

Mammal Watching Report – Atherton Tablelands & Cape York, Queensland February 2021

43 mammal species

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Earlier in 2021 I escaped Victoria (just – before another Covid lockdown) for a ~2week journey covering through some outstanding locations in Queensland. It was a hastily rescheduled trip after border closures meant I couldn't get to Western Australia (for a trip to Bernier & Dorre Islands! – sad face), but an amazing alternative nonetheless. I was principally combining a south-east Queensland multi-day pelagic out to the Britannia & Queensland Seamounts, mostly a seabirding trip, before heading to far north Queensland and up to Iron Range NP on Cape York.

The first section out to the Seamounts was all about birding, the only mammals we encountered was a pod of **Common (Offshore) Bottlenose Dolphin's**. This report then comprises Part 1; a few nights up on the Atherton Tablelands as I stopped over at Cairns on route to/from Cape York, and Part 2; 6 days within outstanding Iron Range NP and surrounds on the Cape York Peninsula, flying in and out of the Lockhart River settlement.

The following report includes and list and summary of mammals seen through Cairns/Atherton Tablelands and then Cape York.



Image: Lemuroid Ringtail Possum (left) & Cinnamon Antechinus (right)

Part 1 – Atherton Tablelands, Qld

This summary is part 1 of 2 for the trip from my time around the Atherton Tablelands, which started as a stopover on route to the Cape, but needless to say I racked up an impressive list. After my visit to the area earlier in the year, I really focussed my efforts this time around a couple of the smaller mammals - Pogonomys and Pygmy Possum. Over 3 nights I targeted the Mt Hypipamee and Mt Lewis areas before also spending a good bit of time in the drier western slopes of the southern Tablelands. It wasn't intentional but I picked up some outstanding diversity with 31 species, it shows just how special this part of the country is for mammal watching.

- **Yellow-footed Antechinus:** one individual picked up in the drier eucalypt country near Herberton. Unusually satisfying nocturnal views as it climbed a log perch before hopping around with terrific agility.
- **Eastern Grey Kangaroo:** occasionally encountered in the drier stuff, Davies Ck NP and a few other areas
- **Swamp Wallaby:** Wondecla State Forest
- **Agile Wallaby:** one on my way out of Davies Ck NP.
- **Northern Bettong:** I was at Davies Ck NP to look for Quoll's.. I didn't find these but stumbled upon a Bettong literally a metre or two away from me. Unfortunately my camera was playing up, so I couldn't quite take advantage of the photo opportunity.
- **Rufous Bettong:** a few sightings, seemingly fairly common in the SW of the Tablelands.
- **Red-legged Pademelon:** friendly as at Feathers n Friends (Julatten) and plenty around at Possum Valley Cottages.
- **Northern Brown Bandicoot:** remarkably tame at Davies Ck NP, I had at least two that were right at my feet.
- **Northern Long-nosed Bandicoot:** one scampering away on the slopes of Mt Lewis.
- **Musky Rat-kangaroo:** I hiked a long way up Mt Lewis (past the closed gate) one afternoon and spotted my way back. The crepuscular Rat-kangaroo's were disturbed a couple of times in the late afternoon.
- **Long-tailed Pygmy Possum:** a big highlight. After checking so many hotspots through the thermal, this one was high in a tree turned out to be the hoped PP. High up along the Mt Lewis trail, the animal was feeding on the plentiful blossoms of the tree. Also with a Feathertail just next to it.
- **Common Brushtail Possum:** a few sites, all in the south of the Tablelands. I woke up to one that had broken into my cottage during the night at Possum Valley.
- **Common Ringtail Possum:** drier forest areas
- **Green Ringtail Possum:** Mt Lewis, 2 seen over my long evening up there.
- **Daintree River Ringtail Possum:** eventually at the end of a long wet and foggy night on Mt Lewis I found a couple of these ringtails. For a species that is supposedly easy enough to track down, I had a lot of trouble. They're much smaller than I thought.
- **Herbert River Ringtail Possum:** Possum Valley Cottages, bordering the same rainforest as Mt Hypipamee NP.
- **Lemuroid Ringtail Possum:** same as Herbert River RT, also very close views at Hypipamee.
- **Northern Greater Glider:** southern Tablelands
- **Sugar Glider:** Wondecla State Forest
- **Broad-toed Feathertail Glider:** Mt Lewis, seemingly different to typical encounters, this animal was high on Mt Lewis deep in the wet rainforest. Anecdotally speaking the NTFG favours dry forest, but obviously not here. Probably a reasonable precedence to apply to the southern counterparts where habitat alone can not be relied upon to separate the two species.
- **Striped Possum:** Possum Valley Cottages
- **Lumholtz Tree-kangaroo:** Possum Valley Cottages
- **Diadem Leaf-nosed Bat:** one perch hunting
- **Eastern Forest Bat** - commonly encountered within rainforest areas at Mt Lewis. A small roost at Feathers n Friends in Julatten is probably this sp.
- **Black Flying-fox:** misc fly-by at Kuranda
- **Pogonomys (Prehensile-tailed Rat):** coming down Mt Lewis I spotted one that froze in the spotlight. They're surprisingly larger than expected. It posed nicely for a few photos.
- **Giant White-tailed Rat:** Davies Ck NP and Mt Lewis.
- **Common Rock-rat:** one along a rocky gully at Davies Ck, great views but it disappeared as quickly as it appeared.
- **Fawn-footed Melomys:** if there was rainforest there was a lot of Melomys.
- **Dingo:** I crossed paths with one late afternoon on the hike up Mt Lewis.
- **European Rabbit:** any of the cleared agricultural areas.
- **Feral Cat:** right after I saw a Rufous Bettong..



Image: Common Brushtail Possum (left) & Pogonomys sp. / Prehensile-tailed Rat (right)



Image: Striped Possum, near Mt Hypipamee NP, Qld



Image: Northern Greater Glider, Qld



Image: Fawn-footed Melomys, Mt Lewis, Qld



Image: Eastern Forest Bat, Julatten, Qld



Image: Long-tailed Pygmy Possum, Mt Lewis, Qld



Image: Rufous Bettong (left) & Daintree River Ringtail (right)



Image: Northern Brown Bandicoot, Davies Creek NP, Qld

Part 2 – Iron Range NP (Cape York), Qld

We probably don't see a lot of reports from this part of the country, so I hope you enjoy the pics and notes. The summary is a part 2 of 2 following my previous post for the Atherton Tablelands.

I had 5 nights staying out of Lockhart River, and each night included some intensive spotlighting, returning in the early hours of the morning. I typically scoured the rainforest area of Iron Range along Portland Road, but also extending through the drier gallery forest towards Chilli Beach and Portland Roads. Use of the bat detector here is pretty satisfying considering that there aren't too many species with overlap echolocation calls, therefore ID is possible to species level in most instances. Bat ID's based on a combination of spotlight view and sound recording.

- **Cinnamon Antechinus** (1) - stoked to find one animal on a very wet night, it was sheltering beneath the bark to keep dry. A couple of quick photos and I let it continue its escape from the elements. Near Rainforest campground. A very big highlight!
- **Common Spotted Cuscus** (7) - generally 2 or so per night, but on the last evening I had 7 individuals. I suggest this coincided with a dry night, during rainy weather they seem to tuck their head in and bunker down in a tree fork or under canopy shelter, this limits detection rate massively.
- Northern Bettong ?!?! notes as below postscript.
- **Agile Wallaby** (7) - misc roadside sightings in drier forest areas along Portland Rd.
- **Red-legged Pademelon** (1) - late on the last night at Cooks Hut.
- **Bare-backed Flying-fox** (3) - incidental sightings on all nights; consistently at GreenHoose & Gordon Ck campground. Diagnostic wing-clapping makes ID quick and easy.
- **Spectacled Flying-fox** (3) - misc sightings each night.
- **Eastern Horseshoe Bat** (30+) - there's a gated mine near Gordon Creek campground which hosts a roost for this species and presumably a few others. On dusk there were many that could be seen flying out and around just below canopy level. Of night, they were the common microbat through the forest which could be easily followed with a torch as they buzzed insects around my head.
- **Little Bentwing Bat** (15+) - much more direct and faster flight than a Horseshoe, a similar size but with distinct call differences. Occasional through the rainforest, but common to abundant in open areas closer to Lockhart River and certainly around Chilli Beach.
- **Common Bentwing Bat** (4) - one evening I had both bentwings foraging over open grassland near Lockhart River. Common was much larger and can be separated by call.
- **Forest Pipistrelle** (4) - not present through the rainforest but found in open gallery forest area. While I couldn't confirm 100%, there's a colony roosting at the GreenHoose residents building. I picked them up in this area easily enough. Visibly the smallest microbat flitting around the area.
- **Eastern Long-eared Bat** (1) - I picked up a Nyctophilus vertical call and tracked it as it passed continuous fly-bys. Not a Myotis based on foraging habit, flight style and absence of a river/waterway nearby. There's no other Long-eared Bat contenders in this area, so can be ID'd to species level. (The first time I've been able to do this for Nyctophilus)
- **Cape York Melomys** (abundant) - 10 to 20 individuals most nights, though only 1 on the particularly wet evening. Commonly picked up in the thermal foraging on the rainforest floor, or up to 2m above ground. Only a couple of individuals higher up at canopy level.
- **Pogonomys sp. [Prehensile-tailed Rat]** (2) - Cooks Hut campground and another location further along Portland Rd. I hadn't thought this was a contender for the trip, but very happy to find a few of these arboreal specialists amongst the ubiquitous Melomys.
- **Giant White-tailed Rat** (2) - only two separate sightings over the whole time, relatively timid and darted away fairly quickly.
- **Dingo** (1) - a lone animal crossed Portland Rd in front of me through the rainforest section, approx near Cooks Hut.
- **Feral Pig** (2) - a couple of miscellaneous individuals while spotlighting

Dips - my main other target was Common Southern Cuscus, a species I knew was relatively 'thin on the ground'. Over 5 nights spotlighting, via a combination of methods; thermal, spotlight for eye shine and scanning while driving; comprising 4-7 hours per night, I still didn't have any success. They're obviously not in high numbers, but I think weather may have been a significant factor; based on activity of similar Spotted Cuscus, the large canopy possums(?) weren't active during wet weather. Detection rates were much higher on dry evenings when the animals were mobile and foraging. One for another trip. Also surprisingly no bandicoot species at all, with 3 present in the area I had though I may stumble upon one or two. And, in hindsight, Cape York Rat would typically be found with relative ease (I think), but nothing for me.

Postscript - possible NORTHERN BETTONG - Iron Range, Cape York (February 2021).

I understand the significance of a claim such and this, and cannot conclusively provide evidence of the record, but for the purpose of broad-casting extra public awareness perhaps someone can add something in the future.

Observation notes - I spent just under a week in the Iron Range area of Cape York in late Feb, staying in accommodation based out of Lockhart River. It was purely a wildlife finding adventure for my only personal enjoyment, mostly birding by day and spotlighting by night and I logged all the vertebrate wildlife during my stay.

After over 25 hours of spotlighting, on my last night, I was driving the road (asphalt section of Portland Road) between Lockhart River and Portland Roads when I disturbed a small macropod species from the road verge. I instantly noticed this as a different 'structured' animal compared to the Agile Wallabies I had earlier seen. I was driving relatively slowly, circa 20km/h, and under the cars headlights my immediate impression was a Bettong spp. hopping away. As I braked to a halt, the main ID observation was presence of a dark-tipped tail held raised as the animal bounced out of view. Impression or 'jizz' of the animal was a lightly structured macropod which hopped with weight held forward over its toes. I had only seen Northern Bettong on the Atherton Tablelands a week beforehand and comparatively speaking I was convinced I was again looking at a Bettong.

I jumped from the car and under spotlight I just saw the animal scamper from the cleared road area into adjacent undergrowth. Using my thermal scope I could make out the heat signature of a small macropod, obviously still close behind the long grass/scrub. Aside from the size, no ID notes could be made from this view. As soon as I made movements to head towards the animal it hopped away and I could hear its continuous movement away from me.

Habitat - this section of Portland Road sits in the drier open gallery forest, adjacent to the rainforest areas Iron Range is typically renown.

Other ID contenders - Agile Wallaby & Red-legged Pademelon, maybe Spectacled Hare-wallaby

Current Known Range - currently known from 4 sub-populations west of Cairns, down to the Coane Range NW of Townsville. This record would be ~500km further north than populations within the northern Atherton Tablelands area.

Investigation - since I've returned from the trip, I've reached out to some local people in the Lockhart River/Iron Range region who are familiar Iron Range wildlife surveys that have been conducted in recent years. I was provided with some interesting anecdotal notes which only further fuelled the intrigue:

- miscellaneous (unconfirmed) notes of a Bettong spp. encountered in a similar area 7 years ago.
- anecdotal reports of one or two other sightings in subsequent years.
- a 3 month wildlife survey using camera and baited traps in the area which turned up no further evidence.
- no confirmed photo or specimen records.

Perhaps this could be an unknown isolated population, perhaps just a mis-ID with some convenient contributing facts. But certainly something to keep an eye out for future mammal watchers in the area. I think there is an agenda being run to hopefully secure more resources and funding for further mammal survey of this area one day. If anyone can help with this, I'd be willing to pass on any extra details and contacts to assist!



Image: Spectacled Flying-fox (left) & Common Spotted Cuscus (right)



Image: Cinnamon Antechinus, Iron Range NP, Qld



Image: Cape York Melomys (left & right)



Image: Pogonomys sp. / Prehensile-tailed Rat, Iron Range NP, Qld



Image: Bare-backed Flying-fox (left) & Giant White-tailed Rat (right)



Image: Common Spotted Cuscus, Iron Range NP, Qld