

# ARIZONA & SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA 27 DECEMBER – 4 JANUARY 2011

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## INTRODUCTION

This was a rather hastily arranged last minute replacement trip to get away over the Christmas & New Year period and consequently not planned with the intensity of most of my trips.

In addition a frantic period up to Christmas and jet lag (clearly a sign of ageing) left me suffering from LES (Lack of Enthusiasm Syndrome) and struggling to put in the hours particularly early in the day and for the first five days of the trip.

Add to this my dislike of crowds at some of the localities & the American obsession with hunting (more of this later & sorry about the stereotyping) this was not one of my most enjoyable or successful trips. Nevertheless I did visit a few sites seemingly not covered in other available reports and the following notes may prove to be of interest.

## WEATHER

The weather certainly handicapped me for some of the trip with temperatures in the deserts of south-west Arizona 15 degrees lower than the seasonal average and night time temperatures consequently being below freezing on most nights. This didn't help matters when spotlighting.

Two days after I left northern Arizona storms dumped a foot of snow around Flagstaff causing chaos on the roads.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

As always the relevant pages on Jon Hall's [www.mammalwatching.com](http://www.mammalwatching.com) are the key source of reference & the Arizona Wildlife Viewing Guide provided ideas for different locations to visit.

Winter is obviously not the best time to visit the area for mammals (I suspect October is the best time) but so long as the weather is not too bad with planning & effort you should be able to see 25-30 species in a couple of weeks as most species remain active at least on warm days in winter as proven by the fact that I saw Gunnison's Prairie-Dog even though they should have been hibernating according to the books.

## THE SITES

### Grand Canyon South Rim (Arizona)

Probably not the best place to start the trip, somewhere warmer with fewer people would have been distinctly preferable. I spent about an hour looking for Uinta Chipmunk which occurs near the visitor centre without success. It wasn't particularly cold and there was no snow on the ground so I would have expected them to be active but the crowds soon put me off and I moved quickly on only seeing 3 **Elk** and the only **White-tailed Deer** of the trip.

### Aubrey Valley Seligman (Arizona)

I visited Seligman on my first full night in Arizona and spotlighted for about 90 minutes at dusk working on the principal that in the cold weather I would be most likely to see Black-footed Ferrets & American Badgers at dusk. I concentrated on the areas between mileposts 24 & 32 particularly around milepost 27 where Jon Hall & Phil Telfer both saw ferrets in 2010. As it was I only saw the eye-shine of one mammal, probably a jackrabbit & soon lost interest (particularly as there was a lot of traffic along route 66) & returned to Seligman for food & sleep. I got up at 4 am to try spotlighting before dawn but still feeling less than enthusiastic the low temperatures & gusty wind persuaded me to try again at a warmer time of year.

The following day I spent 2-3 hours checking out the Aubrey Valley and eventually found 4 **Gunnison's Prairie-Dogs** c.30 miles west of Seligman. This was surprising in that the recent North American mammal guide suggests that they should be hibernating from November – March. Given that the area was carpeted in snow 2 days later I suspect they soon were.

### Mojave National Preserve (California)

I made a short stop just off of I-40 c.106 miles east of Barstow to break up the long drive west. I checked the road south of I-40 opposite Providence Mountains State Recreation Area a couple of hours before sunset. Although I saw very little there was lots of evidence of mammals in the area with the sandy washes running parallel to the road full of tracks of coyotes, jackrabbits, cottontails, various rodents & what I assume were Kit Fox judging from the size. Probably worth a stop to spotlight the area if you are passing latter in the day.

### Carrizo Plains National Monument (California)

The best site visited in California along highway 58 about 42 miles east of Santa Margarita. Santa Margarita is approximately 10 miles north of San Luis Obispo along highway 101. I spent two evenings here.

On the first evening I probably saw two **Kit Foxes** but both sightings, one to the west of the main access road at the end of tarmac approximately 18 miles from highway 58 & another near the Goodwin Education Center about 15 miles from highway 58 but both animals were just outside the range of the spotlight & I could only make it eyeshine. The following night I had good views of a **Kit Fox** on the east side of the road at the end of the tarmac. I also saw single **Coyotes** & several **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** on both nights & on the second night a group of six ungulates either Pronghorn or deer but these were also outside the range of the spotlight. During the late afternoon I also saw at least four **Nelson's (San Joaquin) Antelope Squirrels**. These were all on the short grasslands to the east of the road at the end of the tarmac.

I stayed in San Luis Obispo on both nights & on the drives back saw **Desert Cottontail** & an unidentified **kangaroo-rat** (c. 35 miles from Santa Margarita) on the first night & **Striped Skunk** & **Northern Raccoon** (both 5-10 miles from Santa Margarita).

### Piedras Blancas (California)

Located along highway 1 c.45 miles north-west of San Luis Obispo this is a well-known **Northern Elephant Seal** colony. However with my previous experience of elephant seals being restricted to windswept beaches in Antarctica & South Georgia I found the whole experience of watching elephant seals from a busy car park a total turn-off and only stayed a few minutes, the only highlight being watching Western Gulls trying to rip the umbilical cords off of newborn pups.

### San Simeon (California)

With time to kill after visiting Piedras Blancas I stopped in a small rest area just east of highway 1 roughly five miles south of the elephant seal colony. It was late morning so not productive from a mammal-watching point of view but based on the amount of scat I found would definitely be worth a dawn or dusk visit. A boardwalk leads from the rest area to a pool about 100 metres from the car park. The area around the pool was covered with scat mainly raccoon but with several other species for good measure. At the end of the pool you can either follow the trail up into some forested areas or cut back up the hill on the left. I cut back up the hill & across a road onto another trail. This trail has absolutely loads of Puma scat along it & in hindsight I wish I had rearranged my plans & gone back at night to spotlight from the back roads. It could prove rewarding.

### Channel Islands - Santa Cruz (California)

I had intended to try a day trip on New Year's Day to look for Island Foxes & Island Packers said they thought I would have a 60% likelihood of success in the 5-hours on the island particularly if I concentrated on the area around the campsite at the east end of the island. Unfortunately the forecast for the trip was poor, heavy showers for much of the day, and the poor sea conditions on the crossing persuaded me to blow the trip out.

### Highway 166 - Twitchell Dam to Maricopa (California)

Highway 66 starts about 30 miles south of San Luis Obispo. I made a few stops travelling east seeing several **California Ground Squirrels** just before the first river east of Twitchell Dam & another near Cuyama. I also had an unidentified **antelope squirrel** (probably Nelson's) run across the road just west of Maricopa.

### Cibola National Wildlife Refuge (Arizona)

See map at end of report.

I visited Cibola NWR on spec on the way back east & it was the most enjoyable site that I visited. Cibola lies c.20 miles south of I-10 along the east side of the Colorado River. Drive south from I-10 along route 78 4 miles west of Blythe. After about 6 miles, just after Ripley, continue straight on at the stop sign (route 78 goes off to the right) and continue for a further 10 miles to the refuge visitor centre. From the centre there is a 4-mile auto-trail which proved good for **Mule Deer** (up to 60) & **Coyote** up to 7 on both days. The birding is good as well & Bobcat also occurs here.

There are several other good areas to explore and **Coyotes** are very common. I also had excellent views of **Bobcat** for 10 minutes an hour after dawn on the second morning along the levee road just south of Tie-Back Levee.

I spotlighted on two evenings. On the first evening I had good views of **Kit Fox & Black-tailed Jackrabbit** along the road about 2 miles south of the visitor centre & brief views of a **Bobcat** along the levee road a mile north of Cibola Lake Lookout. The following evening I concentrated on the levee road between Island Road & Baseline Road seeing several **Coyote, Black-tailed Jackrabbits & Desert Cottontail**. I also saw several unidentified rodents & Mountain Lion & American Badger are apparently seen occasionally on the refuge.

It was extremely cold on both nights & I suspect that the spotlighting could be excellent in warmer weather.

I stayed about 20 minutes from the refuge in Blythe but there were cabins available closer to the refuge. Drive north from the visitor centre for a mile & then turn left. The cabins are on the right hand side after a few hundred metres.

### **Fred Williams National Wildlife Refuge (Arizona)**

I visited this site on the back of reading about it as a site for American Badger in the Arizona Wildlife Viewing Guide. It also has Desert Bighorn Sheep. In hindsight it was a bad move & I would have been better visiting Kofa NWR instead.

The refuge is accessed off of highway 95 18 miles north-east of Parker. Pass the refuge administration centre to the west of the road & then take the second right hand turn (a gravel road) just before the bridge. The refuge road supposedly runs for 10 miles so I thought it would be good for spotlighting. Unfortunately the road was closed and gated after 3.5 miles limiting the spotlighting opportunities. However in a two-hour session I twice saw **Grey Fox** about 2.5 miles from the highway & had glimpses of what was probably a Ringtail in the same area. As with Cibola I suspect that spotlighting would have been more productive in warmer weather. The following morning I tried spotlighting an hour before dawn but this proved pointless as the road was heavily disturbed by construction traffic building a pipeline through the refuge, 3 miles from the highway. Great!

I did try walking the road beyond the gate through an area of cottonwoods & tracks suggested that this area could also be worth spotlighting in warmer weather.

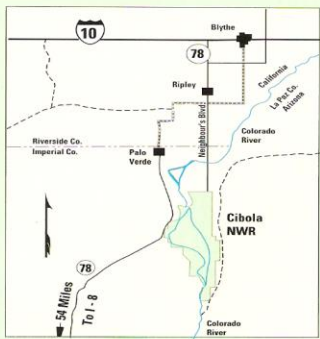
### **Robbins Butte Wildlife Area (Arizona)**

Another site visited after reading the AWVG on route back to Phoenix on my last afternoon. The site is just off highway 85 about 8 miles south of Buckeye which is just south of I-10 32 miles west of Phoenix. This site summed up the problems with watching wildlife in the sites. I visited the site late on a Tuesday afternoon & only encountered 3 other vehicles but all three held hunters the most dispiriting of which was a family of four including boys of probably 10 and 14, all of which were carrying guns. Unfortunately this seems to sum up the attitude of many Americans towards wildlife. Sorry about the stereotyping again but it is supported by my experience of American domestic flights where you commonly hear passengers discussing hunting & the number of hunting magazines that you encounter in every service station you stop at.

Consequently I only spent an hour or so here, long enough to see **Coyote & Harris's Antelope Squirrels** but I was unable to find Round-tailed Ground Squirrel.

### **Arlington Wildlife Area (Arizona)**

I noticed this site on the map while visiting Robbins Butte & decided to finish the trip off here after leaving Robbins Butte. Check your map for access details. Only a few miles west of Robbins Butte as the crow flies it turned out to be about a 15-mile drive but I did see a **Bobcat** cross Old US Hwy 80 just north of Arlington & spent an enjoyable hour or so in the wildlife area south-east of Arlington prior to dark. Although I did not meet anyone else it is obviously another popular area for hunters judging from the used shotgun cartridges but although I did not see any mammals I found tracks of Bobcat & Coyote & what appeared to be a Badger sett which I did stakeout without success for half an hour after dark. The pools offered some good birding as well so it was a pleasant end to the trip.



**Legend**

- Marsh
- State Boundary
- Refuge Boundary
- Paved Road
- Unimproved Road
- Levee Roads
- Open Water

