

Florida Mammal Report: 5 to 21 October 2013

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Northern Raccoon *Procyon lotor*

Introduction

Out of all my overseas trips in recent years, this one was the least mammal focused. The idea was to spend a relaxing fortnight in a friend's Florida villa, dividing our time between relaxation, shopping, meeting friends, sightseeing and a little wildlife watching to keep me happy. The fact Sarah's mum was joining us also meant we had to slow our pace a little as well as keeping overnight trips away from the villa to a minimum.

It wasn't all bad. As I've visited Florida several times before I've already seen many of the mammals on offer. It was also nice to have a central base as opposed to moving accommodation every other night (a sign of middle age?). More importantly, I soon realised that if I dropped the girls off at a large enough shopping outlet or attraction, then I could do pretty much what I liked no matter the distance involved.

All said and done it was a moderately successful trip. Although I failed to see Florida specials such as Round-tailed Muskrat and Florida Mouse, I did mop up most other targets including Florida Black Bear, Eastern Fox Squirrel and Eastern Spotted Skunk. The herping was also good and I even managed a dip in

the pool most mornings! In total I recorded around 17 mammal species plus a couple of unidentified bats.

Travel Details

We flew direct from London Gatwick to Orlando International with Virgin Atlantic. The hire car came from Dollar and was a Chevrolet Equinox SUV. It's fair to say we put the 4x4 through its paces on more than one occasion. I even had to wash it twice - something I've never done before with a rental.

Our villa was based about 10 miles south of Clermont and to the west of Orlando. We also spent three nights in Naples allowing us easy access to Big Cypress National Preserve.

I should mention that for the majority of our trip the US government was in Shutdown meaning that all federally funded wildlife reserves were closed to the public. This included a couple of National Parks and Wildlife Refuges which I had planned to visit. Fortunately the Shutdown did not affect State Parks or Wildlife Management Areas. Moreover, in areas such as the Ocala National Forest it was still possible to explore the roads, but the closed facilities had kept most people away resulting in better wildlife viewing.

Sites Visited

Below I've included all sites where mammals were observed. I've excluded all Eastern Grey Squirrel observations which took place wherever there were trees and I've also omitted the many White-tailed Deer sightings which occurred at dusk on the side of major roads.

Greater Orlando Area

Green Swamp Road (Clermont) 28.372069, -81.738209

This seven mile road can be accessed from the CR-474 and goes through some good wildlife habitat. I drove it several times after dark and it never failed to produce an interesting mammal or snake. In fact mile for mile it was better value than anything the Big Cypress area could offer.

Eastern Cottontail, **Virginia Opossum** and **Nine-banded Armadillo** were observed along the road at one time or another. A huge **Feral Pig** was also seen as it crossed the road late one night.

Orlando Wetlands Park (www.orlandowetlands.org)

A mid afternoon visit here produced a young **Northern Raccoon** but not much else. River Otters had been seen earlier in the day according to the sightings book. A brand new bat house was located in the parking area which may be worth checking out in the future. There was also a Gopher Tortoise living in a burrow near the restrooms.

St. Cloud/Canoe Creek Road/Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area

Kaliga Park on Lakeshore Boulevard, St. Cloud, looks out onto East Lake Tohopekaliga. Late afternoon it's a reliable place to see **Marsh Rabbit** which emerge from the reed beds to feed on the lawns. I saw several on a visit in 2007 and they were still present in 2013. The area is also good for Limpkin.

Canoe Creek Road (CR-523) runs south from St. Cloud (parallel with the Florida Turnpike [91]) and reaches an entrance to the Three Lakes Wildlife Manage Area after approximately twenty miles.

Driving Canoe Creek Road late afternoon gave me two excellent **Eastern Fox Squirrel** sightings within a couple of minutes of each other. The first animal was first seen crossing the road before jumping onto a fence allowing for a quick photo opportunity.



Eastern Fox Squirrel *Sciurus niger*

The second was observed foraging on the verge a couple of miles further south. I drove the road several more times over the trip but never saw the squirrels again. I did, however, see plenty of **White-tailed Deer** at dusk and a roadside American Alligator late one morning.

Just before the entrance to Three Lakes WMA there is the famous Joe Overstreet Road which is popular with birders. Leading to a boat launching area on Lake Kissimmee, the road may also be a good place to look for Fox Squirrels. Bald Eagles and Crested Caracaras are also commonly seen.

Three Lakes WMA is a great place for wildlife watching despite it being a hunting preserve. Predominantly Longleaf Pine flatwoods and dry prairie, the area can be explored by a series of unpaved roads which are virtually free from other traffic. **White-tailed Deer** were seen on an early morning visit along with both **Marsh Rabbit** and **Eastern Cottontail**.

Apparently Eastern Spotted Skunks are sometimes seen by field herpers driving the roads at night. Unfortunately I didn't get chance to see for myself although this is definitely something I would do on a future visit. Note: If planning a night drive in the preserve you may be better using the second entrance a couple of miles further south on Canoe Creek Road. Not only will you bypass the large camping area, but the road is better quality, leading you straight into the dry prairie.

Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge (www.fws.gov/merrittisland)

Closed for most of my trip due to the Shutdown, we visited the refuge on our last day. The Black Point Wildlife Drive was very quiet wildlife wise so we headed to the Manatee Observation Deck located on the northeast side of Haulover Canal. After 20 minutes or so we had spotted a couple of **West Indian Manatees** including one very close to the deck. The water in the canal is very murky and I suspect that they can be better viewed elsewhere. Between November and March Manatees can almost be guaranteed at places such as the Tampa Power Station (www.tampaelectric.com/company/mvc).

Sites north of Orlando

St. Augustine

We certainly didn't visit this historical town for the mammal watching but we saw several pods of **Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphins** from the scenic cruise (www.scenic-cruise.com) which departs several times a day from the municipal marina.

The University of Florida Bat House, Gainesville 29.644218, -82.362939

Located on Museum Road, opposite Lake Alice, the two bat houses are home to approximately 100,000 **Brazilian Free-tailed Bats**. We made a detour here just in time for the dusk emergence and were not disappointed with the awesome spectacle. The free-tails leave the boxes about 10-20 minutes after sunset. Unfortunately there was no sign of the 100 or so Southeastern Myotis that also use the boxes and typically emerge before the free-tails.

It was great to see other people enjoying the bats including many families and a good number of students.

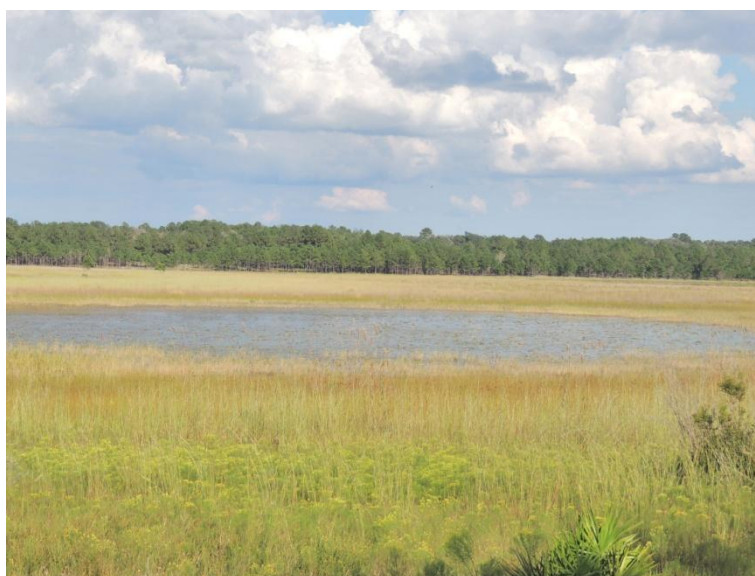
Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park (www.floridastateparks.org/mikeroess)

Situated five miles north of Keystone Heights (between Gainesville and Jacksonville), I visited this park with the sole intention of finding a Round-tailed Muskrat. This near mythical rodent is rarely seen by mammal watchers but a little research indicated a thriving population in Mike Roess around the two lakes and surrounding prairie marsh.

I initially contacted the park manager before my visit who seemed pretty helpful. He explained the muskrats are 'common' around Little Lake Johnson and Big Lake Johnson but are not often seen as the rangers rarely enter the habitat. More to the point he seemed to think I had a decent chance of seeing one and instructed me to make myself known on arrival for advice on where best to look for the muskrats.

I was quite optimistic when I arrived at the park early one afternoon despite being held up on the highway due to a traffic accident for several hours. Unfortunately the ranger at the gate wasn't quite so helpful despite me mentioning my previous correspondence with his manager. Although he agreed the muskrats were common, he didn't think I had a chance of seeing one from any of the trails. He was more concerned with making sure that I didn't wander off the trail and that I left the park at sunset (when the gate is closed). One bit of advice he did give me was that spotlighting is the best way to find the muskrats, although that wasn't much use to me!

It turned out that the park is quite compact, and that Little Lake Johnson (LLJ) and a good part of Big Lake Johnson (BLJ) can be viewed from trails (and also from below the amphitheatre in the case of BLJ). In fact I was surprised how little water they contained, resembling large ponds rather than lakes.



Round-tailed Muskrat habitat, Little Lake Johnson

I spent the remaining afternoon scanning LLJ with my binoculars (a telescope would have been better), occasionally checking on neighbouring BLJ. As muskrats are crepuscular/nocturnal I didn't expect to see any activity until dusk. I kept scanning until dark without any success, although at least I kept the local mosquito population well fed. I then spent an hour spotlighting, again with no luck. I arrived at the gate well after sunset to find it still open (I wasn't too worried about the gate being closed as I suspect it may open automatically to vehicles exiting the park).

Despite my failure I still think Mike Roess is a great place to look for Round-tailed Muskrat and I would have visited again if I wasn't already at the end of my trip. My visit to the park was on a Friday meaning it quickly filled with very noisy campers (along with their deafening motorcycles, hyperactive kids and

barking dogs). Perhaps even more relevant was the full moon which may have reduced the muskrat activity so soon after sunset.

It is possible to stay overnight in the park, either in a tent or cabin. This would allow unlimited spotlighting and a chance to look for muskrats at dawn when they are most active (according to the ranger).

Mike Roess is also quite good for other mammals. In addition to the ever present **Eastern Grey Squirrels** and **White-tailed Deer**, I saw an **Eastern Fox Squirrel** while driving into the park. I also picked up the eyeshine from a probable **Bobcat** in the spotlight just as I was about to head back to my car. Unfortunately it was very distant and disappeared before I could get a decent view.

Ocala National Forest (www.fs.usda.gov/main/ocala)

Located just over an hour north of Orlando, the Ocala National Forest is home to a large population of Florida Black Bear. It was this animal I was mainly looking for when I visited the forest twice, once late afternoon and another time at dawn.

The afternoon session coincided with heavy thunder showers which quickly flooded the many sand roads which transect the area. For this reason we stuck to driving the well maintained Pipeline Road which heads south from the SR-40. Normally this track would be heavily used as it leads to the Big Scrub camping area. However, the Shutdown combined with the rain meant we had the road to ourselves.

It wasn't long before we found our first **Black Bear** – a young adult watching us from the roadside. Unfortunately it didn't hang around for long, quickly bounding off into the forest and out of sight. A second, more distant bear was seen as we neared the end of the road along with an **Eastern Cottontail** and many Florida Scrub Jays.

Hoping for a better bear sighting Sarah and I visited Ocala several days later in time for sunrise. **White-tailed Deer** were common, both in the forest and surrounding fields, although the bears proved more elusive. We explored many side roads including some very narrow and sandy tracks (care should be taken in a 2WD as the sand can be deep!) before we found very fresh bear scat not too far from Railroad Grade Road. Moments later we glimpsed the bear on the track although it quickly disappeared into a thicket. I stopped the car, turned off the engine and waited. It wasn't long before the bear reappeared, cautiously crossing the road in front of us and allowing for fantastic views. As if that wasn't enough, two tiny cubs followed some way behind the sow, much to our amazement.

Sites south of Orlando

Okeechobee County

I spent a couple of hours late afternoon exploring Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, a large expanse of dry prairie situated a couple of hours south of Orlando. Mammalwise it was quiet although I did get great views of a **White-tailed Deer** with a fawn.

At dusk I met up with Josh Holbrook, a well known herpetologist who kindly offered to help me find some snakes in the surrounding agricultural area. We were also targeting Eastern Spotted Skunk, an animal that is not uncommon in the dry prairie. Previously Josh used to find skunks under artificial refuge while searching for snakes. Recently most of the debris has been cleaned up making our target much harder to find.

We drove the roads bordering the state park finding at least six species of snakes and good numbers of amphibians. We also smelt lingering skunk odour in areas where the animals had recently been active. A couple of hours later we finally found a very black **Eastern Spotted Skunk** foraging along the roadside giving us fantastic views. Unfortunately it didn't hang around long enough for me to take a photograph.

Needless to say I was pretty pleased with such a good sighting. Josh was also happy, although he often sees the skunks when out herping, he's taken several people specifically looking for them without success.

Josh was fantastic company and it was a pleasure to be out field herping with such a pro. The skunk was the icing on the cake on what was already turning out to be a very enjoyable evening.

Driving back to the highway I glimpsed a **Coyote** crossing the road. I stopped the car and managed to squeak it out into the open allowing for a decent view.

Naples

In the second week we drove down to Naples where we spent three nights in a hotel. This allowed us to explore the Big Cypress area.

Naples Botanical Garden (www.naplesgarden.org)

We visited the gardens midmorning and glimpsed a **Hispid Cotton Rat** in the Caribbean Garden. There's also a nice nature trail which I guess would contain all the commoner local mammal species.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary (www.corkscrewsanctuary.org)

This excellent reserve is run by the National Audubon Society and is home to the majority of South Florida's mammal fauna including Black Bear and Florida Panther.

Our late morning visit was not ideal for wildlife watching although we did see a couple of **Northern Raccoons** from the boardwalk.

Other commonly seen mammals in Corkscrew include River Otter and Bobcat. There is also a bat house in the car park containing a colony of Brazilian Free-tailed Bats.

Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park (www.floridastateparks.org/fakahatcheestrand)

Containing the largest Royal Pine hammock in the USA, the Fakahatchee Strand is a linear swamp forest approximately twenty miles long by five miles wide. Starting on SR-29 the W. J. Janes Scenic Drive is an eleven mile track through the heart of the reserve.

The drive is as good a place as any to chance upon a Florida Panther so I was eager to drive it as soon as possible. As it turned out, the road was in very bad condition with continuous craters and washouts. Although it was still perfectly drivable along most of its length, the experience would be far more enjoyable without the mother-in-law complaining from the back seat every time I hit a pothole!

The scenic drive closes at sunset so we drove it late afternoon seeing few mammals of note. Reaching the far end we found three old ladies in a Chevrolet Impala blindly following their sat-nav into the maze of flooded, unmaintained roads that make up the abandoned Southern Golden Gates Estate. Determined not to drive back on the Janes Scenic Drive in their now slightly ruined 2wd, they were driving through increasing deep water in a futile quest to reach the highway via a different route!

It took a while to convince them to turn around and by now it was dusk. I offered to accompany them back along the scenic drive hoping that the unusual situation would give me a valid excuse to be in the reserve after sunset. Sadly apart from some unidentified bats, I didn't see a single mammal on the drive back to SR-29.

Incidentally the Golden Gates Estate is now in public ownership and is currently being restored for conservation purposes.

Big Cypress National Preserve

Although officially closed due to the Shutdown, it was still possible to explore Big Cypress National Preserve via several well known roads.

The Tamiami Trail (US Highway 41) cuts through some excellent habitat although traffic was relatively heavy, even late at night. Numerous road signs and a 40mph speed limit after sunset were a constant reminder that Florida Panthers inhabit the area.



Marsh Rabbit *Sylvilagus palustris*

A little easier to see than panthers were the **Marsh Rabbits** that emerge late afternoon to feed on the roadside grass. I also saw a couple of **Northern Raccoons** on the highway late at night.

The Loop Road is a 26 mile scenic drive through the south of the preserve (accessed from Tamiami Trail) and I drove it once early afternoon and twice late at night. Although it's unpaved for most of its length, it is well maintained by the National Parks Service.

On the first night drive I was spotlighting an area of flooded Bald Cypress when I picked up a **Marsh Rice Rat** foraging around the exposed knees of a particularly large tree. Although the view was brief (the rat disappeared around the trunk and out of view) I was able to see the distinctive white feet clearly.

The second night drive produced a **Virginia Opossum** but no other mammals. Fortunately there was plenty of other wildlife to keep me awake including various nocturnal birds and plenty of herps.

The Turner River Road (839), Upper Wagonwheel (837) and Birdon Road (841) form a 16 mile loop through wet prairie habitat that can also be accessed from the Tamiami Trail. I drove the circuit afternoon, dusk and at night without much luck mammalwise, although I did see some unidentified large bats hunting over the marsh at sunset.

I had planned to visit the Everglades National Park on this trip but all my mammal sites were off limits due to the Shutdown.

Species Seen

1.	Virginia Opossum <i>Didelphis virginiana</i>	-One seen crossing Green Swamp Road (Clermont) late at night. - Also seen on Loop Road (Big Cypress) at night.
2.	Nine-banded Armadillo <i>Dasyus novemcinctus</i>	-Two seen on Green Swamp Road (Clermont) on different nights.
3.	Eastern Grey Squirrel <i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	-Extremely common. Seen in most woodlands and suburbs.
4.	Eastern Fox Squirrel <i>Sciurus niger</i>	-Two seen from Canoe Creek Road (St Cloud) late afternoon. -One crossed entrance road to Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park late afternoon.
5.	Marsh Rice Rat <i>Oryzomys palustris</i>	-One spotlighted in cypress swamp on Loop Road (Big Cypress).
6.	Hispid Cotton Rat <i>Sigmodon hispidus</i>	-Brief views of this animal in Naples Botanical Gardens late morning.
7.	Eastern Cottontail <i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	-Individual seen in Ocala National Forest late afternoon. - Single observed early morning in Three Lakes WMA. -One noted a couple of hours after sunset on Green Swamp Road, Clermont
8.	Marsh Rabbit <i>Sylvilagus palustris</i>	-Several seen late afternoon in Kaliga Park, St. Cloud. -Single seen early morning in Three Lakes WMA. -Multiple sightings at dusk of this species feeding on shoulder of Tamiami Trail (US Highway 41), Big Cypress.
9.	Brazilian Free-tailed Bat <i>Tadarida brasiliensis</i>	-Hundreds seen leaving University of Florida Bat Houses, Gainesville, at dusk.
10.	White-tailed Deer <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	-Very common in Florida area and seen at most sites north of Kissimmee Prairie Preserve SP. -Also often seen feeding on the side of major roads at dusk.
11.	Wild Boar (Feral Pig) <i>Sus scrofa</i>	-Single crossed Green Swamp Road, Clermont, late at night.
12.	Coyote <i>Canis latrans</i>	-One observed late evening on road leading from Kissimmee Prairie Preserve SP to highway.

13.	Black Bear <i>Ursus americanus</i>	-Two sightings along Pipeline Road, Ocala National Forest late afternoon. -Sow and two cubs observed just after sunrise on dirt track, Ocala National Forest.
14.	Northern Raccoon <i>Procyon lotor</i>	-Common and often active during the day. Seen at several sites including Orlando Wetlands and Corkscrew Swamp.
15.	Eastern Spotted Skunk <i>Spilogale putorius</i>	-Brief but excellent views of this species a couple of hours after sunset. Animal was foraging on roadside a couple of miles from Kissimmee Prairie Preserve SP.
16.	Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphin <i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	-A couple of small pods seen from Scenic Cruise, St Augustine.
17.	West Indian Manatee <i>Trichechus manatus</i>	-Two seen from Manatee Observation Deck, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge.
-	Bobcat <i>Lynx rufus</i>	A probable seen in spotlight an hour after sunset at the far side of Little Lake Johnson, Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park. Eyeshine and behaviour suggested this species.

Conclusion

Florida is certainly a good place to combine wildlife watching with normal tourist activities. While certainly not my most productive trip, I did manage to see some fantastic mammal species. Highlights include Black Bear, Eastern Spotted Skunk, Marsh Rice Rat and Eastern Fox Squirrel.

I was a little disappointed not to find more small rodents. Live trapping is illegal in Florida without a permit so I was hoping to find mice and rats by other means. Strangely I saw none on the road at night and I failed to find any hiding under debris.

If I make it to Florida again I will be sure to visit the Archbold Biological Station to look for Florida Mice. I will also dedicate more time to staking out the elusive Round-tailed Muskrats at Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park.

Useful Resources

Although a little dated now, I found Pranty (2005) useful for maps and directions for most of the sites visited. It also contains a detailed and comprehensive Florida mammal list.

Pranty B (2005) *A Birder's Guide to Florida*. American Birding Association Inc, Asheville NC.