

The Far South Coast of New South Wales and East Gippsland, Victoria

July 3-9 2020

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A Common Wombat at Green Cape Lighthouse, Ben Boyd National Park.

Dr. Stewart Summers and I left Sydney mid-morning and drove pretty much non-stop to Narooma. The only notable was a Grey Goshawk. After checking in to a motel we visited the boardwalk along the Wagonga Inlet. Here we found the first mammal of the trip—a large bull New Zealand Fur Seal loafing about in the bay. The clear water allowed us to spot the Rough Leatherjacket and Common Stingaree in the seaweed fringed estuary. We re-tracked north to Lake Brou in Eurobodalla National Park disturbing our first of many Eastern Grey Kangaroos. At the entrance of Lake Brou currently blocked to the ocean there were a few Double-banded and Red-capped Plovers with some overwintering Bar-tailed Godwits. We walked a kilometre north along the beach to the sand dunes and waited for dark to arrive.

A nearly full moon was luckily obscured by decent cloud cover and by 6pm it was dark enough to begin spotting. It was still and relatively warm, the previous day had been unseasonably warm. After half an hour I detected a small mobile hot spot with the thermal camera. Alerting Stewart we approached as quietly and closely as possible. Turning on the torch there was a White-footed Dunnart almost below me and luckily it froze briefly in the light before making several typical high speed erratic manoeuvres and being lost in the ground cover. Another thirty minutes went by and then another hot spot, distinctly mobile was found in the near vicinity of the first sighting. It was interesting that you could see it climbing up into a low Acacia shrub here, the spot coming and going

into view as it foraged up to a foot or more high in the shrub. Again we turned on the torch and this time quite a good lateral view of it side-on on the ground and it again it briefly froze before bolting. It was lost but then about ten minutes later I detected another dunnart hot-spot again foraging at the base and climbing low into a shrub. This one never gave us a decent view. It was of note that there were several moths sheltering in this shrub and were presumably the target of the dunnart's attention. The microhabitat is an interesting feature as the dunes shelter the wind and the close proximity to the ocean keeps the temperatures mild. The dune swale is vegetated with sparse grasses like *Spinifex maritima*, hummock Acacias and is generally quite open with patches of leaf litter. It seems very few other small terrestrial mammals utilise this habitat-the only I have seen previously in the dunes was a Bush Rat once at nearby Potato Point on a previous visit. There were several sightings of Swamp Wallaby on this night. By 9pm it was getting cold and mammal activity was very quiet so we wandered back to the car chuffed with our success.

The thermal camera was a definite game-changer and having searched for several nights in nearby locations and at the one we targeted, White-footed Dunnart became my first official thermal camera mammal lifer. As a side note be aware that ticks are quite common in the district even in winter and I picked up a couple on this night. The general area is quite good for mammals with previous visits at nearby Potato Point producing sightings of more than ten native mammals including Agile Antechinus, Feather-tailed Glider, Long-nosed Bandicoot, Bush Rat and Southern Right Whale.



An adult Pacific Gull at Lakes Entrance.

It was a lengthy driving day to get to Lakes Entrance in Victoria, some 350 kilometres south of Narooma. We stopped in Bega for some fuel and a bacon and egg roll. It was the by-election for the "bellwether" seat of Eden-Monaro, narrowly one by the ALP. There was extensive bush fire damage from Cobargo to beyond the Mallacoota turn-off. We settled into another motel and were a bit surprised to see a party of Figbirds in the garden. It was time to commence our search for the

Burrnan Dolphin, recently (2012) split from Bottle-nosed Dolphin. It is currently known from coastal eastern Victoria and northern Tasmania. Lakes Entrance is a well known site for the species. Interestingly a recent paper disputes the distinctiveness of the skull morphology. Pending a genetic reappraisal it may well be lumped back with Bottle-nosed Dolphin in the near future. Oh well!

Setting up at Bullock Island Wharf, you can view three channels of the lake complex, one of which leads to the ocean. The site was busy with local and holidaying fishers. It was also blowing a stiff southerly and quite chilly so we watched from the car. After an hour or so I picked up a small pod of Burrnan Dolphins approaching up the south channel that then headed out to the ocean. The views were a bit distant but the light was good and they were clearly Bottle-nosed types. We had three animals in view at once but suspected there were at least five in total. Later we had a closer single dolphin make three appearances quite close to the car before promptly disappearing. Between dolphin sightings we were entertained by Sooty Oystercatcher, Pacific Gull, Whistling Kite, Fan-tailed Cuckoo and both New Zealand and Australian Furseals. The Furseals have a colony along the breakwater wall and can be studied well with a scope.



Blue-winged Parrot at Cricket Bat Lane.

It was lucky we had seen the dolphins the previous day as a couple of more watches failed to produce any more sightings. After a brief “dolphin-watch” at Bullock Island we headed to Newlands Arm in Paynesville to spend a couple more hours looking for this cetacean. A great view across the lake but dolphin free for us. Grey Currawongs and Forest Raven showed well. We explored further along to Cricket Bat Lane and Loch Sport and the Ninety Mile Beach. Cricket Bat Lane connects across a RAAF bombing range. It held big populations of Eastern Grey Kangaroos and a flock of Emu. We could hear Stubble Quail, saw a Peregrine Falcon and in the late afternoon found a flock of fifteen Blue-winged Parrots. Finding the hoof prints of Hog Deer, our primary target, we waited here until after dark but had no luck finding this introduced ungulate. Proceeding back to the Ninety Mile Beach we explored along a quiet road to a coastal holiday park. At the junction of several private roads with “No Shooting-Trespassing” signs Stewart picked up the thermal image of a female Hog Deer we got a bit of a window on but was still partially obscured. Luckily a few hundred metres further up Stewart picked up two stags that gave a good, open, unobscured view as they trotted

away-antlers and all. Having had success we retraced our steps back to Lakes Entrance, the drive being punctuated by a sighting of a Short-beaked Echidna and a Red Fox.

Yet another brief seawatch at Bullock Island came up “dolphin-less” so we headed north towards Brodribb River. There was breaking news that increasing cases of Corona community infection in Melbourne would see the border with NSW closed at midnight on the 7 July. We would have only the one night to search around Bellbird Creek. After dropping unnecessary gear at Brodribb River Rainforest Cabins we scouted Bendoc Ridge Road, Bellbird Creek and Bemm River in the afternoon. At the latter site we saw a Red-necked Wallaby (amazingly the only live one of the trip), a Superb Lyrebird and Yellow-tufted Honeyeater. Road-killed Sambar was seen twice.

On dark it dropped to a pretty chilly 5 degrees C but was overall pretty still at ground level and a later rising full moon kept the start of our night search dark. The plan was to slowly trawl both by foot and vehicle along Bendoc Ridge Road to the Bellbird Track about five kilometres off the Princes Highway. The area had been burnt in January but the deep gullies held tree ferns and some rainforest element trees. In these gully areas we got out of the car and slowly walked, myself with the thermal, Stewart with his torch. At 643 pm whilst I was trying to figure out a thermal hotspot that turned out to be a roosting lyrebird Stewart said “I’ve got something here”. Peering over his right shoulder, he certainly did. It was a Long-footed Potoroo and it was about 15 metres away in a gap in the foliage down slope from the road. We watched it for a minute as it was not at all spooked by the white light before it moved a little to the right climbed up and held briefly (about ten seconds) on a fallen log showing the entire animal including the long nose, small forepaws, grey-brown pelage, relatively long tail and sizeable paleish feet. It kept moving left into thick cover and we lost it from view and never re-located it again. It was a great sighting. Stewart had picked it up by its moderately strong eyeshine. It is an understatement to say we were both thrilled with the length and quality of the view of this critically endangered potoroid. It felt like we had seen a Night Parrot. Stewart earned the nickname “Potoroosky”, perhaps becoming the first person ever to see in the wild all three surviving species in this genus!

With the thermal we also detected a single Bush Rat and a single Mountain Brushtail which both gave good to excellent views. We also detected two other arboreal marsupials we could not confirm the identity of as they disappeared from view. We left Bendoc Ridge Road about 10 pm and spent the night at Brodribb River. Driving into the cabin we found a Southern Boobook perched on a fence line. It had been a consistent feature of our night work that there was a definite peak in nocturnal wildlife activity between 630-900pm and after that it became quiet as the temperatures dropped off.

The next day was pretty bleak with widespread drizzle, stiff winds and cold temperatures. We skedaddled across the NSW border and turned off towards Green Cape in Ben Boyd National Park. At the lighthouse the rain eased off and we did a seawatch with a telescope for a couple of hours. It was pretty lively with the best being two Buller’s Albatross giving repeat close views off the point. There were also a few Yellow-nosed, Black-browed and lots (100 plus) of Shy Albatross, a single juvenile Southern Giant-petrel, a single Black-faced Cormorant and at least two Brown Skuas. A presumed Humpback Whale was seen blowing a few times-we just could never see the whale in the decent swell. A Common Wombat was very tame grazing on the lawns of the lighthouse. Flowering

Grevillea lanigera was attractive and the unburnt heathlands held several Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters.



Yellow-bellied Glider at night in Ben Boyd National Park.

On dusk we had an entertaining spotlight session in the northern section of Ben Boyd National Park at Haycock Road. The major sighting was a presumed male (by size) Masked Owl I jagged with the light. We lost it by the time we parked but it responded immediately to a bit of vocal mimicry, flew straight towards us and perched for a minute giving a cracking view. Later we tracked down a calling Yellow-bellied Glider with the thermal that allowed some photographic chances. We heard YBG calling at Bendoc Ridge Road and also the following night at Kiandra. They are easy to hear but generally take a bit of effort to track down depending upon the terrain.

After a night in Eden we awoke to be surrounded by police highway patrol cars brought in I imagine to close the border with Victoria that had come into effect this evening. Continuing north we went via the more scenic coastal route through Tathra and Bournda National Park. The national park provided some good birding with Hooded Plovers, Crescent Honeyeaters and a fair number of the "yellow-tipped" Striated Pardalotes-winter visitors from Tasmania. Back in Narooma we scouted out the Kiandra Rainforest Walk for spotlighting and did an unsuccessful scout for Spotted Quail-thrush through the rather trashed and heavily logged coupes further west along the maze of ridgetop tracks. Spotlighting was pretty good. An excellent view of an Agile Antechinus in the rainforest gully was a definite bonus. We found three Southern Greater Gliders, a Sugar Glider and amazingly our first Common Brushtail Possums. That made twenty mammals seen for the trip. A big male Powerful Owl responded to playback and swept in like a Harpy-Eagle: very impressive at night.

We returned to do some birding the next morning and found Little Lorikeet, Eastern Shrike-tit, Rose Robin, numerous Wonga Pigeons and a generally good variety of bushbirds. Our trip list was 127 species of birds. We returned to Sydney and the adventure was over.

MAMMALS

Short-beaked Echidna

White-footed Dunnart

Agile Antechinus

Common Wombat

Mountain Brushtail

Common Brushtail

Southern Greater Glider

Sugar Glider

Yellow-bellied Glider

Long-footed Potoroo

Eastern Grey Kangaroo

Red-necked Wallaby

Swamp Wallaby

Bush Rat

*European Rabbit

*Red Fox

Australian Fur-seal

New Zealand Fur-seal

***Hog Deer**

Burrnan Dolphin

Also road-killed Common Ringtail and Sambar Deer plus unconfirmed Common Dolphin and Humpback Whale.



A Hooded Plover in Bournda National Park, NSW.