

## NORTHERN AUSTRALIA MAMMALS

11-29 June 2012

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Dr. Dave Redfield and I teamed up for our third Australian mammal watching tour. Our previous trips had covered southwestern Australia north to Shark Bay and in Queensland from Brisbane to Iron Range. This trip commenced in Alice Springs and finished in Karratha. It involved 18 days, 7500 kilometres of driving and several internal flights.

On 11 June we arrived in Alice Springs. After picking up the four wheel drive, checking into the hotel we linked up with my friend, Dr. Chris Pavey and headed west to Ormiston Gorge, part of the West McDonnell Ranges. Chris took us to a small cave where we located a single **Hill's Sheathtail Bat** roosting in characteristic pose; our first mammal of the trip. We soon were enjoying good views of a couple of handsome **Black-flanked Rock Wallabies**. While Chris and I looked unsuccessfully for basking Fat-tailed False Antechinus, Dave had a pair of **Dingos** saunter past. After dark we spotlighted back to Alice Springs seeing a further three Dingos, Tawny Frogmouth, Southern Boobook, Australian Owlet-nightjar and a Curl Snake.

On 12 June we headed north from Alice on the Tanami Track making it to Tilmouth Well Roadhouse where we spent the night. In the late afternoon we headed out on the Newhaven Station track making it to the station gate. We had arranged permission with the land holders to go spotlighting. As we waited for dusk a Brown Falcon chased and killed a Spinifex Pigeon virtually at our feet. Three Black-breasted Buzzards were also a highlight. **One-**

**humped Camels**-a herd of twenty plus a **European Rabbit** (in Alice at the casino) were the only additions to the mammal list in the day. As it darkened we commenced spotlighting and had numerous good views of skittish **Spinifex Hopping-Mice** seeing at least twenty individuals.



Hill's Sheath-tail Bat at Ormiston Gorge



Eastern Barn Owl at Newhaven

We also spotted a single **Kultarr** on one of several spotlight walks. Another highlight were great views of **White-striped Mastiff-bats**. The bats were flying low down and giving repeat excellent views of their black chests and white lateral stripes, in some individuals joining over the belly. These particularly white-bellied individuals had some resemblance to Yellow-bellied Sheath-tail Bats but close views showed the black chest extending into the belly. We observed another species of bat that appeared reddish pink in flight, especially the wings and may have been a species in the Inland Freetail Bat complex. A single **House Cat** was sighted adding to our feral mammal haul. Other nocturnal sightings included a Barn Owl, Southern Boobook and at least three Little Button-quails.

The following day from Tilmouth Well we retraced our steps back through Alice Springs and continued south then west to Curtin Springs Station. Birding highlights were great views of a pair of Striated Grasswrens and a Slaty-backed Thornbill. Spotlighting proved uneventful with a single Spinifex Hopping Mouse recorded along with two House Cats. We also saw two Spotted Nightjars, a Little Button-quail and a Spiny-tailed Gecko.

On the 14 June we returned to Alice Springs sighting a Dingo on the way at Mount Ebenezer with good views of Chiming Wedgebill. A tour of the nocturnal house at the Desert Wildlife Park with curator Nick Atchison was excellent as was a night tour in the predator proof enclosure that housed Echidna, Bilby, Mala, Greater Stick-nest Rats and Golden Bandicoots. We also squeezed in a visit to a cave south of Alice where we found ten **Inland Cave Bats**. More sightings of Black-flanked Rock Wallabies were enjoyed at Heavitree Gap and Simpson's Gap on this day and the following morning with a short spotlighting trip on the Santa

Teresa road being cold and very quiet. So it was we left Alice with ten species of mammal on the list, seven of these native.

The 15 June saw us flying to Darwin where we picked up a brand new Mitsubishi Pajero. We visited the nocturnal house at the Territory Wildlife Park that held quite a diverse collection of local native mammals including some rarities like Carpentarian Rock Rat. Then we headed east to Kakadu National Park. At night we went spotlighting around the South Alligator River floodplain and Mamukala wetlands. The major highlight was a good sighting of a **Dusky Rat** endemic to this part of the world. Other mammals seen included **Agile Wallaby**, Dingo, **Northern Brown Bandicoot** and **Little Red Flying-fox**. Non mammal sightings included good views of Water Python, Children's Python, Orange-naped Snake, Barn Owl and Barking Owl.

Up early on the 16 June we were at Nourlangie Rock before sunrise. A Red-backed Button-quail female on the road was a good sighting. We walked around and scoped the escarpment hoping for the localised scarce endemic Black Wallaroo. Banded Fruit-doves were in good form with multiple sightings. By 0845 things were not looking very hopeful as it heated up when at the Gunnwardewarde lookout I scoped a well hidden male **Black Wallaroo**. It eventually came out from thick cover and gave a good view. Thank goodness for this!

In the evening we headed to Bardedjilidji for spotlighting. This proved excellent. First up we had an excellent view of **Short-eared Rock Wallaby**. This was followed by an amazing view of a **Northern Dibbler** also known as the Sandstone False Antechinus running about on the low sandstone pagodas. It froze several times allowing binocular views of the median crown stripe, long tail and rufous ear patches. This was outstanding. At 2100 I picked

up a movement in a tree near the rocks and tracked down a **Rock Ringtail Possum** that we watched with binoculars for a few minutes. This was followed almost immediately by an **Arnhem Rock Rat** seen running along the erosion groove of a sandstone pillar. Seen on the return drive to South Alligator were Dingo, Northern Brown Bandicoot and a small unidentified mouse or dunnart. Non mammals included Barn Owl, Southern Boobook, Giant Cave Gecko, Slaty-grey Snake and Saltwater Crocodile.

On the 17 June we did some relaxed birding before returning to the Border Store area of Kakadu. We enjoyed a lovely Thai meal at the store and had a great view of a Short-eared Rock Wallaby nearby. First up we concentrated on the mature tropical woodlands in the Merl campground where after some effort we had a cracking view of a **Sugar Glider**. There were also plenty of Agile Wallabies, **Black Flying-foxes** and a couple of luminous **Orange Leafnose Bats**. We then returned to Bardedjilidji and again had great success here. First up we watched a couple of **Pale Field Rats**, one giving an excellent view. Then we picked up a **Fawn Antechinus** that gave a good binocular view freezing for several moments and showing the chunky body, shorter tail and lack of median crown stripe of the Northern Dibbler. Then we picked up another Rock Ringtail feeding in a low tree well away from the rocks that then dropped down out of the tree and was relocated up on top of the escarpment. The final major sighting was a great flight view of a **Least Blossom-bat** that was circling around a flowering Darwin Woollybutt. Its strong eye shine revealed its identity but if it were not for the allopatric distributions in this part of the world it would be inseparable from Queensland Blossom Bat. Driving back to South Alligator turned up Spotted Nightjar, Northern Brown Bandicoot, House Cat, Dingo, Water Python, Barking Owl and Barn Owl. All up 11 species of mammal on this day.

On the 18 June we departed Kakadu National Park. In a roadside culvert we located three **Northern Cave Bats**-new for both of us. This was to be our only success investigating culverts and we certainly checked a lot. At Pine Creek we enjoyed the amazing **Ghost Bats** in an abandoned mine shaft. The whirr of the wings sounded like a roar. We left quickly to minimise disturbance. These are impressive animals. In the nearby hills we found our first **Euros** whilst in town itself was a camp of Black Flying-foxes. In the evening we headed west to Umbrawarra Gorge. It proved extremely quiet and we were fortunate to have seen some of the species we were after in Kakadu that are known from this site including rock wallabies and rock ringtail. We watched a **Grassland Melomys** make two appearances in a flowering Grevillea displaying its adept arboreal behaviour. Beyond this we sighted Tawny Frogmouth, Owlet-nightjar and two Spiny-tailed Geckos. The country appeared over burnt. Diurnal bird of the day was Partridge Pigeon seeing (10) on the drive into the gorge and a pair at Mardugal in Kakadu earlier in the day.

The 19 June was largely a travel day covering the highway from Pine Creek to Kununurra. We enjoyed Purple-crowned Fairy-wren at Victoria River with Star Finch and Yellow-rumped Munia seen in the Ord River Irrigation area late in the afternoon. In the evening we initially spotlit at The Grotto, halfway between Wyndham and Kununurra. Dingo and Agile Wallaby were seen on the drive. The Grotto turned up four Magnificent Tree Frogs, a Children's Python and a couple of interesting geckos including Gehyra khoira. A single Cane Toad was an ominous precursor of the invasion that never ends. We then quartered around the Ord Irrigation area hoping for Long-haired Rat. None of these but a Northern Brown Bandicoot, several Agile Wallabies, a House Cat, numerous Barn

Owls, a Southern Boobook and back at camp a tree full of Little Red Flying-foxes.

The following day we made the long drive to Mitchell Plateau, destroying one tyre on the Gibb River Road eventually spending the night at the tented camp. A road-killed Northern Nail-tailed Wallaby was notable on the Gibb River Road. A quiet cool evening turned up a Black Flying-fox, a Dingo and a couple of Grassland Melomys.

The 21 June and we drove to the Mitchell Falls and spent an enjoyable day watching the birds and looking for likely mammal habitats to explore at night. Our first stroke of luck came when after catching a glimpse of a **Monjon** we returned in the late afternoon and were rewarded with an outstanding view of a female with a large out of pouch joey having a drink from mum's pouch. We watched proceedings for a good ten minutes before they disappeared. In the campground car park we saw our only Euro in the Mitchell Plateau. Our first two hours of spotlighting proved frustrating and quiet although we heard scuttling and glimpsed a few unidentified small mammals. Then we had a major sighting when a **Golden-backed Tree Rat** was disturbed in a vine thicket and exploded onto the ground bolting away showings its flash white-tipped banner tail. Then a good view of a Least Blossom-bat, several Black Flying-foxes in the flowering Darwin Woollybutts followed by a good binocular view of a **Common Rock-Rat**. A further two sightings were made of possibly the same Monjon with an excellent view of a **Northern Quoll** rounding out an outstanding evening.

The 22 June saw us relaxing in the morning and we returned back out to Mitchell Falls in the evening. Exploring a deep sandstone crevice I had a major stroke of luck when I found a rare **Northern**

**Leaf-nosed Bat.** Dave crawled in to the narrow chamber and we photographed the bat. Unwittingly we disturbed a **Common Sheath-tail Bat** that proceeded to fly into Dave's face before it landed on the same rock wall as the Northern Leaf-nosed Bat. On dusk we explored the hummock grassland-Acacia woodland on the sandstone between Little Merten's Falls and the next pocket of monsoon vine forest. Some scuttling and careful approach turned up a **Golden Bandicoot** that gave an excellent view. We realised this is what it must have been we glimpsed the night before. Back in the vine forest it was quiet when Dave noticed a three metre long Olive Python cruising between us. Spotting back through the hummock grass another stroke of luck-this time a **Western Chestnut Mouse**, which was remarkably tame and largely missing its tail. It gave a great binocular view. This was followed by a Monjon. Back in the vine forest more scuttling in the undergrowth turned up an impressive **Kimberley Rock Rat**-a male by size. This was followed by another excellent view of a Least Blossom-bat. At 11:15 pm eventually we achieved the hoped for breakthrough when I disturbed a **Scaly-tailed Possum** running on the ground in a rock crevice. It was remarkably quick but stopped and looked back over its shoulder and showed the conspicuous whitish-tipped tail, rufous rump, short grey fur and muscular large head and body appearing about the size of a Common Ringtail. I dashed forward and relocated it on the other side of the crevice-this time it ran towards me before stopping and bolting away at an impressive speed. We later had another possible glimpse of the possum and Dave got onto another Kimberley Rock Rat.

On the 23 June we went to Surveyor's Pool and had success with the localised endemic Black Grasswren-a female that showed well. This followed on from Kimberley Honeyeater and the rare yellow-faced population of Partridge Pigeon we had enjoyed



earlier. We retraced our steps to Drysdale River on the heavily corrugated track enjoying a good feed in the evening at the station. Spotlighting was quiet and we could not find anything of note. We had previously seen Northern Nailtail Wallaby in Cape York although Drysdale is a good area for this species.

On the 24 June we did the long drive to Broome. We enjoyed some birds including five Black-breasted Buzzards, three Australian Bustards and some dapper Long-tailed Finches. We slept well this evening.

Adrian Boyle helped out with some advice on searching for the recently split **Australian Snubfin Dolphin** (split from Irrawaddy Dolphin). As the tide rushed in at Crab Creek we waited and waited and waited and waited. It was looking like a no show so we relocated to the viewpoint near the Broome Bird Observatory. Finally at 4pm we made the breakthrough and enjoyed binocular views of a small pod of four that were fast on the surface. They disappeared quickly with the outgoing tide. We joined up with Adrian for a beer at the Sunset Bar at Cable Beach sighting a **Long-beaked Bottle-nosed Dolphin** with cold bev in hand! Adrian came with us to look for **Northern Brush-tailed Possum** and he provided good luck when I found three in a Lillypilly tree where I had parked the car! This possum has a very patchy distribution in the tropical north. We said our farewells and Dave and I did a short spotlight on the road out to James Price Point but it was quiet and we returned to the Broome Bird Observatory for a well earned sleep.

On the 26 June it was farewell Broome and heading south to Port Hedland. We made contact with Brad Beaumont in Dampier and the good news was the strong winds of the previous few days

were dropping and he could take us on his boat to look for Rothschild's Rock Wallabies on the afternoon of the following day. Dave and I changed our plans and headed to Marble Bar for the evening enjoying a good pub meal and a spotlighting drive that produced several Euros and a pair of Bush Stone-curlews. Spinifexbird was seen quite well and Grey-headed Honeyeater was also new for Dave.

We drove through the next day and made the rendezvous with Brad. He dropped us over at West Lewis Island where we spent a fabulous afternoon enjoying mobs of **Rothschild's Rock-Wallabies**, perhaps a hundred or so. They gave excellent photographic opportunities. It reduced the pressure on searching for this species on the mainland where foxes have taken a serious toll on the species. Brad pointed out where William Dampier had anchored on his voyage where Dampier gave a bleak assessment of the area.

The 28 June was our last full day. We repaired our flat tyre and then decided to explore the Millstream-Chichester National Park. We tracked down the Red-browed Pardalote and then a great sighting of the rare Grey Falcon bombing a Spotted Harrier. Both species were new for Dave. We spent some time exploring around the Python Pool but there was no sign of any rock-wallaby scat but there were scats of Northern Quoll. We enjoyed beautiful views of Painted Finches. With an early flight the next morning we opted against spotlighting. We returned to Dampier to have a meal at the Yacht Club and a beer with Brad Beaumont; a fine last evening.

Next day the flights worked well and by evening we were in Sydney. A total of 43 species of mammal were seen on the trip.

Kultarr Antechinomys *Antechinomys laniger*  
Fawn Antechinus *Antechinus bellus*  
Northern Quoll *Dasyurus hallucatus*  
Northern Dibbler *Pseudantechinus bilarni*

Golden Bandicoot *Isodon auratus*  
Northern Brown Bandicoot *Isodon macrourus*

Northern Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus arnhemensis*  
Scaly-tailed Possum *Wyulda squamicaudata*

Sugar Glider *Petaurus breviceps*

Rock Ringtail Possum *Petropseudes dahli*

Agile Wallaby *Macropus agilis*  
Black Wallaroo *Macropus bernardi*  
Euro *Macropus robustus*  
Short-eared Rock-Wallaby *Petrogale brachyotis*  
Monjon *Petrogale burbidgei*  
Black-flanked Rock-Wallaby *Petrogale lateralis*  
Rothschild's Rock-Wallaby *Petrogale rothschildi*

Least Blossom-bat *Macroglossus minimus*  
Black Flying-fox *Pteropus alecto*  
Little Red Flying-fox *Pteropus scapulatus*

Ghost Bat *Macroderma gigas*

Northern Leafnose Bat *Hipposideros stenotis*  
Orange Leafnose Bat *Rhinonicteris aurantius*

Common Sheathtail Bat *Taphozous georgianus*

Hill's Sheathtail Bat *Taphozous hilli*

White-striped Mastiff-bat *Tadarida australis*

Northern Cave Bat *Vespadelus caurinus*

Inland Cave Bat *Vespadelus finlaysoni*

Grassland Melomys *Melomys burtoni*

Golden-backed Tree Rat *Mesembriomys macrurus*

Spinifex Hopping-mouse *Notomys alexis*

Western Chestnut Mouse *Pseudomys nanus*

Dusky Rat *Rattus colletti*

Pale Field Rat *Rattus tunneyi*

Common Rock-Rat *Zyzomys argurus*

Arnhem Rock-Rat *Zyzomys maini*

Kimberley Rock-Rat *Zyzomys woodwardi*

Dingo *Canis lupus dingo*

\*House Cat *Felis catus*

\*One-humped Camel *Camelus dromedarius*

\*European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Australian Snubfin Dolphin *Orcaella heinsohni*

Long-nosed Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops aduncus*



Dingo at Mitchell Plateau



Rothschild's Rock Wallaby at West Lewis Island