

In search of the Striped Possum: A night at Chambers Rainforest Lodge

Michael Johnson, March 2023

I have managed to see most of the wet tropic mammals of Far-north Queensland that I had wanted to see on a trip up there in 2021 (<https://www.mammalwatching.com/2021/04/05/new-trip-report-far-north-queensland/>). However, there were still a handful of mammals I want to see, with the striped possum (*Dactylopsila trivirgata*) topping the list. Striped possums (there are four species in New Guinea) share the Family Petauridae with the wrist-winged gliders and the Leadbeater's possum. It has an extended fourth finger for digging grubs out of trees, much like an aye-aye, and are widespread in New Guinea but confined to a limited area of rainforest in Australia.

Chambers Rainforest Lodge, located in a block of rainforest next to Lake Eacham and with a dedicated wildlife viewing platform, is often regarded as the easiest place to see them. I have tried to book in there before however as they are quite small and accept groups, it can be difficult to get a booking when you want one. This trip I was able to book a single night and hoped that would be enough. At AU\$140 for the night, I thought the cost very reasonable.

Accommodation at the lodge is in self-contained units with a deck, living area and bedroom. Each unit has a kitchenette, and there is no food service at the lodge. The units are grouped in blocks of three adjacent to the forest, and sitting on your deck you are looking straight into the forest. Next to the office, which is up the hill across a clearing from the units, there is a lounge with a natural history library as well as a deck overlooking the property.

Reading about the lodge, I had imagined the wildlife viewing platform to be elevated, however it is at ground level, and is a roofed concrete pad with seating, although the ground slopes away quite rapidly in front of it. Yellow floodlights lit the forest immediately in front.

I went down to the platform with my wife at about 7pm. At around 7.30 a member of staff came down and coated the lower trunk of two of the trees in front of us with honey. We were also joined by another couple for a while, and through the evening two other couples also came and went. Thankfully, everyone was very respectful and kept quiet while at the platform, although none were actual mammalwatchers!

Probably about 15 minutes later a Kreft's glider appeared, enjoyed some of the honey and then departed. Having seen an animal my wife was satisfied and returned to our cabin. Later, another Kreft's glider appeared and a long-nosed bandicoot made its presence known. At one point a barking owl started calling and I feared that if it continued that might be the end of mammal watching for the evening. Thankfully, it gave up after about 10 minutes.

Then about 8.30 or so a striped possum appeared. It was making its way down one of the trees with the honey. First thing I noted was it was much larger than expected. For some reason I had assumed it would be about the size of a Leadbeater's possum, but it was more the size of a yellow-bellied glider. Then it started doing extraordinary things with its tail, firstly twirling it around in a circular motion then holding it erect at right angles to its body. I have never seen any other species of possum or glider of any family doing anything similar.

Reaching the honey, it then started to feed. After a while, the long-nosed bandicoot reappeared, moving past the base of the tree. Despite being two metres high in the tree and well out of the reach of the bandicoot, the possum retreated up the tree, where I could see it about 12 metres up the tree, hiding on the other side of the trunk. As the bandicoot departed, the possum returned to the feeding station. This

behaviour was repeated twice more before the possum departed for good. In all I had close to half an hour with the possum, and excellent views.

After that, another Kreft's glider appeared, and the bandicoot continued to be active. It came onto the platform, coming within two metres of me and this giving excellent views. However, facing the prospect of diminishing returns, I decided to return to our cabin and was in bed by 10pm.

The next morning, I birded the property, observing seventeen species. Notable amongst them were Victoria's riflebird, spotted catbird, Eastern whipbird and wompoo pigeon, none of which are normally easy to see.

On the way back to Mission Beach, we went in search of what is becoming a nemesis species, the Lumholtz's tree kangaroo. This species has eluded me on both my previous trips over the last two years. We visited Nerana Tea Plantation and Malanda Falls, both well-known sites. Once again, I dipped. Sadly, the Nerana Tea Plantation visitor centre is now permanently closed, however this does not stop you searching the trees that line the road.

Striped Possum feeding – from my Iphone.

