

Greg Easton California Trip Report—Monterey Bay, Point Reyes: March 18 & 20, 2023

We decided to spend our kids' spring break in the Bay Area so I was determined to squeeze in a bit of mammal watching along with exploring San Francisco. Saturday morning the 18th we departed San Francisco at 7:30 AM and were in Santa Cruz by just after 9:00. We booked a trip on santacruzwhalewatching.com with Stagnaro Charters. The morning started off slow but about an hour into the trip we found our first Grey Whales. It is always hard to get an exact count but we ended up seeing 2 different groups with an estimated 10 total whales. A couple of them turned on their sides and gave us a small wave and we got some decent shots of the tails as they made their deliberate migration north. Their slow pace allowed the boat to follow for quite some time.

On the way back to the harbor my wife spotted a pod of Orcas far ahead of us. We sped after them and when we caught up they allowed us to follow and watch for about 20 minutes. At one point we could smell their foul fish breath as they surfaced. While watching the Orcas a couple of Humpback Whales surfaced on the other side of the boat but we stayed focused on the Orcas. As we approached the harbor we saw the ubiquitous California Sea Lions on a buoy and then several Southern Sea Otters. A loan harbor seal was resting on the dock when we returned. We missed any of the smaller dolphin species, but the Orcas more than made up for it. The naturalist and crew were fantastic, you could feel their enthusiasm.















After another day in the city we drove Sunday night to Novata as all of the family accommodations closer to Point Reyes were booked. We were on the road by 7:00 and reached Point Reyes Station by 8:30. We tried our luck first on the Bear Valley Road. There are some nice open areas on the southern end of the road but they were empty. We turned around and drove north along Sir Francis Drake Blvd taking the turn off at Pierce Point Road to continue to the far northern stretch of the seashore. There wasn't much traffic and we drove slowly. Having four of our kids + an exchange student friend from Spain gave us 7 sets of eyes. Point Reyes is a unique wildlife area as much of the Peninsula consists of working cattle ranches. With the recent torrential rains all the vegetation was bright green. Because of the hundreds of grazing cattle, Tule Elk, and Mule Deer there are expansive open areas that offer great vantage points to find coyotes and bobcats in plain sight. On my prior visit to Point Reyes in 2014 the Tule Elk seemed to be concentrated in the far north, I believe where they had originally been reintroduced, but now they appear common through the area. Mule deer were also common. A few minutes later we saw the 1st of what would be 16 coyotes on the day. At the end of the road we took the short walk down to McClure's beach and had the spectacular setting all to ourselves. The bird life is plentiful and diverse as well. We watched a juvenile red-tailed hawk hunting rodents and a great blue heron fishing in a marsh. We had taken the Pierce Point Road first thing in the morning assuming it would be better to look for Bobcats and knowing that Drake's Beach wouldn't be open until 10:00 to see the Elephant Seals. As we made our South our crew was growing restless and concerned that we may have missed our best window to see a Bobcat. My son had shared a quote from a 2018 trip report that Bobcats were "very easy to see." We started joking about how easy they were to see when we drove by one of the ranches and my wife commented that there should be one on the massive pile of used tires. A few seconds later the exchange student said "Gato!" There was actually a cat on the tire pile but it was a domestic cat.

My son identified a dark spot on a distant hillside so we stopped to investigate. Zooming in on some pictures it still wasn't clear what it was until it stood up—a black dog out in a field. A woman with a large telephoto lens emerged from the nearby trees and said she had been trying to get closer to a bobcat she had seen in the distance. We were jealous for sure. She said the bobcats would be more active when the sun had dried up the ground in the afternoon and suggested we try the Estero Trail road. Estero Trail Road is a one lane track that allows traffic both ways and leads of course to a trailhead. It looked like prime bobcat territory but still nothing. We saw five more coyotes before reaching Drake's Beach. Seeing the Elephant Seals up close was cooler than I anticipated. Some of them were literally lying against the concrete barrier that kept people off the beach. There must have been nearly 100 seals, mostly young pups basking in the sun, but some were playing in the shallows and making a racket. A handful of sub-adult males gave us some idea how much they would grow and what their trunk like snouts would eventually look like. A couple of helpful volunteers kept folks from getting too close and taught us all about the creatures. We spent 35 minutes watching and learning.

After a late sack lunch we drove to the Point Reyes Lighthouse. The parking lot was pretty full but the weather was great for the quick paved stroll to the point. Of course there were more mule deer along the path and we saw some harbor seals on the beach below to the north. Out at the point the steps down to the light house were closed so we stayed at the viewpoint long enough to see several passing Grey Whales in the distance.

Just down the road we stopped at the Sea Lion overlook where the sign indicated there were often both California and Steller Sea Lions which proved to be the case. The Steller Sea Lions dwarfed their cousins.

On a rocky point 30 yards up the shore was a lone large Elephant Seal. At the Chimney Rock parking lot we took the short walk to the Elephant Seal Overlook for a final distant view of the new life species for me. We stopped to snap a picture of a pure white Mule Deer doe in a group of regular colored deer.

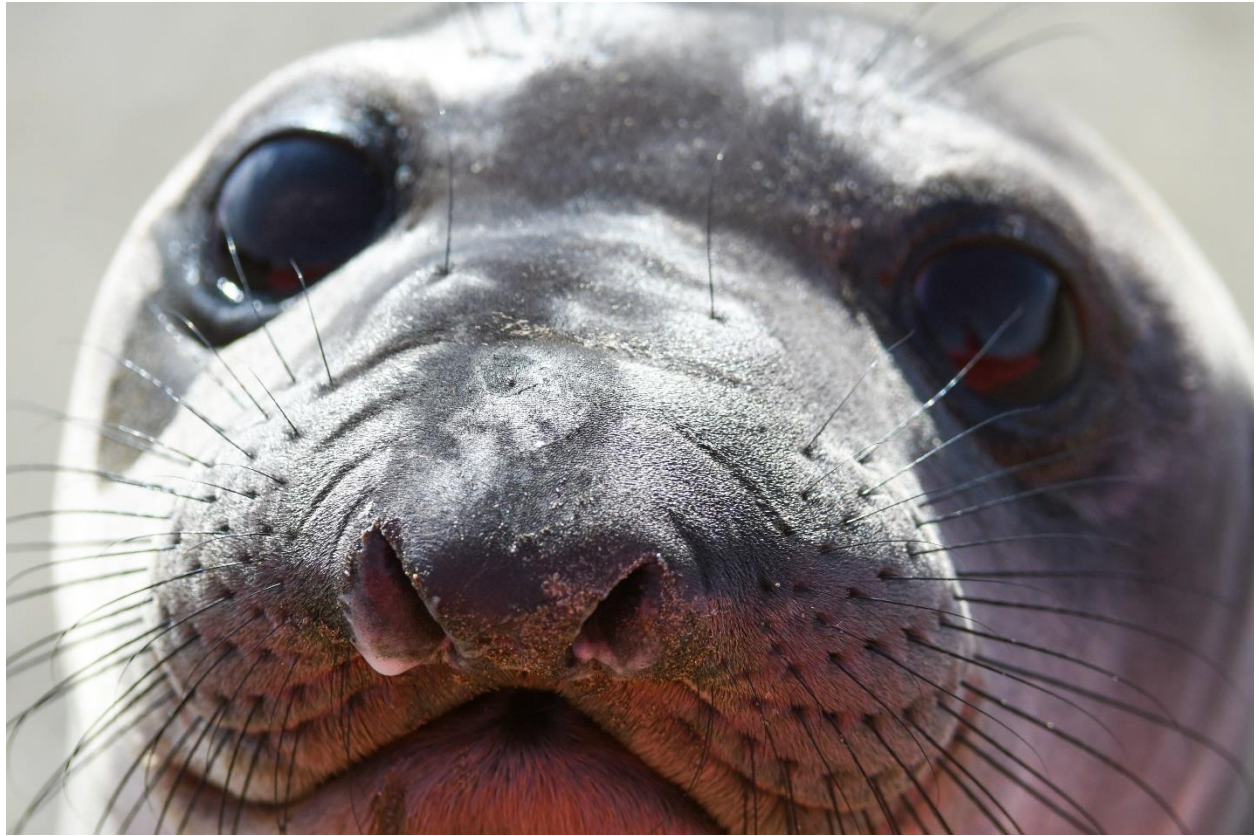
We would be staying the night with relatives 90 minutes away in Kenwood but my wife is almost always a good sport and wasn't ready to give up pursuit of her first bobcat. My 15 year old daughter was the only passenger not too excited about looking for wildlife. She had been more interested in the cows to this point. I had offered \$10 to whoever spotted the first bobcat and her younger sisters wanted the money. We decided to try the Estero Trail Road one more time. ½ a mile up the road my 15-year-old said, "Coyote, deer, coyote, deer!" It was in fact a coyote and we all had a good laugh that she had spotted it but another car had already stopped so we pulled past. 100 yards later she cried, "Bobcat!" Just like that she earned \$10 and our appreciation! We stopped the car snapped a few pics and within a minute it had walked into a ravine and out of sight. For all buy my son and I it was their first bobcat and first wild feline in North America. Just a few minutes later we saw our first Brush Rabbit. We decided to press our luck and drive the Pierce Point Road again before leaving. Just after turning left as we began a short ascent a bobcat ran out on the road directly in front of us, paused long enough to look at us for an instant than turned 180 degrees and vanished into the brush. It was sooooo close to us but no chance for a picture. When we reached the ridge my son spotted yet another bobcat in a distant open green field. Three bobcats in 25 minutes, guess it was easy after all.

We needed to stretch our legs again so we took the trail out to Abbotts Lagoon. If you need Brush Rabbit, this is your place as we probably saw 10 on the short walk in addition to 2 more coyotes, a burrowing owl, and some quail. River Otters are said to frequent the area but we didn't see any sign. We drove out to the beginning of the Tule Elk preserve area and turned around when we saw a gaunt coyote that had a crippled hind leg. Content with our luck we began the drive out of the reserve. Just the Abbotts Lagoon turn off my wife spotted a badger 20 feet off the road in some tall grass. I hopped out of the car just in time to take a picture as it sauntered across the road. It never stopped or looked back as it sped away. Within a quarter of a mile of our last spotting we saw another bobcat, this one even further away but it wasn't clear if it was the same cat or not. It didn't stick around very long. We struck out one last time on Bear Valley Road on our way out, but what a day it was!

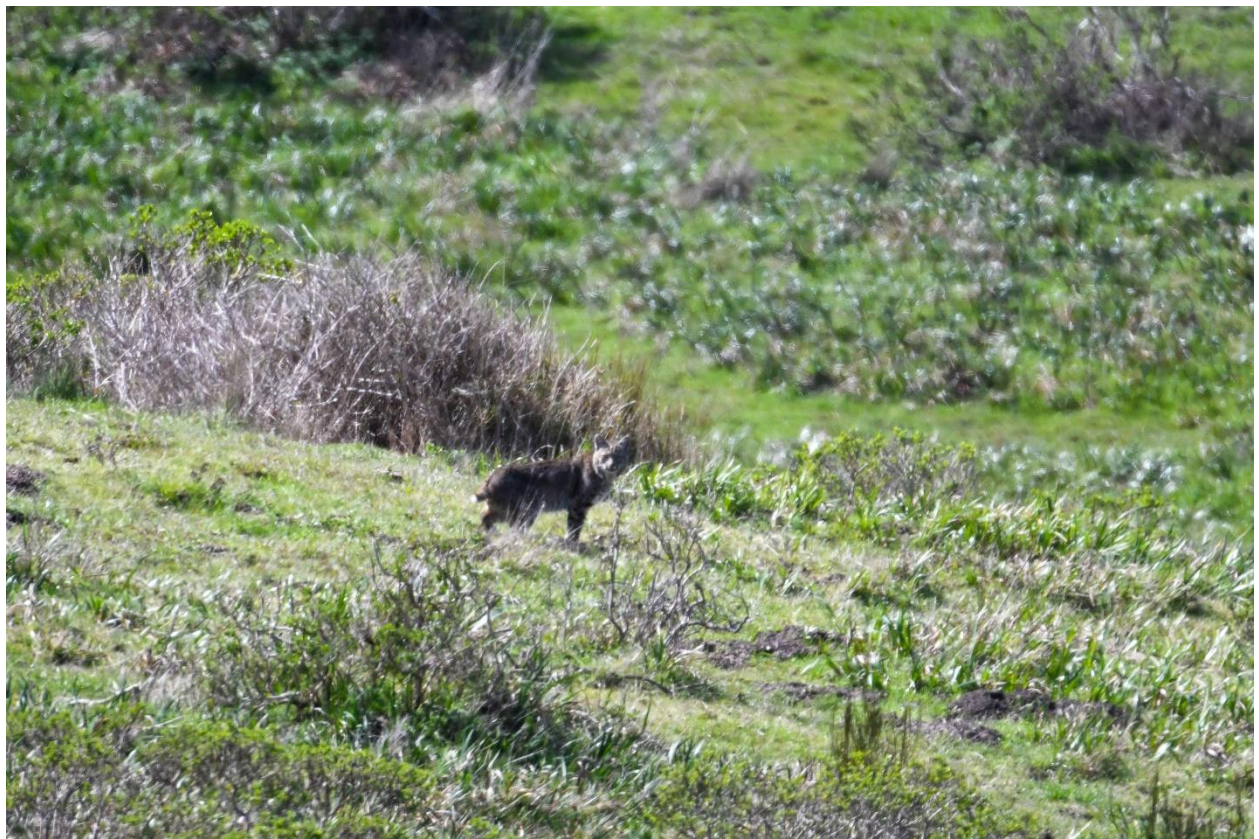
More pictures below:

















Mammal List:

Brush Rabbit (12) on Estero Trail road and common along Abbott's Lagoon trail at Point Reyes

Badger (1) just south of the Abbott's Lagoon at Point Reyes

Bobcat (3-5) seen from Estero Trail Rd, and along Pierce Point Rd at Point Reyes, possible sighting along highway 95 south of Jordan Valley, OR (saw a cat walking along the side of the road late at night, did not have a long tail, but still possibly a feral or domestic cat though it seemed too large)

Coyote (16) seemed to be everywhere in Point Reyes

California Sea Lion (100+) seen at Pier 39 in SF, at Sea Lion viewpoint at Point Reyes and Santa Cruz

Steller's Sea Lion (4-5) seen at Sea Lion viewpoint at Point Reyes

Elephant Seal (100+) seen at Drakes Beach, Elephant Seal Overlook, and at the Sea Lion viewpoint

Harbor Seal (13) seen at Santa Cruz dock, on a distant beach at Point Reyes and from Alcatraz

Tule Elk (100+) common throughout Point Reyes

Black-Tailed Deer (100+) common throughout Point Reyes

Grey Whale (10-15) 10+ in Monterey Bay and 3 at Point Reyes, also saw two unidentified distant whales on Alcatraz ferry that were likely Grey Whales

Orca (10-15) Monterey Bay

Humpback Whale (2) Monterey Bay

Harbor Porpoise (2) seen on the ferry to Alcatraz

Pronghorn (15) seen along the lonely highway in Northern Nevada

Jackrabbit (1) seen at night in Northern Nevada, unsure if black-tailed or white-tailed