

Introduction to mammal-watching

Australia has more endemic mammal species than any other country on Earth, including a stellar selection of unusual species such as the Platypus and Tasmanian Devil, as well as the internationally recognised Koala and kangaroos. Seeing some of these species is high on the 'must do' lists of most visitors; and while some are commonplace to many Australians, there is a growing interest in wildlife-watching in general in this country. Apart from the iconic species, more than 30 species of whale and dolphin (cetaceans) inhabit seas reaching from the cool Southern Ocean to tropical shallows; several species of seal and sea lion (pinnipeds) grace southern shores and a large percentage of the world's Dugongs graze in sheltered tropical bays. The night skies are filled with the world's highest diversity of flying foxes – the largest flying mammals – and dozens of microbats, including the unique Ghost Bat, which preys on rodents and small birds, a fishing bat and one specialised for navigating in misty rainforests. A host of rodents has evolved to fill unusual ecological niches, from the otter-like Water Rat to inhabitants of tropical boulder piles, a giant rainforest species and tree-climbing specialists. With such an array, should anyone need convincing to watch mammals?

Mammal-watching doesn't generate the same level of interest that birds do (obvious exceptions being many African countries, plus a few choice locations such as India, Madagascar and Alaska). And, it has to be said, mammal-watching presents its own challenges. In Australia mammals are generally more difficult to see and identify than birds; there's no established 'safari circuit' and few professional guides are adept at winking out mammals the way birding guides find sought-after species for paying customers. Comparatively few mammals can be seen casually while, say, hiking or at popular tourist sites. And there is less information on finding mammals than birds (a gap that this book attempts to fill).

Nonetheless, many large species such as kangaroos, wallabies, whales and seals can be readily observed during the day. Some possums and gliders are common even in urban environments. And some tourist sites and ecolodges offer excellent mammal-watching opportunities of unusual or less common species.

GETTING STARTED

The basic field kit for a mammal-watcher is much the same as for bushwalking or birdwatching: loose, comfortable clothing in subdued, earthy tones (preferably greens or browns); suitable headwear to provide protection from the sun during the day and also to keep you warm at night; sturdy footwear, such as hiking boots; drinking water to suit conditions (carry extra drinking water in the arid zone); plus