing span ( $R$ ) and  
 562 center of pressure ( $r_{cp}$ ) are 10 mm and 7 mm, respectively. Scale bar represents 2 mm. **e**, An illustration  
 563 of rolling an elastomer-electrode multilayer into a DEA. **f**, A zoomed-in illustration of the inset shown in  
 564 **e**. **g**, A zoomed-in illustration of the inset shown in **f**. The bottom layer of the top multi-layer and the top  
 565 layer of the bottom multi-layer forms a region that can be actuated. **h**, Confocal microscopy image of the  
 566 DEA's cross section. The elastomer sheet is 220  $\mu\text{m}$  thick and it has seven elastomer layers. The thickness  
 567 of the top and the bottom layers are approximately 65% of the middle layers. Scale bar represents 100  $\mu\text{m}$ .  
 568 **i**, Fabrication of the DEA. After the elastomer sheet is rolled into a cylindrical shell, the top and bottom  
 569 cap are glued onto the DEA. A weight is placed on top of the DEA as the glue cures. After the glue cures,  
 570 the DEA connections remain in compression (red) while the rest of the DEA returns to its neutral state  
 571 (green). **j**, Front view of a DEA. Scale bar represents 3 mm.



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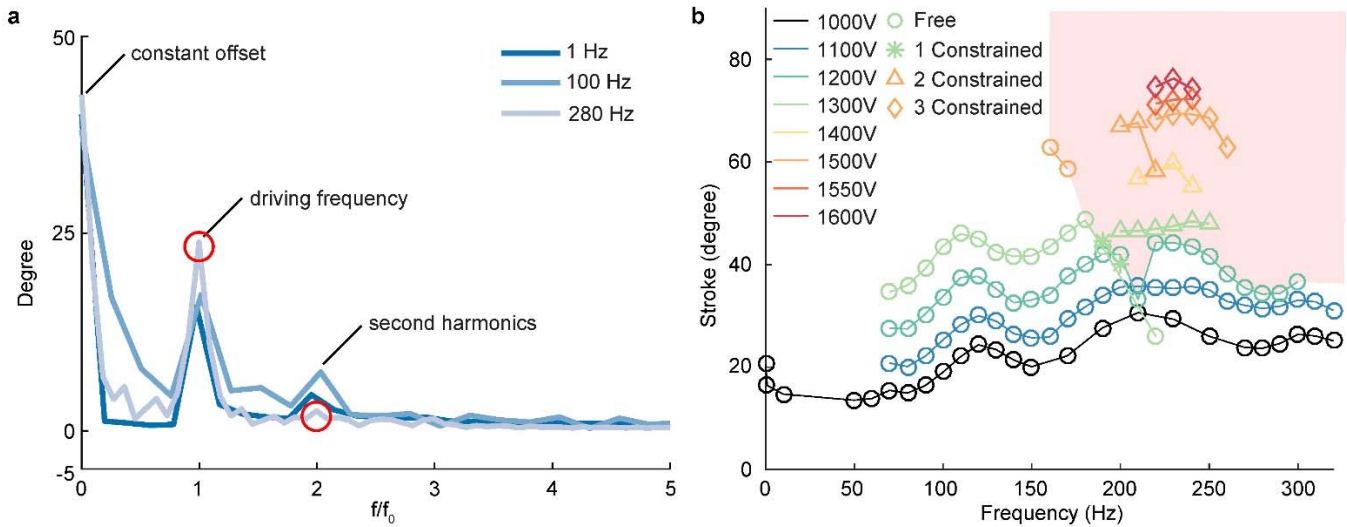
573 **Extended Data Figure 2 | Characterization of blocked force, free displacement, and power**  
 574 **dissipation.** **a**, Experimental setup for measuring the DEA's blocked force. **b**, Experimental setup for  
 575 measuring the DEA's free displacement. **c-d**, Sample blocked force (**c**) and free displacement (**d**)  
 576 measurements when the DEA is driven at 350 Hz and 1300 V. The red arrows in **c** and **d** indicate the  
 577 ranges of blocked force and free displacement that correspond to Figure 2a and b. **e-f**, The DEA's energy  
 578 (**e**) and power (**f**) density as functions of driving frequency and voltage. This DEA's blocked force and  
 579 free displacement measurements are shown in Figure 2a-b. **g**, The DEA's instantaneous power  
 580 consumption when driven at 1400 V and 300 Hz. **h**, Measurement and modeling of the DEA's temperature  
 581 profile during its operation at 1400 V and 300 Hz. **i**, Thermal images showing the temperature of the DEA  
 582 during operation. **h** and **i** show the same experiment. Scale bars in (**a**, **b**, and **i**) represent 1 cm.



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584 **Extended Data Figure 3 | Robot in-flight collision and damage sensing.** **a-b**, A composite image (**a**)  
 585 and the measured DEA current (**b**) of a short takeoff flight without any collisions. **c-f**, Two takeoff flights  
 586 in which the robot hits a wall during its ascent. The red circles in **c** and **e** mark the collision events and  
 587 they correspond to the current spikes in **d** and **f**, respectively. **g-h**, A robot takeoff flight in a transparent  
 588 box. The robot makes multiple collisions and the red circles in **g** and **h** relate these collisions to DEA  
 589 current changes. **i-j**, An image sequence (**i**) and the measured current (**j**) of a flapping-wing  
 590 characterization test. One robot wing falls off during the experiment and this event is detected by  
 591 measuring the DEA current. Scale bars in (a, c, e, g, i) represent 1 cm.

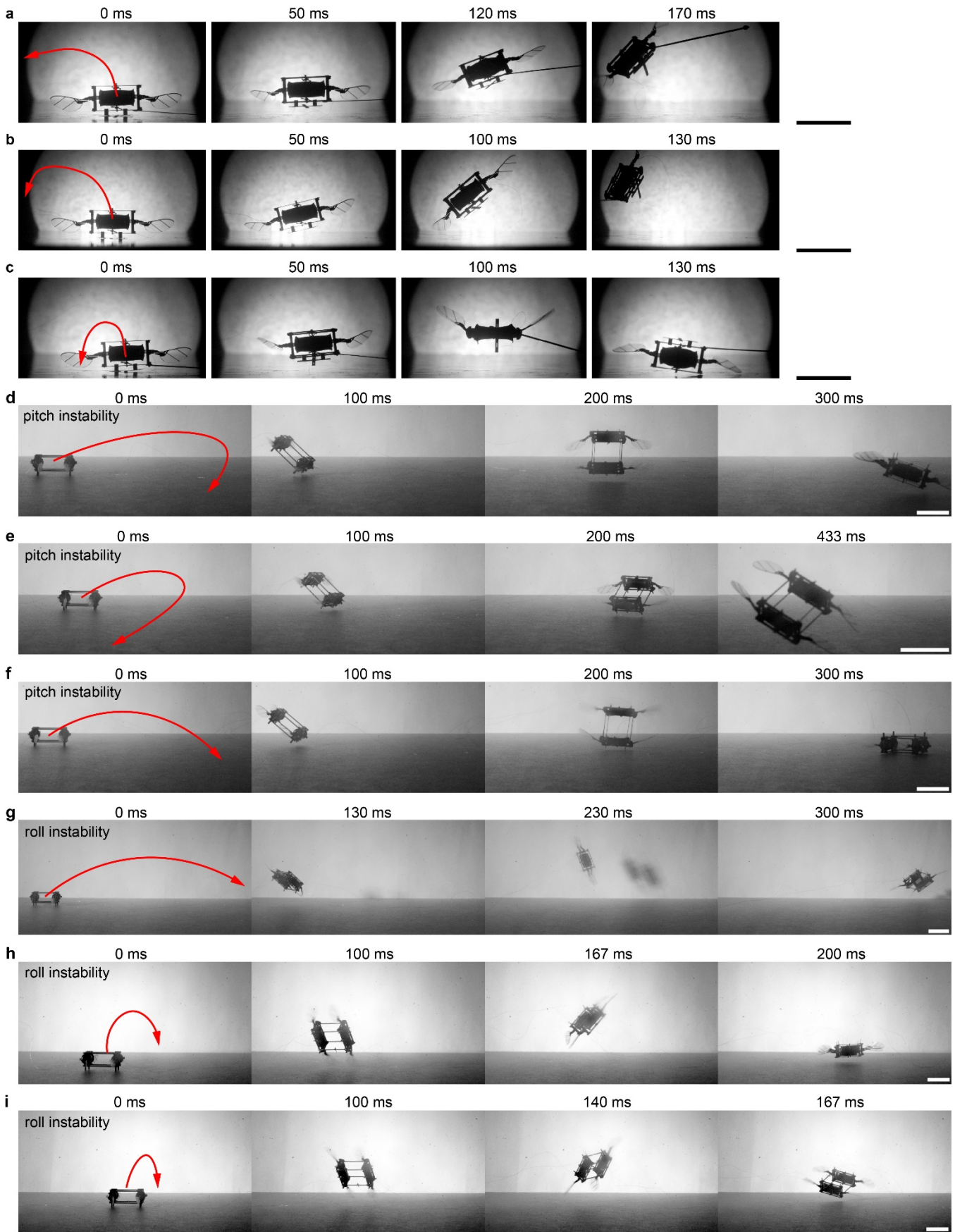
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594 **Extended Data Figure 4 | DEA actuation nonlinearity.** **a**, Fast Fourier Transform of the tracked wing  
 595 stroke kinematics when a wing is driven at 1 Hz, 100 Hz, and 280 Hz. The stroke kinematics data is taken  
 596 from that shown in Figure 3b. There is a substantial second order harmonic for the cases of 1 Hz and 100  
 597 Hz. When the wing is driven near the system resonant frequency (280 Hz), the red circles indicate that the  
 598 fundamental harmonic grows and the second harmonic is attenuated. **b**, Right wing stroke amplitude as a  
 599 function of driving voltage and frequency. The red region represents stroke amplitudes and frequencies  
 600 that cannot be achieved without constraining the DEA. This data corresponds to the same experiment  
 601 shown in Figure 3f.

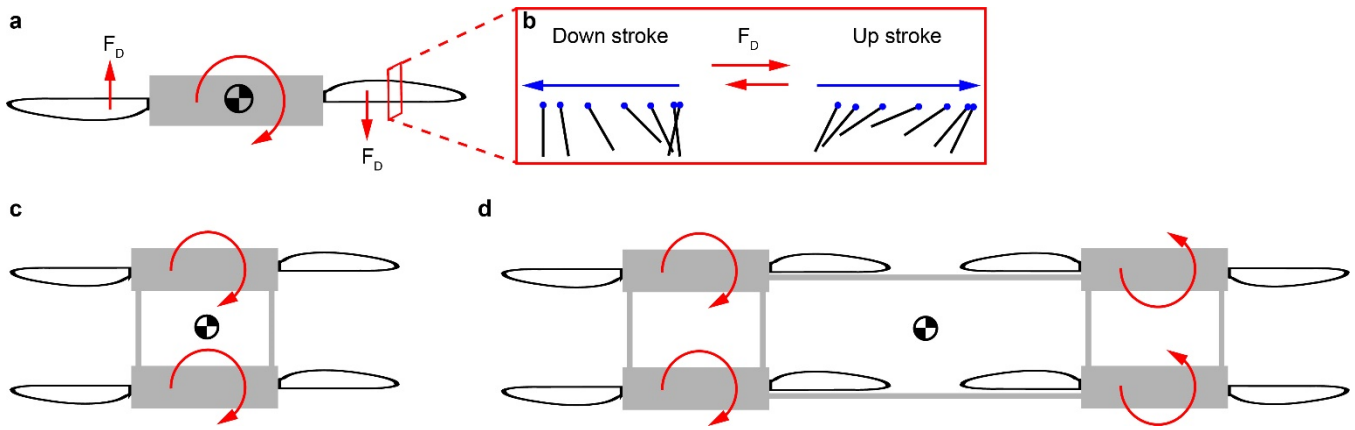
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604 **Extended Data Figure 5 | Repeated unstable takeoff flights. (a-c)**, Three takeoff flights of a robot with  
605 one DEA. In these flights, the robot flips upside down within 200 ms after liftoff due to aerodynamic  
606 torque imbalances from the two wings. **(d-i)**, Unstable takeoff flights of a robot with two DEAs. In **(d-f)**,  
607 the robot pitches forward and eventually flips over due to asymmetric lift forces from the front and the  
608 back robot modules. In **(g-i)**, the robot rolls sideways and flips over due to lift force imbalances between  
609 its left and right wings. Scale bars in **(a-i)** represent 1 cm.

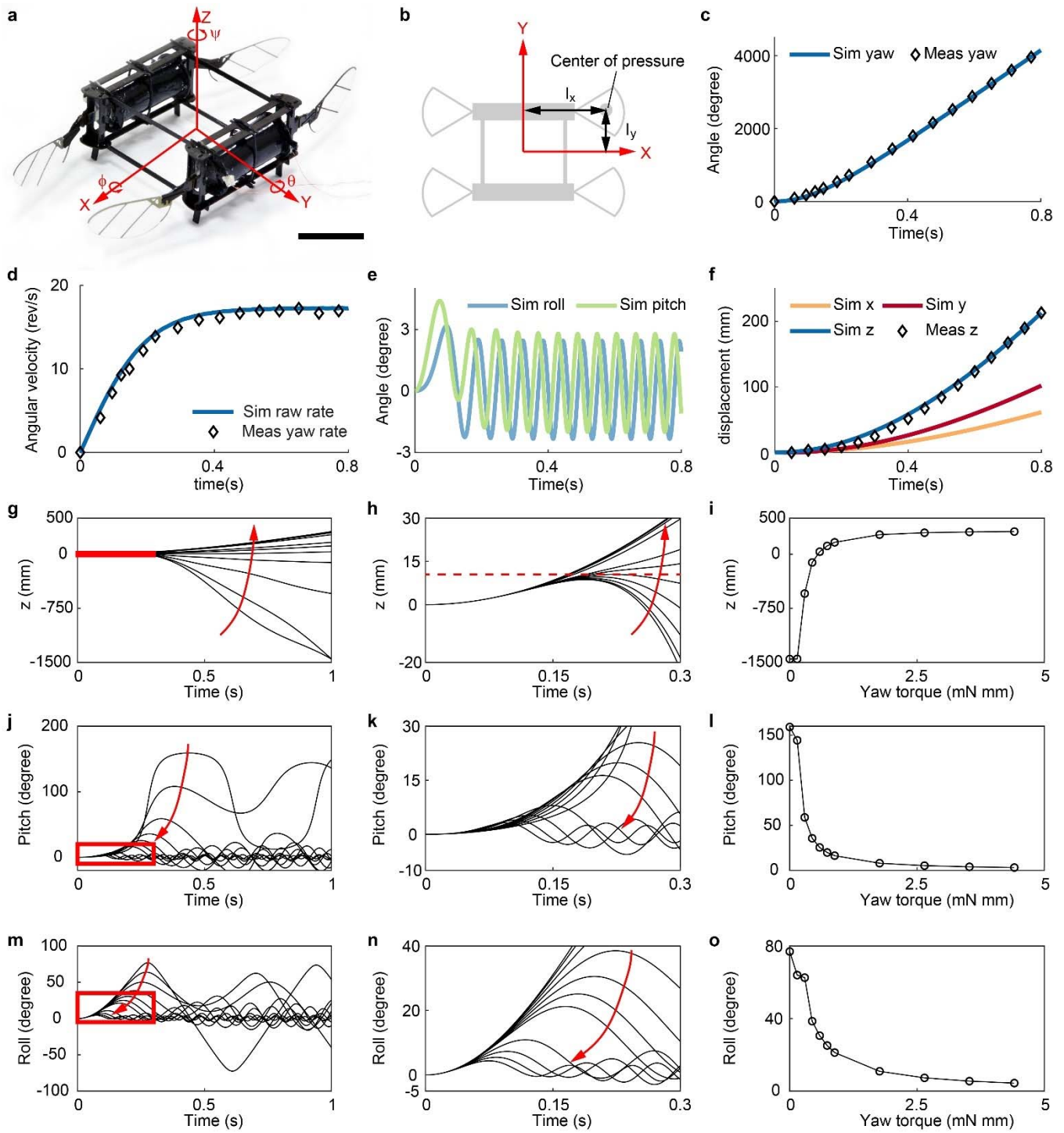
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612 **Extended Data Figure 6 | Illustration of robot yaw torque generation through biasing the mean wing**  
 613 **pitch angle.** **a**, Illustration of wing pitch bias in an one-DEA module. The red arrows indicate the  
 614 directions of the mean drag force due to biasing the wing pitch. The net drag forces from the two wings  
 615 induce a robot yaw torque. **b**, The inset shows the motion of a wing chord on a 2D plane. The wing pitch  
 616 bias causes different wing pitching motion in the up stroke and down stroke phases of the wing motion,  
 617 which leads to different drag forces. **c**, Two one-DEA modules having the same yaw torque bias direction  
 618 are assembled into a two-DEA robot. **d**, Two two-DEA modules having opposite yaw torque bias  
 619 directions are assembled into a four-DEA robot.

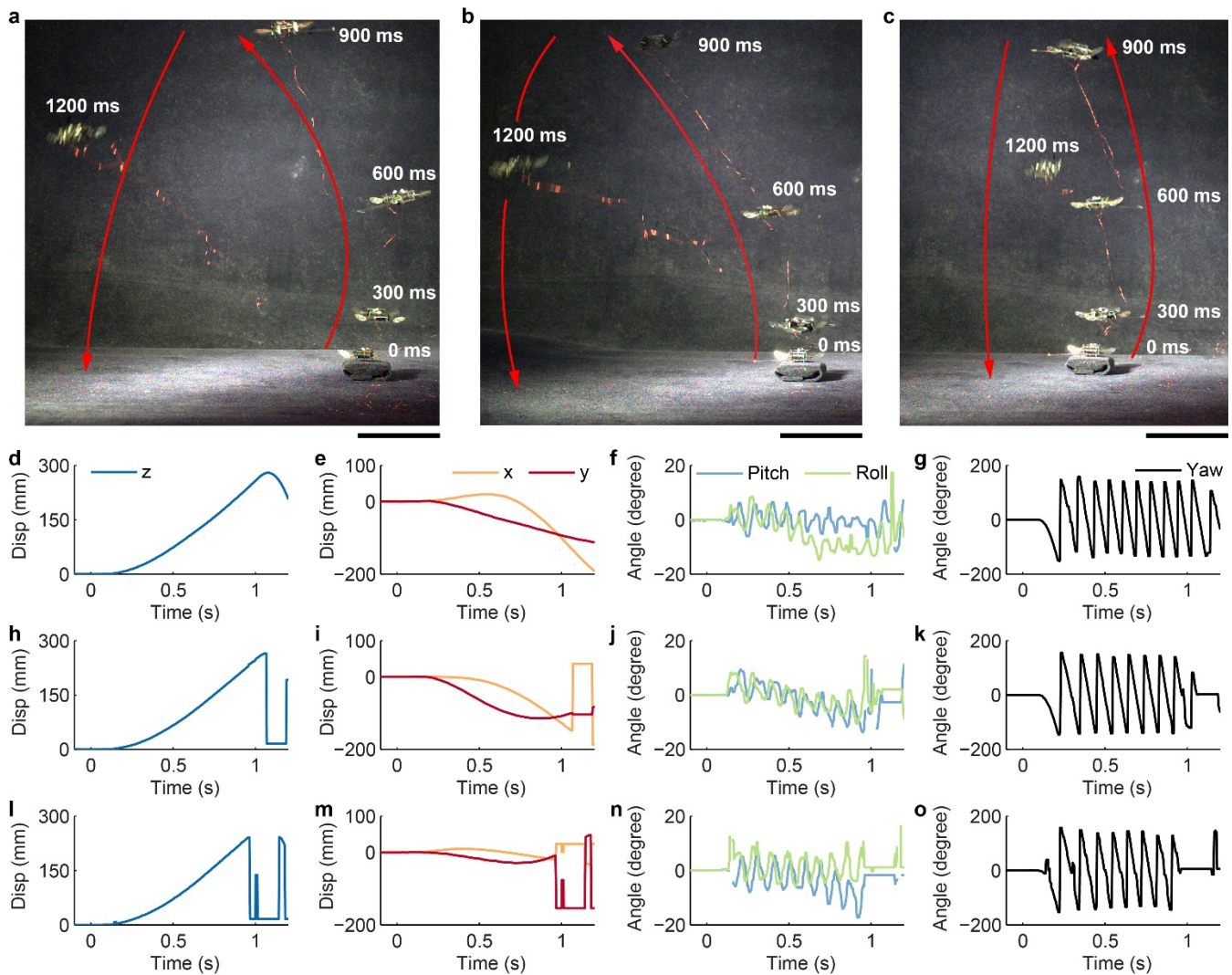


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621 **Extended Data Figure 7 | Simulation of open-loop ascending flight and comparison with**  
 622 **experimental results.** **a**, Coordinate system definition of the four-wing robot model. Scale bar represents  
 623 1 cm. **b**, Top view schematic of the four-wing robot.  $l_x$  and  $l_y$  denote the distance from the robot's center  
 624 of mass to each wing's center of pressure. **c**, Comparison of measured and simulated yaw ( $\psi$ ) motion. The  
 625 robot makes 11 revolutions with respect to its z-axis 0.8 s after takeoff. **d**, Comparison of measured and  
 626 simulated yaw rate ( $\dot{\psi}$ ). The steady state angular velocity of the robot's yaw rate is 17.5 revolutions per  
 627 second. **e**, Simulated roll ( $\phi$ ) and pitch ( $\theta$ ) motion. Our simulation predicts that the steady state oscillation  
 628 with respect to the robot's X and Y axes is smaller than  $3^\circ$ . **f**, Simulation results of the robot's displacement

629 after takeoff. The experimental measurement of the robot's vertical motion is superimposed on the same  
630 graph. The data shown in (c-f) correspond to the same simulation and experiment shown in Supplementary  
631 Video 5 and Figure 4b-c. **g-o**, Dynamical simulation of robot takeoff flights under different values of body  
632 yaw torque. **g**, Robot altitude as a function of time. **h**, A zoomed-in plot of robot altitude shortly after  
633 takeoff. This plot corresponds to the red region in **g**. **i**, Robot altitude at one second after takeoff as a  
634 function of input body yaw torque. **j**, Robot pitch motion as a function of time. **k**, A zoomed-in plot of  
635 robot pitch that corresponds to the red region in **j**. **l**, Maximum robot pitch deviation as a function of input  
636 yaw torque. **m**, Robot roll motion as a function of time. **n**, A zoomed-in plot of robot roll that corresponds  
637 to the red region in **m**. **o**, Maximum robot roll deviation as a function of input yaw torque.

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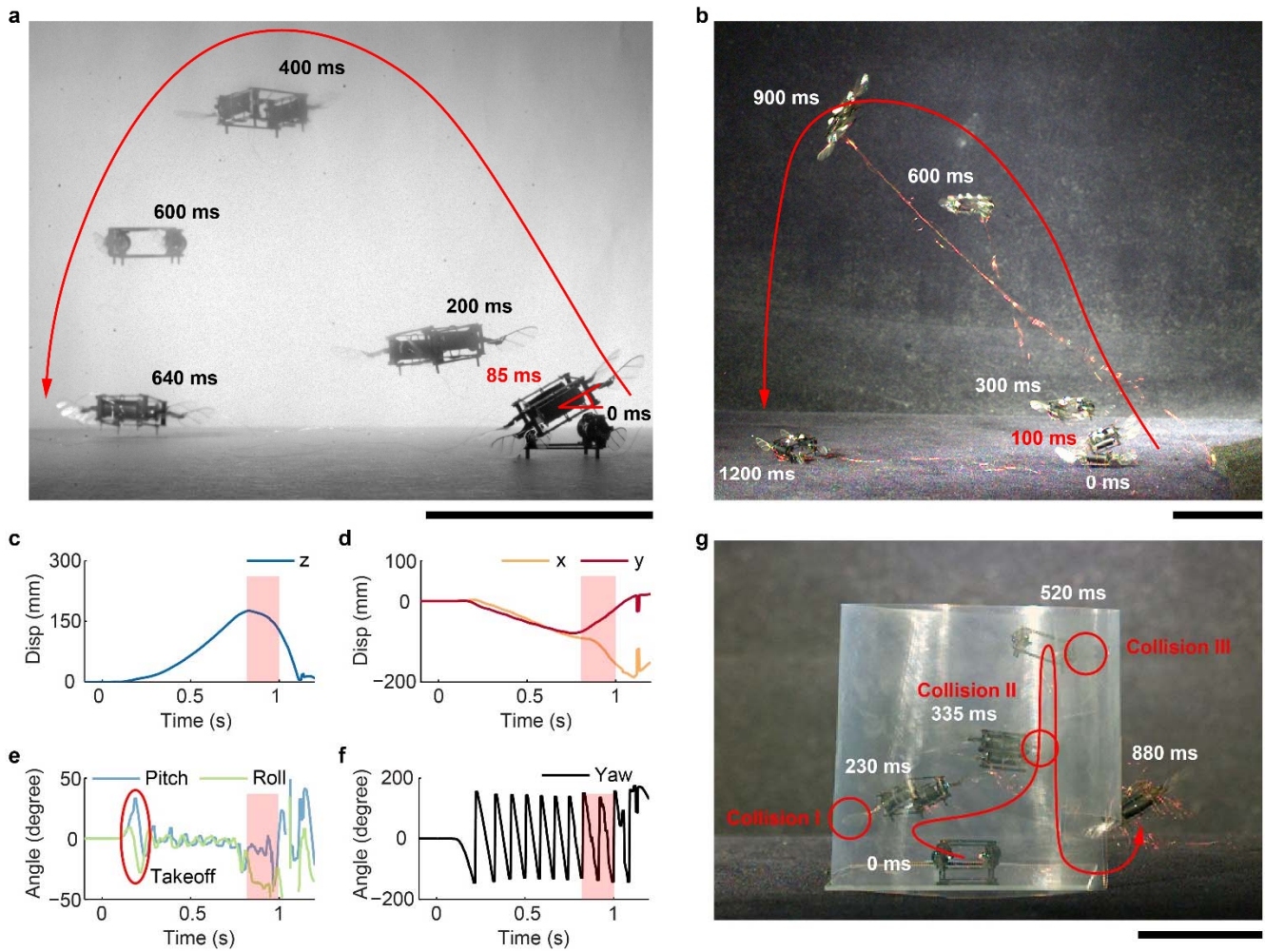


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640 **Extended Data Figure 8 | Three passively stable ascending flights of a robot with two DEAs.** a-c,  
 641 Composite images of three one-second, open-loop ascending flights. **d-g**, Tracked robot altitude (**d**), x  
 642 and y center of mass position (**e**), pitch and roll orientation (**f**), and yaw rotation (**g**). The data shown in **d-**  
 643 **g** correspond to the flight shown in **a**. Similarly, (**h-k**) and (**l-o**) show the tracked flight data corresponding  
 644 to the flights shown in **b** and **c**, respectively. Sudden jumps in the tracking data (**h**, **i**, **l**, and **m**) indicate  
 645 the time at which the Vicon motion capture system loses tracking.

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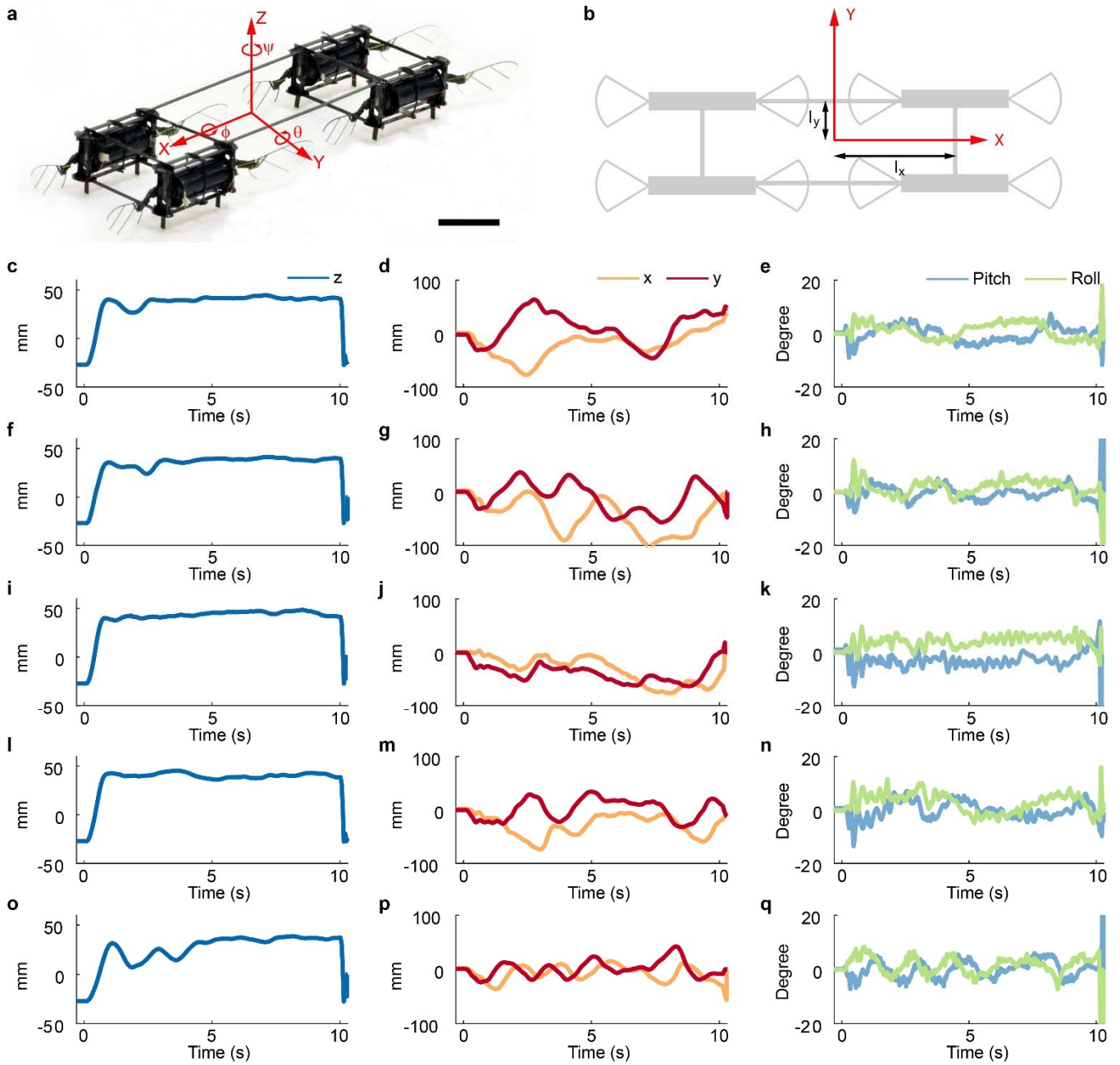
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649 **Extended Data Figure 9 | Robot unbalanced takeoff flights and a failed collision recovery**  
 650 **experiment.** **a**, A composite image of a 0.5 second open-loop takeoff flight captured at 3000 frames per  
 651 second. The robot pitch deviation is approximately 35 degree 85 ms after takeoff. **b**, A composite image  
 652 of a 1 second open-loop takeoff flight conducted in the Vicon motion tracking arena. **c-f**, Tracked robot  
 653 altitude (**c**), x and y center of mass position (**d**), pitch and roll orientation (**e**), and yaw rotation (**f**).  
 654 The data shown in **c-f** correspond to the flight in **b**. The red circle in **e** illustrates the large robot pitch and roll  
 655 deviation after takeoff. The red shaded region in **c-f** show the changes of robot position and orientation  
 656 after it is pulled by its tether. **g**, An example of a failed collision recovery experiment. The robot is  
 657 destabilized after making the third collision. Scale bars in **a**, **b**, and **g** represent 5 cm.

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660 **Extended Data Figure 10 | Controller design of the eight-wing robot and hovering flight**  
 661 **repeatability.** **a**, Perspective view of the eight-wing robot with a superimposed coordinate system. The  
 662 roll ( $\phi$ ), pitch ( $\theta$ ), and yaw ( $\psi$ ) angles are defined with respect to the fixed X, Y, and Z axes. Scale bar  
 663 represents 1 cm. **b**, Top view schematic of the eight-wing robot.  $l_x$  and  $l_y$  denote the distance from the  
 664 robot center of mass to the geometric center of each DEA. **c-q**, Tracked robot position and attitude data  
 665 of five 10-second hovering flights. In these flights, we do not control the robot's yaw motion. **(c, f, i, l, o)**,  
 666 The first column shows the robot's altitude as a function of time. **(d, g, j, m, p)**, The second column shows  
 667 the robot's lateral position as a function of time. **(e, h, k, n, q)**, The last column shows the robot's roll ( $\phi$ )  
 668 and pitch ( $\theta$ ) motion as a function of time.

669

670

Parameter	Symbol	Value
Robot mass	$m$	160 mg
Mean drag coefficient	$\overline{C_D}$	1.6
Mean lift coefficient	$\overline{C_L}$	0.7
Transmission ratio	$T$	2530 rad·m <sup>-1</sup>
Maximum lift to weight ratio	$f_m$	1.2
Robot transmission dimensions	$t, w, l$	25 μm, 1.2 mm, 200 μm
Young's modulus of polyimide film	$E$	2.5 GPa
Wing aspect ratio	$AR$	3
Wing span	$R$	9.9 mm
Wing span wise moment of inertia	$I_{zz}$	15 mg·mm <sup>2</sup>
Wing span wise center of pressure	$r_{cp}$	7 mm
Air density	$\rho$	1.2 kg·m <sup>-3</sup>
Wing hinge geometry	$t_h, w_h, l_h$	7.5 μm, 2.65 mm, 110 μm
DEA mass	$m_a$	100 mg
DEA natural resonance frequency	$f_{res}$	465 Hz
Heat generated during operation	$Q$	0.25 J·s <sup>-1</sup>
DEA heat capacity	$C$	0.15 J·K <sup>-1</sup>
Ambient temperature	$T_a$	28.7 °C
Initial temperature at onset of cooling	$T_i$	70 °C
Heat conduction rate during heating	$K_1$	0.04 s <sup>-1</sup>
Heat conduction rate during cooling	$K_2$	0.022 s <sup>-1</sup>

673 **Extended Data Table 2** | Physical and simulation parameters for the four-wing robot. These parameter  
 674 values correspond to the simulation results shown in Extended Data Figure 7.

Parameter	Symbol	Value
Mass	$m$	320 mg
Principal moment of inertia	$I_{xx}, I_{yy}, I_{zz}$	$2.99 \times 10^4, 2.41 \times 10^3,$ $3.13 \times 10^4 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mm}^2$
Distance to robot center of mass	$l_x, l_y$	13.3, 7 mm
Lift force of each wing	$F_{L1}, F_{L2}, F_{L3}, F_{L4}$	0.86, 0.81, 0.82, 0.88 mN
Drag force of each wing	$F_{D1}, F_{D2}, F_{D3}, F_{D4}$	0.29, 0.29, 0.29, 0.29 mN
Body damping force coefficient	$b_f$	$0.5 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mm}^{-1}$
Body damping torque coefficient	$b_t$	$1.5 \times 10^3 \text{ mg} \cdot \text{mm}^2$

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676 **Extended Data Table 3** | Values of flight controller parameters for hovering flights corresponding to  
 677 Figure 4e-i and Extended Data Figure 10.

#	Flight duration (s)	$\lambda_0$ (s <sup>-4</sup> )	$\lambda_1$ (s <sup>-3</sup> )	$\lambda_2$ (s <sup>-2</sup> )	$\lambda_3$ (s <sup>-1</sup> )	$\Lambda_0$ (s <sup>-2</sup> )	$\Lambda_1$ (s <sup>-1</sup> )	$\alpha$ (V/mN)	$\beta$ (V)	$\gamma_1, \gamma_2, \gamma_3, \gamma_4$ (V)
1	10	13608	6631	798	62	25	125	82	1172	38, 80, 69, 34
2	10	13608	6631	798	62	25	125	82	1172	38, 80, 69, 34
3	10	27216	9946	570	57	25	125	82	1172	38, 80, 69, 34
4	10	30618	9946	570	57	25	125	82	1172	38, 80, 69, 34
5	10	54432	13262	713	71	25	125	82	1172	38, 80, 69, 34
6	16	54432	13262	713	71	30	150	82	1172	38, 85, 74, 34

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