



A Naturalist's Guide to Sydney

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Sydney, a modern mega city with 5 million inhabitants, is not only beautiful, but also good spots to find wildlife. I spend a semester in Sydney in the second half of 2019 and tried to find some of the wildlife. This guide is not complete and focuses on sites reachable by => public transport.

Arthropods: The most famous is probably the =>Sydney Funnel-web Spider. Within the city, Arthropod diversity is reduced. A bit outside, more diversity, as well as freshwater crayfish can be found. An obvious and interesting group are Cicadas that also make any other nature activity less enjoyable at some point in the summer/day because of the volume and mass of animals.

Atlas of living Australia (ALA): The place to get information on distribution and records of all species groups, particularly mammals. I recommend participating and reporting sightings. This is also possible by using iNaturalist and a range of other recording schemes.

Birding: Within the city, there is attractive species such as => Parrots, =>Fairy-Wrens and even =>Penguins and =>Powerful Owls. The most sought-after birds in the Sydney region are probably =>Regent Honeyeater, =>Rockwarbler and =>Superb Lyrebird. Good central birding areas include =>Centennial park and Botanical Garden, a bit further out are =>Sydney Olympic Park, Dee Why Lagoon, Long Reef Point (waders at low tide in summer), Manly Dam and =>Warriewood Wetland/Irrawong Reserve. With a car, =>Royal National Park, =>Ku-ring-gai-Chase-National Park, as well as Pitt Town Lagoon area and Bushells Lagoon area are rewarding. In Wianamatta Nature reserve and Castlereagh Nature Reserve some dryland birds such as Red-capped Robin and Buff-rumped Thornbill are possible. With a weekend, the =>Blue Mountains, possibly with the fantastic =>Capertee Valley are options, as well as Jervis Bay and Barren Grounds National Park (both with Eastern Ground Parrot and Eastern Bristlebird, I prefer the latter area) are within reach.

Birdline NSW: The place to read about rare birds in NSW. Often, because of many observers in the Sydney region, there are also interesting birds around Sydney reported.

Blue Mountains: Easily reachable from Sydney with the Blue Mountains Express. Beautiful, and if not around the most popular, overrun tourist sites like the Three sisters, very enjoyable to hike and do some birding. The NSW-endemic =>Rockwarbler is not very easy, but possible. Check =>ebird for recent sightings. =>Superb Lyrebird are fairly common and usually findable during hikes or even in the outskirts of the towns.



Capertee Valley: Quite a distance from Sydney and a car is necessary. However, one of the best birding spots in Australia with a high diversity, as inland and coastal bird species meet. =>Regent Honeyeater, =>Rockwarbler and Plum-headed Finch are three of the most sought-after in this place. Crested Shrike-Tit, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Diamond Finch and =>Superb Lyrebird are other specialities. Good birding is around the campsites in Glen Davis (-33.125838, 150.281499 and -33.123955, 150.323321), down the Crown Station Road (-33.134094, 150.150741) and towards Capertee National Park. Roadsides are excellent throughout the area, but please respect locals and their land. A map with birding spots can be found here (<http://archive.lithgow.nsw.gov.au/tourism/caperteebirds.pdf>). Beside birds, mammals like Red-necked Wallaby, Wombat and Grey Kangaroo are numerous and the place is absolutely stunning, being the widest canyon of the world. The authors favourite place in Australia! There is free public camping past Glen Davis as well as Public Camping within Glen Davis, conveniently also some of the best birding spots in the valley!

Centennial Park: A big park in central Sydney. Can be good to observe some of the Australian species up close, including Parrots, Ibis and Magpies. Passerines are scarce, but Superb Fairy Wren can usually be found. Best birding is around the Duck pond (-33.901926, 151.235978). There is a =>Fruit bat colony in Lachlan Swamp just north of Duck pond, with both Grey-headed and Black Flying Fox. Roosting Tawny Frogmouth (in the swamp), Barn Owls (in palm trees) and Powerful Owls are difficult to find, but there are usually helpful local birders.



Diving: Diving can be rewarding, however when I was there, the difference in species compared to snorkelling was limited. Big cuttlefish, as well as Nudibranches are species I found only during diving. For Weedy => Seadragon diving is necessary as far as I know.

Eastern Water Dragon: A big, spectacular looking Lizard. Very common around waterbodies in Sydney. The most famous colony is along the waterfront between Manly and Shelly Beach.

Fairy-Wren: One of the most spectacular and luckily also most common songbirds in Sydney, Superb Fairy-Wren can be found in almost any place with a few bushes and shrubs and can be quite confiding. Good photo opportunities are often found around the waterbird reserve in =>Sydney Olympic Park.

Fish: The most diverse vertebrate group in Sydney. Nocturnal freshwater eel can be found in almost every freshwater body, but the true diversity is found of course in the sea. Best way to see the diversity is =>Snorkling or =>Diving

Fruit Bat/Flying-Foxes: One of the most well known roosts is in the =>Centennial park in the Lachlan Swamp area (-33.900216, 151.235949), consisting of Grey-headed flying-fox and a few Black flying-fox. When the Fruit Bats fly out at dusk, they can be seen in the sky of many areas of Sydney. In the night, they can be seen and especially heard throughout areas with trees in Sydney.

ebird: The place to get up-to-date information on birds recorded around Sydney.



Herping: Often slow-going compared to other regions in Australia but can be rewarding. A very popular and well-known spot is the West Head Road in the =>Ku-ring-gai-Chase-National park. The =>Eastern Water Dragon is common, as well as various skinks such as Eastern Water Skink. Blue-tongued Lizards are found in some city parks, for example =>Sydney Olympic Park. Freshwater

Turtles can be found in even in the most urban parks, for example =>Centennial Park. Sea turtles are occasional summer visitors.

Humpback Whales: These huge whales migrate past Sydney from April-November: First the animals go North towards the breeding grounds in the Great Barrier Reef and then return, including the moms with calves. Whales can be seen anywhere along the Coast, best is probably with one of the commercial Whale Watching boats. I went with gowhalewatchingsydney.com.au. Check for deals online, it should not cost more than 40 dollars for a trip!



Kangaroos: Quite difficult to see in the Sydney area. The Morisset picnic area used to be very reliable with Grey Kangaroo, but is now closed, also due to mistreatment of the animals by tourists! Easier are Wallabies: Swamp wallabies are quite common in the nature reserves in the suburbs. Good places include Manly Dam (look down from the bridge above the dam, beware of closing time) and Warriewood Wetland/Irrawong Reserve. There are more Macropods towards and in the Blue Mountains. Quite good numbers are found in the =>Capertee Valley.

Koala: Only one big population left in the Sydney area around Campbelltown. A possible place to try could be along Smiths creek. This population is spreading, and I saw an individual on a track in the Royal National Park. There might be a better chance in Port Stephens, but there was a big fire in 2018 and the population might be currently reduced.

Ku-ring-gai-Chase-National park: Situated in the North of the city, this national park offers good hiking, views and decent birdwatching and spotlighting. The West Head Road is good for spotlighting. Amphibians include the Red-crowned Toadlet and Giant Burrowing frog. One of the most common snakes is the attractive Bandy-Bandy, other possibilities include Tiger snake, Diamond Python and Death Adder. Besides good herping, it offers chances to find Eastern Pygmy Possum: Look in the flowering Banksia. Other mammals besides the occasional bat are sparse, there is the occasional Sugar Glider in the more forested parts and the outside chance of seeing a rodent such Bush Rat and New Holland Mouse. Koala is sparse, Echidna quite common, but difficult to find in the dense bush.

Mammalwatching: A range of mammals can be found around Sydney. The most common mammals are the introduced rats. =>Fruit bats are obvious, especially at the roosts and when flying out over

the city at dusk. Microbats are common in the larger parks and some nature reserves. Long-nosed Bandicoots and Swamp =>Wallaby are common in some suburban nature reserves. Eastern Pygmy Possum is a bit of a speciality and with some luck viewable, especially in flowering Banksia. =>Ku-ring-gai-Chase-National park offers the best chances. Antechinus are widespread, but identification is difficult. Rodents besides the introduced ones are difficult to see, to mention are Water rat, Bush rat and New Holland Mouse. Echidna is not uncommon, but difficult to find, one place is the North Head. Another Australian icon, the =>Koala is rare in the Sydney region with only one major population left. The => Blue Mountains offer good mammalwatching with Greater Glider, Spot-tailed Quolls and Wombats. In the water, there is regularly =>Humpback whales, as well as Bottlenose dolphins visible from the shore, with many more species possible when taking a =>pelagic. There is a seal colony (probably with both species, Australian and New Zealand Fur Seals) somewhere in front of the Macquarie lighthouse, usually visited by the Whale Watching boats. Basking seals can be seen in the harbour as well.



Parrots: Parrots, especially Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Little Corella and Rainbow Lorikeet are common even in the middle of the city. Good views of Corellas can be obtained in =>Centennial park, there is often a group of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos along Manly Beach and Rainbow Lorikeet can be seen/heard at most times in the city, although mostly as fast flying dots in the sky.

Pelagics: Sydney pelagics (<http://www.sydneypelagics.info>) usually runs the 2nd Saturday every month. It is a great possibility to see some seabirds and maybe cetaceans, usually dolphins, but rarer species are also observed quite regularly. During migration of the =>Humpback whales, sightings of these whales are nearly guaranteed as well. There is other pelagics run within reasonable distance of Sydney, most notable and regularly from Kiama. All details can be found on sossa-international.org. Booking early is recommended, as trips fill up quickly. Take a seasickness tablet and no bananas!

Regent Honeyeater: The =>Capertee Valley is probably the best place in the world to see this critically endangered species. However, the breeding is connected to weather condition and in a dry year there can be very few Regent's in the whole valley. It is always worth to check =>birdline NSW for individuals closer to the coast and =>ebird for recent sightings in the valley.

Penguins: There is a Blue/Fairy/Little Penguin colony in Sydney, the last mainland colony of New South Wales. One pair is nesting under the ferry dock (Manly Wharf 2), the main part of the colony is not accessible. Approach the volunteers in the evening for a little chance to see the Penguins when they are returning from the sea.



Possum: Any park in Sydney holds Possums, usually Brush-tailed, but also Ring-tailed. If you go out by night, you have a very good chance to see one.

Powerful Owl: There is resident couples in some city parks including =>Centennial park and Botanical Garden. In Centennial park, ask one of the local birders where they currently roost, and they might be able to help you.

Public transport: Usually quite reliable. Careful, the buses can be too early! Best used with the Opal card, that can be bought almost anywhere. The Opal app (alternatively Google Maps) provides real-time updates. On Sundays, there is a reduced fare for the whole day, including the Blue Mountain Express and ferries, making traveling very affordable. Plan enough time to get anywhere, Sydney is big...

Rockwarbler: The only endemic bird of NSW. Good spots include the cliffs in =>Royal National Park, the =>Blue Mountains and =>Capertee Valley. Check =>ebird for recent observations.

Royal National Park: A big national park with diverse habitat, but difficult to explore without car and very popular with locals. Good birding along Lady Carrington Drive and around the Coast Track (-34.141004, 151.117805), including chances for Rockwarbler and Crescent Honeyeater at the latter place. The National Park should also be good for spotlighting.

Safety: The real danger in Australia are not the dangerous wildlife, but the environment. Riptides in the sea and heat and getting lost in the bush are probably the biggest dangers. Go prepared and tell someone where you go.

Seadragon: Weedy Sea Dragons live around Sydney. As they apparently prefer depths starting from 10 metres and are fairly well hidden, diving is recommended. I heard Bare Island, as well as North

Harbour Aquatic Reserve are fairly reliable, if the weather allows. Twice my trip was moved due to unsafe diving conditions, so plan well ahead.



Seawatching: Can be rewarding year-round for birds, especially with strong South and Eastern winds. End of September/Start of October there is a big migration of Wedge-tailed and Short-tailed Shearwaters and 100'000 can migrate by in a single day, a spectacle! In => Humpback whale migration season, these giants can show up anywhere and usually findable when looking out to the sea for some time. They can be very close to the shore.

Snorkelling: A personal highlight for me. Snorkelling even within the city can be very rewarding. Good spots include Shelly Beach/Cabbage Tree Bay Aquatic Reserve, Gordon's Bay, Freshwater Beach as well as many of the other beaches/bays. Sharks such as Port Jacksons and Wobbegong are regular, same as good-sized Blue Grouper and different Rays. With a bit of luck, Turtles and much more are possible. Stick to the obvious rules: Don't snorkel a new site alone and beware of Riptides. As a rule of thumb, the longer there was no rain, wind and waves, the better the visibility. If the wind is coming from the sea, there is also the danger of Bluebottles: A jellyfish-like marine hydrozoan that has a very painful sting! When stung, apply as hot water as bearable to the stung area. Usually you can spot their sail well ahead and avoid getting them.

Superb Lyrebird: Common in the Blue Mountains, as well as in the bigger nature reserves around Sydney, listen for their song, as well as scratching in the leaves. Close to Sydney, try =>Warriewood Wetland/Irrawong Reserve and the national parks.

Sydney Funnel-web Spider: Quite difficult to find. Their funnel-webs are found in every natural area around Sydney, but I did not manage to find the spider itself. For obvious reasons, it is not recommended to try to dig these spiders out. Even if a Funnel-Web spider is found, identification to species level is difficult. Another potentially interesting spider group are the Peacock spiders: Even more difficult to find, try leaf litter that holds some humidity, but also gets sun. Big Huntsman spiders are quite common in the night, even in downtown Sydney.



Sydney Olympic Park: Very well reachable with the train, via the station Concorde West. Offers good birding with a chance for a surprise. The Waterbird reserve (-33.835676, 151.078564) holds a good diversity of birds including Red-necked Avocets and on the way from Concord West there is a mangrove boardwalk (nice, but usually quiet) and often Fairy Wrens that are quite easy to photograph. If one continues further North, there is another nice birding area called Woo-la-ra (-33.827322, 151.072224), comprising of two hills, some wetlands and forest/bush. This area is good for some grassland species such as Brown Quail and raptors with White-bellied Sea Eagle nesting in the general area. The BirdLife Australia Discovery Centre (-33.830043, 151.064908) is close by, holding a basic exhibition and a live camera from the Eagle nest.

Wallabies: => Kangaroos

Warriewood Wetland/Irrawong Reserve: My favourite birding spot in Sydney. Reachable from the centre by taking the B-line bus up to Warriewood and then a 15min walk to the boardwalk of the reserve. Across the road (-33.693800, 151.288457) is the entrance to the Irrawong Reserve. Compromises of a variety of habitat, swamp and wetland in Warriewood wetlands, wet forest in the first part of Irrawong Reserve up to a nice waterfall and the dry forest above. There is quite a nice diversity, especially for Passerines. Rufous Fantails in the wet forest and Superb Lyrebirds in the dry forest are two of the specialities. Spotlighting for mammals can be rewarding with Long-nosed Bandicoots, Possums, Antechinus and Swamp Wallaby. In the dry forest there is apparently a chance for Pygmy Possum as well.