

Trip Wildlife Report: Spring Break in Baja



March 25 through April 5, 2009

Wildlife Locations Visited: San Ignacio Lagoon, Bahia Concepcion, Bahia de Loreto National Park, Santa Catalina Island, Montserrat Island, Carmen Island, Ojo de Liebre Lagoons, Vizcaino Desert Biosphere Reserve, Catavina Desert Sierra San Pedro Martir, Norte Ensenada



Trip Overview

Twelve days in Baja may not seem like a lot, but when you have the dedicated Smith family at the helm, an amazing amount of fun and wildlife viewing can be had. Quick in the planning, the trip came off with an astounding degree of success. Not only was the trip fairly quickly slapped together, it was almost cancelled due to six-year-old Cokie Smith's emergency surgery less than two weeks prior to the trip. Resulting from a complication from the prior year's appendectomy, Cokie found himself in yet another life-threatening situation with a primary blockage of his small bowel caused by adhesions. After a life-flight helicopter ride to Seattle's Children's Hospital, Cokie underwent emergency surgery and several days of hospitalization. But after several days of recovery, and a doctor's okay, we decided to follow through with the trip after all. And we were very glad we did!

After a quick flight down to San Diego, California, we rented our piece-of-shit Dodge from Dollar (although it did make it through the entire trip with only minor, non-trip-stopping problems...), we crossed the militarized US-Mexico border and drove through the cesspool known as Tijuana, and the exploding metropolis of Ensenada (wow how that place has grown since my spring break days in the 80's!), we made it to the sleepy and dusty town of San Vicente, where we had an outstanding seafood dinner and a noisy, dusty night's sleep.

Laguna San Ignacio

With an early start, we started our very long (about 500 km) drive to Baja California Sur, ultimately to Laguna San Ignacio. With many stops through the amazing boojum deserts of the Sierra San Pedro Martir, we made respectable time. While in the boojum forests we ticked off several bird species and even our first mammal. **California ground squirrels** were scurrying around the inselbergs warming in the morning sun. We spotted many new reptiles as well. I was hoping to see my first lifer, the **white-tailed antelope squirrel**, but that would have to wait for another day....



The transpeninsular highway is surprisingly fast and you can make really good time. There were times we were flying at speeds in excess of 80mph!!! Although I would not recommend that in most sections as the road has virtually NO shoulder and the trucks in the opposing lanes often get within inches! And there are tons of **feral cattle or Chinampo** and **feral burros** throughout the peninsula that would love to be crashing through your windshield.

We made it to San Ignacio town with plenty of sun left and had time to shop for provisions such as tequila, beer, candy and Cokie's Mexican caballero hat that he still wears today with pride. After inspecting the spectacular 300-year-old Mission San Ignacio, we got started on the 60km gravel road out to Pachico's Ecotours Camp situated right on Laguna San Ignacio.

After hearing so many horror stories about the gravel road out to the lagoon, we were relieved to experience a very well-maintained, fairly fast road with minimal wash boarding (although I think it probably does get worse depending on how recent the grading has been...). We arrived to Pachico's camp just in time for a spectacular sunset. After meeting our hosts, Jesus Mayoral and his partner, Sabrina, who were kind enough to allow us to use one of their cabins gratis to make Cokie's stay more comfortable, we were able to relax and unwind after our long trip.

While Som was getting settled, Cokie and I decided to go on a desert night hike with spotlights to see what we could see. Great first night! In less than one km of walking in the immediate vicinity of the camp, we got good sightings of **peninsular coyote** and **desert kit fox**! And we even got a quick look at a **Merriam's kangaroo rat**. No one back at camp believed we saw the fox as no one had ever seen one there before. Jesus knew there were foxes around but thought they were much further out. But the other guests thought we were crazy no doubt... Most people probably assume they are looking at a coyote as they are so common there. Som was disappointed that she didn't join us on the night's hike, but I was confident we would have another shot in the following four days at the camp.



Our primary focus for visiting Laguna San Ignacio was the **gray whales**. The lagoon is famous for the large concentrations of the grays during the winter months. Courtship, mating, birthing and rearing all happen in the

lagoon for about 300+/- whales. Scammon's lagoon (Laguna Ojo de Liebre) further north and Laguna Magdalena further south all combine to provide habitat for over 2000 gray whales during the mating season (a bit less than 10% of the total population). We selected San Ignacio over the others due to the fame it has for the so-called "friendly"



whales. Although there is never any guarantee of being visited by the whales close enough to pet them, the literature showed San Ignacio as the place to be. And we were NOT disappointed!

Three full days in Laguna San Ignacio allowed us the opportunities to see over fifteen mother-baby pairs of whales, with “friendly” encounters with at least eight pairs! In fact, every single trip out to the mouth of the lagoon to see the whales, we had at least 45 minutes to over 1.5 hours of petting, kissing and playing with the whales! We could not have imagined better luck! Being so close to such magnificent mammals is beyond comprehension and mere words cannot describe the experience. I will never forget the smile on Som’s face while she was petting, and in many cases actually kissing, the whales - the pure joy of the experience was evidenced in her massive smile!



Cokie on the other hand took a couple days to get used to the size of these massive mammals. On day one, he quickly petted the first whale to approach the boat but after a few moments,

I guess it finally clicked just how massive these creatures were, and he spent the entire rest of day-one and two running to opposite sides of the panga (boat) from the massive approaching and playful whales. It was like watching a scared ping-pong ball...He wasn't really that scared, he just wanted to stay far away from the whales, their spray and their smell.... But on day-three, he dealt with his fears and spent the entire trip petting both the mothers and the babies



– he loved it! I really enjoyed watching him overcoming his fears completely on his own. He told me the night before, “dad, I really am going to try to pet the whales tomorrow – even the mommies.”

The stay at Laguna San Ignacio was utterly fantastic. Days whale-watching and birding were phenomenal. Visiting the osprey rookeries on the nearby bird island would have been worth the trip to the lagoon in itself. The bird life was prolific there – thousands of brown pelicans, double-crested, Brandt’s and pelagic cormorants, peregrine falcons, Heerman’s gulls, royal terns, snowy plovers, reddish egrets, hundreds of marbled godwits and willets were some of the avian highlights. We even had good sightings of pomarine jaegers and a south polar or Antarctic skua, the species with the longest migration of any species of bird on the planet!

The mammals in San Ignacio were great as well! We had good sightings of at least 8 **peninsular coyotes** and three separate **peninsular desert kit foxes**! We also saw several **black-tailed jackrabbits** in the desert during night drives. We had a fleeting glimpse of an **American badger** as well. At first I was a bit surprised by the sighting but after seeing large badger holes in the desert during day walks, I knew they were there. On two

separate nights, we got good looks at the same **gray fox** near the base camp. I was only able to bring one of my traps but it was well used. We were able to trap a **long-tailed pocket mouse** and a **white-tailed antelope squirrel**! Both were new lifers for me. And on the way out, we saw dozens of the antelope squirrels – even got some great shots of them.



Parque Nacional Bahia de Loreto

Our next destination was Loreto and Parque Nacional Bahia de Loreto over on the Sea of Cortez. The drive was easy and spectacular. There we vistas forever and miles and miles of prime desert. We had time to take several walks in the desert which was fairly parched but still very spectacular. Once in Loreto, we made contact with our operator – Leon from Baja Outpost, who was surprised that I actually showed up! After Cokie’s surprise illness, I had not communicated much with him, basically assuming that we were going to cancel the trip.... I caught him by surprise but we were able to get the plans for the panga ride the following day out to Isla Santa Catalina and to search for the blue whales.

We had time to stroll the lovely town of Loreto that evening, get some souvenir shopping in and even time for one of the best sea-food meals I have ever had - at Tio Lupe’s! Wow – prawns, crab, lobsters, margaritas, and tons more for less than \$50! The ancient Mission Loreto was gorgeous as well and even once served as the capital of “all the Californias”. Cokie picked up a cute “Tiburcio” puppet that both he and his mother love

(they even picked up a few more in Ensenada are play with them daily still!). We stayed at the Oasis hotel right on the beach.

The next day we awoke bright an early for breakfast at Baja Outpost. After some wonderful cappuccinos, we boarded our panga in Leon's (the Brazilian owner-operator) driveway and literally drove in the boat down the street to launch. In minutes we were on our way in the spectacular Bahia de Loreto National Park, which basically consists of the bay itself and several islands, the most prominent of which are Isla Carmen, Montserrat and the amazingly spectacular and desolate, Isla Santa Catalina.

We spent hours looking for the elusive blue whale, which I figured out pretty quickly, after speaking with our captian, "Kiki", had not been seen in the Bahia for weeks, contrary to Leon's, "we-have-been-seeing-the-whales-daily-since-January-22..." bullshit...but somehow, I did not care that much. The scenery was spectacular, and we were getting some great birding in. Seeing my first pair of Craveri's murrelets speeding by the boat was great and they even caught Kiki's attention as he had never seen them in the bay before. The manta rays were flipping and jumping all over the bahia and one surfaced directly next to the panga. I think Cokie thought they were cooler than any

whale. And after our second megapod of dolphins (consisting of three species – **bottlenose, spinner and long-beaked common dolphins**), I was already feeling we getting our money's worth. And our second megapod was populated by several thousand (at



least!) dolphins!!! We boated in this pod for over an hour – sublime. They were hopping right next to Cokie's face which was positioned just off the bow. He was close enough to get wet repeatedly. And I loved how he never got bored even though the spectacle went on so long.

Isla Santa Catalina

After a few hours of searching for the non-existent blue whales, we headed to the Isla Santa Catalina. After finding a suitable campsite on the island, we beached the panga, set up camp, and we immediately set off to explore the amazing desert of the island. We were repeatedly warned of all the dangerous reptiles of the island to the point where it scared Som and Cokie a bit too much. After convincing them that I was no babe-in-the-woods in the desert (I am a bit disappointed that they didn't already know this...) we had a very productive walk through the cardon desert forest of the island.

We spent the later afternoon snorkeling in the bay by the campsite. It was Cokie's and Som's first time and I can tell they are completely hooked! While Cokie didn't get much further out than a few meters, he saw some fish, a sea star and a crab, and was extremely excited about the experience. Som and I went out quite a bit further and saw hundreds of reef fish and huge schools of spectacular yellow fish. We even got a chance to see the small native barracuda hunt in the school – quite a sight. Puffer fish were everywhere – one even startled me appearing suddenly right in front of my mask about 4 inches away.

While the family was warming up on the beach (the water was a bit cold...), I hiked up the nearby mountain to get some great sunset and panorama shots. I spied several rodent caches while on the stroll through the Catalina Barrel Cactus forest (one of many endemic species). The strolls in general were great for herp watching. We had great sightings of the endemics like the **Santa Catalina Island whiptail**, **desert iguana**, **side-blotched lizards**, but my biggest hope was seeing the famous Santa Catalina Island Rattleless Rattlesnake. But we were told that the chances were poor as it was a bit cool for them.



After sunset, we had a wonderful grilled yellow-tail dinner with margaritas and salad! Great food for a desert campout! The next morning was steak and eggs! After dinner we set out on a night walk. No sooner than we had put on our headlamps and turned on our spotlights, we came across a

beautiful **Santa Catalina Island rattlesnake** only ten meters from the campsite! He was moving slowly due to the temperature, but that allowed us very close views and some wonderful images. I even got to hold his rattleless tail for a bit – amazing. Som was mortified but she saw that I was taking no chances.... The rest of the walk was spent looking for carbon-pollinators like bats (about five species are in the area and we saw at least two but I could not ID them...). We narrowed one down to the **big brown bat** based on wing and ear size and of course the distribution maps.

Cokie and Som slept in the tent while I slept under the desert sky. There was a wind all night so when I felt my clothes being tossed about, I really thought nothing of it. But in the middle of the night when I noticed a sizeable rodent crawl right over my face, I knew I had to turn on the lights...and I did - there were little **cotton rats** all over me! At least I think they were *Sigmodon* species. Hard to tell actually as the literature is very poor for this region and I could only ID them based on a process of elimination – too large for *Peromyscus* and *Reithrodontomys* species and too small for *Neotoma*...and the tails were too short of any of the above. A morning walk the next day picked up two **desert woodrats** under some dead *Pachycereus pringlei* skeletons we turned over.



We got underway after some great desert bird-watching on the island. We spotted gila and ladderback woodpeckers, hooded orioles, verdins, northern cardinals, wrens, house finches, great looks at two separate *Pyrrhuloxias* and many more. While I knew that we were not going to see any blue whales, I insisted on spending some more hours searching the feeding areas just the same. And I was glad we did or I would have not known that pilot whales also congregated in megapods numbering in excess of two-three hundred individuals. Combined with the spinner and long-beaked common dolphins, there were literally hundreds of cetaceans around us!

We made it back to Loreto right on time. Som and Cokie wanted to hang out in a hotel with a pool for a bit longer so we spent the evening again at the Oasis and had some of Tio Lupe's killer sea food again! At the hotel, Cokie was very proud of his very first "jumps" in to a pool! We got in some more shopping and local birding in, and had a great sleep.

Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve & Oje de Liebre Lagoon

The next day was our day to start the "boojum desert" portion of the trip. The next few days were planned to be spent in the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve as well as the Catavina (Vizcaino) and Bahia de los Angeles (San Felipe) desert systems. The drive to Vizcaino was uneventful and gorgeous. We made time for some more desert strolls and birding, herping, etc. - tons of white-tailed antelope squirrels, but no other mammals to speak of. Once in the Vizcaino, the goal was to see the "berrendos" or **peninsular pronghorn antelope**. While seeing them completely in the wild would have been ideal, I was



realistic to know that that may be next to impossible as most wild sightings are actually from planes that search for hours over the desert for the images they get. So we headed deep in the Vizcaino desert to the berrendo reserve. Next to impossible to get any information about, the reserve was surprisingly easy to find. About 60 miles in to the desert from the town of Vizcaino on the road to Bahia Ascencion and Bahia Tortuga, we were able to see the small signs pointing us to the reserve. The reserve is several thousand acres of fenced Vizcaino desert set aside for the reproduction of the pronghorn, which number about 200-300 in the wild and about the same number in the reserve. The animals in the reserve are healthy, well cared for and reproducing fine, as we noticed several dozen kids in the female area. It was well worth the drive and the setting was very natural, and if I didn't know better, the images I got there could easily be construed as "in nature".



We didn't leave the Vizcaino reserve until late afternoon, so we decided to spend the night at Ojo de Liebre lagoon on the north end of the park and just south of the dump known as Guerrero Negro. What a great

choice! We literally owned the entire lagoon as no one was there except us! And our evening spot lighting was fun – tons of black-tailed jack rabbits to entertain us. But the high point of the evening was watching the **Merriam's kangaroo rats** poke around the campsite. We even caught one and were able view it up close. Som and Cokie loved how it hopped just like a kangaroo! Got some great shots. The birding was a bit past its prime there but we did pick up several new species while exploring the salt pools and lagoons – mostly ducks.

The Catavina Desert & Bahia de los Angeles

The drive today was heading further north near Catavina, where we noticed some prime desert on the way down earlier in the trip. We made it in good time and checked in to staying at the Desert Oasis hotel right on the highway – the only hotel for over a hundred miles in either direction. But after hearing the \$110 price tag for a room, we decided to camp in the desert up the road. We pulled off a couple miles of the road and set up camp in a dry gulch (no signs of rain for weeks so no worries...). Not soon after we started exploring the rock formations nearby, we came across some fascinating rock art pictographs! What a spectacular way to spend our last night in the desert – in a sacred site surrounded by surreal wilderness. We spotlighted but nothing new was added to the list. The next morning's sunrise walk was perhaps the best birding of the trip adding

many new species such as lesser goldfinches, Costa's hummingbird, Scott's orioles, Bewick's wrens (surprised to see them so far south!) and many others. And we caught **wild horses** and dozens of **spadefoot toads** in the ephemeral ponds up and down the wash. They no doubt had a great wet season. I even heard a coyote growling just outside our tent during the night. I couldn't help but wonder if he was growling at us for invading his space. What a great spot.

The next day was mainly for driving. I wanted to get some last minute images of the **California ground squirrels** in the area – no problem – tons of them. But strangely we had the best sightings at a rest area just north of Ensenada where they were basically habituated.

Our amazing Baja adventure was finished with us getting nearly hopelessly lost in Tijuana – just trying to find our way to the damn lanes that got us in to the border post (the world's busiest!!!). After three hours of that adventure, we finally made it to San Diego and a hotel for the evening and then back to Seattle the next day.

What a phenomenal adventure we had.

Mammal List

1. Black-tailed Jack Rabbit (*Lepus californicus*)
2. California Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*)
3. White-tailed Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus leucurus*)
4. Long-tailed Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus formosus*)
5. Merriam's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys merriami*)
6. Desert Woodrat (*Neotoma lepida*)
7. Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*) (ID based on size and small ears – seen on cardon pollinating at night)
8. Peninsular Coyote (*Canis latrans peninsulae*)
9. Desert Kit Fox (*Vulpes macrotis arsipus*)
10. Gray Fox (*Urocyon littoralis*)
11. American Badger (*Taxidea taxus*)
12. California Sea Lion (*Zalophus californianus*)
13. Peninsular Pronghorn Antelope (*Antilocarpa americana peninsularis*)
14. Feral Burro (*Equus africanus asinus*)
15. Feral Horse (*Equus caballus*)
16. Chinampo (*Bos primigenius*)
17. Gray Whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*)
18. Short-finned Pilot Whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*)
19. Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncates*)
20. Spinner Dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*)
21. Long-beaked Common Dolphin (*Delphinus capensis*)

Possible Sightings

1. Cotton Rat (*Sigmodon* species)

Herp List (Very partial as most species went unidentified)

1. Brush Lizard (*Urosaurus* species)
2. Long-tailed Brush Lizard (*Urosaurus graciosus*)
3. Santa Catalina Whiptail Lizard (*Cnemidophorus catalinensis*)
4. Santa Catalina Desert Iguana (*Dipsosaurus catalinensis*)
5. Banded Rock Lizard (*Petrosaurus mearnsi*)
6. Rock Lizard (*Petrosaurus* species)
7. Desert Spiny Lizard (*Sceloperus magister*)
8. Santa Catalina Side-blotched Lizard (*Uta squamata*)
9. Santa Catalina Rattlesnake (*Crotalus catalinensis*)
10. Couch's Spadefoot Toad (*Scaphiopus couchii*)

Bird List

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| 1. Brown Pelican | 33. Semipalmated Plover |
| 2. Eared Grebe | 34. Wilson's Plover |
| 3. Double-crested Cormorant | 35. Snowy Plover |
| 4. Brandt's Cormorant | 36. Black-bellied Plover |
| 5. Pelagic Cormorant | 37. Sanderling |
| 6. Reddish Egret | 38. Marbled Godwit |
| 7. Great Egret | 39. Least Sandpiper |
| 8. Little Egret | 40. Western Sandpiper |
| 9. Tricolored Heron | 41. Whimbrel |
| 10. Great Blue Heron | 42. Pomarine Jaeger |
| 11. Black-crowned Night Heron | 43. South Polar Skua |
| 12. Brant Goose | 44. Western Gull |
| 13. Red-breasted Merganser | 45. California Gull |
| 14. Bufflehead | 46. Heerman's Gull |
| 15. Northern Shoveler | 47. Ring-billed Gull |
| 16. Northern Pintail | 48. Yellow-footed Gull |
| 17. Lesser Scaup | 49. Herring Gull |
| 18. Surf Scoter | 50. Franklin's Gull |
| 19. Osprey | 51. Caspian Tern |
| 20. Turkey Vulture | 52. Royal Tern |
| 21. Golden Eagle | 53. Forster's Tern |
| 22. American Kestrel | 54. Least Tern |
| 23. Peregrine Falcon | 55. Sooty Shearwater |
| 24. Red-tailed Hawk | 56. White-tailed Tropicbird |
| 25. Common Black Hawk | 57. Brown Booby |
| 26. Harris's Hawk | 58. Blue-footed Booby |
| 27. Cooper's Hawk | 59. Magnificent Frigatebird |
| 28. California Quail | 60. Craveri's Murrelet |
| 29. Long-billed Curlew | 61. White Ibis |
| 30. American Oyster Catcher | 62. White-winged Dove |
| 31. Greater Yellowlegs | 63. Mourning Dove |
| 32. Willet | 64. Common Ground Dove |

65. Lesser Nighthawk
66. Allen's Hummingbird
67. Costa's Hummingbird
68. Gilded Flicker
69. Gila Woodpecker
70. Ladderback Woodpecker
71. Common Raven
72. Phainopepla
73. Loggerhead Shrike
74. Spotted Towhee
75. California Towhee
76. Black-throated Sparrow
77. Savannah Sparrow
78. White-crowned Sparrow
79. Western Meadowlark
80. Brewer's Blackbird
81. Barn Owl
82. Burrowing Owl
83. Cassin's Kingbird

84. Ash-throated Kingbird
85. Vermillion Flycatcher
86. Willow Flycatcher
87. Black Phoebe
88. Scrub Jay
89. Northern Mockingbird
90. Verdin
91. White (or Yellow) Wagtail
92. Northern Cardinal
93. Pyrrhuloxia
94. Hooded Oriole
95. Scott's Oriole
96. House Sparrow
97. House Finch
98. Lesser Goldfinch
99. American Coot
100. Belted Kingfisher
101. Bewicks Wren



