

Mammal watching on Bonaire

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Bonaire is probably not a place anyone would consider as a mammal watching destination. It has no native land mammals except for eight species of bats, all of which are common elsewhere. Its other terrestrial fauna is also amazingly poor for an island located so close to the South American mainland: there are no native amphibians, and reptiles are limited to two species of blind snakes and eight species of lizards. Bird list is also short, although some species (white-cheeked pintail, red flamingo, merlin, scaly-naped and bare-eyed pigeons, brown-throated parakeet, yellow-shouldered parrot, white-tailed nightjar, Caribbean elaenia etc.) are easier to see here than in most other parts of their ranges. See <http://www.bonairebirds.com/> for birding information.

However, diving on Bonaire is probably the best in the Caribbean, or at least in the top five. So, in case you go there for scuba diving and decide to spend your surface intervals looking for mammals, here are some tips. Dive sites are marked on most tourist maps of the island, and also (with signed yellow stones) on the coastal highway.

Bats and rats. See <http://www.washingtonparkbonaire.org/bats.html> for detailed information on each of the eight species recorded on the island. Three of them are very rare, with no known roosts.

Bonaire is mostly limestone, so there are countless small caves and grottoes, but only a few known large caves, most of which are difficult to access. It is illegal to enter any caves without a local guide, and violators are subject to a fine, but reportedly no one has been fined yet.

The main cave area is located at the northeastern tip of the island, accessible by a long dirt road. If in doubt, ask directions for Spelonk Lighthouse and follow the cliff to the west from it. These caves have numerous common long-tongued and lesser long-nosed bats. The former mostly roost near cave entrances; the latter prefer dark dead-ending tunnels.

Another cave area is in Hato, north from Kralendijk, the island capital. Follow the main road north along the coast. After you leave town, the road makes a few sharp turns, leaving the shore for a while and then coming back to it again near the national park office and dive site #20 (Oil Slick Leap). Just before the national park office turnoff there is a resort and a dive shop on the right. Walk the dirt road into the woods which starts across the highway from the resort office. In a minute you'll see a black-and-white pyramid which marks the cave entrance. This cave can be walked through, but there are no bats in the walk-through part. Look for the narrow corridor going in the opposite direction from the bottom of the entrance sinkhole (expect to get wet and dirty as it is narrow and partially flooded). It has a few funnel-eared bats. Look also for black rats near cave entrances. The resort across the road has two hummingbird feeders, which are visited by common long-tongued and lesser long-nosed bats at night (expect a long wait).

The third cave area is further northwest along the main road; look for a sign "Tolo" marking dive site #13. The caves are well visible from the road. They are shallow grottoes where barn owls nest, but I found one Peter's ghost-faced bat there at night.

Washington-Slangbaai National Park and many other parts of the island have extensive groves of columnar cacti where common long-tongued and lesser long-nosed bats feed during the flowering season. I don't know if it's realistic to expect seeing them in this way.

Both cities on the island (Kralendijk and Rincon) have Pallas' mastiff bats (look for them in abandoned buildings or flying around at dusk) and, reportedly, Norway rats.

Other mammals. Only two species of marine mammals are seen along the island's shores. Humpback whales are occasionally seen in winter from the western shore of Washington Slangbaai National Park. Inshore bottlenose dolphins are sometimes seen in the strait between Bonaire and Klein Bonaire. There are no ferries from Bonaire, but if you hitch a ride on a cargo boat to Venezuela or elsewhere, look for pelagic dolphins.

Feral donkeys, goats and cats are common in the central part of the island.