My partner, Jasmine, and I recently joined a field trip to the small but beautiful Bougainville Island. Politically part of Papua New Guinea but geographically part of the Solomon Islands archipelago, it's a region renowned for its unique biodiversity.

The trip was organized by the International Bat Research Conference (IBRC) and hosted by Dr. Junior Novera, a Bougainville local and conservation leader. He welcomed our international group of 21 bat scientists, practitioners, and rehabilitators (from Australia, Canada, Taiwan, Malaysia, Poland, New Zealand, and the USA) to his home in Kunua for seven days.

Junior and his community are the driving force behind the Kunua Conservation Network. Their primary goal is a crucial one: to have the Kunua Plains and Mt. Balbia declared a protected area by 2030.

While I had dreams of batting in the highlands, this trip served as an excellent introduction to Kunua. I quickly learned that with a large, diverse group—varying in physical capability, interests, and comfort zones—and only five days to explore, ambitious highland expeditions weren't feasible. Our efforts were focused on the accessible lowland rainforests and swamps.

This was a potent reminder of a key ecological and social reality in the South Pacific: unlike most regions, active traditional land ownership is the rule. Most forests are owned and lived in by local people. Consequently, research requires permission, formalities, and meetings. You are essentially a guest in someone's backyard, and it's vital to treat the experience with that respect.

Despite the constrained scope, we found a wonderful array of species: 4 bat species, 3 frog species, 3 snakes, and several lizards.

We set multiple mist nets and harp traps around village gardens, lowland forests, and along the Aiope River. I absolutely plan to return to Kunua, team up with Junior, and explore with more time and specific objectives.

Day 1: Departing from Cairns, Australia, arriving on the mainland of Papua at Port Morsby and then to Buka, we were greeted with a welcome ceremony—a special experience that is hard to contextualize. We transferred by boat across the Buka Passage to Bougainville Island itself.

Somewhere over Papua New Guinea

Jasmine and I on arrival of Buka

Welcome party at the airport

The Buka Passage

View from the west coast of Bougainville

A four-hour drive awaited, the final three of which were a serious off-road drive along a muddy, flooded track on the west coast. A highlight was a quick stop to see a small colony of Solomon's flying foxes (*Pteropus rayneri*) roosting by the beach. We finally arrived in Kunua at 10 pm to a fantastic reception from the Mothers of Kunua and the entire village, who were incredibly excited to host us.

Day 2: Jasmine, myself, and a few others scouted the village periphery for fruiting trees. We found promising banana blossoms and a creek lined with fruiting figs—perfect for attracting bats. We returned that afternoon to set up our harp trap and mist nets. That night, our efforts were rewarded with multiple Woodford's fruit bats (*Melonycteris woodfordi*) and a beautiful Solomon's naked-backed fruit bat (*Dobsonia inermis*).


Setting up mist nets with the crew and Junior

Melonycteris woodfordi

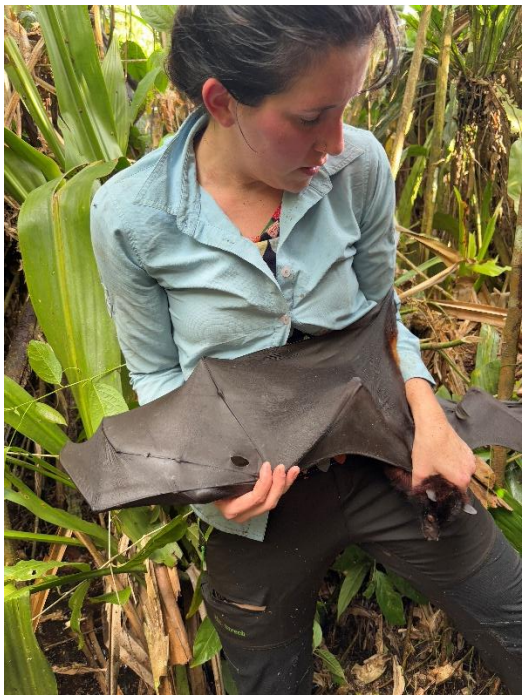
Checking adult status

Keying out captures

A small sugar hit before release.

Day 3: Junior led a trip to locate an unmapped colony of *P. rayneri* in a neighbouring village's dense swamp. After speaking with local hunters, we learned that while the colony is occasionally hunted, the primary pressure is on wild pigs, fish, and cuscus. After hours of wading through swamp water (and being truly humbled by my lack of swamp coordination!), the hunters successfully relocated to the colony. I was struck by their stunning appearance—an impressive size with a beautiful mantle, though they were decidedly cranky at being disturbed.

Swamping it



Solomon Island Flying Fox

Solomon Island Flying Fox

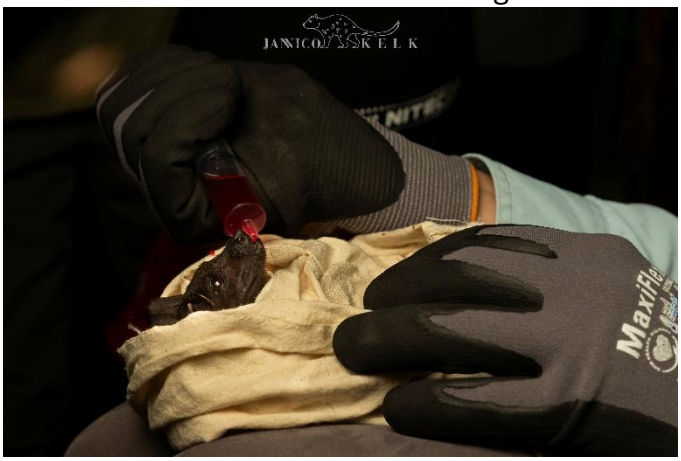
Swamp hiking

Solomon Island Flying Fox

Day 4: We continued trapping along the forest edge near Junior's home. Again, we captured *M. woodfordi* and *D. inermis*. A different capture was Geoffroy's rousette (*Rousettus amplexicaudatus*), which piqued my interest. This species typically roosts in caves, and Junior mentioned there are some nearby, hinting at a great target for a future bat survey.

Jasmine and Nicola extracting a bat

Melonycteris woodfordi



Dobsonia inermis

Melonycteris woodfordi

Rousettus amplexicaudatus

Dobsonia inermis

That evening, we spent time herping and found an excellent diversity of herpetofauna:

Snakes:

- Solomon Island Ground Boa (*Candoia paulsoni*)
- Brown Tree-snake (*Boiga irregularis*)
- Solomons Trees-snake (*Dendrelaphis salomonis*)

Lizards:

- White-striped gecko (*Gekko vittatus*)
- Sphenomorphus solomonis

Frogs:

- Torokina wrinkled ground frog (*Cornufer aculeodactylus*)
- Treasury Island tree frog (*Litoria thesaurensis*)
- Warty webbed frog (*Curunfer bufoniformis*)

Other bats detected via audio included:

- Dark sheath-tailed bat (*Mosia nigrenscens*)
  Commonly heard and seen flying low around the villages.
- Angulate pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus angulatus*)
  Commonly heard and seen flying around the villages
- Bare-rumped sheathtail (*Saccolaimus Saccolaimus*)
  Typically associated with open areas. Our thoughts is that they are associated with the beach and Aiope river.
- *Miniopterus cf australis*.
  This genus is a mess in the region and the calls consisted to *M. cf australis* as per Pennary and Lavery 2017.

Solomon Island Ground Boa

Solomons Tree-snake

White-striped gecko

Brown Tree-snake

Torokina wrinkled ground frog

Sphenomorphus solomonis

Treasury Island tree frog

Day 5 and 6: We visited a village within the proposed Kunua Plains Key Biodiversity Area. As it was basically our last few days, the community came together to celebrate. It was pretty full on – river ceremony, dancing, traditional food (cus cus stew!) and tree planting along the Aiope River at the future research centre site.

It was fascinating to see the mosaic of small-scale subsistence crops intertwining with secondary and primary rainforest, all leading to the Aiope River and the slopes of Mt. Balbia. This is where Junior conducted his transect, studying mammal diversity across different land-use types.


Mothers welcoming us to the village


River Ceremony


Tree Planting

Tree Planting

Junior at his PhD transect

Celebrations

Celebrations

Our final night of trapping yielded more of the same bat species, this time with well-earned beers in hand as we celebrated a successful IBRC field trip.

The species list was modest but rewarding. Most importantly, it built a foundation. I plan to return to Kunua, team up with Junior again, and with more time, explore the incredible biodiversity of Bougainville's ecosystems.