

Let's start with the obvious facts—Australia is BIG, and there are around 70 species of kangaroos/wallabies of which I can only tell a select few apart, a week is not long enough to make an impression, let alone a dent in a serious Australian itinerary, and this was probably the least planned mammal watching trip I've undertaken. I'll take full responsibility for the latter, but need some serious help to reasonably complete my mammal list. Identifying marsupials in Australia feels like identifying rodents to me at home and since I didn't take my larger camera lens I'll be limited in what I can identify after the fact.

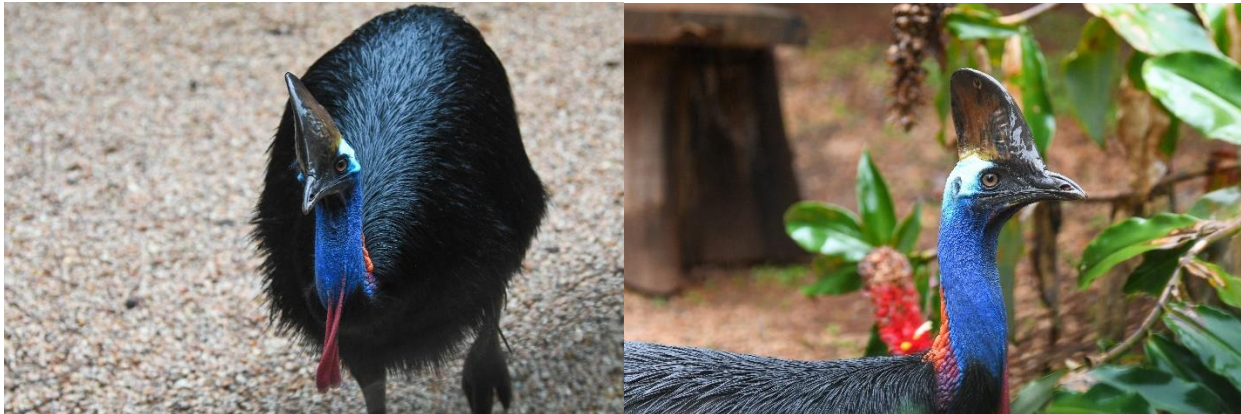
This was a spring break trip for my three youngest daughters and while they have varying degrees of both wildlife interest and willingness to indulge their dad, I had to remind myself periodically that their needs and interests should be considered. All that said, I could hardly ask for better travel companions in my wife and daughters of 11, 13, and 16. The lack of planning was a function of a little bit of ignorance on my part after reading some other trip reports, some complications caused by Cyclone Kirrily in January, and some personal circumstances that demanded much of my time the last few months after I booked the travel and accommodations for the trip. In the end, we were just fortunate that the trip even was carried out as I received a text 30 hours before departure that our flight the next day to San Francisco was cancelled due to weather. What did that mean for the flight to Sydney? Going into spring break would I be able to find another flight to San Francisco with just a day's notice? If I did, would we end up spending our second spring break in a row in the Bay Area? That brought back some good memories of Point Reyes and Monterey Bay, but it wasn't what I had in mind.

While on a conference call I scrambled to text my wife and start searching for options. Miraculously, within an hour all 5 of us were booked on Delta for flights to and from Sydney the next day that worked with rest of our reservations and fortunately only cost \$300 more per person than our subsequently refunded flights from United. At that point anything we saw and experienced on the trip was just a bonus as I was just grateful that we were able to go.

We arrived in Sydney Saturday morning March 16th and spent our 5-hour layover connecting with my niece who had recently moved to Sydney. Needless to say the harbor and opera house are worth a visit even if you aren't looking for mammals. We were back at the airport in time to collect our luggage from short-term storage and transfer to the other terminal for our late afternoon flight to Cairns. I had mapped out our itinerary and booked our international and domestic flights based on the assumption from the website that departures for an overnight stay at the Great Barrier Reef were available everyday. Sadly I learned that wasn't the case and the only night that worked for us was exactly in the middle of our stay in Queensland which would significantly limit the experience in both the Atherton Tablelands and the Daintree Rainforest. Such it was to be. That meant immediately upon arrival we drove a couple of hours south on dark windy roads in heavy rain to Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat <https://www.rosegums.com.au/> on what was one of the longest days of my life that included 4 successive flights without really sleeping. Due to exhaustion and weather and knowing I didn't want to sleep in very long on our only day in the Highlands I didn't make any attempt to spotlight the first night. On the drive in I figured we would see our first mammal and we did within the last mile before reaching our destination. A small marsupial stood on the edge of the road and stared at us as we stared back. By the time I got my phone out and the windshield wipers turned off I only got a very poor and distant video of the critter through a wet windshield. Rose Gums is located on 190 spectacular acres of private forest that I sadly really didn't get to explore. The manager was gracious and helpful with my late evening check in and directed me to put the provided car cover on at night to protect against cassowary

damage. Apparently in a previous incident a cassowary had seen its reflection in a guest's vehicle and proceeded to attack the enemy—damaging the car in the process. I showed him my video and he surprised me by saying Northern Brown Bandicoot—after further review I'm pretty sure it was a red-legged pademelon...

Part of what led me to select Rose Gums was the map on their website about the "Kangaroo Trail" which identified places to see 5 species of kangaroo/wallaby/pademelon in relative close proximity. That map would provide the basic itinerary for our lone day in the area. My youngest and I attempted a short walk in the early morning but were turned back after 10 minutes by driving rain that soaked our pants and jackets before the day had hardly begun. An hour later all 5 of us were in the reception eagerly awaiting the lorikeet feeding scheduled for 8:30. From the dry confines of the reception you can look down through slatted windows that open on a wire and trough. While not so patiently waiting we were stunned when a cassowary walked right onto the stage. Apparently he is a mostly permanent resident in the vicinity though not a target or beneficiary of their feeding efforts. We snapped some great shots of what would prove to be our only cassowary of the trip. Cassowaries rank pretty high on the non-mammal animal of interest list. The manager appeared a few minutes later and said he had just seen the Musky Kangaroo Rat at the hide a few meters on the other side of the building and we quickly checked off the first of the 5 on the kangaroo trail. While a true kangaroo, its name makes clear the obvious similarity in appearance to a large rat. He didn't hold still as he grabbed a few snacks but we got a few pictures before returning in time for the arrival of a couple dozen rainbow lorikeets. Not a bad start to the morning and wildlife portion of the trip!



The next prescribed stop was the Nerada Tea Factory for one of the most anticipated species of the trip, the Lumholts Tree Kangaroo, whose very existence is fascinating. We didn't have much insight of where

to look or how to find one other than looking up. The gates at the plantation were closed and while there was a narrow strip of forest between the road and the fields it didn't seem particularly promising. Signs prohibited parking on their property so we parked across the street on the road edge. Along their forest fence were signs indicating wildlife was present so we walked up and down the road scanning the trees to no avail. I should have known finding a tree Kanagaroo wouldn't be so simple.

Stop 3 said to drive down a Fig Tree Close, a street near Malanda to look for red-legged pademelons. After driving the house lined street we were about to give up where the road split but decided to push on a little further and were rewarded with what we can presume was pademelon on the forest edge. It only paused momentarily when we stopped so my lone picture is it's backend disappearing but the color and size met the description and I decided to trust the kangaroo trail! The other picture included here is the same species, I believe, seen on a short night walk that night at Rose Gums.



Our appetite whetted by the disappointment at the tea factory, we tried Malanda Falls Nature Park that was also listed on the back of the kangaroo trail map as a potential site for tree kangaroos. The park has forest tracks as the trails are called on either side of the road. We did them both as the forest was thick and mature and appeared to be ideal habitat other than being almost in the middle of the small town. A posting at the visitor's center noted recent sightings and raised our hopes. There's a nice broad but short muddy waterfall along the first loop but we saw nothing else but birds and a few people. Across the street there were even fewer people and I had two spottings of what appeared to be the red-legged pademelon hopping in the underbrush but I'm not certain. With the rain and poor lighting due to the forest and distance I didn't bother trying to photograph them before they disappeared. We thought that was all for the walk but a few minutes further down the road I stopped to inspect some roadkill in hopes of learning more about marsupial identification. As I was walking down towards the carcass the girls were exiting the car and a loud noise drew me back to them in a hurry. They had discovered what would prove to be the first of many leeches that found us more inviting than the jungle floor. By the end of the trip we were familiar more intimately than we cared to be with three species of leeches which led to appropriate jokes about Tres Leches, a favorite dessert of my oldest daughter who served as a missionary in Argentina but wasn't on this trip due to college schedules. I must have missed the warnings in the trip reports I read on Australia about the leeches. I've been to a few rainforests in several countries and continents, but never had such frequent leech encounters as in all of the parts of Australia we visited.

The 4th stop on the kangaroo trail is Granite Gorge Nature Park which from pictures on the internet appeared like a spotting gimme. As we approached the park we spotted a wallaby that was clearly too

large and light colored to be the expected species. After the trip it was confirmed as an Agile Wallaby. Though not terribly wild, the endemic Mareeba Rock Wallabies at the park are free roaming but have grown accustomed to being fed by tourists and either enjoy or tolerate the occasional back rub from excited teenage girls and their dads. They did not disappoint any of us. The terrain at the park was a spectacular mix of granite outcroppings, mature trees, water flowing seemingly everywhere and long ago deposited banks of sand, a beautiful contrast to the thick forests and agricultural fields we had spent the morning in.



The 5th and final stop of the trail was the Mareeba Golf Club where on this rainy afternoon the eastern gray kangaroos outnumbered the golfers by about 200:1. We rented a cart and drove out to see them. We most enjoyed watching the joeys in the mothers' pouches whether their face or other extremities were protruding, While the sightings weren't terribly wild, checking 4 of the 5 species made a productive day and kept my kids engaged and interested.



We had enough time to check a track at Wongabel State Park unfruitfully for tree kangaroos, but of course fruitfully for leeches before returning to the Peterson Creek bridge near Yungaburra where we had taken a quick stop earlier in the day at the platypus viewing blind. This time dusk was approaching and we thought our timing ideal. The open gaps in the blind for viewing are not at ideal heights for adults or kids as far as I can tell but it is still a nice set up to search for the elusive platypus. A couple of other searchers came and went. Dozens of large bats flew overhead that I read later were Spectacled Flying Foxes. We crossed the bridge and took the trail under the bridge that offers a closer unobstructed view to the next section of the river but the reported trail that follows the river has been gated off as private property. There were smaller bats under the bridge but I couldn't get a picture for identification. Our patience waned and we returned to the parking lot just as a van of guided tourists arrived. We decided to return and observe from a respectful distance to see if we could be helped by a professional. He had a spotlight instead of head lamps and found a rat swimming along the far bank that my daughter

saw but I missed. Still no platypus so we decided it was time. Not knowing the area it was easy to pick the Italian place just down the street which meant one daughter and I returned for another 15 minutes while I food was being prepared. This time under the bridge we saw brown fur dive below the surface and disappear. It appeared too narrow and small for a platypus and fit what I would have guessed for a water rat. The pizza was good and we headed back to Rose Gums with full stomachs needing sleep before our 5:30 departure the next morning.

I decided to drop off the key in the box at the reception to save the trip in the morning and give me a chance to spotlight while the girls packed their bags. I quickly saw a couple more of the uncertain marsupial that we had first seen on the road the night before but this time I got some pics that looked like a red-legged pademelon to me. I went 10 minutes down one of the trails in the rain and found what appeared to be a long-nosed bandicoot motionless next to the trail. As I raised my camera it fled. On the way back to our wonderful 3-bedroom unit that included a full kitchen and lots of local information I found another long-nosed bandicoot at the end of the driveway and snapped a decent picture.



We were on the road at quarter to 6 headed back to Cairns for our excursion to the Great Barrier Reef. I'll spare much of the detail since it didn't include any mammals, but we did 6 of the possible 7 snorkeling sessions on our 2 day one night "Reef Encounter." The food was great, and the weather overcast enough to reduce the risk of sunburn which was much appreciated. The water wasn't nearly as clear as I had hoped but the reef itself surpassed my expectations and it was worth purchasing the pictures taken by the trip photographer with the appropriate underwater equipment. The highlights were several Green Sea Turtles, White-Tipped Reef Sharks, Māori Wrasse, and lots of Parrot Fish.

We were back ashore Tuesday afternoon by 5:00 which meant it was dark long before we reached the Daintree River on our trip north. Cyclone Kirrily had wrecked havoc on northern Queensland in January

and the area was clearly still in recovery. The ferry across the river was quick and efficient. We were to learn that many businesses had not yet reopened or were operating at reduced capacities or schedules and the roads were still a mess with lots of short construction related delays due to lane closures, clean up along the shoulder of fallen trees and washed out hillsides, and in a few cases on-going work to reroute the flow of water. The road is designed with frequent low spots where the water naturally overflows the banks and needs to cross the road. Without these depressions you'd either need near constant culverts or you'd have standing water over much of the road during monsoon season. Each low point in the road is accompanied by a measuring stick to indicate to drivers the water depth. Most stakes showed up to 1 meter but a few went all the way to 2 meters! Now I understood why so many of the trucks and SUVs had exhaust pipes up near the vehicle roofs.

We didn't see any wildlife on our way into the Daintree Crocodylus

<https://www.daintreecrocodylus.com.au/> where we would spend the next two nights. We had hoped to take a guided night walk one of the nights but had been alerted that due to damage to the trail on site it was currently unavailable. The heavy rain and exhaustion sent us all to bed shortly after arrival. The rain never really stopped with just a few brief pauses until we had recrossed the river 36 hours later. In the morning I figured we would try the on-site trails ourselves but quickly turned back as we would have needed rubber boots and they weren't available. The lodge was pretty slow getting the café going in the morning and due to our late arrival the night before we hadn't heeded their important advice to stock up on groceries in Mossman before taking the ferry. Hungry kids don't make for great mammal watching companions so we stayed until breakfast and were on the road just before 9. With the steady rain I wasn't feeling that ambitious anyways. We spent all day learning first hand about the infrastructure damage from Cyclone Kirrily. I'm sure the immediate human impact was far worse but were a couple of months late to witness that. The Jindalba Boardwalk was only open for about 20 meters and you couldn't actually drive all the way to Cape Tribulation where we had hoped to get some groceries due to road closures. Daintree Crocodylus had communal kitchen facilities for guest use but we never used them. We didn't see a mammal other than a cow all morning until a tan dog ran across the road in front of us at Cooper Creek. Its skittish nature surprised me after my wife pointed it out to me in the distance and it never hesitated as I watched it run deeper into the jungle. At Madja Boardwalk we were able to take the entire circuit along the river and mangrove swamp tub. The most enthused mammal watcher among my daughters spotted a musky rat kangaroo in dryer ground near the trail's end. This felt a bit more legitimate than the one being fed at Rose Gums. The stop at Ice Cream was surprisingly worth it, both for the tasty ice cream and because we saw for the 3rd time that day a local guide with a couple from Canada as clients. We had small-talked with the tourists at both Jindalba and Madja, but this time I worked up the nerve to speak to the guide directly and ask him a few questions. I told him of the tan dog and he said, "Is your question whether it may have been a dingo? Well if it was skinny as hell and had a white tip of the tail, it probably was." I hadn't even hoped to see a dingo on this trip so that was like hitting the jackpot.

The Daintree Discovery Center was better than I expected and we all enjoyed the canopy walk, viewing tower, and educational exhibits. It's hard to imagine seeing many mammals with the noise of other tourists, but there may be a better chance right when it opens or just before it closes. We all needed a nap after that before we went back out for dinner and some spotlighting. We had received a couple of tips but figured given the moisture we were best off returning to the boardwalks as well. Dinner at Daintree Siesta was a pleasant surprise as was the trip fare for the most part. A very patient circuit of the of the Madja Boardwalk offered only kinked necks and a green tree frog that was literally resting on the guardrails. The cautious stops for salt-water crocs were unsuccessful too but we finally had a small mammal flash across the road in front of us. I'm guessing it was a northern brown bandicoot but with

very little degree of confidence. It felt like we shined lights on every tree along the 200 yards of the Jindalba track but saw no returning eye shine. We had struck out again on tree kangaroos, possums and gliders. I think I'm going to have to break down and get a thermal scope. At 10 we were back at the lodge—drenched and tired, but at least not too hungry. The Crocodylus markets itself as a place to rewind so the accommodations are sparse, but we found them sufficient with running hot water, mosquito nets, lights, and electricity in the communal areas during limited hours. We didn't wait for breakfast at the café the next morning as we retreated back across the Daintree River to the south.

After nearly 2 inches of rain each of the last two days, we were surprised and thrilled to see the sun on the south side of the mountains and river. We took a scenic drive along the river beyond Daintree Village but were skunked on the mammal front. Upon recommendation of the folks at Crocodylus we had booked an hour-long crocodile cruise with Solar Whispers. Our Dutch immigrant guide had adopted an Australian accent and a good sense of humor to accompany his understanding of the salt-water crocodiles and the Daintree ecosystem. It was not the best time of year to spot crocs as warmer water meant no need to warm themselves on the banks and the recent cyclone had washed away all of the new year's crocodile nests and eggs when the water level rose nearly 15 feet. However, he had found a mature female on his previous trip that morning so we crossed our fingers. We soon found a yearling sunning on a log and later found the same female on a bank above us mostly hidden in the grass. It wasn't a great sighting but we were close and there was no question what it was.

On our way back to Cairns we stopped briefly in Kewarra to see the local Agile Wallabies which we only later realized we had already seen near Granite Gorge. We spent our last hours before the flight to Sydney stopping into see the impressive Barron Falls and Gorge. The Daintree had only produced one sure new mammal species but I was thrilled to add dingo. Based on our spotlighting failures up north I was less confident of finding success on our own down south so I reached out to some tour groups and Jon Hall hoping to find a local guide to Royal National Park. Jon came through of course, but his friend was out of town and both his friend and the tour agencies assured me the park was closed after dark despite the official website listing closure at 8:30 and trip report of successful spotlighting.

We arrived late into Sydney and took a while to figure out the rental car situation and find our nearby hotel. We picked up my niece the next morning and headed to Royal National Park where we enjoyed the scenery and a couple of short walks but found 3 more leech species than mammal species in the park. A pair of ubiquitous kookaburras posed for me but that was the wildlife highlight. We couldn't go all the way to Australia in good conscience and not at least try to find a koala so we headed over to Campbelltown where a reported population survives in a bit of a green belt called the Georges River Nature Reserve that is surrounded by development. It was apparent why koalas lived there but upon arrival I was pretty sure we wouldn't succeed in our little allotted time. We started on a power line on the south edge of town and found a few trails that extended a short way into the forest but nothing that continued to any distance and every time we wandered without a trail we inevitably found ourselves running into the massive webs of the spiders and that didn't go over well. After a disheartening hour we grabbed an enormous lunch at Mr B's Eatery where the portions made American servings look small. The day was largely spent with no species added to the ledger. We drove an hour and a half south to the Kangaroo Valley which may have been the most scenic site of the entire trip.

Internet searches had made wombats sighting seem like a formality at the Bendeela Campground. The hardest part turned out to be finding the campground which was not where Apple Maps indicated it was. I eventually stopped and asked for some directions and reached the park by 5:15. The guard let us in without a camping reservation and it was obvious that visitors frequently came to see the wombats.

However, he said they wouldn't be out until 7 or 8. We parked and explored the grounds on foot finding what appeared to be two different species of wallabies grazing on the edge of the lawn—later identified as red-necked wallabies and eastern grey kangaroos. The wombat dens were everywhere and we knew it was just a matter of time. We only stayed long enough to see two when it was clear in talking to others they would be all over after dark. The 2nd that emerged was so unconcerned about people that I found myself too close for my camera to focus! The only downside was he didn't bother to look up at me and pose for his picture.



We departed with a bit of daylight hoping that we could make it to Berrima in time for one more attempt at platypus. We arrived as the light disappeared but had difficulty finding the quarry path which had been recommended as the best spot to search along the river. We did see a European rabbit while we looked for the trail. It turned out we were literally right next to the path but it took us a while to figure that out. In the meantime we walked 15 minutes to another section of the river and enjoyed several buildings remaining from the early 1800's as we walked across town. We didn't find a platypus in

the river but our spotlights finally yielded a mammal when my wife found a pair of possums high up in a tree. Walking back to get the car and pick everyone up I saw what I initially thought was a cat in someone's front yard. When I zoomed in with my camera I realized it was a large possum (common brush tail as I would later learn) and just as I clicked the shutter a loud rustle in the shrubs directly behind me spooked me. I turned as a running dog emerged. Fortunately he turned up the road away from me and the possum but when I turned around the possum was long gone. While picking up the car I found the quarry path trail head 10 meters from where we had parked near the old Anglican Church. We held our breath and tried to be silent as we approached the river. Continuing up the trail we unexpectedly found a wombat heading our way. He seemed just as surprised a rambled into the brush and up an incline. A perfect natural platform overlooked a pool and we used the rest of the batteries in our headlamps in fruitless search for a platypus. It was a long 90 minute drive back to Sydney.



Due to our flight changes we were departing at 1:15 instead of 11:30 which opened a short window for my animal enthusiast daughter and I to make a quick run the next morning all the way back down to Berrima. We failed again for the platypus but found a solitary swamp wallaby across the river too far for a good picture. We raced back to Sydney and headed back to the states.

Mammal Species List: (15 identified plus 2 unidentified—14 lifers)

Red-Legged Pademelon
Musky-Rat Kangaroo
Agile Wallaby
Mareeba Rock Wallaby
Eastern Grey Kangaroo
Red-Necked Wallaby
Swamp Wallaby
Long-Nosed Bandicoot
Dingo
Common Ringtail Possum
Common Brush-Tailed Possum
Bare-Nosed Wombat (Common)
Water Rat
European Rabbit
Spectacled Flying Fox