

Pilbara (Rothschild's Rock-wallaby) trip report 17–21 September 2025

David Andrew (all photos by John Rogers)



Rothschild's Rock-wallaby at Signal Hill in the Pilbara mining town of Newman. The purple coloration on its nape and shoulders echoes the rich colors of the iron-laden substrate that covers much of the region.

The Pilbara is a remote, mountainous but arid area of north-western Australia. Like many parts of Australia it is vast and virtually uninhabited, and adjoins other vast, empty arid regions such as the Gibson and Great Sandy Deserts. Rainfall is sporadic and unpredictable, yet the Pilbara's small-mammal fauna is rich and largely intact, possibly because the introduced Cane Toad has (so far) been unable to reach it across the surrounding deserts (for the uninitiated, the spread of this exotic toad across northern Australia is implicated in the serious decline of many native species).

Pilbara mammal highlights include the attractive Rothschild's Rock-wallaby and up to 19 species of endemic small terrestrial species, such as the Pilbara Pebble-mound Mouse and the excellent Kaluta; and a few bats, including sound populations of Ghost Bat and an endemic Pilbara population of Orange Horseshoe Bat (probably due for recognition as a species in its own right).

Seeing them is another matter of course, but John Rogers and I paid a flying visit in mid-September 2025 expressly to look for the rock-wallaby and four endemic birds (Pilbara Grasswren, Western Quail-thrush and the distinctive Pilbara subspecies of Black-tailed Treecreeper and Spinifex Pigeon). The rock-wallaby is a Pilbara endemic, traditionally seen

with a bit of effort at Burrup Peninsula near Karratha or, with luck, at Millstream-Chichester or Karajini National Parks, where they can be skittish and aren't guaranteed. However, Signal Hill in the mining town of Newman has recently appeared on the mammal-watching radar as a reliable site for it. As it happens Signal Hill is also a prime site for the Pilbara Grasswren so I have knocked together this trip report in case any other Colossi straddling the chasm between mammal-watching and birding decide to visit the area for almost-guaranteed sightings and photos.

The region is rich in minerals and whole mountainsides are being excavated for iron ore and other minerals. Those that are left over are covered in spinifex and the flats in-between could be loosely described as mulga shrubland; tall eucalypts line the (usually dry) watercourses. Newman appears to exist solely as a service centre for the huge iron ore mine next door, and every flight carried dozens of fly in-fly out ('FIFO') mine workers wearing hard hats and high-viz safety jackets.

We allocated – and needed – four days to see all our main targets. Arriving at sunset after a delayed flight we headed straight up Signal Hill and sure enough spotted a **Rothschild's Rock-wallaby** in the headlights before we'd even parked the hire car. We thermalled two or three more, but further thermaling that – and every other – night produced no small mammals.

Day 1 was spent trying to locate a Western Quail-thrush at several sites south of Newman, where no live mammals and no quail-thrushes were seen. Overall the region seems rather depauperate of wildlife – we saw only two lizard species, and no large macropods save a solitary **Euro** and a couple of dead Red Kangaroos roadside. The region was rumoured to be in drought, but except when it's actually raining it would be hard to detect the difference – standing water was almost non-existent. Back at Signal Hill at sunset, we finally got onto a **Pilbara Grasswren** so bird number one was in the bag.

Day 2 saw us unsuccessfully searching for the quail-thrush at sunrise and dipping the treecreeper in the afternoon. The latter appears to be rather thinly distributed, probably owing to a dearth of suitable habitat, i.e., trees. By Day 3 we were getting worried about the birds, but after much tramping across mulga flats at dawn found a very obliging pair of **Western Quail-thrush**. No luck with the treecreeper though and to raise our flagging spirits we searched some culverts and bridges for roosting microbats, and found several which have been identified as **Finlayson's Cave Bat**. Note the individual variation in the photos – we thought some were perhaps Inland Broad-nosed and/or Little Broad-nosed Bats, but microbat experts subsequently advised the dark facial skin and fondness for culverts are good indicators for Finlayson's.

Day 4 we struck out for Karajini NP, 200 km to the north-west, which the park's mascot, the Spinifex Pigeon, appeared to have vacated. We climbed down into the oasis-like Dale's Gorge and its offshoot Fortescue Gorge, where there is a small **Black Flying-fox** camp, but saw nary a pigeon. Shocked by this state of affairs, we repaired to the Ophthalmia Dam outflow back at Newman and as the sun slipped over the horizon finally bagged a pair of **Black-tailed Treecreepers**. Our last day was spent searching for **Spinifex Pigeons** and, just as we turned

to leave for the airport we found a flock of 15 sitting under a mulga tree at the town cemetery.

Travel in this remote region can present some challenges and a FIFO visit to Signal Hill could greatly simplify the task of looking for the attractive Rothschild's Rock-wallaby. Although the species is widely distributed, much of the region is inaccessible and/or locked up under mining leases, and sightings are not guaranteed. The population on the Burrup Peninsula near Karratha is accessible only with a 4WD or by boat; the Black-flanked Rock-wallaby also inhabits the Burrup area and if you are seeking local help you'll need to be sure they know which one you are looking for.

For anyone interested, Newman is readily accessible by daily commercial flights from Perth; there are hotels, supermarkets, vehicle hire, petrol etc. All major roads are sealed and the few unsealed roads we used were suitable (in dry conditions) for 2WD vehicles. The Pilbara is also renowned among scenery buffs for its rugged gorges and colourful rock formations. There are plenty of remote bush camping sites and an extended trip could be productive for small mammals. Two 'new' species of planigale have recently been recognised and doubtless more taxonomic changes await us.

MAMMAL LIST

1. Rothschild's Rock Wallaby

Petrogale purpureicollis



This cooperative individual loitered near Signal Hill car park at sunset.

2. Euro

Macropus robustus



Euro near Radio Hill, Newman.

3. Finlayson's Cave Bat

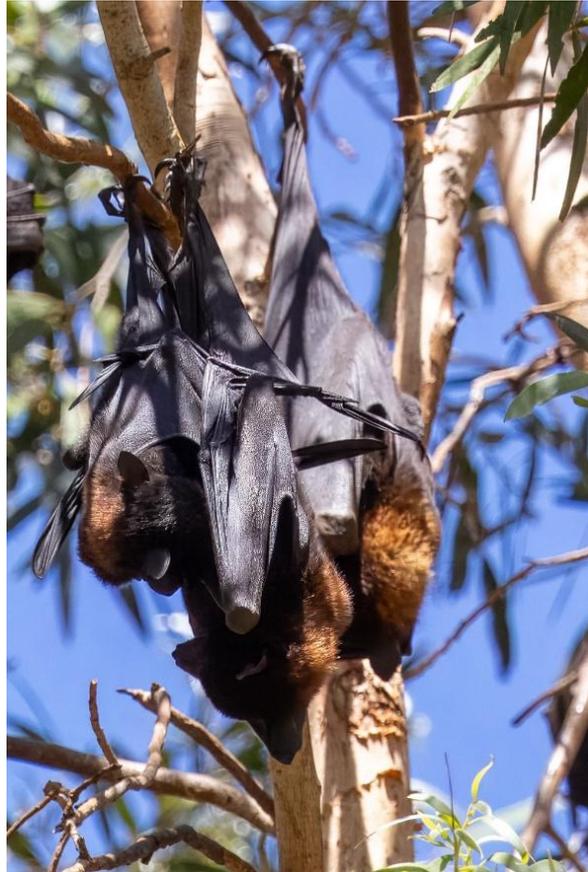
Vespadelus finlaysoni





4. Black Flying-fox

Pteropus alecto



Black Flying-fox camp at Dale's Gorge, Karajini NP.

BIRD LIST



Pilbara Grasswren (left), a recent split from the *Striated Grasswren* complex; and the rufous-bellied subspecies of *Spinifex Pigeon* (right): distinctive and allopatric but recently re-absorbed into *Spinifex Pigeon* as a subspecies.



The **Westen Quail-thrush** (left) is barely distinguishable from its eastern counterpart, but keen students of **Australian Magpie** taxonomy will note the white 'trousers' and massive honker on the Pilbara subspecies *G. t. longirostris* (right).

Common Name	Scientific Name
1 Wandering Whistling-Duck	<i>Dendrocygna arcuata</i>
2 Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>
3 Pacific Black Duck	<i>Anas superciliosa</i>
4 Gray Teal	<i>Anas gracilis</i>
5 Common Bronzewing	<i>Phaps chalcoptera</i>
6 Crested Pigeon	<i>Ocyphaps lophotes</i>
7 Spinifex Pigeon	<i>Geophaps plumifera</i>
8 Diamond Dove	<i>Geopelia cuneata</i>
9 Peaceful Dove	<i>Geopelia placida</i>
10 Pied Stilt	<i>Himantopus leucocephalus</i>
11 Black-fronted Dotterel	<i>Thinornis melanops</i>
12 Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
13 Australasian Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus novaehollandiae</i>
14 Hoary-headed Grebe	<i>Poliiocephalus poliocephalus</i>
15 Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
16 Australasian Darter	<i>Anhinga novaehollandiae</i>
17 Little Pied Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo melanoleucos</i>
18 Australian Ibis	<i>Threskiornis molucca</i>
19 Straw-necked Ibis	<i>Threskiornis spinicollis</i>
20 Royal Spoonbill	<i>Platalea regia</i>
21 Nankeen Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax caledonicus</i>
22 White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>
23 Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
24 Black-breasted Kite	<i>Hamirostra melanosternon</i>
25 Wedge-tailed Eagle	<i>Aquila audax</i>
26 Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
27 Whistling Kite	<i>Haliastur sphenurus</i>
28 Rainbow Bee-eater	<i>Merops ornatus</i>
29 Blue-winged Kookaburra	<i>Dacelo leachii</i>
30 Red-backed Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus pyrrhopygius</i>
31 Brown Falcon	<i>Falco berigora</i>
32 Galah	<i>Eolophus roseicapilla</i>
33 Little Corella	<i>Cacatua sanguinea</i>
34 Australian Ringneck	<i>Barnardius zonarius</i>

35	Western Bowerbird	<i>Chlamydera guttata</i>
36	Black-tailed Treecreeper	<i>Climacteris melanurus</i>
37	Pilbara Grasswren	<i>Amytornis whitei</i>
38	Purple-backed Fairywren	<i>Malurus assimilis</i>
39	Splendid Fairywren	<i>Malurus splendens</i>
40	Yellow-throated Miner	<i>Manorina flavigula</i>
41	Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater	<i>Acanthagenys rufogularis</i>
42	Singing Honeyeater	<i>Gavicalis virescens</i>
43	White-plumed Honeyeater	<i>Ptilotula penicillata</i>
44	Black Honeyeater	<i>Sugomel nigrum</i>
45	Brown Honeyeater	<i>Lichmera indistincta</i>
46	Weebill	<i>Smicrornis brevirostris</i>
47	Slaty-backed Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza robustirostris</i>
48	Chestnut-rumped Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza uropygialis</i>
49	Gray-crowned Babbler	<i>Pomatostomus temporalis</i>
50	Western Quail-thrush	<i>Cinclosoma marginatum</i>
51	Black-faced Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina novaehollandiae</i>
52	Crested Bellbird	<i>Oreoica gutturalis</i>
53	Grey Shrikethrush	<i>Colluricincla harmonica</i>
54	Rufous Whistler	<i>Pachycephala rufiventris</i>
55	Black-faced Woodswallow	<i>Artamus cinereus</i>
56	Little Woodswallow	<i>Artamus minor</i>
57	Pied Butcherbird	<i>Cracticus nigrogularis</i>
58	Australian Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>
59	Willie Wagtail	<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i>
60	Magpie-lark	<i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i>
61	Torresian Crow	<i>Corvus orru</i>
62	Little Crow	<i>Corvus bennetti</i>
63	Hooded Robin	<i>Melanodryas cucullata</i>
64	Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>
65	Tree Martin	<i>Petrochelidon nigricans</i>
66	Star Finch	<i>Emblema ruficauda</i>
67	Zebra Finch	<i>Taeniopygia guttata</i>



Black-tailed Treecreeper: again, it is allopatric and distinctive but still regarded as a subspecies *C. m. wellsi* of its northern congener.