

WESTERN LONG-BEAKED ECHIDNA and other mammals in West Papua and the Moluccas – October 2023 – version 2

We had the great fortune to have a night's spotlighting near Sorong in West Papua prior to a boat-based bird-watching trip around Raja Ampat and the central Moluccas. The highlight was a **Western Long-beaked Echidna**. 15 species were identified to species level – 3 on the spotlighting night, 6 cetaceans and 5 others were incidental (& 1 targeted) while on the bird-watching trip. Many bats (both Fruit Bats and microbats) were seen but not able to be identified by us.



Western Long-beaked Echidna – West Papua, October 2023

Thanks to Jon Hall's, and others', reports in August of their trip to West Papua we were able to organise a night's spotlighting prior to commencing our boat-trip. We contacted Absalom via Facebook and arranged for one night out, travelling from and to our hotel in Sorong. He organised a 4WD (which was definitely needed on one muddy stretch of road), a driver and an interpreter (to assist with his English). It was a 3-hour drive to Kampong Klalik where Absalom had organised for a team of villagers to scout for echidna and to spotlight with us. After dark we headed off spotlighting along a flat track into the rainforest – Absalom, ourselves and some of the villagers all using torches. We saw a number of frogs and snakes and a **Lowland Ringtail Possum** which really didn't want to show itself – this was the best photo we could get.



An uncooperative Lowland Ringtail Possum –minus his head but you can just see the tip of his tail curling round a branch on the left.

After about 2 hours a call came back down the track that an echidna had been found “not far” ahead. We raced off with great anticipation and excitement, not knowing how spooked it might be and whether it would stay around while we made our way. Low and behold the call happened to coincide with where the track stopped being flat and where it went up the side of a mountain. We heaved and puffed and sweated our way, as fast as we could up the steep slope. Half an hour passed as we clambered through the dirt, stones and vines, when there it was, stationary beside a big rock. So much excitement, despite being out of breath more than 20 minutes ago. It clearly wasn’t going anywhere, which on this occasion at least meant the panic to get there before it bolted was unnecessary. It had the end of its snout buried in the dirt – this appeared to make it feel quite safe. Being a “long-beaked” type echidna, there was still 90% of the snout, as well as its eyes, still fully exposed, which didn’t make sense to us, as being well concealed. When we were all still for long enough, it would withdraw its snout and look around. However when it wanted extra security it would put 1cm of snout back in the dirt and look quite contented with the world.



Us and the group of villagers with the Western Long-beaked Echidna



Western Long-beaked Echidna in high-security mode

Once we had had our fill we set off back down the hill. A big thank-you to the villagers who walked beside us on the steep sections to make sure we didn't fall down. On the descent we stopped at a cave/hole in a cliff face where the echidna apparently sleeps during the day – fascinating. The only other mammal we saw on the way back was a Striped Possum. This was also difficult to see well. When we first saw it, there was definitely a white tail-tip which

made us suspect a Glider (Sugar/Kreffft's/Papuan – whatever they are called here). It kept moving and we kept changing our position to get a good look, rather than a composite image from several partial views. In the end the animal we got a photo of revealed a Striped Possum. Whether we saw 1 animal or two we are not sure – never to be resolved. The retreat through the forest took an hour and a half, by which time we were quite tired. Thankfully the driver had been sleeping while we were out so that we had a good drive back to Sorong arriving around 2:30 am.



Striped Possum

Our bird-watching boat trip commenced in Sorong travelling around the Raja Ampat group of Islands, to Kofiau Island, then to the Moluccan islands of Obi, Seram, Boano and Buru finishing at Ambon two weeks later. On our way to our first anchorage off Waigeo Island, we stopped at dusk off a little islet to witness thousands upon thousands of **Spectacled Flying-fox** leave their roost trees for a night's feeding on Waigeo. It was spectacular. The **Waigeo Spotted Cuscus** is well known for being quite colourful and we went looking for this on Kri Island where we found 2 in the grounds of the Sorido Bay Resort. They were quite active in the afternoon. All other mammals for the trip were found opportunistically while either cruising or bird watching.



Waigeo Spotted Cuscus

Sea watching while travelling between islands identified the following cetaceans:

Omura's Whale	Obi to Seram
Pygmy Killer Whale	Raja Ampat to Kofiau + Boano to Ambon
Short-finned Pilot Whale	Raja Ampat to Kofiau + Obi to Seram
Fraser's Dolphin	Raja Ampat to Kofiau
Spinner Dolphin	Sorong to Waigeo + Obi to Seram
Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin	Raja Ampat to Kofiau + near Seram



Omura's Whale



Short-finned Pilot Whale

Our biggest disappointment for the trip was missing the **Obi Cuscus**. We had hiked up a mountain on an old logging track one day seeing a few good birds (& hearing pigs in the distance). But we nearly melted in the humidity. Next day a few of us went back up the same track but it was much quieter, just as hot and we weren't seeing much. Eventually we turned back leaving the others to continue as we knew if we kept going it would have to be a very quick descent to meet our sailing time. Back at the boat the others told us that they had gone only another 15-20 minutes and saw 2 **Obi Cuscus** up in a tree in the middle of the day. So we missed out !!

At each island there were always many flying foxes active in the day as well as in the evening. Following advice from people experienced in the region we think that the large ones on Obi were **South Moluccan Flying Fox** and on Seram and Buru they were **Black-bearded Flying Fox**. When owling of an evening there were often microbats whizzing around. On Obi in particular there were also mid-sized bats fleetingly passing our view – they were way too close to be tracked in a beam so also remain unidentified, but possibly a Bare-backed species.

While owling high up on the main range on Seram one night (circa 1000m) we stumbled across 2 **Northern Common Cuscus**. They were delightful to see and one was almost white. While driving back to the coast a **Malay Civet** bolted across the road.



A very pale Northern Common Cuscus



A different coloured Northern Common Cuscus

As a Post-script, I woke after 3 hours sleep following our amazing Echidna spotlighting session complaining of a sore eye. The cause turned out to be a leech attached to the white part of my eye !! Once panic had subsided, my wife was able to remove it. A bit of a bloody mess, but otherwise OK, however this was the first day of our tour and tomorrow we would be on a boat for 2 weeks with limited access to any help, so still quite concerning as to what would happen. By that evening it was still very red, so our Ground Agent took me off to a clinic where I was examined and obtained anti-biotic drops. Next lunchtime, just before boarding the boat, I was taken to see an eye-specialist just “to be sure, to be sure”. She thought it would be Ok to continue the trip and gave me some more drops. 2 hourly drops night and day for the next few days was hard work but it all got better in due course. It was the only leech for the whole trip!

The snorkelling at various places was sensational. Water clarity was unbelievable and diversity of fish was fantastic. One of the participants was able to identify 240 species of fish in 4 x 1 hour snorkelling sessions (we could only remember 150 or so by the time we got to write them down).

The Ground Agent in Sorong & Raja Ampat was Magnificus Expeditions <https://www.magnificusexpeditions.com/> who I can't recommend highly enough. They run their own tours as well as being ground agents for the big international companies and I think would be a good bet if you were looking to do some mammaling (or birding) in this part of the world. A big big thankyou to Valentina Shita Prativi, who looked after me so wonderfully with my medical issue and did an amazing job with our bird tour too.



Our ship: the Indo Seamore

The birdwatching tour was with ROCKJUMPER on their “Remote West Papuan Islands Cruise” using an Indo Seamore ship , <https://indoseamore.com/> . The 14-passenger boat was ideal and the crew were magnificent.

John Goldie and Kathy Walter

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