

Three “easy” mammal destinations

For those that don't know, I own Moonlit Sanctuary, a wildlife park close to Melbourne Australia. I travel a fair bit for work, attending tourism trade shows amongst other things. Wherever I go I try to have some time for wildlife watching. Here are three of the places I've been this year, watching whales in Monterey Bay, California, USA, primates and squirrels at Fraser's Hill, Malaysia, and dugongs in Moreton Bay, Queensland, Australia.

They are “easy” because they are all within two or three hours of a major city and international airport, and no great feat of logistics or organisational genius is required for any of them.

1. Monterey Bay, California, USA

Monterey Bay is well known for its marine mammals, and there have been a number of reports on this site. The reputation is reinforced with the knowledge there appears to be about half a dozen companies offering whale-watching expeditions, each seemingly with two or three boats of various sizes. However, most trips seem to be for three or four hours and some of the boats can take 100 or more passengers. One of the more amusing aspects of my trip was watching some of the larger boats heel over as the passengers' rush to the side of the boat the whales could be seen from.

Monterey Bay Whale Watch, which has been mentioned before on this site, run occasional full day (12 hour) trips, and as one coincided with a business trip to LA, and I had the day spare, I decided to do it. On arrival at Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey at 7am to check in I heard the girl behind the ticket counter describe the trip as the “nerd's tour”. Apparently, I had chosen the right one.

There were only 12 passengers on our boat, with a crew of 5, of whom 3 were marine biologists. A lot of time was spent by staff photographing different whales, including using a drone. Nancy Black, the company owner, was at the helm. In addition, a professional photographer was along for the ride (apparently, he joins every all-day trip) and he was very willing to discuss any aspect of photography. I have the impression these trips are run for the interest of owner and staff, and passengers help pay for the fuel. Needless to say, we were in possibly the smallest boat I saw that day.

Marine mammal watching started within the harbour, with a harbour seal, Californian sealions and a sea otter all seen before passing the breakwater. Heading out into the bay we soon came across an ocean sunfish, the first of several seen that day, as well as their prey, Pacific sea nettles (jellies). It seemed like no time when we were in the middle of the action with humpback whales hunting cooperatively with Californian sea-lions. The sea-lions herded anchovies into big bunches, then disappear allowing the whales to push in to swallow as many as they could. The sea-lions then grabbed what they could of the stunned and dead leftover fish. This went on all morning with numerous breaches and one occasion a whale jumped clear of the water.

We headed out to open water in the hope of seeing other species of whales, however this did not happen although we did see 3 Dall's porpoises. Never mind, there were plenty of interesting birds including my first albatross. A solitary bull elephant seal was seen poking its head clear of the water. It is easy to see how this behaviour might have contributed to the mermaid legend.

We came back inshore for more humpback action when news came through of a large number of Risso's dolphins further north. We came across what looked like a river of dolphins heading in a south-easterly direction. Many were performing acrobatics as they swam forward, while mothers shepherded their offspring. An amazing sight, well worth the price of the ticket, as they say.

Heading back into the bay and only a couple of kilometres off Monterey, we came across several small groups of humpback whales hunting. The sealions had seemed to have disappeared and the whales were fishing by coming up under the anchovy schools, water and fish pouring from their mouths as they breached. This went on continuously for at least a couple of hours with the group of three humpbacks we were watching and we could see small groups of whales all over the bay. Eventually dusk was approaching and as we made our way back to the wharf a small sunfish raised one of its fins as if to wave goodbye.

Monterey Bay has been described as one of the great mammal experiences and I would have to agree.

Mammals seen:

- 1 Sea otter *Enhydra lutris*
- 1 Northern elephant seal *Mirounga angustirostris*
- 1 Harbour seal *Phoca vitulina*
- 1000+ Californian sea lion *Zalophus californianus*
- 500+ Risso's dolphin *Grampus griseus*
- 3 Dall's porpoise *Phocoenoides dalli*
- 30+ Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Birds seen from the boat:

- Brandt's cormorant *Phalacrocorax penicillatus*
- Brown pelican *Pelecanus occidentalis*
- Black-crowned night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*
- Black turnstone *Arenaria melanocephala*
- Red-necked phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*
- Western gull *Larus occidentalis*
- California gull *Larus occidentalis*
- Heermann's gull *Larus heermanni*
- Arctic tern *Sterna paradisaea*
- Elegant tern *Thalasseus elegans*
- Sabine's gull *Xema sabini*
- Parasitic jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*
- Pigeon guillimot *Cephus columba*
- Rhinoceros auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*
- Common murre *Uria aalge*
- Buller's shearwater *Ardenna bulleri*
- Pink-footed shearwater *Ardenna creatopus*
- Sooty shearwater *Ardenna grisea*
- Black-footed albatross *Phoebastria nigripes*
- Belted kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*

2. Fraser's Hill, Malaysia

Fraser's Hill, or in Malay and perhaps more appropriately, Butik Fraser, is a former British hill station only two hours from central Kuala Lumpur. It is the smallest of the hill stations in Malaysia and unlike the others, there has been no agricultural or forestry development, leaving large amounts of intact forest around. The town is very spread out and that combined with the paved road system and a number of jungle trails makes it an "easy" jungle destination. It is primarily known for its birds and

that is the main reason I visited; however, it is also excellent for primates. I had a weekend between a business event in KL and a business event in Perth, I decided to spend my time there rather than fly back to Melbourne for a day prior to going back to Perth.

As can be imagined the road up the hill was very windy and that combined with the fact that I was recovering from whooping cough meant I felt quite ill by the time I got to my accommodation and so I staggered out onto the balcony for fresh air and collapsed into a chair. It was then that I saw the first and most unexpected mammal. I saw a creature working its way through the canopy of a tree downhill but only 20 metres or so away. Having seen pine martens in the Alpin Zoo in Austria only a few weeks prior, my first reaction was "that's a yellow-throated marten". I continued to watch this animal for a further 10 minutes or more but never got a good look at its head or tail. Later, looking at the only mammal guide book I had with me, the body colour was different and I convinced myself it was a Pallas's squirrel, which are common there. However, the more Pallas's squirrels I saw the less likely it seemed that my animal was one. An internet search showed that the morph of yellow-throated martens found in central Malaya was indeed the same colour as my animal. So now I am certain that is what I saw.

After a couple of hours, I was feeling a bit better so I headed off to find some food. Almost immediately I came across some real Pallas's squirrels as well as what I took to be slender squirrels, a species I have encountered in Singapore previously. It turns out that these have been split from the slender squirrel and are now known as Malaysian montane squirrels.

I managed to take a wrong turn which turned out to be fortuitous, as after I turned back, I came across my first primate, a dusky langur on a tree branch above the road. A beautiful animal, we watched each other for a few minutes until it moved off into the forest. A little further on I saw a small party of long-tailed macaques foraging in the tree tops. Long-tailed macaques are common animals in south-east Asia and often around tourism destinations they can be found begging for food and making a general nuisance of themselves. Somebody had obviously run a very effective campaign at some point to stop this happening at Fraser's Hill. I saw several old signs asking people not to feed the monkeys and all the monkeys I saw went about their normal business ignoring people below.

I also saw my first group of western striped squirrels. This attractive small squirrel proved to be the most delightful to watch as they climbed effortlessly between branches and vines. At that point I wasn't doing badly, 6 mammal species in less than 4 hours. All except the marten re-appeared on my walks over the following two days but I was only to see 3 further species of mammal.

The call of siamangs could be heard echoing through the surrounding valleys every day, especially in the morning. Of course, their call can carry long distances so trying to chase the call down would be a fruitless exercise. I had been told that the road to the waterfall was a good place to see them and so on the second afternoon I headed off down the road. I ignored the other part of the advice, which was that mornings were the best time to see them. So of course, I didn't see a siamang but I did manage to see a white-thighed langur. Other reports indicated that they are more common than the dusky langur but I saw a few dusky langurs but only one white-thighed langur.

I did not see a siamang till late on the third (last) afternoon when I took a 200m walk down one of the trails up past Allen's Water. There it was about 50 metres into the forest. A friend gave the advice that the best way to see siamangs at Fraser's Hill was to just walk the roads and trails until you saw them. I guess that advice applies to the other primates too, it certainly isn't hard (although a moderate level of fitness is required) but it does take a bit of time.

Fraser's Hill is regarded as the best place to see the Sunda slow loris. I did take a torch with me however it turned out to be useless for spotlighting. In any case with early morning bird walks and being a little ill I appreciated the early evenings. I have now purchased an excellent head lamp so will be ready for them next time as well as any flying squirrels or other small mammals that might be around.

I left my accommodation about 9am the last morning for the airport. Fraser's Hill has a one-way road up the hill and a one-way road down the hill. Heading downhill just after the one-way section started and going around a corner there was a big male southern pig-tailed macaque sitting on the barrier, only inches away from my open window. Over the next 100 metres or so we drove past his troop of younger males, females and infants. As a result, I ended up seeing more pig-tailed macaques than any other primate.

Logistics: If not driving yourself (certainly an option) a car can be arranged from KL or a cheaper option would be to take a train to Kuala Kubu Bharu then a taxi the remainder of the way. Make sure to arrange your return trip as there are no taxis on Fraser's Hill. Likewise, if self-driving fill up in Kuala Kubu Bharu as there are no fuel outlets on the hill, either. The two hotels are the Sharzan Inn and the Punkat Inn. My tourism contacts in Malaysia suggested that staying at the Silverpark Resort, a series of apartments, would be more comfortable. It is located on top of the hill and was quite central to most of the walking routes I used. The apartments are self-catering and restaurants don't open till 11am and the small shops only stock snacks and souvenirs, so make sure you bring breakfast foods with you if taking this option.

Mammals seen:

Siamang *Symphalangus syndactylus*
Long-tailed macaque *Macaca fasciculari*
Southern pig-tailed macaque *Macaca nemestrina*
White-thighed langur *Presbytis siamensis*
Dusky langur *Trachypithecus obscurus*
Pallas's squirrel *Callosciurus erythraeus*
Malaysian montane squirrel *Sundasciurus tahan*
Western striped squirrel *Temiops mcchellandi*
Yellow-throated marten *Martes flavigula*

Birds seen:

Mountain imperial pigeon *Ducula pickeringii*
Barred cuckoo-dove *Macropygia unchall*
Red-headed trogon *Harpactes erythrocephalus*
Fire-tufted barbet *Psilopogon pyrolophus*
Black-browed barbet *Psilopogon oorti*
Greater yellowback *Chrysosophlegma favinucha*
White-throated fantail *Rhipidura albicollis*
Bronzed drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*
Lesser racket-tailed drongo *Dicrurus remifer*
Ochraceous bulbul *Alophoixus ochraceus*
Black-crested bulbul *Pycnonotus flaviventris*
Mountain fulvetta *Alcippe peracensis*
Long-tailed sibia *Heterophasia picaoides*

Spectacled laughingthrush *Rhinucichila mitrata*
Sultan tit *Melanochlora sultanea*
Mugimaki flycatcher *Ficedula mugimaki*
Large niltava *Niltava grandis*
Pied bushchat *Saxicola caprata*
Asian glossy starling *Aplonis panayensis*
Orange-bellied leafbird *Chloropsis hardwickii*
Black-throated sunbird *Aethopyga saturata*
Little spiderhunter *Arachmothera longirosta*
Streaked spiderhunter *Arachmothera magna*
Bar-winged flycatcher shrike *Hemipus picatus*
Mountain leaf-warbler *Phylloscopus trivirgatus*
Slaty-backed forktail *Enicurus schistaceus*
House crow *Corvus splendens*

3. Dugongs in Moreton Bay, Queensland, Australia

The dugongs of Moreton Bay are probably the most southerly herd of the species in the world, and the only ones close to a major city. I was in Brisbane for business so took the opportunity to try and see them. I looked at dolphin tour boats but they were all basically about having a good day - see a few dolphins, have a bow ride, have a snorkel, and a nice lunch. If they saw a dugong, they might point it out to you. But overall it was not what I was after. I ended up hiring a fishing charter boat. It cost \$400 for three people and four hours, however we ended being out for closer to 5 hours. Although it might sound expensive, I thought it very fair, and the results were certainly worthwhile. If anybody is interested I used Moreton Bay Fish Charter (www.moretonbaycharters.com.au) and Steve was extremely helpful and obliging. I can't recommend him more highly.

Three marine mammals are resident Moreton Bay, Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins, Australian humpback dolphins and dugongs. The dolphins are very common and easy to see, being quite showy in breaching and jumping. Dugongs barely break the water when coming up to breathe and are not nearly as common. So, we spent the first three hours searching for them but we were not bored during this time. We saw plenty of birds and came across a small pod of humpback dolphins. Fishermen often feed them so they are very inquisitive around boats, coming right up and around them hoping for a free feed.

Eventually we found them seemingly in the middle of nowhere. First one was seen then another and another. Steve cut the engine and let us float along with them. It soon became clear we were in the middle of a very large herd. Steve said he had never seen so many and I estimate there were about 50 dugongs in total. It was very restful watching and listening to them surface and exhale, making a sound a little like a sigh before diving back down to the seagrass beds to feed. We were with them for about an hour before we had to turn around and head back to shore.

We saw more birds, there are a lot of small sand islands in Moreton Bay, supporting populations of waders. We also encountered a pod of bottlenose dolphins, once again they were as interested in us as we were in them. All together a perfect morning.

Mammals seen

Dugong *Dugong dugon*
Indo-pacific bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops aduncus*
Australian humpbacked dolphin *Sousa sahalensis*

Birds seen

Little pied cormorant *Microcarbo melanoleucos*
Little black cormorant *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*
Pied cormorant *Phalacrocorax varius*
Australian white ibis *Threskiornis molucca*
Eastern reef heron *Egretta sacra*
Australian pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus*
Bar-tailed godwit *Limosa lapponica*
Eastern curlew *Numenius madagascariensis*
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*
Caspian tern *Hydroprogne caspia*
Common tern *Sterna hirundo*
Crested tern *Thalasseus bergii*
Pied oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris*
Wedge-tailed shearwater *Ardenna pacifica*
Masked woodswallow *Atamus personatus*