

American Southwest Tour (June 2017)

In June of 2017, a group of young birders (Aidan Place, Sameer Apte, and Jack Chaillet) from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania took a road trip through Texas and Arizona. While the primary purpose was, of course, birds, we sought for mammals as well. We finished the trip with 42 species of mammal plus 4 introduced species. The highlights included **Cougar, Mexican Spotted Ground-squirrels, White-backed Hog-nosed Skunk, Robust Cottontail, Antelope Jackrabbit, Mexican Long-tongued Bat, Gulf Coast Kangaroo Rat, and Ringtail**. It was a great trip, covering a broad swath of the Southwestern US, and, for a birding trip, was surprisingly successful with mammals.

Itinerary-

The trip started in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. From there we drove to the Texas Hill Country (stopping the night in the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas). The Lower Rio Grande Valley was next and then up to Big Bend National Park (NP) and west to Arizona. In Arizona we visited the Chiricahua, Santa Catalina, Huachuca, and Santa Rita Mountains as well as Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (NM). The return drive to Pittsburgh was made via Phoenix and Grand Canyon NP.



Itinerary for the Trip

Day by Day-

Day 1: Spent mostly driving and so had little in the way of mammals. A lunch stop at Mammoth Cave NP in Kentucky oddly produced nothing but **White-tailed Deer**. We couldn't even find an Eastern Chipmunk. That evening saw us camping at Spring Lakes Recreation Area in Arkansas and we had one **Northern Raccoon** while driving after dark at Mt. Magazine.

Texas-

Day 2: Another full day of driving, but we did arrive in Austin, Texas at dusk, in time for the mass exit for 1.5 million **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** from their roost beneath the Congress Avenue Bridge. The bats themselves were an awesome spectacle but almost cooler were the huge crowds which had turned out to watch them. It's always awesome seeing people appreciating nature and the hundreds of people lining the bridge makes me a bit more hopeful for the future. Certainly it's a great opportunity for conservation. That night we camped at Turkey Bend Recreation Area near Balcones Canyonlands National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) where we

were to go birding the next day. We sadly had no mammals at night on the way in although Texas Mouse is in the area.

Day 3: Sameer went for a walk before the rest of us were up yet and had a brief look at a **Nine-banded Armadillo**. Besides that we had no other mammals in the Hill Country that morning, with the exception of our first **Rock Squirrel**. By the early afternoon we were on our way south towards the Gulf Coast. A stop in Port Aransas snagged us **Common Bottlenose Dolphin**. However, the real mammal highlight of the day was our nightdrive on South Padre Island. Based off of [Jon Hall's](#) and other trip reports, we knew the island to be a good spot for **Gulf Coast Kangaroo Rat** (the very pale coastal subspecies). Following the directions of others, we drove and walked along the single road which runs north along the island, quickly leaving human habitation and entering the dunes. We were unable to locate anything from the road itself so decided to park by the last beach entrance (#6) and walk along the beach side, scanning the dunes. Without too much effort we were able to locate and get incredible looks at two Kangaroo Rats! A definite trip highlight! Our campsite for the night was at Adolph Thomae Jr. County Park and the drive to there was highlighted by a **Nine-banded Armadillo** and a couple **Black-tailed Jackrabbits**. However, despite the park's assurances otherwise when we had called them earlier, we arrived around 1 am to find the gate closed and locked. Not to be deterred, the least tired among us hiked in while the third slept in the car. Rather hot and badly mosquito bitten, we set up camp and went to sleep.

Day 4: Early morning birding found us another good mammal, **Mexican Ground Squirrel**, around the feeder area at the visitor center of Laguna Atascosa NWR. A **Feral Pig** was also seen on the refuge. The rest of the day as well as the day after was entirely birding and we encountered no interesting mammals.

Day 5: A day birding around Santa Ana NWR and Bentsen Rio Grande SP produced no memorable mammal encounters, despite a night hike around Bentsen.



Mexican Ground-squirrel, Laguna Atascosa NWR

Day 6: We awoke very early in the morning to walk out from our campsite in Bentsen. Along the way, Aidan spotted two **Collared Peccaries** crossing the entrance “road,” which was, at least at the time, inaccessible by car. We then drove upriver to the boat dock at Salineño, just past the feeder setup. While Aidan was watching a number of interesting birds, Sameer and Jack saw an adult **Bobcat** with a cub crossing the short path leading westward toward the island in the Rio Grande. After that, we drove upriver to Del Rio, where we spent the night in a hotel.



Collared Peccary, Big Bend NP

Day 7: The drive from Del Rio to Big Bend NP produced a couple of interesting mammal sightings, most notable of which were a roadkill **American Hog-nosed Skunk** and a group of introduced **Aoudad**. Our first stop once we arrived in Big Bend was the Rio Grande Village Visitor Center area. After standing in a clearing in the cottonwoods for a few minutes, we noticed a single **Collared Peccary** standing only a few feet from us. The peccary, as shown above, let out a big yawn and strolled along, apparently undisturbed. We decided to spend the evening in Chisos Basin Campground, a well-known spot for Robust Cottontail and American Black Bear. Once night fell, Aidan and Jack took a night drive around the basin and some of the surrounding desert. We found a single **Merriam's Kangaroo Rat**, as separated from Ord's by habitat, along 118 east of Panther Junction. Along the short road to K-Bar, we saw a very small mammal streak across the road. Based on the size, it was likely either a small pocket mouse species or a Crawford's Gray Shrew. We then decided to turn onto Glenn Spring Road, where, along just the first few hundred yards of road we had at least seven more **Merriam's Kangaroo Rats**, also identified by habitat. Aidan also spotted an unidentified woodrat running across the

road. A number of **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** were present as well. On the way back to the campground, we saw a single **Gray Fox** by the side of Chisos Basin Road. Some people had told us that there were **American Black Bears** hanging out around the Chisos Mountains Lodge, and we encountered one bear next to the lodge parking lot that night, causing us to jump out of our seats.

Day 8: That morning we embarked on the famous hike along Boot Spring for Colima Warbler. The loop we hiked started from the Chisos Basin Visitor Center and went up the Laguna Meadows Trail to the Colima Trail, across the Colima Trail, and then down the Boot Spring and Pinnacles Trails. Having not located Robust Cottontail the day before, we had high hopes for locating some that morning. We were not disappointed with two **Robust Cottontails** seen on the hike, a very confiding individual along the Laguna Meadows Trail and another individual in the basin near our campsite. We left Big Bend that afternoon and drove to El Paso where we stayed the night.



Robust Cottontail, Big Bend National Park

Arizona-

Day 9: That morning we began the drive to Portal, Arizona in the Chiricahua Mountains. We set up camp upon arrival at Sunny Flats Campground in Cave Creek Canyon. The camp manager told us upon arrival that there had been a Black Bear sleeping during the day about .5 miles down the nature trail running down the canyon from the campground. It was a pretty mammal-less day with the exception of a **Striped Skunk** (extremely numerous around Cave Creek), a briefly seen **Gray Fox** that Sameer spotted, the ubiquitous **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** at lower elevations, and a couple of unidentified **Ord's/Merriam's Kangaroo Rats** during a nightdrive along the main canyon road and through the desert around the town of Portal.

Day 10: Was mostly spent birding around Cave Creek Canyon. We had **Mexican Fox Squirrel** as well as **Cliff Chipmunk** and many, many "**Coue's**" **White-tailed Deer**, the second smallest subspecies of White-tailed Deer. These diminutive deer were absolutely everywhere in Cave Creek Canyon, in much larger numbers than Aidan remembered them being on his last visit (in 2014), and they seem to have undergone a significant increase in population. Around noon we (perhaps foolishly, given the heat) went down to the grasslands around Portal where the highlight was a **Spotted Ground Squirrel** crossing the road. That afternoon we went to Barfoot Park in the high elevations of the Chiricahuas. There Jack and Aidan had brief looks at a **Black Bear** which Sameer, sadly, missed. Our night plans were to bird in Pinery Canyon and we hoped to get some good mammals there. We were not disappointed as Aidan spotted a **Puma** bounding along the opposite slope of Pinery Canyon as we descended the switch-backing road around dusk. The animal quickly disappeared however and so only Jack and Aidan were able to get on it, leaving Sameer to miss yet another large carnivore! A thrilling sighting nonetheless! The return drive back up the canyon was, if anything, even more thrilling.

As we came around a bend in the road, we found ourselves staring at an **American Hog-nosed Skunk** crossing the road! This excited us enough, but, on the way back down to Cave Creek Canyon, we found yet another! Any day you see one of these difficult to find skunks is a good one, but a day you see two and a puma as well is nothing short of incredible. We also encountered two **Gray Foxes** at different points on the drive back to the campsite from Pinery as well as a **Brush Mouse**. Gray Fox seem to be in very good number in the area as we saw a total of three during our time in the Chiricahuas.



"Coues" White-tailed Deer, Cave Creek Canyon

Day 11: Early morning birding in Pinery Canyon produced a **Botta's Pocket Gopher** dragging grass into its burrow. In the afternoon we paid a visit to Chiricahua National Monument. The scenery is spectacular and we found some good birds but unfortunately the mammals were few and far between. In particular, we were unable to locate any Gray-collared Chipmunk which Vladimir Dinets reports as present in the *Peterson Field Guide to Finding*

Mammals. On our drive back to our campsite, just as we reached the road's highest elevation, we got a flat tire on our car. Unsure what to do we, perhaps foolishly, tried to limp it down the mountain until we could get a proper jack (the incoming thunderstorm provided extra encouragement to descend into the canyon). However, with still a mile and a half to go to the Southwest Research Station (the first point of civilization in the canyon), the tire was too shredded to go further. Aidan ran the rest of the way and was able to borrow a jack and some manual labour off of some interns working at the station. However, having a donut on the car and unsure how far we'd have to drive to get a new tire on, we, unfortunately, had to abandon our plans of trying for White-sided Jackrabbit that night. Consequently, the only other notable mammal sighting that day was a **Hooded Skunk** that Aidan had crossing the road around 11 P.M. while he was driving into Portal for cell service.

Day 12: After a long ordeal of trying to find a new tire and eventually getting it changed in Douglas, we left the Chiricahuas and headed for the Huachuca Mountains. It was a shame to leave such a brilliant area for mammals and an area where we'd had such success, but we had to move on. On the drive, we saw a large number of (abandoned?) **Banner-tailed Kangaroo Rat** mounds, a species we had badly wanted to encounter but missed. When we reached the Huachucas, we went straight to the Ash Canyon B&B, a bird feeder setup famous for its rare hummingbirds. A group of **Collared Peccary** arrived at the feeders not long after we did. Mary Jo Ballator, the B&B's owner told us that the peccary usually spend their time in the riparian area downhill and come up to the feeders about twice a day, usually when new feed has been put out. However, more exciting to us was the **Arizona Cotton Rat** which was also coming to the feeders, a lifer for everyone.

Day 13: A slow day for mammals with the only highlight being our trip first **Arizona Gray Squirrel** at our campsite at Carr Canyon in the evening.



Mexican Long-tongued Bat, Santa Rita Lodge

Day 14: After some morning birding in the Huachucas, we moved to the Santa Rita Mountains where we were camping at Madera Canyon. On the way, we stopped at Las Cienegas National Conservation Area. Large chunks of this grassland site had evidently undergone a recent fire but we were still able to find a large number of the reintroduced **Black-tailed Prairie-Dogs** at their colony. That evening we staked out the hummingbird feeders at Santa Rita Lodge for nectar-drinking bats for which we had heard it was a good spot. We were not disappointed when, just after dark, a large number of **Mexican Long-tongued Bats** came in to feed, some even coming to feeders within a few feet of where we stood. It was fantastic to watch! However, it got even better when a **Ringtail** came to the feeders! While we were watching that, we noticed a **White-nosed Coati** on the ground below us. The coati caused the Ringtail to flee as it sauntered over to drink from the hummingbird feeder itself. Three great mammals in the span of 20 minutes! We then drove down the canyon into the desert below in search of Antelope Jackrabbits which are supposed to be found on the entrance road. However,

all we could come up with were **Black-tailed Jackrabbits**, one of which was near suicidal in its unwillingness to move out of the way of the car, and a single **Virginia Opossum**.

Day 15: A birding day with few mammals. However, our evening and night were spent at California Gulch for a rare bird in the area. While birding around, we were able to get a good look at an **Antelope Jackrabbit**, making up for last night's miss. They really are quite large! After dark we also had a **Striped Skunk**, as well as a second **Antelope Jackrabbit** on the drive back along Ruby Road. California Gulch definitely does seem to have some good mammaling opportunities, the only downside being how isolated it is (it was a solid two hour drive from Madera Canyon)!

Day 16: In the morning, we headed north to Tucson, where we saw a single **Round-tailed Ground Squirrel** behind a convenience store. We spent the afternoon driving to Organ Pipe Cactus NM, where we were to spend the night camping. We arrived in the evening and had enough time to hike the Alamo Canyon Trail at dusk. While Aidan and Sameer were further up the trail, Jack came upon a pair of accommodating **Bailey's Pocket Mice** right at his feet. Unfortunately, the animals had left by the time Sameer and Aidan came back to look for them. That night, we drove along the road from the Alamo Canyon Campground to Highway 85, where we had a single unidentified pocket mouse (likely Desert). We then drove south down the highway for a few miles, during which time we had a **Merriam's Kangaroo Rat** and an **Arizona Pocket Mouse**. On the drive back into Alamo Canyon, we encountered a **Silky Pocket Mouse** and at least one **Black-tailed Jackrabbit**.

Day 17: Our final day together as a group (Jack and Sameer had commitments elsewhere so were flying back while Aidan drove) was mostly a day of driving back from Organ Pipe. However, we did stop for a while on Mt. Lemmon just outside Tucson. The trails and

campsites were covered with **Cliff Chipmunks** and **Rock Squirrels** as they usually are and we were pleased to find a single **Abert's Squirrel** (introduced here) feeding at the top of a conifer.

Day 18: After the other two were dropped off at the airport, Aidan headed north. The drive back was mostly a straight shot with few stops. However, on the first day, Aidan stopped at Grand Canyon NP where he had a large number of **Elk** and a **Colorado Chipmunk**.

Day 19: A single **Pronghorn** on the road side in northeastern New Mexico was the only mammal of note.

Mammal List-

Common name	Scientific name
Canidae - 2	
Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>
Grey Fox	<i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>
Felidae - 2	
Bobcat	<i>Lynx rufus</i>
Puma	<i>Puma concolor</i>
Mephitidae - 3	
American Hog-nosed Skunk	<i>Conepatus leuconotus</i>
Hooded Skunk	<i>Mephitis macroura</i>
Striped Skunk	<i>Mephitis mephitis</i>
Procyonidae - 3	
Ringtail	<i>Bassariscus astutus</i>
White-nosed Coati	<i>Nasua narica</i>
Northern Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>
Ursidae - 1	
American Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>
Antilocapridae - 1	
Pronghorn	<i>Antilocapra americana</i>
Bovidae - 1	
Aoudad	<i>Ammotragus lervia</i>

Cervidae - 2	
Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>
Delphinidae - 1	
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
Suidae - 1	
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
Tayassuidae - 1	
Collared Peccary	<i>Pecari tajacu</i>
Molossidae - 1	
Brazilian Free-tailed Bat	<i>Tadarida brasiliensis</i>
Phyllostomidae - 1	
Mexican Long-tongued Bat	<i>Choeronycteris mexicana</i>
Dasypodidae - 1	
Nine-banded Armadillo	<i>Dasypus novemcinctus</i>
Didelphidae - 1	
Virginia Opossum	<i>Didelphis virginiana</i>
Leporidae - 5	
Antelope Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus alleni</i>
Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>
Desert Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>

Eastern Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>
Robust Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus robustus</i>
Cricetidae - 2	
Brush Mouse	<i>Peromyscus boylii</i>
Arizona Cotton Rat	<i>Sigmodon arizonae</i>
Geomyidae - 1	
Botta's Pocket Gopher	<i>Thomomys bottae</i>
Heteromyidae - 5	
Bailey's Pocket Mouse	<i>Chaetodipus baileyi</i>
Gulf Coast Kangaroo Rat	<i>Dipodomys compactus</i>
Merriam's Kangaroo Rat	<i>Dipodomys merriami</i>
Arizona Pocket Mouse	<i>Perognathus amplus</i>
Silky Pocket Mouse	<i>Perognathus flavus</i>
Sciuridae - 12	
Arizona Black-tailed Prairie Dog	<i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>
Abert's Squirrel	<i>Sciurus aberti</i>
Arizona Gray Squirrel	<i>Sciurus arizonensis</i>
Eastern Gray Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>
Mexican Fox Squirrel	<i>Sciurus nayaritensis</i>
Bryant's Fox Squirrel	<i>Sciurus niger</i>
Mexican Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus mexicanus</i>
Spotted Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus spilosoma</i>
Round-tailed Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus tereticaudus</i>
Rock Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus variegatus</i>
Cliff Chipmunk	<i>Tamias dorsalis</i>

Colorado Chipmunk	<i>Tamias quadrivittatus</i>
Species: 47	