

## Far North Queensland Trip February 2021

### Michael Johnson

With travel in Australia opening up after last year's lockdowns and international travel still not a possibility, we decided to make a trip to far north Queensland in early February. I'd only been to Cairns thrice before, once during our honeymoon and twice for tourism trade shows. Our party consisted of my partner Sue and friend Graeme.

We based ourselves with Sue's good friend Linda, who has a wonderful house on top of a hill overlooking South Mission Beach and the South Pacific Ocean. Sue left the wildlife watching to Graeme and me and spent most of her time beside the pool. Everybody was happy.

We were travelling in the wet season and this is risky as weather can make travel difficult and wildlife observation impossible. Just the week prior there had been a tropical cyclone warning. However, we had very little rain, only one afternoon was a "wipe-out" because of rain. The wet season does offer some advantages for bird watching including Papuan migrants such as **yellow-breasted boatbills** and **buff-breasted paradise-kingfishers**, but no advantages for mammal watchers specifically. Of course, one advantage is that there are very few other tourists around but at the same time many venues, such as Kingfisher Park, close during the wet season.

My initial plan was to have a five-night trip up to the Daintree and through the tablelands, starting and ending in Mission Beach. Social commitments put an end to this and in the end, we only had three one-night forays into the tablelands, and never got to the Daintree. Despite this the trip was a great success, and we got most of our target species.

We used two guides, Alan Gillanders and Patrick de Geeste. I have no problems in highly recommending both gentlemen. All photos in this report taken with an iPhone 8, thus the quality.

In the end we observed and identified the following numbers of species:

Mammals: 24 species, 18 new.

Birds: 115 species, 55 new.

Reptiles: 8 species, 6 new.

Amphibians: 6 species, 5 new.

Fish: 3 species, 2 new.

Invertebrates: 25 species, all new.

Arriving in Mission Beach there was a **southern cassowary** with chick in front of the house we were staying at. **Agile wallabies** were easily seen around the township while **red-legged pademelons** can be seen after dark. Over the next couple of days, we did early morning birding walks in the nearby Djiru National Park, along the Musgravea track. **Musky rat-kangaroos** were easily seen, which surprised me as I hadn't seen any previous reference to them being there. During an evening walk we had excellent views of an **eastern tube-nosed bat**. This species was easy to identify with its ruby-red eye shine and distinctive two-part call. We saw one again later up on the tablelands and heard another, so they are not uncommon. I was disappointed not to see any other mammals but did almost step on a **scrub python**. Scrub pythons are one of the truly giant snakes with verifiable recorded lengths of up to 7.2 metres. This one was lying coiled on the path, and its coils seemed to go on forever.



Our forays followed a set pattern, leaving in the morning for the tablelands, stopping at suitable birding sites on the way, settling into accommodation followed by an evening of mammal watching. An early morning bird watching in a local hotspot, and then heading back to Mission Beach after breakfast with stops as time allowed. Our first trip did not go entirely as planned. We were headed to Atherton for the night, where we planned to spotlight for Lumholtz tree kangaroos. Graeme, who lived in the region at one time for about five years, had noticed my disappointment at what was to that point a fairly small list of birds. He decided we should go to Hasties Swamp, which he said we were bound to see thousands of birds and dozens of species. I had seen several reports to support this assertion, and even the girl in the supermarket knew Hasties Swamp was the place to go for birds. Imagine our reaction when on entering the bird hide, we saw all

of six birds in view. I felt our trip was doomed.

Come evening we visited Tolga Scrub to see a roost for **spectacled** and **little red flying foxes**. After this we headed to Lumholtz Lodge as a mutual friend had suggested that the proprietor, Margit Cianelli, would be happy to take us spotlighting for **Lumholtz tree kangaroos**. It soon became clear that Margit had no intention of taking us spotlighting however she was happy to introduce us to Nelson, a habituated tree kangaroo that lived with her sister nearby. Nelson has free range to come and go, feeding and mating in the wild as he wishes. He is also extremely friendly and was soon climbing on my back, shoulder and head. Showing the intelligence of this species, Nelson had also



learnt by observation how to open a door handle giving him free access to the house. Margit insisted that as he could roam at will he was a wild animal, but I could not in justice "tick" an animal I first saw sleeping on a bed located in its own bedroom. The evening became a very enjoyable boozy dinner during which we discovered Margit and Graeme had a number of acquaintances in common, both in Germany and Australia.

With only two evenings now available for mammal watching we thought we better get some professional help. So, we arranged for Alan Gillanders to guide us the next night away. We were to meet at Yungaburra that evening. After lunch in the local hotel Graeme and I went looking for **platypus** on the walk along the local creek. Not surprisingly for mid-afternoon we did not see any however we did see one on Lake Eachum later in the day. Also seen at Lake Eachum, but the

following morning, was a roost for **eastern long-eared bats**. Come dusk Alan picked us up from our motel and took us straight to his “secret spot”. First seen was a **rufous bettong** hopping down the road towards us. A little bit further up the road we parked and started watching **yellow-bellied gliders** in the surrounding trees. We had fantastic views of them, one came down to eye-level and was only about a metre away. **Broad-toed feathertail gliders** soon appeared and were obviously interacting with the yellow-bellied gliders, taking advantage of the bigger gliders to get a feed. The evening was off to an excellent start. I was thrilled as we keep and breed all three species at Moonlit Sanctuary, but I had only ever seen a yellow-bellied glider once before in the wild, and the other two never.



Common or eastern ringtail possums are found down the eastern side of Australia from the northern-most tip of Cape York to the southern-most tip of Tasmania, in a range that includes our three biggest cities and the nation’s capital. For most Australians, it would probably be our most familiar mammal after the brushtail possum. One of my earliest memories is seeing them in trees around our house. It therefore would come as a surprise to most Australians that there were four very distinct and different species ringtail possum within 200km of Cairns. Obviously, it was a priority for me to see them all.



Next stop was beside the road about 10 minutes from the gliders. By using his thermal scope, within minutes Alan had located a **Herbert River ringtail possum**. In the same group of trees Alan quickly located a **coppery brushtail possum**, first of several seen that night. There is still some debate as to whether this is a valid species, or just a sub-species of the common brushtail possum. We then literally walked across the road to find a **lemuroid ringtail possum**, who’s movements clearly showed how it got its name. Moving on to the car park of a national park, we

quickly found a **green ringtail possum**, and also had our second sighting of an eastern tube-nosed bat. Having bagged the three local ringtail possums, we then went on a search for tree kangaroos, but didn’t find any. We did see two **eastern barn owls** and a **lesser sooty owl** at it’s nest hollow. A great night out.

Our final foray was to be to Mt Lewis for the **Daintree River ringtail possum**. On the way up we stopped at the Neranda Tea Plantation tea rooms as it is often recommended as a site for Lumholtz tree kangaroos. The tea rooms were closed because it was the wet season. I don’t know if the tree kangaroos knew this but we couldn’t find any. Next stop was Granite Gorge for the **Mareeba rock wallaby**. This is a privately owned facility and having visited I am somewhat perturbed about patronizing it. The owners seem to be intent on turning it into a sub-standard zoo with a collection of parrots crammed into tiny cages. The rock wallabies are not affected by this however this place is a blight on an industry I am otherwise, in the Australian context, generally proud to belong to.

We were booked into Feathers and Friends for the night, and that is where we met up with our guide for the night, Patrick de Geeste. We headed up to Mt Lewis and at the base of the mountain our first mammal was a **giant white-tailed rat** running across the road. Another was later seen back

at our accommodation. After reaching the gate we walked past the gate and further down the road, spotlighting as we went. A Daintree River ringtail was the first animal spotlighted quickly followed by another green ringtail. Quite a number of **fawn-footed melomys** were observed and a **bush rat** seen running along a track in the embankment. However, an **Australian tree mouse** (better known as the prehensile-tailed rat) was the rodent highlight of the evening. We had great views of this rarely-seen animal, which was only about 2 metres up a tree and close enough for us to have touched. Walking back to the car we saw a **rusty antechinus** sitting on a rocky outcrop. The final animal for the evening was a **northern long-nosed bandicoot** observed on the drive back to our accommodation. We saw another one a couple of nights later in South Mission Beach.

Before departing Feathers and Friends the next morning we view a roost for **northern broad-nosed bats** in an abandoned building on the property. This was to be the last mammal species added to our list for the trip.

What did we miss? Obviously, tree kangaroos. I would also have very much liked to see striped possums, but these are difficult to see in any case. Then there were another bettong and bandicoot species, as well a number of species of bats and rats. Of course, I would have thrilled to see any of these, but none were target species. Overall given the time restraints a very satisfying trip.

#### **Mammals observed and identified.**

1. Platypus *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*
2. **Rusty antechinus** *Antechinus adustus*
3. **Northern long-nosed bandicoot** *Perameles pallescens*
4. **Broad-toed feathertail glider** *Acrobates frontalis* (new Family)
5. **Coppery brushtail possum** *Trichosurus johnstonii*
6. **Lemuroid ringtail possum** *Hemibelideus lemuroides*
7. **Green ringtail possum** *Pseudochirops archeri*
8. **Daintree River ringtail possum** *Pseudochirulus cinereus*
9. **Herbert River ringtail possum** *Pseudochirulus herbertensis*
10. Yellow-bellied glider *Petaurus australis*
11. Agile wallaby *Macropus agilis*
12. **Mareeba rock wallaby** *Petrogale mareeba*
13. Red-legged pademelon *Thylogale stigmatica*
14. **Rufus bettong** *Aepyprymnus rufescens*
15. **Musky rat-kangaroo** *Hypsiprymnodon moschatus* (new Family)
16. Fawn-footed melomys *Melomys cervinipes*
17. **Australian tree mouse\*** *Pogonomys mollipilosus*
18. **Bush rat** *Rattus fuscipes*
19. **Giant white-tailed rat** *Uromys caudimaculatus*
20. **Eastern tube-nosed bat** *Nyctimene robinsoni*
21. Spectacled flying-fox *Pteropus conspicillatus*
22. **Little red flying-fox** *Pteropus scapulatus*
23. **Eastern long-eared bat** *Nyctophilus bifax*
24. **Northern broad-nosed bat** *Scotorepens sanborni*

\* This species is more commonly know as the prehensile tail rat. A recent recommendation to change the common name was adopted because (a) it belongs to a largely Asian genus known as tree mice and (b) there is a rodent in South America also known as the prehensile tail rat.