23/08/2021

# Wildlife Drone Surveys at Fig Tree Hill – Ecological Report

REPORT PREPARED FOR LENDLEASE PTY LTD WILD CONSERVATION - KANE DURRANT & CHAD BERANEK - 23RD AUGUST 2021



Kane Durrant and Chad Beranek WILD CONSERVATION | PO BOX 1143, NARELLAN, NSW 2567

# Summary

Wild Conservation was engaged by Lendlease Pty Ltd to undertake drone-based wildlife monitoring, with the primary target species being the koala, across the 480 hectares of the Fig Tree Hill development site and 290 hectares in reserves (including Beulah Bush, Browns Bush and Noorumba Reserve) for comparison. In total, 19 koalas were detected across the entire survey area. Of these, 11 were detected in Browns Bush on the eastern side of Appin Road, four were detected in Beulah Bush and three were detected in Noorumba Reserve. One koala was detected within scattered paddock trees in the south of the Fig Tree Hill development site. There were two adult female koalas detected with back young. An additional two threatened species were detected: the grey-headed flying fox (Pteropus poliocephalus) and the glossy black cockatoo (Calyptorhynchus lathami). Detection probability was determined to be high, as repeat surveys of Beulah Bush and Noorumba Reserve yielded similar results to initial surveys, with only one koala being missed in the second survey. We conclude that eight koalas occur west of Appin Road in and adjacent to the Fig Tree Hill development site (including the reserve systems) and determine that this is a robust baseline population estimate. This will be important for monitoring population trajectory in light of development and conservation management for the future.

## Introduction

Wild Conservation was engaged by Lendlease Pty Ltd to undertake drone-based wildlife surveys to locate koalas on the Fig Tree Hill development site and adjacent reserves, in order to determine the population size and density. This is important to establish a base-line population estimate so that this can be monitored during the process of development and to determine if conservation and restoration actions are benefiting the population. It is also important to record areas of usage by the koala population and areas that may need enhancement for future survival.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature currently considers the koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) as 'Vulnerable' (Woinarski and Burbidge 2016), a listing that is reflected across Australian federal and state departments for New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (McAlpine et al. 2015). The current conservation status of the koala is the result of pressure from European settlement in Australia which has resulted in estimated population reductions of more than 50% (Reed and Lunney 1990, Melzer et al. 2000). The remaining koala populations now face both local and regional extinction in some areas of NSW (Lunney et al. 2002, Lunney et al. 2014) due to both anthropogenic drivers (e.g. habitat loss, dog attack, road injury) and biological drivers (e.g. wildfire, disease) of decline (Lunney et al. 2002, Lunney et al. 2007, McAlpine et al. 2015). These drivers of decline have the capacity to be encouraged or intensified by land clearing and climate change (Lunney et al. 2014, McAlpine et al. 2015). In light of this, it is important for developers to understand the populations of faunae that inhabit proposed sites, so a best practice approach can be delivered during the project.

The koala is an inherently cryptic arboreal marsupial which makes monitoring difficult, and due to this difficulty, many different survey methods have been developed (Melzer et al. 2000, Cristescu et al. 2015). Although we now have reasonably well-developed ideas about

koala tree preferences (Phillips and Callaghan 2000, Phillips et al. 2000, Matthews et al. 2007) and koala habitat maps (Lunney et al. 1998, Lunney et al. 2000, Lunney et al. 2009, Callaghan et al. 2011, Law et al. 2017), presence/absence monitoring techniques cannot obtain information on population size and density. With increases in technology and investigations of new ideas, many novel detection techniques of koalas have been discovered, which may lead to new methods of estimating density (Cristescu et al. 2015). This includes the use of passive acoustic monitoring, training dogs to be able to lead surveyors to koala scats and the use of drone technology to fly thermal imaging cameras to detect heat signatures (Cristescu et al. 2015, Law et al. 2018, Corcoran et al. 2019, Beranek et al. 2020).

Out of the promising emerging techniques for surveying koala populations, drones with mounted thermal cameras appears to be the most flexible, cost effective and promising (Corcoran et al. 2019, Beranek et al. 2020, Witt et al. 2020, Howell et al. 2021). This technology has been used to locate koalas for studies that require capture, for pre-logging operations and for situations where accurate information on density and population size are needed. It is important to couple thermal drone detections with an on-ground team to verify sightings, should data not be biased towards one species or another. Large possums and even roosting birds can appear to be koalas to a drone pilot, so it is necessary to mitigate this margin of error with a follow up real time sighting.

Koalas are known to occur in the general region of Campbelltown, but specifics of population size and use of the habitat within Fig Tree Hill are notional. Here we report the results of baseline drone surveys carried out for the detection of koalas in June/July 2021 at Fig Tree Hill. We also report other species detected during the drone surveys via spotlighting during detection validation.

## Methods

#### Study site

The Fig Tree Hill development site is located in the suburb of Gilead, which lies between Wedderburn and Menangle, NSW and is bounded to the east by Appin Road and to the west by the Nepean River (GPS of the site: -34.130542, 150.774482). Much of the site is composed of cleared paddocks and is currently used for livestock agriculture. The clearing dates back to the 1800s and more recently the 1960s. The site is divided east to west by a heritage-listed canal. There are remnant stands of native Cumberland Plain Woodland and Cumberland Plain Transitional Woodland that lie along Woodhouse Creek, Menangle Creek and the Nepean River. There are larger intact stands of native remnant vegetation within Noorumba Reserve (located to the north east of the site), Beulah Bush (located to the south east of the site) and Browns Bush (located to the east on the opposite side of Appin Road). The reserve systems were also of interest for surveys to determine the population size in the surrounding areas of the Fig Tree Hill property.

The area was broken up into 10 units, with each comprising of one night of drone surveys (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Two of the sites were surveyed twice to gain inference on the detection probability of koalas via drone.

Site	Description	n	Dates surveyed	Surface area (ha)
F1	North-west western portion of site.	1	27/06/2021	61
F2	North-western portion, adjacent to the Nepean River.	1	28/06/2021	41
F3	South-western portion, adjacent to Nepean River	1	29/06/2021	71
F4	Middle of site, portion closer to the Nepean River	1	01/07/2021	99
F5	Middle of site, portion closer to Appin Road	1	02/07/2021	98
F6	Beulah Bush	2	05/07/2021, 12/07/2021	66
F7	Noorumba Reserve	2	06/07/2021, 13/07/2021	56
F8	Along Menangle Creek and scattered paddock trees south of Noorumba Reserve.	1	11/07/2021	110
F9	Browns Bush – north	1	14/07/2021	73
F10	Browns Bush - south	1	15/07/2021	95
			Total:	770

**Table 1.** Details of drone missions. n = number of repeat surveys.



Figure 1. Map of the drone flight paths as plotted on Google Earth.

#### Drone surveys

The drone survey protocol followed the method described in (Beranek et al. 2020). We deployed a DJI drone; the Mavic 2 Enterprise Advance. Flights were made to follow a lawn mower pattern with 20% overlap and were constructed as kml files on Google Earth Pro. Each flight path was uploaded onto a DJI smart controller. Flights were nominally 65 m above ground level (AGL) but varied due to terrain. Terrain following was used in the Browns Bush sites (F9 and F10) to account for high topographic variability. The thermal imager (13 mm lens) was set to high gain (-25° to 135°C) and colour and thermal video (MP4) video recordings were simultaneous. Each flight lasted around 23 – 25 minutes until the battery needed to be changed, where each mission required 6 – 8 full charged batteries. Flights were suspended if wind resistance exceeded 10 m/s and at no time did the altitude exceed 120 m. Flight speed for most flights was 5 m/s to minimise motion blur and provide maximum coverage.

The Australian Civil Aviation Safety Authority requires remote pilots to maintain a visual line of sight (VLOS) at all times and to be able to orient the aircraft. Therefore, the drone was fitted with a high intensity strobe navigation light that has a range of over 5.5 km at night and at least 2 km in daylight. However, maintaining VLOS when flying above the forest canopy can be problematic as nearby foliage obscures the aircraft. To mitigate this, a 10.5 m elevated boom lift (Genie TZ-34/20) was used to elevate the pilot close to the canopy top.

#### Thermal detection verification

An in-field validation protocol was followed since error can occur when trying to identify species from thermal signatures (Corcoran et al. 2019). Manual verification was achieved by an on ground team that navigated to the location of each detection with head-torches and a spotlight. A photo was taken for all detections and are attached in the appendix of this report. Photos were not possible for some detections due to logistical issues.

# Results

Overall, seven species of fauna were detected, which comprised of two species of birds and five mammals (see Table 1). In total, there were 19 individual koalas detected. Of these, eight were found within the area surveyed to the west of Appin Road (including F6 - Beulah Bush and F7 - Noorumba Reserve). Of the koalas west of Appin Road, majority were found within the reserve systems (F6 - Beulah Bush = four and F7 - Noorumba Reserve = three), while one was found in scattered paddock trees within the south-east portion of F4. No koalas were found west of the canal. A further 11 koalas were found on the eastern side of Appin Road in Browns Bush. Repeat surveys of F6 – Beulah Bush and F7 – Noorumba Reserve resulted in similar numbers of koala detections.

Two koalas were observed to have back young/pouch young. One was located within F4 and the other was located within Beulah Bush.

There were two additional threatened species detected, the grey-headed flying fox and the glossy black cockatoo. Grey-headed flying foxes were detected via drone at almost half of the sites. Most were observed active or foraging on large-leaf privet (*Ligustrum lucidum*) or on the flowers of iron-barked eucalypts (e.g. *Eucalyptus cebra*). However, at one detection in unit F2, there were 28 individuals adjacent to the Nepean River that were presumed to be roosting (GPS: -34.124745, 150.756421). A pair of night-roosting glossy black cockatoos were detected in unit F10 (Browns Bush north, GPS of detection: -34.132586, 150.796998).

Common Name	Species name	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6 S1	F6 S2	F7 S1	F7 S2	F8	F9	F10	Total
Roosting birds	Aves	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2
Southern boobook	Ninox boobook	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Glossy black cockatoo	Calyptorhynchus Iathami	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Sugar glider/Squirrel glider	Petaurus sp.	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
Koala	Phascolarctos cinereus	0	0	0	1*	0	4*	4*	3	2	0	10	1	19
Ring-tailed possum	Pseudocheirus peregrinus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
Grey-headed flying fox	Pteropus policocephalus	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	5
Brush-tailed possum	Trichosurus vulpecula	5	7	3	1	0	8	5	0	0	1	2	1	18

**Table 1. Species list.** \* indicates that a female with a back young/pouch young was detected during the survey. Total indicates the maximum abundance across site, i.e. the maximum of repeat surveys as a site are used.

There were four tree species that the koalas were found using based off 26 koala detections (including detections of the same individual on repeat surveys). Most were observed in either grey gum (*Eucalyptus punctata*, 11) or grey box (*Eucalyptus moluccana*, 9), however some were detected in ironbark Eucalypts (either *E. fibrosa* or *E. crebra*, 4) and spotted gum (*Corymbia maculata*, 2). See figure 2.

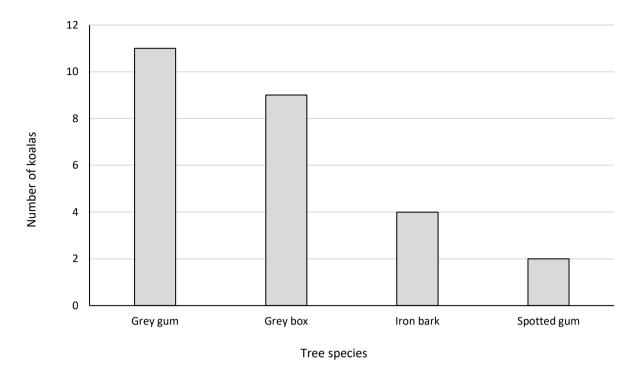


Figure 2. Tree species use overview of koalas detected via drone.

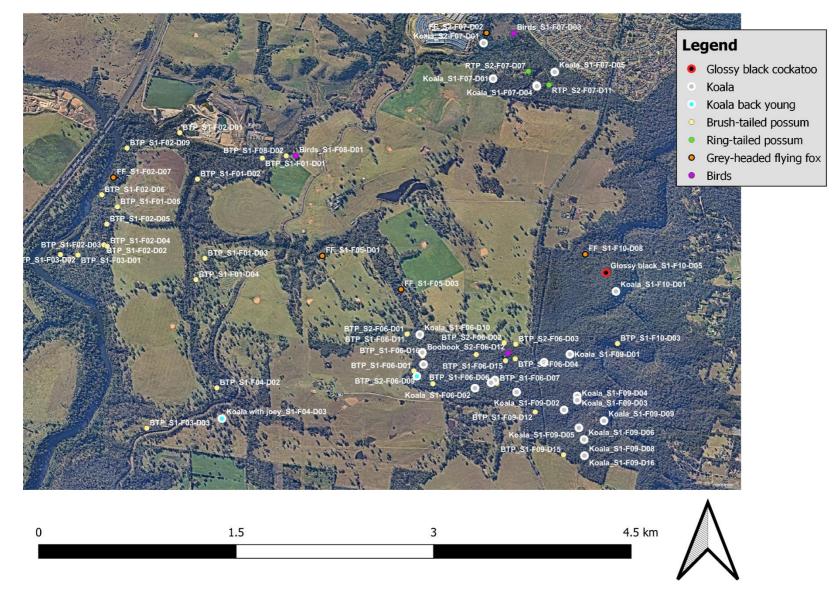


Figure 3. Map of detections.

## Discussion

Here we demonstrate that at least eight koalas use habitat on the Fig Tree Hill side of Appin Road (when including Beulah and Noorumba Reserves). With only one of these being found on the site proper. This individual was a female with back young found at F4. The nursing female was detected by drone and confirmed by the validation team. She was then checked over several return visits but had moved on after a second detection. The area was flown again approximately one week later to try and track her but to no avail. It is the opinion of our team that she moved into Nepean Creek or into the neighbouring property to the south.

During our surveys, no koalas were detected in Woodhouse Creek, other than those in Beulah Reserve. An additional 11 were detected in Browns Bush on the east side of Appin Road. This sets a baseline population size of 19 in the survey area, with two adult females observed with joeys. This information is useful to inform management strategies for this population.

It is possible that the heritage listed canal acts as a dispersal barrier for koala movement on the site as no koalas were detected west of this structure. There is a corridor that has been noted where koalas may travel under the canal at Woodhouse Creek but being that the habitat is more suitable on the east, and that the landscape and creek are both narrow and steep at this point, it is difficult to ascertain whether koalas frequent this area. Further monitoring of this population barrier will be useful to formulate a management plan. Most koalas were detected in areas with large extents of high-quality remnant Cumberland Plain Woodland and Cumberland Plain Transitional Forest. Only one koala was detected in areas with scattered paddock trees. These results emphasise the importance of protecting areas with large extents of koala woodland, such as Beulah and Noorumba Reserves.

Two other threatened species were detected during the surveys, the grey-headed flying fox (*Pteropus policocephalus*) and the glossy black cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus lathami*). The former species was found throughout the area and were most often observed actively feeding. However, one detection led to the discovery of a potential roost on the Nepean River. The glossy black cockatoos were a surprise finding and were detected in Browns Bush. These results highlight the importance of the current remnant woodland as a source of habitat for threatened species.

Our results validate the use of in-field validations of thermal signatures (Beranek et al. 2020). There were numerous detections of brush-tailed possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) which have thermal signatures that are difficult to distinguish from the thermal signature of a koala (Corcoran et al. 2019). Identifying thermal signatures without in-field validation is likely to lead to spurious results, which may eventuate in uninformed management decisions to the detriment of the koala.

Furthermore, we highlight the fact that repeated surveys are beneficial to produce greater accuracy and precision in population estimates, as we saw during our repeats of Beulah and Noorumba Reserves. While drone surveys have a higher detection rate than traditional techniques for koalas (Witt et al. 2020), the detection rate is not 100% and there are factors that may influence the probability of detection of an individual (Corcoran et al. 2021). Repeated surveys allows the possibility of modelling the detection probability and

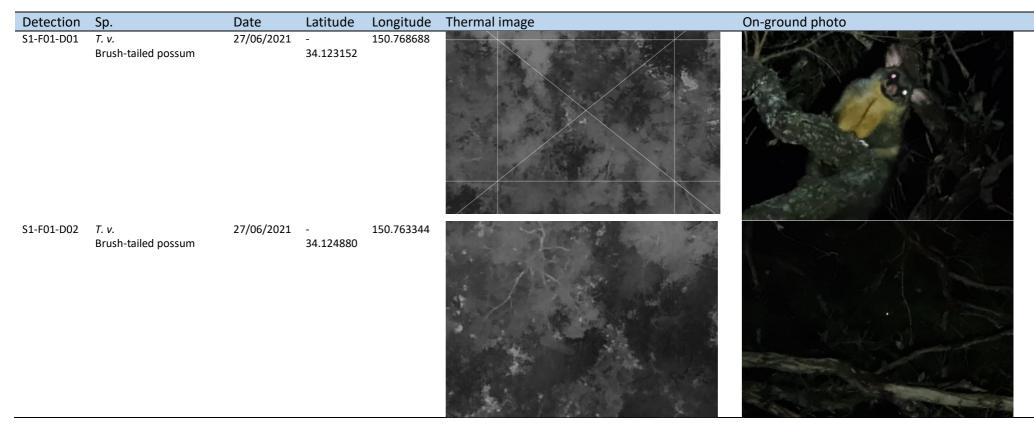
accounting this into density/population estimates which can lead to more accurate and precise results and allows the calculation of confidence intervals (Royle and Nichols 2003). Disregarding the use of modelling approaches and repeated surveys allows for the potential to detect animals that may have been missed in previous surveys.

## References

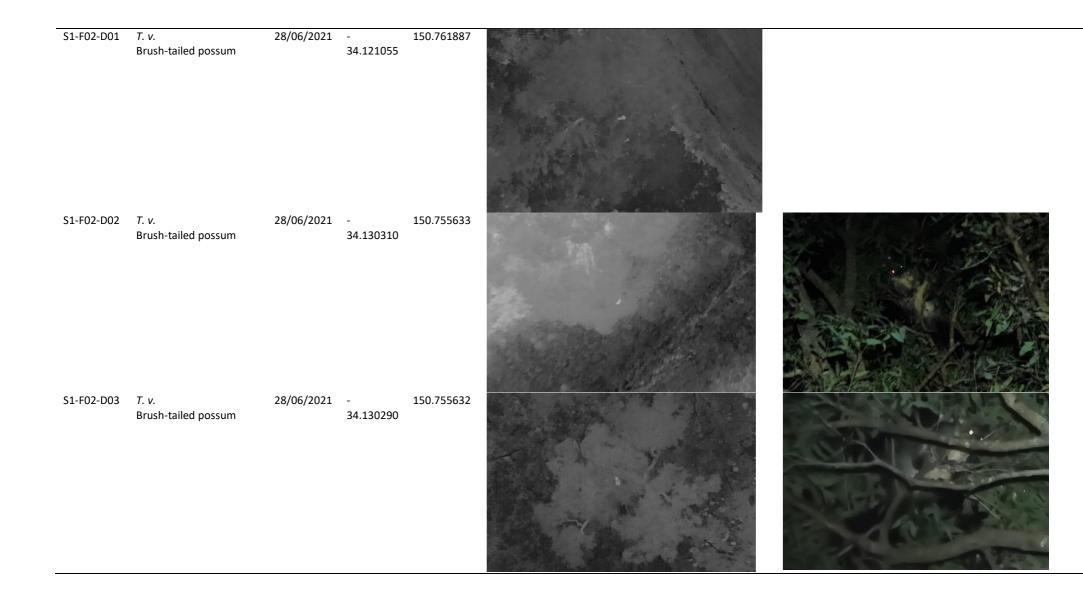
- Beranek, C. T., A. Roff, B. Denholm, L. G. Howell, and R. R. Witt. 2020. Trialing a real-time drone detection and validation protocol for the koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*). Australian Mammalogy 42.
- Callaghan, J., C. McAlpine, D. Mitchell, J. Thompson, M. Bowen, J. Rhodes, C. de Jong, R. Domalewski, and A. Scott. 2011. Ranking and mapping koala habitat quality for conservation planning on the basis of indirect evidence of tree-species use: a case study of Noosa Shire, south-eastern Queensland. Wildlife Research **38**:89-102.
- Corcoran, E., S. Denman, and G. Hamilton. 2021. Evaluating new technology for biodiversity monitoring: Are drone surveys biased? Ecology and Evolution **11**:6649-6656.
- Corcoran, E., S. Denman, J. Hanger, B. Wilson, and G. Hamilton. 2019. Automated detection of koalas using low-level aerial surveillance and machine learning. Scientific Reports **9**:3208.
- Cristescu, R. H., E. Foley, A. Markula, G. Jackson, D. Jones, and C. Frere. 2015. Accuracy and efficiency of detection dogs: a powerful new tool for koala conservation and management. Scientific Reports **5**:8349.
- Howell, L. G., J. Clulow, N. Jordan, C. T. Beranek, S. Ryan, A. Roff, and R. Witt. 2021. Drone technology provides cost benefits during landscape-scale monitoring of cryptic forest dwelling species across all population densities. Wildlife Research *Accepted*.
- Law, B., G. Caccamo, P. Roe, A. Truskinger, T. Brassil, L. Gonsalves, A. McConville, and M. Stanton. 2017. Development and field validation of a regional, management-scale habitat model: a koala Phascolarctos cinereus case study. Ecology and Evolution **7**:7475-7489.
- Law, B. S., T. Brassil, L. Gonsalves, P. Roe, A. Truskinger, and A. McConville. 2018. Passive acoustics and sound recognition provide new insights on status and resilience of an iconic endangered marsupial (koala *Phascolarctos cinereus*) to timber harvesting. PloS one **13**:e0205075.
- Lunney, D., M. S. Crowther, I. Shannon, and J. V. Bryant. 2009. Combining a map-based public survey with an estimation of site occupancy to determine the recent and changing distribution of the koala in New South Wales. Wildlife Research **36**:262-273.
- Lunney, D., S. Gresser, L. E. O'neill, A. Matthews, and J. Rhodes. 2007. The impact of fire and dogs on Koalas at Port Stephens, New South Wales, using population viability analysis. Pacific Conservation Biology **13**:189-201.
- Lunney, D., A. Matthews, C. Moon, and S. Ferrier. 2000. Incorporating habitat mapping into practical koala conservation on private lands. Conservation biology **14**:669-680.
- Lunney, D., L. O'Neill, A. Matthews, and W. B. Sherwin. 2002. Modelling mammalian extinction and forecasting recovery: koalas at Iluka (NSW, Australia). Biological Conservation **106**:101-113.
- Lunney, D., S. Phillips, J. Callaghan, and D. Coburn. 1998. Determining the distribution of koala habitat across a shire as a basis for conservation: a case study from Port Stephens, New South Wales. Pacific Conservation Biology **4**:186-196.
- Lunney, D., E. Stalenberg, T. Santika, and J. R. Rhodes. 2014. Extinction in Eden: identifying the role of climate change in the decline of the koala in south-eastern NSW. Wildlife Research **41**:22-34.
- Matthews, A., D. Lunney, S. Gresser, and W. Maitz. 2007. Tree use by koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) after fire in remnant coastal forest. Wildlife Research **34**:84-93.
- McAlpine, C., D. Lunney, A. Melzer, P. Menkhorst, S. Phillips, D. Phalen, W. Ellis, W. Foley, G. Baxter, and D. De Villiers. 2015. Conserving koalas: a review of the contrasting regional trends, outlooks and policy challenges. Biological Conservation **192**:226-236.
- Melzer, A., F. Carrick, P. Menkhorst, D. Lunney, and B. S. John. 2000. Overview, critical assessment, and conservation implications of koala distribution and abundance. Conservation biology 14:619-628.
- Phillips, S., and J. Callaghan. 2000. Tree species preferences of koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) in the Campbelltown area south-west of Sydney, New South Wales. Wildlife Research **27**:509-516.

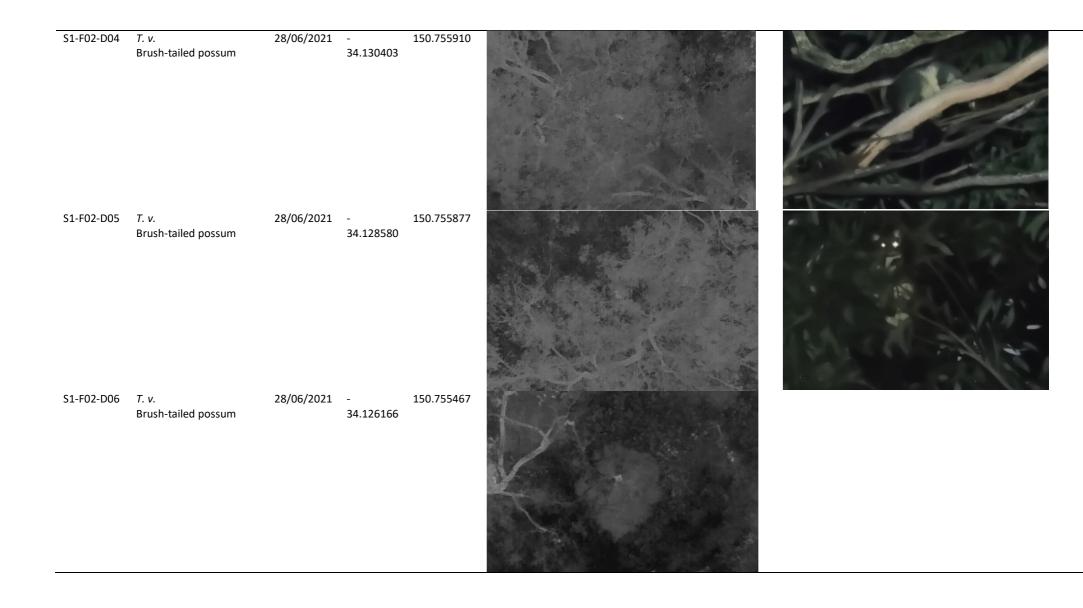
- Phillips, S., J. Callaghan, and V. Thompson. 2000. The tree species preferences of koalas (*Phascolarctos cinereus*) inhabiting forest and woodland communities on Quaternary deposits in the Port Stephens area, New South Wales. Wildlife Research **27**:1-10.
- Reed, P., and D. Lunney. 1990. Habitat loss: the key problem for the long-term survival of koalas in New South Wales. Koala summit: managing koalas in New South Wales:9-31.
- Royle, J. A., and J. D. Nichols. 2003. Estimating abundance from repeated presence–absence data or point counts. Ecology **84**:777-790.
- Witt, R. R., C. T. Beranek, L. G. Howell, S. A. Ryan, J. Clulow, N. R. Jordan, B. Denholm, and A. Roff. 2020. Real-time drone derived thermal imagery outperforms traditional survey methods for an arboreal forest mammal. PloS one **15**:e0242204.
- Woinarski, J. C. Z., and A. A. Burbidge. 2016. *Phascolarctos cinereus*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2016: e.T16892A21960344.

**Appendix 1.** Detection images. *T. v.* = brush-tailed possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*), *P. p.* = grey-headed flying fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*), *P. sp.* = glider (*Petaurus* sp. either sugar or squirrel glider), *Ps. p.* = ring-tailed possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*), *P. c.* = koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*), *N. b.* = southern boobook (*Ninox boobook*), *C. l.* = glossy black cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus lathami*), \* = back young/pouch young. Shaded rows highlight koala detections.



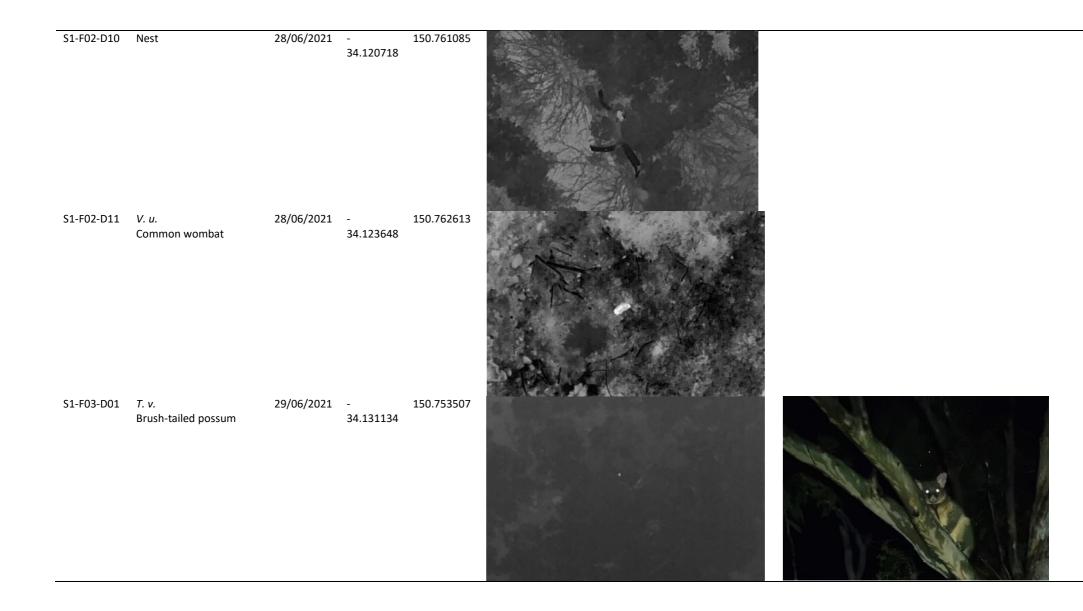




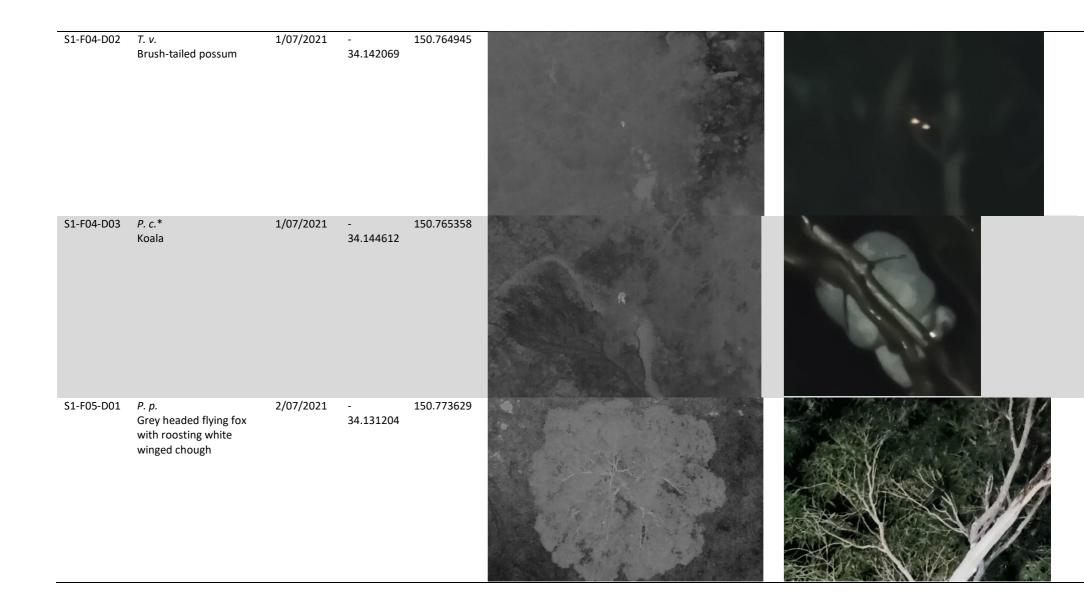


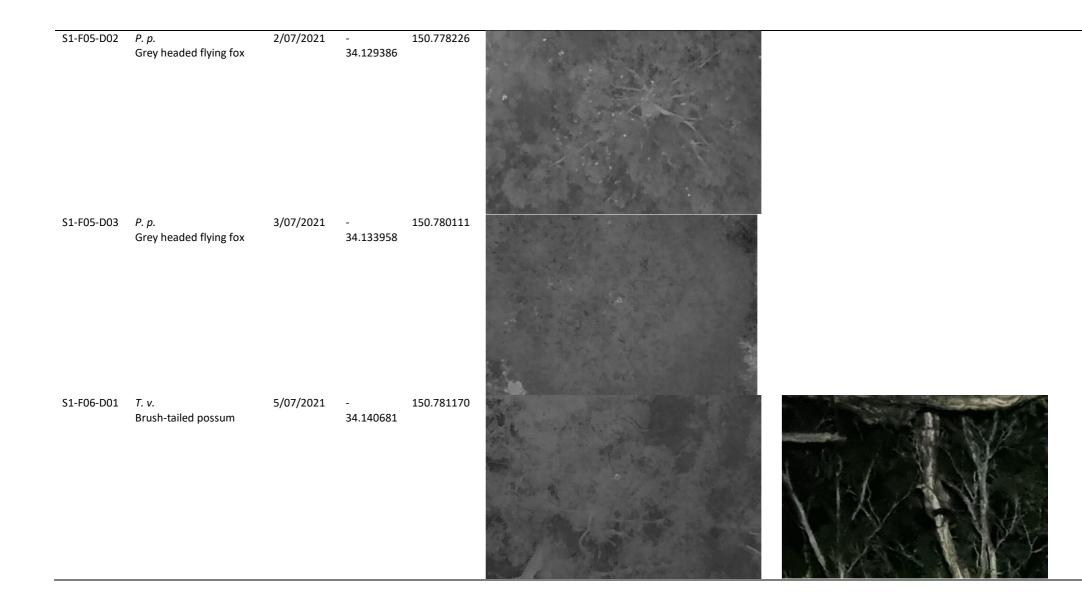
S1-F02-D07	P. p. Grey headed flying fox	28/06/2021	- 34.124745	150.756421	
S1-F02-D08 Brush- tailed possum	<i>Т. v.</i> Brush-tailed possum	28/06/2021	- 34.124783	150.757206	
S1-F02-D09 Brush- tailed possum	<i>T. v.</i> Brush-tailed possum	28/06/2021	- 34.122317	150.757541	

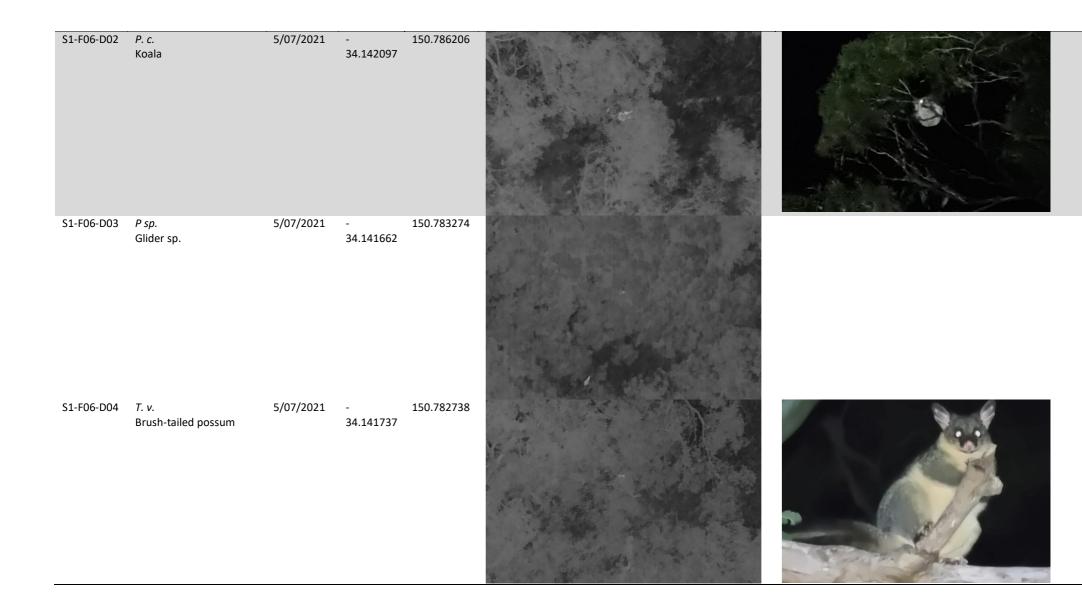
VANE DUDDANT AND CHAD DEDANEY

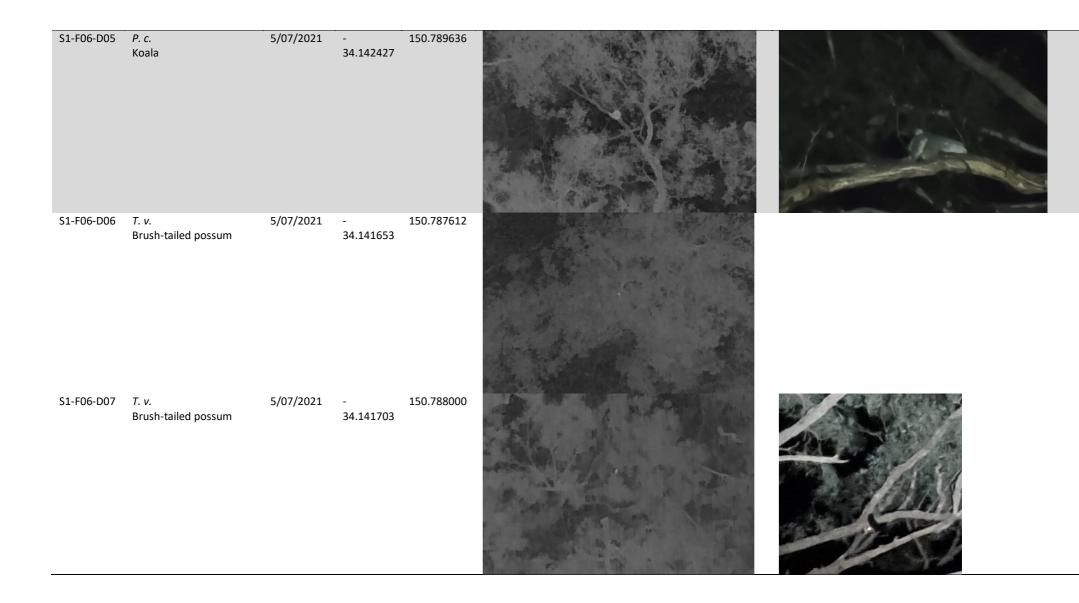




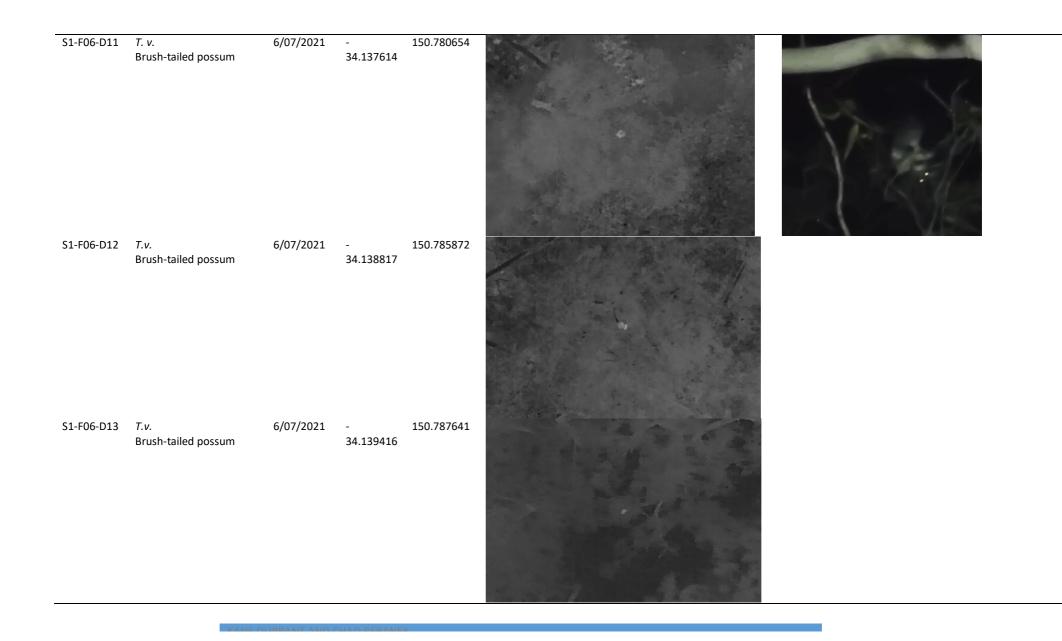






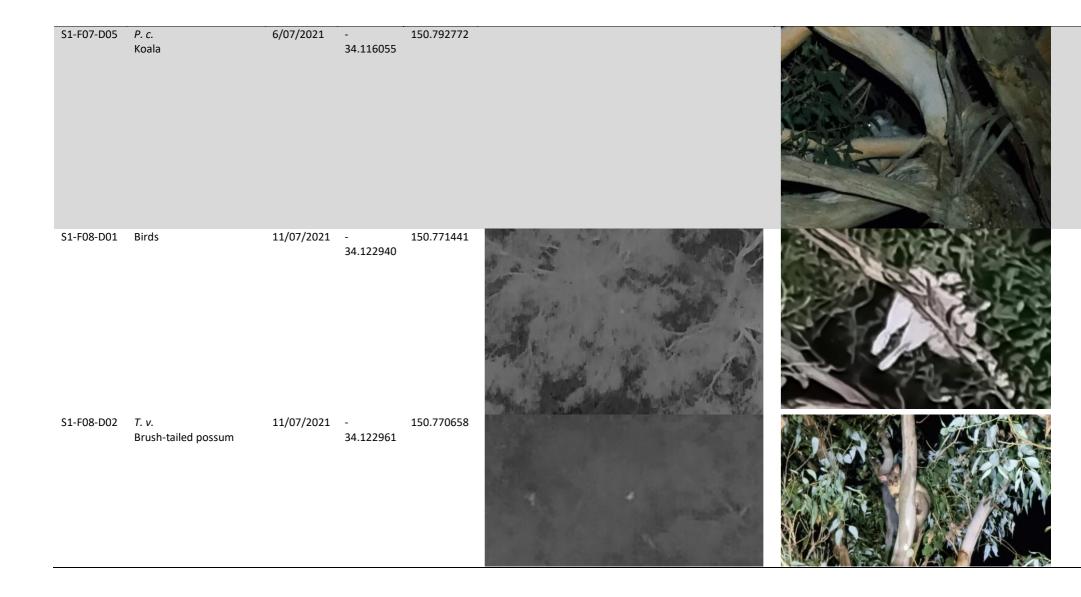


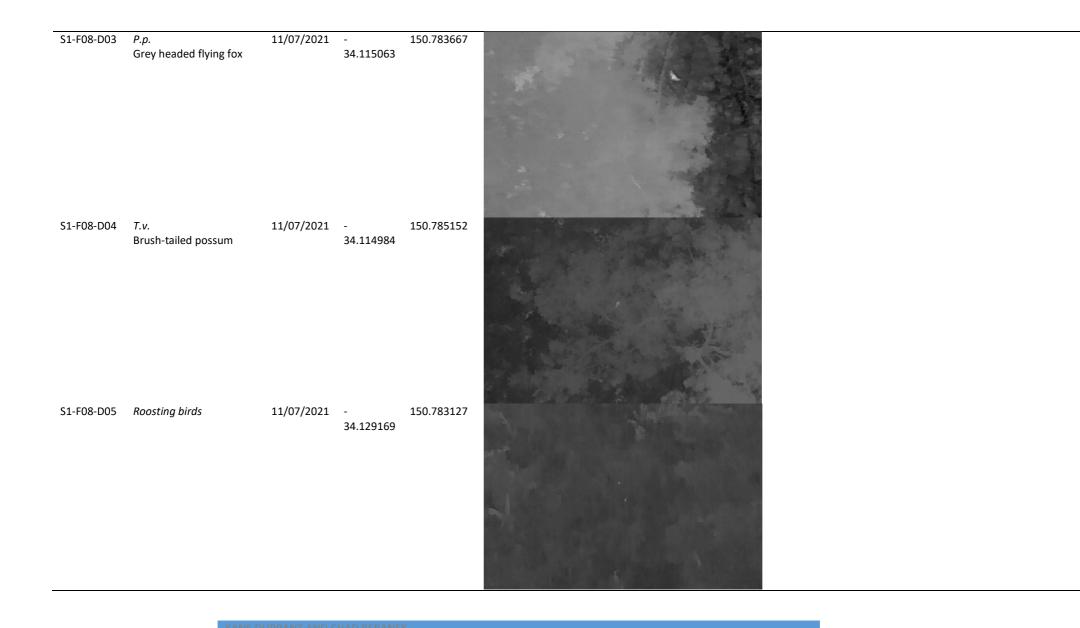
S1-F06-D08	P. c. Koala	5/07/2021	- 34.141433	150.787848	
S1-F06-D09	NA Detection moved on	5/07/2021	- 34.140740	150.787574	
S1-F06-D10	P. c. Koala	6/07/2021	- 34.137686	150.781664	



S1-F06-D14	<i>T. v.</i> Brush-tailed possum	6/07/2021	- 34.139330	150.786307	
S1-F06-D15	<i>T. v.</i> Brush-tailed possum	6/07/2021	- 34.139838	150.788719	
S1-F06-D16	<i>T. v.</i> Brush-tailed possum	6/07/2021	- 34.139449	150.781892	

S1-F07-D01	P. c. Koala	6/07/2021	34.116600	150.787696	
S1-F07-D02	NA	6/07/2021	- 34.117285	150.787606	
S1-F07-D03	Birds	6/07/2021	- 34.112844	150.789387	
S1-F07-D04	P. c. Koala	6/07/2021	- 34.117166	150.791285	









S2-F06-D12	<i>N. b.</i> Southern boobook	12/07/2021	- 34.139194	150.788933	
S2-F06-D06	<i>T.v.</i> Brush-tailed possum	12/07/2021	- 34.141933	150.788010	
S2-F06-D07	P. c. Koala	12/07/2021	- 34.141650	150.787528	

S2-F06-D08	P. c.* Koala	12/07/2021	34.141117	150.781417	
S2-F06-D09	Τ. v. Brush-tailed possum	12/07/2021	- 34.141073	150.781479	
S2-F06-D10	P. c. Koala	12/07/2021	- 34.140146	150.781967	

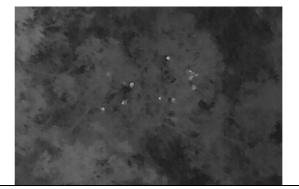
S2-F06-D11	P. c. Koala	12/07/2021	- 34.139164	150.781869	
D1-F06-D11	<i>P. c.</i> Koala Next day survey	13/07/2021	- 34.139164	150.781869	
D1-F06-D10	P. c. Koala Day survey	13/07/2021	- 34.140146	150.781967	

S2-F07-D01 P. c. 13/07/2021 -150.786917 Koala 34.113675

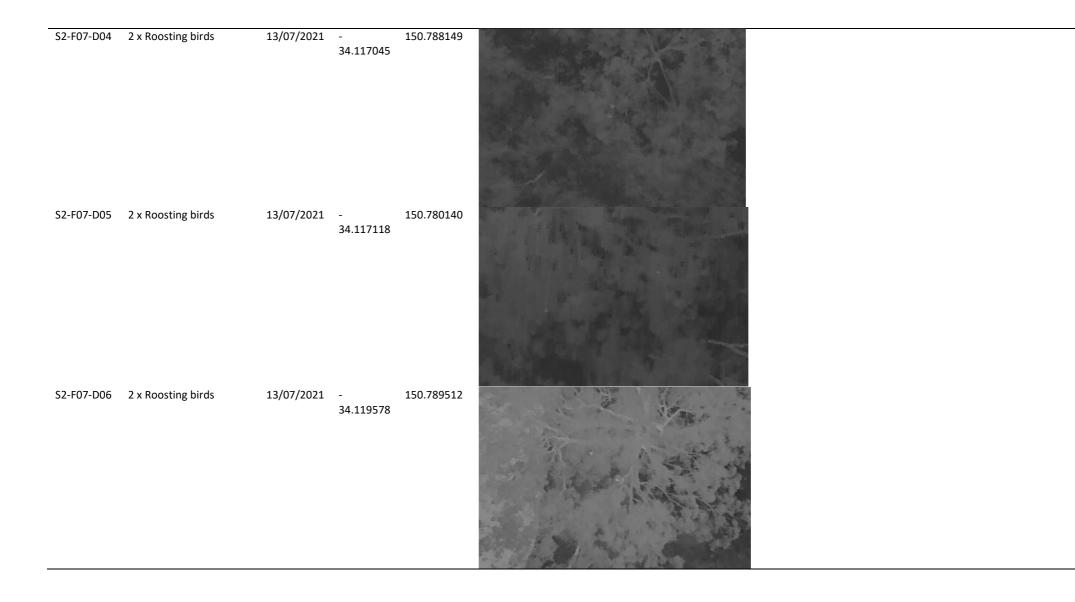
S2-F07-D02 P. p. 13/07/2021 -150.787156 Grey headed flying fox 34.112834

S2-F07-D03 16 x birds/bats

13/07/2021 - 150.78773 34.117284







\$2-F07-D07	<i>Ps. p.</i> Ring tailed possum	13/07/2021	- 34.115986	150.790604	
S2-F07-D08	<i>P. sp.</i> Glider sp.	13/07/2021	- 34.112928	150.787147	
S2-F07-D09	P. c. Koala	13/07/2021	- 34.117228	150.791311	



S1-F09-D01	P. c. Koala	14/07/2021	- 34.139310	150.794025	
S1-F09-D02	P. c. Koala	14/07/2021	- 34.143893	150.793542	
S1-F09-D03	P. c. Koala	14/07/2021	- 34.142739	150.794630	

