

Papua New Guinea 2016

New Guinea has a reputation of being a very tough place to see mammals and my first trip to the island in 2011 proved this: in 3 weeks in the field in West Papua, including some really remote places, I only saw a single Great Flying-fox (*Pteropus neohibernicus*). So when I had the chance to go to the eastern half to the island this year to conduct a training course for local botanists, I vowed that I would see at least one marsupial. As it turned out, I saw three (plus some bats and a mouse) and learnt that mammal watching is actually possible on the island. Here, I first briefly report on my observations and then give some information on mammal-watching based on what local people told me.

I was based at Binatang Research Center, right on the beach about 15 minutes north of Madang city. This center was founded some 20 years ago by Vojtech Novotny, who has built it into probably the most important biological research center on the island. The station itself is located amid coconut plantations and villages and useless for mammals. I only saw a House Mouse (*Mus musculus* or *M. castaneus*) in the lab, some Spectacled Flying-foxes (*Pteropus conspicillatus*) at dusk (there is also a large colony in Madang city), and some small bats flying around at dusk, probably Papuan Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus papuanus*). We also visited some nearby forest fragments in the foothills, where early one morning I glimpsed a Common Spotted Cuscus (*Spilogale maculatus*). The locals claimed the bandicoots are also common but largely nocturnal and for security reasons we did not move about at night.

From the center, we drove 6 hours to a cloud forest region at 1700-1900 m on the slopes of Mount Wilhelm. The local people and workers from the center claimed that cuscuses and large rodents (presumably *Mallomys*) are common in the forests, but we had rain and or heavy fog each night and spotlighting was impossible. The only mammals I saw were small bats at dawn and dusk, perhaps Mountain Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus collinus*).

Finally, after finishing the course at Bintang, I flew to Port Moresby and spent 2 days mainly birdwatching with local guide Daniel Wakra (danielwakra@yahoo.com). Daniel is a former hunter from Mount Hagen turned tour guide and conservationist. He organizes plenty of private and group tours, intimately knows the country and its birds, and is a great guy. I can wholeheartedly recommend him. He is not an expert in mammal identification, but he certainly knows how to find them! When he learnt that I was also interested in mammals, we spent some time looking for them and saw a Gray Forest Wallaby (*Dorcopsis luctuosa*) at 10 am in Varirata National Park and a Common Echimyptera (*Echimyptera kalubu*) at 4:30 am along a dirt road on the drive to Brown River.

So much for my trip, which netted me 4 identified and 3 tentatively identified mammal species. Not much, but more than I had feared.



Gray Forest Wallaby in Varirata NP. The naked pale tail tip is barely visible behind the thin sapling.

Some information on mammal watching in PNG

Talking with Daniel, I learnt that he actually has repeatedly organized trips for mammal watching and photography, and of course he regularly sees mammals on his birding trips. Here are some sites he recommends:

Port Moresby and the surrounding areas for a couple of days. In addition to the mammals we saw, he told me that the night before my visit he had gone out with a snake collector until 3 am, seeing a number of Agile Wallabies (*Notamacropus agilis*, of course this is not a species one would normally go to PNG to see...), bandicoots (various species are possible), and a strange forest rat that he could not identify. He also regularly sees Common Spotted Cuscus in Varirata National Park.

Kiunga and Tabubil in extreme western PNG: lowland and mid-montane forests with tree kangaroos (Doria's or Goodfellows?) and caves with bats and flying foxes. In his mammal book, Tim Flannery talks about a cave near Tabubil where he found 12 species of microbats and Daniel mentioned that he knew a cave with bats. The same one? The rare Bulmer's Fruit-bat (*Aproteles bulmerae*) is also found in this general area, but I don't know how easy or difficult access to the roosting cave may be.

Mount Hagen: very comfortable Kumul Lodge, which has Speckled Dasyure (*Neophascogale lorentzii*) feeding below the bird-of-paradise feeding tables and about five species of possums/cuscuses in the forest. Hiking to and camping at higher elevations adds several possums and dasyures plus rodents. He uses local kids to find the sleeping places/burrows of the species.

Huon mountains for Huon Tree Kangaroo (*Dendrolagus matschiei*) plus plenty of possums, cuscuses, etc. One needs to charter a small plane to get there.

Crater Mountain: he went there with a Japanese customer who specifically wanted to see Long-beaked Echidna (*Zaglossus bruijini*) and they indeed found two.

In addition, the people at Binatang Research Center told me about the Wanang Conservation Area where the center runs a really nice research station. This is a 10,000 ha patch of pristine lowland rainforest in a large logging concession (a bit like Danum Valley) in the Ramu River valley. It is reached by a 4-6 hours drive from Madang, followed by 3-6 hours on foot, depending on weather and road conditions, so it may require two days to get there. Apparently, the forest maintains the full set of forest biota, including two species of terrestrial kangaroos (presumably White-striped Forest Wallaby *Dorcopsis hageni* and New Guinea Pademelon *Thylogale brownii*), lots of bandicoots, etc. This place is not usually open to tourists, but the idea is that the local communities profit from the station, so they may be willing to receive serious mammal watchers. I can establish the contacts.

In conclusion, after hearing all of this, I now think that it is possible to organize a 2-3-week trip to PNG and see 15-20 species of marsupials plus rodents and bats, depending on how much trapping and netting one does. There are two challenges, however. The first is costs. PNG is very expensive. Daniel charged me 350 US\$ per day, which is steep but not excessive by local standards. He told me that at the end of this year he was organizing a 3-week trip for a single person, with the explicit aim of finding some birds and plenty of mammals. Total in-country cost for this was 28,000 US\$, including his guiding fees, accommodation, food, seven inland flights, 4WD hire, plane charter, porters, etc., etc. Of course, if one gets together a group of 3-4 people, then per person costs would be less, I guess around 8000-9000 US\$ per person for 3 weeks (plus 2000 \$ for getting to PNG from almost anywhere in the world except Australia...). The second issue is security. While I found the people extremely friendly and hospitable and never felt in any danger, crime and violence are real problems. I heard plenty of stories and you can see the razor wire everywhere, the cars with bars on all windows, etc. So I would never travel without a knowledgeable and reliable local guide. And don't go there in 2017: it is an election year and especially in the mountains things can get a little crazy, apparently. But if you can fork over the cash and are up to a bit of adventure, what a trip that could be...