

Southern California Weekend

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This weekend trip across the coast, mountains, and deserts of S California was designed to take advantage of abnormally high winter rains following on years of “drought” in this part of the state. The trip ran better than expected, netting 26 species and good sightings of almost all target species (my only major dips were Cactus Mouse, Canyon Mouse, and amazingly Round-tailed Ground Squirrel—what I thought was my easiest target!). The only significant surprise was the lower numbers of kangaroo rats and pocket mice at most sites than expected (given the wet winter); perhaps it will be better to search for these in early-mid May. Thank you to Vladimir Dinets for advice on species IDs and Brian Keelan for details on the Stonehouse Mine.

(Day 1: 3/31/17)

We departed the Bay Area about an hour late and hit commute traffic driving towards the I-5, leaving us too far behind schedule to attempt a detour to Munz Ranch Road near Lake Hughes. After an early dinner, we made our first stop to break the boredom on San Emigdio Canyon Road at about 8:30 PM, which we drove to the gate at the Wind Wolves Preserve entrance. In about 30 minutes, we observed 4 **Heermann’s Kangaroo Rats** (in the grasslands), 2 almost certain **Agile Kangaroo Rats** (in a brushy wash with darker tail stripes and larger ears than the former; I have prior experience with this species), and best of all – 3 **San Joaquin Pocket Mice** (now the best site I know for this species). If you have never seen *D. agilis* before, I do not recommend this site as even live-trapping studies at nearby Bitter Creek NWR had a hard time differentiating the two species; better to try Munz Ranch Road or Saddleback Butte SP.

From here, we drove to Hemet arriving at midnight and went straight to Crown Valley. Here, we observed 1 **Desert Cottontail**, 2 **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** (ssp. *bennetii*), and 1 **Stephens’ Kangaroo Rat** (near 33.6489, -117.0052), the key species here, which obligingly froze in the spotlight and gave great views for 1 minute. This must be the best place in the world to observe this difficult species! Afterwards, we spent time spotlighting along Thomas Road but it was quite cold and late and all we saw was 1 **Dulzura Kangaroo Rat** (ID is easy here!). San Diego Pocket Mouse, Northern Baja Mouse, and “Intermediate” Woodrat are also common here.

(Day 2: 4/1/17)

We had a late start the next morning and drove toward Mt. San Jacinto. Along the way, we observed 2 **Mule Deer** (ssp. *fuliginatus*) grazing in a meadow near Mountain Center. We went straight to the Idyllwild Nature Center, where we easily observed 1 **California Ground Squirrel** and the main target, 3 **California Chipmunks** (ssp. *davisi*), readily identified by large size, dull coloration, orange undertail, and lack of “terminal pulse” after the call (thankfully one animal called for 5 minutes as we watched!).

We then drove to Borrego Springs (after seeing *Pinus quadrifolia*) and rested during the hottest parts of the afternoon. Just after nightfall, we hiked the Borrego Palm Canyon Trail to the palm oasis. Unfortunately, the trail (as well as the water hole at the trailhead) was fairly disturbed so

there was little chance for pocket mice, rare bats, Peninsular Bighorn Sheep, or other goodies. I did however observe 3 **Canyon Bats** and had a brief, but clear look at a presumed **Pocketed Free-tailed Bat** swiftly fly between cracks in the boulders high up on the canyon walls (this species is known to roost in the canyon). The main highlight was a Desert Banded Gecko.

From there, we drove to Little Blair Valley off the Great Southern Overland Stage Route to look for pocket mice (this site and nearby La Puerta Valley have the highest number of sympatric pocket mouse species of any location—an incredible 7!). On the dirt road connecting the valley's campgrounds, we saw ~15 **Merriam's (Aguanga) Kangaroo Rats** (ssp. *collinus*), 1 **Baja Pocket Mouse**, 3 unidentified *Chaetodipus* pocket mice, and a probable Mexican Long-tongued Bat slowly flying (sometimes seemingly hovering in the light) low over an area with lots of Agave flowers (fairly confident with the ID: rare in CA, but the conditions, habitat, and behavior were almost a perfect fit for this species; perhaps the very wet winter resulted in this species being more common in S CA—it is found in arid and semiarid areas of W and C San Diego Co.).

On a rougher side jeep trail traveling E-NE from (33.0366, -116.3900), I observed 2 more **Merriam's Kangaroo Rats** (ssp. *collinus*), a **Dulzura Kangaroo Rat**, a **Northern Baja Mouse** (jumping down from some dried agave stalks), a *Chaetodipus* pocket mouse (most likely San Diego), and heard many Coyotes howling. Perhaps just a coincidence, but far higher numbers of heteromyids were observed in Anza-Borrego from the dirt roads than paved roads; in hindsight, I wish I had spent more time searching those (and detouring busy paved roads on dirt roads)...

From there, we returned towards Borrego Springs and thankfully the rodent diversity began to increase. In quick succession, I observed a **San Diego Pocket Mouse** (ssp. *pallidus*) dash across the road just S of Scissors Crossing near (33.0947, -116.4670) and a **Spiny Pocket Mouse** run into vegetation in the rocky gorge W of Sentenac Canyon near (33.1171, -116.4375). Near Borrego Springs, we looked for Desert Pocket Mouse along Di Giorgio Road but only saw a **Black-tailed Jackrabbit** and 1 each **Merriam's** (ssp. *arenivagus*) and **Desert Kangaroo Rats** (the latter unusually small in size) along with a dead Desert Glossy Snake nearby.

(Day 3: 4/2/17)

Another late start this morning as we departed Borrego Springs for the hot agricultural lowlands of the Imperial Valley. Immediately, we got two brief, crappy looks at the only target here, Round-tailed Ground Squirrel along Edgar Road. Despite trying 3 more sites and asking several locals in nearby towns, we couldn't find more and had to make do with “untickable” views.

After an abortive search for Round-tailed Ground Squirrel and Desert Tortoise at the edge of the Algodones Dunes and along Ogilby Road, we passed through a low-key border patrol inspection station and then drove to the valley of the Lower Colorado River. Here, we began searching bridges for possible bat roosts between Hart Mine Road and Blythe. At the bridge across the river near Oxbow BLM Recreation Area, I found 2 groups of bats roosting in 2 concrete crevices on the west end of the bridge. Crammed into one crevice was a group of about 30 **Mexican Free-tailed Bats** (the same slightly strange-looking animals reported by Jon Hall) and in the second I struck gold with a cluster of 4 *Myotis* that turned out to be the rare and little-known **Arizona Myotis** (thanks to Vladimir Dinets and Juan Cruzado Cortes with ID help). What luck!

I also found the well-known night roost of California Leaf-nosed Bat under the E end of the Hart Mine Road bridge, but didn't check it out later that evening due to lack of time.

After dinner (in god-awful Blythe) we began the drive to the Mule Mountains as the sun began to set, spotting a possible *White-throated Woodrat* dash into cover along the Bradshaw Trail. After following Brian Keelan's directions (note that the trails around the washouts are now passable with 2WD and reasonable clearance), we arrived at Stonehouse (Hodge) Mine (33.5106, -114.7928) just before nightfall, parked the car at the dilapidated building about 0.2 mi from the mine shafts, and walked up the canyon to the flat below the mine shafts. Just before darkness, we saw about 5 **Cave Myotis** fly by, readily identified by relatively large size, gray-brown color, and comparatively strong flight to other *Myotis*. Shortly after, **California Leaf-nosed Bats** began to emerge and we enjoyed observing more than 100 of these cool bats foraging low to the ground for about 30 minutes without entering the mineshafts or otherwise disturbing this sensitive species. Awesome!

We then drove south to Milpitas Wash Road, spotting another **Black-tailed Jackrabbit** and a pale, fluffy **Desert Kangaroo Rat** on the road from the mine, a probable **Baja Pocket Mouse** near the turnoff for Three Slashes Road, and an unidentified snake. Milpitas Wash Road itself looked singularly unpromising, so we returned to Palo Verde, getting a good look at a **Desert Pocket Mouse**, which dashed off CA-78 a few miles to the north. We then checked the Lugo Road bridge, a known night-roost for Arizona *Myotis*, but did not observe any bats; perhaps it is only used in the summer months.

Afterwards, we began the long drive toward Mecca Hills Wilderness, searching carefully for new species once we neared the hills. On Box Canyon Road, we observed a Great-horned Owl at shockingly close distance in the headlights and saw 1 **Black-tailed Jackrabbit**. Most importantly, we had a great sighting of a **Long-tailed Pocket Mouse** as it froze on the road in front of the car, allowing us to see its longer ears, shiny fur, and beautiful tufted tail.

We then drove the badly wash-boarded road to Painted Canyon, finding nothing until we arrived at the end of the road when I briefly heard **Spotted Bat** flight calls! We immediately began walking up the canyon and heard calls a total of 8-9 times thereafter; twice animals flew overhead and called very loudly, giving tantalizingly brief glimpses in the spotlight. However, I could not really see the spots on the coat as they flew by so remain desperate as ever to observe this bat properly. The calls were heard between 12:00-12:45 AM, with the highest number about a 10 minute walk up the canyon from the trailhead; temperature was 75° F with a rapidly setting waxing crescent moon and little to no wind.

While trying to locate calling Spotted Bats, I also had a great sighting of a **Western Yellow Bat** flying down the canyon. On the drive out, we had a poor sighting of a **Desert Pocket Mouse** and collapsed in the motel in Indio.

Species List: 26 (+1 heard-only, 2 "probables," and 1 "untickable" near-miss)

[Mexican Long-tongued Bat (*Choeronycteris mexicana*)]

1. California Leaf-nosed Bat (*Macrotus californicus*)

2. Arizona Myotis (*Myotis occultus*)
3. Cave Myotis (*Myotis velifer*)
4. Spotted Bat (*Euderma maculatum*)
5. Western Yellow Bat (*Lasiurus xanthinus*)
6. Canyon Bat (*Parastrellus hesperus*)
7. Pocketed Free-tailed Bat (*Nyctinomops femorosaccus*)
8. Mexican Free-tailed Bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*)
9. Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*)
10. Desert Cottontail (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)
11. California Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*)
- [Round-tailed Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus tereticaudus*)]
12. California Chipmunk (*Tamias obscurus*)
13. Agile Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys agilis*)
14. Desert Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys deserti*)
15. Heermann's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys heermanni*)
16. Merriam's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys merriami*)
17. Dulzura Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys simulans*)
18. Stephens' Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys stephensi*)
19. San Diego Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus fallax*)
20. Long-tailed Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus formosus*)
21. Desert Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus penicillatus*)
22. Baja Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus rudinoris*)
23. Spiny Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus spinatus*)
24. San Joaquin Pocket Mouse (*Perognathus inornatus*)
- [White-throated Woodrat (*Neotoma albigula*)]
25. Northern Baja Mouse (*Peromyscus fraterculus*)
- [Coyote (*Canis latrans*)]
26. Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

Other interesting species on route, but missed:

Western Riverside County – Crawford's Desert Shrew, Western Spotted Skunk

Anza-Borrego SP – California Pocket Mouse (ssp. *femoralis*), Little Pocket Mouse (ssp. *bangsi*, *brevinasus*, *internationalis*), Southern Grasshopper Mouse (ssp. *ramona*), Kit Fox, Ringtail, Peninsular Bighorn Sheep

Lower Colorado River Valley – Cactus Mouse, Arizona Cotton Rat (ssp. *plenus*)

Mecca Hills WA – Western Small-footed Myotis, Canyon Mouse