

Mammal watching in the Bahamas

Vladimir Dinets, April 2013

Despite being one of the least human-modified parts of the Caribbean, the Bahamas have very few native land mammals. In addition to the Bahamas hutia, 14 bat species have been recorded (list available at <http://www.bnt.bs/Bats-of-the-Bahamas>), but only 6-7 of them occur regularly, mostly in the southern part of the archipelago. Interestingly, all except two are of Caribbean rather than North American origin. 22 cetacean species occur in surrounding waters, but mostly at low densities (see list at <http://www.bnt.bs/Dolphins-and-Whales-of-The-Bahamas>).

The closest island to the mainland is Grand Bahama, accessible by ferry from Fort Lauderdale (bahamaexpress.com, 3 hrs each way, \$145 return). Ferries go there (at 9 am) and back (at 6 pm) on Wed, Fri and Sun. Sundays should be avoided as finding local transportation is more difficult and Rand Nature Center is closed. It is possible to do a day trip: upon arrival, go to Port Lucayan (taxi \$5), rent a scooter (\$30), go to Lucayan National Park (45 min one way) and then to Rand Nature Center. You should have just enough time before the return ferry. I did this in late April of 2013 and didn't see any marine mammals (or seabirds, for that matter) during the crossing, but other people have reported seeing Bryde's whales in spring and humpbacks in November and March, as well as pantropical spotted, striped, short-beaked common and bottle-nosed dolphins. On the island, buffy flower bats roost from mid-April till October in the sinkhole near the national park visitor center, and introduced raccoons occur at the nature center.

Another ferry runs from Miami to Bimini on a similar schedule. On Bimini, there are tours offering swimming with wild pantropical spotted dolphins; bottlenose dolphins are also seen during these tours.

I haven't been to any islands except Grand Bahama, but in June 1998 spent a few days cruising around the archipelago on a research boat. We saw three different groups of Blainville's beaked whales in the area of deep water east of Abaco, where this species and Cuvier's beaked whale are said to be common year-round. In addition, we saw striped dolphins in the same area, pantropical spotted dolphins off Eleuthera, and short-beaked common dolphins in various places. We also passed within 200 m of East Plana Cay and saw hutias through a scope (they once survived only on that island, but have been recently reintroduced to Little Wax Cay and Warderick Wells Cay further north).

I would really like to visit Abaco where Bahaman funnel-eared bat and Bahamas subspecies of Brazilian freetail occur. It is accessible by air from Ft. Lauderdale. Transportation between islands is generally limited, chaotic and expensive.