

Eastern Sierra Weekend
Venkat Sankar
August 3-5, 2017

This very short trip was designed as a last-minute effort to find many species (some common, others less so) missed or poorly observed on my last exploration of the region with Vladimir Dinets. Despite last minute schedule changes, this excursion worked out quite well (thanks in no small part to extensive pre-trip research), netting numerous interesting species with a few unexpected bonuses. Overall, I was very successful in the Great Basin (where rodent densities are currently high in places) but much less so in the Sierra Nevada, where I missed most targets. It's worth noting that dramatic afternoon thunderstorms are frequent in the Sierra Nevada (and to a lesser extent Great Basin, where they wash out roads and cause flash floods) at this time of year, so perhaps early September is a better time to visit the region for mammal watching. Thankfully, all the clouds had one pleasant side effect for me—blocking out the near-full moon!

(Day 1: 8/3/17)

We left the Bay Area early in the morning to allow ample time for short detours in the Sierra Nevada. We first visited Merced Grove for supposedly easy Long-eared Chipmunk, but despite spending over an hour carefully searching the main trail only found 2 **Western Gray Squirrels**, a **Douglas Squirrel**, and 2 **California Ground Squirrels**. Heavy thunderstorms on Tioga Road limited exploration elsewhere in the mountains, and we only saw **Mule Deer**.

After a bit of rest in Bishop, we set off into torrential rain through Chalfant Valley. Thankfully, the rain stopped as we neared Benton, but mammals were very thin on the ground. A short search at nightfall near Montgomery Pass only found a **Black-tailed Jackrabbit**. We then drove to Fish Lake Valley Hot Well, where I explored the nearby sand dunes (37.8586, -117.9640) on foot. Sadly, the whole area was almost completely lifeless and in more than an hour of searching, I only found 3 **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** and a few possible burrows of my main target, Pale Kangaroo Mouse. I searched another area of sand dunes near (37.8442, -118.0494), finding lots of rodent burrows but only a few skittish **Merriam's/Ord's Kangaroo Rats**. This is probably a good area to try trapping for kangaroo mice.

Continuing south through the valley, I searched Marble Creek wash (37.7573, -118.0962), seeing a few **Desert Cottontails** and an almost-certain **Sagebrush Vole** (highly unsatisfactory view; very pale, small rodent with inconspicuous tail darting into a sagebrush thicket). Soon after, we briefly observed 2 shy, light-colored **Merriam's/Ord's Kangaroo Rats**. I was about to lose hope when not long after, an adorable **Pale Kangaroo Mouse** hopped onto the road verge and froze in the headlights near Dyer airport (37.6197, -118.0296). A fantastic rodent, with huge feet, an oversized head, rather short crestless tail, and black beady eyes and my mammal of the trip!

We continued over Gilbert Pass into Deep Springs Valley, where I got a good view of a **Long-tailed Pocket Mouse** near Wyman Creek. We then visited the road to Antelope Springs (the road starts at: 37.3185, -118.0907), getting good views of 2 **Chisel-toothed Kangaroo Rats**.

We continued spotlighting Highway 168, scoring again with great views of a **Bushy-tailed Woodrat** scurrying around a talus slope in the canyon E of Westgard Pass. After half-heartedly cruising the first part of White Mountain Road for Inyo Shrew (we only saw yet another **Black-tailed Jackrabbit**), we returned to Bishop, observing a **Canyon Mouse** dart off the road in the narrow, rocky canyon above Zurich. And so what first seemed like a bust turned into a great (and very long) night! As a note, Death Valley Road (off Highway 168 at: 37.1851, -118.2531) should also be good for Chisel-toothed Kangaroo Rat, Long-tailed Pocket Mouse, and Canyon Mouse.

(Day 2: 8/4/17)

After a late start the next morning, we drove rough Silver Canyon Road (high-clearance 4WD required) about 6 miles in, seeing a **White-tailed Antelope Squirrel** and a herd of 5 **Bighorn Sheep** (ssp. *nelsoni*); strangely, we missed Least Chipmunk which is reportedly very common. If you have the right vehicle and the bravery to drive this road at night, it should be excellent for Chisel-toothed Kangaroo Rat, Long-tailed Pocket Mouse, Desert Woodrat, and Canyon Mouse. I also found Sagebrush Vole runways in the wash at the base of the canyon and a few abandoned mines worth checking for bats.

We then visited Mammoth Lakes Scenic Drive, where I missed Lodgepole Chipmunk but found the first **Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels** of the trip. Due to lack of time, we skipped a detour to Convict Creek, where Yellow-pine Chipmunk is easily photographed. We then drove to Yosemite NP, spotting 2 **Least Chipmunks** and 3 **Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels** below Tioga Pass. We started hiking Mono Pass Trail to look for Alpine Chipmunk, but had to turn back 0.7 miles in due to a heavy thunderstorm; we saw a **Lodgepole Chipmunk** well and 2 **Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels**. Conditions at Saddlebag Lake were equally bad, so I resigned myself to failure with Alpine Chipmunk.

To dodge the rain, we went to Mono Lake Park. My main target was Montane Vole, but the population seems to have crashed here, as I could find no recent activity from the boardwalk (just last year's runs). I only observed a **Mountain Cottontail** and a very curious **Mule Deer**. After some waiting, I saw a molehill moving, but couldn't see the Broad-footed Mole below.

After dinner and rest at the Mobil, we drove Poole Power Plant Road after sunset, spotting many **Big Brown Bats** and a several smaller **Little Brown Bats** flying low over the creek. Extensive surveys have only recorded these two species here; interestingly this Sierran high-altitude form of *Myotis lucifugus* is quite distinct from other animals and warrants at least a subspecific split.

We then went to Farrington Siphon as night fell, spotting a small herd of **Mule Deer** and many small bats emerging from an abandoned dwelling that I tentatively identified as **Western Small-footed Myotis**, but no White-tailed Jackrabbits. Continuing toward Walker Lake, we got very good views of 2 **Panamint Kangaroo Rats**, 2 **Ord's Kangaroo Rats**, and a **Great Basin Pocket Mouse**; sadly, the road was gated well before its terminus. This was unfortunate, as Walker Lake Road later travels through sagebrush pasture and lush streamside meadows where Montane and Long-tailed Voles, Sagebrush Vole, Northern Grasshopper Mouse (especially common), and Western Jumping Mouse have been recorded.

From there, we drove to the NE side of Mono Lake on Highway 167, a really excellent road for night drives! Slowly driving to the intersection of Route 3N01 (38.1347, -118.8779) and back, we saw a **Merriam's Shrew** (dashing off the road in arid sagebrush far from water near Bodie turnoff), a lovely **Dark Kangaroo Mouse** (in sand dunes near 38.1057, -118.9669; commonly live-trapped here), several **Panamint** and **Ord's Kangaroo Rats**, and a **Great Basin Pocket Mouse**. We also drove the first few miles of Route 3N01 to the SE, but only saw an **Ord's Kangaroo Rat**. *D. ordii* is not sympatric with *D. merriami* in Mono Basin, so can be readily identified. Lagomorph numbers are very low in and near Mono Basin; I saw 0 jackrabbits and only a roadkill Pygmy Rabbit (I had a fabulous sighting of a live one on CA-167 last year).

We then visited Long Valley Dam in Owens Gorge; Brian Keelan's directions are spot on and we drove to site he recommends (37.58741, -118.70121) at about midnight. After a few minutes of waiting, I heard 2 **Spotted Bats** calling overhead and got reasonable views of them in flight. Now very tired, we drove back to Bishop, spotting a **Deer Mouse** along the way.

(Day 3: 8/5/17)

We left in the morning for the long drive back to the Bay Area. Wildlife was somewhat sparse along Tioga Road, with 1 each **Golden-mantled** and **California (!) Ground Squirrels** and **Lodgepole Chipmunk** below Tioga Pass; many **Belding's Ground Squirrels** and 2 **Douglas Squirrels** near Tuolumne Meadows; and a distant **Yellow-bellied Marmot** and **Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel** at Olmsted Point. The main highlight was a flyover Northern Goshawk near Tenaya Lake.

Once at Crane Flat, we began an abortive search for Long-eared Chipmunk. Arriving at the Tuolumne Grove, I noted extensive **Mountain Pocket Gopher** diggings near the parking area and observed and photographed one plugging a burrow within 5 minutes! I set off in search of the chipmunk with renewed optimism but drew a blank (only another **Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel**) and even tried Hodgdon Meadow further down with no joy. Adding to my previous attempts near Lake Tahoe, I don't think anyone else has failed so many times with this chipmunk. I guess everyone has a nemesis mammal...

Species List: (29 species + 2 probable + 1 "movement-only")

1. Merriam's Shrew (*Sorex merriami*)
[Broad-footed Mole (*Scapanus latimanus*)]
2. Little Brown Myotis (*Myotis lucifugus*)
[Dark-nosed Small-footed Myotis (*Myotis melanorhinus*)]
3. Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*)
4. Spotted Bat (*Euderma maculatum*)
5. Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*)
6. Desert Cottontail (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)
7. Mountain Cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*)
8. Western Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus griseus*)
9. Douglas Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus douglasii*)
10. White-tailed Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus leucurus*)

11. Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*)
12. California Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*)
13. Belding's Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus beldingi*)
14. Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus lateralis*)
15. Least Chipmunk (*Tamias minimus*)
16. Lodgepole Chipmunk (*Tamias speciosus*)
17. Mountain Pocket Gopher (*Thomomys monticola*)
18. Chisel-toothed Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys microps*)
19. Ord's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys ordii*)
20. Panamint Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys panamintinus*)
21. Dark Kangaroo Mouse (*Microdipodops megacephalus*)
22. Pale Kangaroo Mouse (*Microdipodops pallidus*)
23. Long-tailed Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus formosus*)
24. Great Basin Pocket Mouse (*Perognathus parvus*)
- [Sagebrush Vole (*Lemmiscus curtatus*)]
25. Bushy-tailed Woodrat (*Neotoma cinerea*)
26. Canyon Mouse (*Peromyscus crinitus*)
27. Deer Mouse (*Peromyscus maniculatus*)
28. Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*)
29. Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

Other interesting species en route, but missed:

Tioga Road – Montane Shrew, Long-tailed Vole, Montane Vole, Western Jumping Mouse, Black Bear, American Marten

Mono Lake – Piute Ground Squirrel, Little Pocket Mouse, Sagebrush Vole, Northern Grasshopper Mouse

Piute Pass – American Pika, Alpine Chipmunk, Western Heather Vole

Deep Springs Valley & Oasis – Vagrant Shrew, Silver-haired Bat, Long-legged Myotis, Desert Kangaroo Rat, Merriam's Kangaroo Rat, Little Pocket Mouse

White Mountain Road – Inyo Shrew, White-tailed Jackrabbit, American Pika, Panamint Chipmunk, Uinta Chipmunk, Sagebrush Vole

*If you'd like any additional information on where to see these or any other mammal species in the region, please contact me! (vnsankar123@gmail.com)