

After reading several appealing reports on Jon's website about California and Minnesota for lynx sightings in particular, my wife and I decided we would visit those states in the USA for our 2023 winter trip. There were many cool pictures of lynxes posted in some reports, but I understood that if seeing bobcats in Point Reyes NP in California should be pretty straightforward, observations of Canadian Lynx in Minnesota along the Gunflint trail looked to be far from being easy on the other hand. Consequently, we contacted several people to get more detailed information: Jon Hall, Janco van Gelderen and Charles Foley who went there in the past were kind enough to give us plenty of recommendations and advice based on their experience (I would like to thank them all here). All said this would not be easy. I also contacted Chris Townend from Wise Birding who organized several successful trips for Canadian lynx but unfortunately, his trip dates for 2023 were not working for us. Finally, I found a way to directly contact David Johnson, the photographer and guide in Grand Marais who knows very well the area and the Canadian lynx habits and we could find a deal to use his service for the two of us. It proved to be a good decision as I will describe later in the report. The California side of our trip was easy to organize as independent travelers. We eventually came up with a nice trip itinerary consisting of one first full week in Minnesota/Gunflint Trail and a second week in California focusing on Point Reyes NP and Monterey areas. The international and domestic flights were booked directly online with the airline companies.

Now back home, I must say that we really enjoyed visiting these two places. We could see most of our main mammal targets but once again, our observed mammals list was quite short compared to what we could read in some past trip reports. When I see how many species people manage to see during their trips, I don't understand what we are doing wrong to be so poor with our species list. Maybe this is because we are spending long times in specific places to get nice photos of our observations rather than moving fast from place to place to just tick mammal species. Indeed, I'm always frustrated when I see only a glimpse or brief observation of a mammal that I cannot capture with some decent photos.

Below more detailed descriptions of the places we visited and what we could see there.

Minnesota:

We booked a direct flight from France to Minneapolis, which was very convenient. At the airport we picked our car booked with Sixt with a fairly good price deal through AutoSlash, as suggested by Jon. They offered to upgrade us with a larger and full 4x4 car for a limited extra. Based on the readings from past reports and recommendations from David Johnson, we accepted with no hesitation. The drive from Minneapolis airport to the first hotel we booked at Lutsen on the Superior Lake shore was about 4h long in very good road and weather conditions so this was not bad at all although with the France-USA time difference we obviously arrived very tired at the hotel around 9pm. We took the time to make a stop in Duluth to look for snowy owls and we had some cool observation at the Superior airport.

We had planned to stay 5 full days / 4 nights at the Gunflint trail. Based on the trip reports we read, we did not decide to stay in Grand Marais itself but to find a hotel along the Gunflint trail so as to limit the driving times every day but the challenge was to find a hotel with decent price open in February. Luckily, we found Big Bear Lodge that has 3 rooms in the main building at very decent price if I compared to what I could find in Grand Marais. This lodge was very nice, comfortable and the new owners very friendly. The only caveat was that they had no restaurant but the Gunflint lodge, which had a great restaurant, was not so far away and there were also other dining options nearby. I don't regret a second this accommodation choice.

About the weather, we had warm temperature for the season around zero Celsius and sunny sky for the first three days. Then, we had one day with very strong wind and ice rain and on the last night it snowed quite heavily. It wasn't a storm though and the landscape on the last day was then all white and gorgeous. Thanks to the good and rapid road plowing combined with our 4x4 car, we had no issue to drive on the roads and tracks that day.

Now let's talk about our mammal observations. As I said earlier, we managed to book the service of David Johnson. We wanted to visit the Gunflint trail alone initially but given what we read in past reports and feedback from other persons I contacted, they all said it would be worth it if we could book David to maximize our chance to see lynxes and I'm glad we did. Not only he shared with us his recent hot spot locations but also gave us access to his hides he set on a few places in the forest. All this came with a cost of course. We spend the first 4 days between staying in the hides for long hours and roaming by car along the Gunflint Trail back and forth between Grand Marais and the very end of the trail. I don't know if it was due to the weather conditions or bad luck but we literally saw nothing during those 4 days, except for **red squirrels** and one **northern bog lemming** on the side of the road. No fox, no moose, no white-tailed deer, no marten, I'm not even mentioning wolves, nothing... Even the birds were seen in very low numbers, which I found very odd. David felt sorry for us and told us this was quite unusual to be so quiet. We tried twice the Gunflint Lodge at night and there also we did not see any flying squirrels at their feeders. We only saw a **snowshoe hare** once crossing the road in front of our car when we left the restaurant, that's all... What did not help I think was the traffic. Contrary to what was written in past reports, I was surprised to see such a heavy traffic on the Gunflint Trail while we were there between February 12 and 16. Indeed, it

was crowded with many cars, trucks and even buses till the very end of the trail, not only during the day but also at night. They were many noisy snowmobiles everywhere along and around the trail, so I imagine this was disturbing the wildlife.

We were becoming very nervous and for our last day (we still had an extra buffer day initially planned for Sax-Zim Bog that we could cancel if needed) we discussed with David on which new strategy to adopt to increase our chances for lynx sighting. He suggested to skip the hides and drive along a road in the Western part of Superior Forest where he had several lynx observations over the winter. He drove us there and then suggested we should spend the whole day driving back and forth this road at very low speed and see what happens. It was the day with heavy snow, so the drive was very scenic and we were alone on the road. This was very peaceful and quiet. We only crossed a couple of other cars that day. Funny enough, one of the car was Chris Townend's who was scouting there for his group who would arrive the next day. So after David left us, we spent the day driving among trees covered with snow and icy lakes with our eyes wide open anxiously scanning the woods and lakes with the hope to see something. Again, we saw very little: a few **red squirrels** and one **red fox** resting on a frozen lake at the edge of the forest: a very cool observation but well, it was just a red fox. The day was passing by and we were starting to get desperate. After talking with Chris Townend and explaining how unlucky we had been so far with observations, we left him for our last drive on that road before we had to leave for our next destination. Christ took one direction, and we took the other one. At the end of the road, we said ok let's try one last time and like in some TV documentaries when we lost hope and started to discuss when and how we would come back, all of a sudden, the miracle happened: three **Canadian lynxes** came out of the forest and stopped on the road just a few meters from our car. OMG!! Our hearts were beating heavily and our hands shaking while we were quickly grabbing our cameras with the fear the lynxes would run off before we could take a photo. But no..., although I think the lynxes were as surprised as us at the beginning, they looked very relaxed and then kept on walking along the road in front of the car. We quickly realized that what we had in front of our eyes were a mother with her two cubs, lovely! In order to not afraid them, we followed them from a distance at extremely low speed with the windows open to take photos while driving (a challenge for me the driver 😊). This worked well as they kept on walking on the road for quite a while, I think 10 or 15 minutes, looking back at us from time to time. Our main fear was if another car would come from the other side of the road and scare them, but this didn't happen. The mother lynx was oblivious to us but it was not the case for the cubs who stared at us more and more and at some point, they decided to enter the forest again. The mother called them but they did not reappeared and she eventually left us. We kept hearing them calling each other for a few minutes before it got silent again. Man, what an observation!! We were so elated and smiling heavily. Literally on the last day and last hour of our time in the Superior Forest, we finally saw a Canadian lynx and on top of that, it was a marvelous sighting with some great photo opportunities as you can see with the pics I'm posting below in this report.

It was getting dark and we drove straight to Duluth where we spent the night before visiting the Sax-Zim Bog area the day after. This was mostly a birding day but we managed to see **red squirrels** and several **white-tailed deers**. We spent the whole day there with the hope to see great gray owls but we saw none. We drove back in the evening to Minneapolis where we slept at the airport to catch our super early morning flight to San Francisco.

California:

The domestic flights from Minneapolis to San Francisco through Denver went smoothly. Upon arrival we took our rental car at the Budget counter: they gave us an ugly Kia Soul car but it was more than enough for our needs. We then drove straight from the airport up north to Point Reyes NP using the iconic Golden Gate Bridge and beautiful US1 north road through Muir Beach and Stinson Beach. The landscape there is gorgeous with superb views over the Pacific Ocean, and on top of that the weather was gorgeous with a sunny sky and warm temperatures. We arrived in Inverness early afternoon for a quick lunch and then continued to the park itself where we chose to start with Pierce Point Road.

We weren't in the park for more than 15min that we already bumped to a first **bobcat** who was walking calmly on a field nearby the road. Wow!! First bobcat encounter and already a nice photo opportunity! We continue to drive along Pierce Point Road till the end at Pierce Point Ranch. Along the drive, we saw several **mule deers** as well as a large herd of **Tule Elks** near the ranch. Unfortunately, none of them had antlers this time of the year. We came back with enough time to drive along Sir Francis Drake Blvd before sunset. Near the historic life-saving Station Cemetery, we then saw a second **bobcat** on a slope terrain busy hunting. Wonderful! a second bobcat in even better observation and light conditions for pictures! We could follow him for 10-15min before he decided to hide in a bush. We then climbed in our car and no kidding, 5 min later we observed a third **bobcat** just before the Cypress Tree tunnel road. This third individual was a bit more skittish than the previous ones and had a blind eye but amazing! 3 bobcats in only half a day spent in the park 😊 We continued to drive a bit more until we reached a second herd of **Tule Elks** among which a few males still had some antlers, which was perfect for pictures. We then called it a day and drove back to Point Reyes Station for a well-deserved dinner and cider. We were so happy about such a great start in the park. After dinner we drove to Novato where we had our hotel booked

for the next 4 nights (the not so great but comfortable enough and cheap Days Inn). Indeed, we could not find any reasonably priced accommodations close to the park, hence this choice. This was 40 min drive away from the park, which was not too bad. On the second day, we came back to the park early in the morning to visit and walk around Abbotts Lagoon with the hope to see river otters there, but we saw none. On the other hand, we saw several **coyotes** including some very tame ones I was surprised we could approach so close on foot. On the trail, we also observe a few **brush rabbits**. We drove along Pierce Point Road and Marshall Beach Road for most of the day. We again saw many **mule deers** and **Tule Elks**. We focused our effort along Marshall Beach Road where we met several people scanning the fields like us and who told us this area was called the bobcat alley. And indeed, we saw **3 more bobcats**, including one individual who seemed to be quite habituated with people having large cameras taking pictures. I did not count but at some point, I think we were about 10 persons following him (from some distance – not harassing him) for about 30 min doing his business trying to hunt mice or gophers but with no luck. At some point he ran away from us, which stopped the observation. Besides tracking bobcats, we decided to drive the other side of the park till Point Reyes Lighthouse where we saw several **California sea lions** down the cliff, but more interestingly Chimney Rock and the Historic Point Reyes Lifeboat Station where we could observe for extended time many **Northern elephant seals** resting on the shore. At that time of the year, there were many pups with their mums, and we could even see a large and impressive male mating with one female. This was another great day at the park! On the third day, we decided to visit another area to try for other species. Jon Hall gave us some advice on a location for long tailed weasels, but we saw none. We only saw a couple of **Douglas's squirrels**. Being interested in birds as well, we decided to visit the Colusa National Wildlife Refuge that is a well-known migration stop for many birds including several goose species. This was actually quite a long and tiring drive but observations were very rich, so it was worth it. We came back to Point Reyes NP in the evening for a spotlighting session along Pierce Point Road, but the weather was starting to degrade with strong wind and cold temperatures and we saw nothing except for an **American badger** that crossed the road in front of the car but way too quickly to allow any photo... On the fourth day, we came back again to the Park. The weather was seriously degrading with that cold front hitting California: very strong wind and now freezing cold! We spent an hour in front a burrow that was supposedly used by an American badger according to people we met but we saw nothing. Then we went to Abbotts Lagoon but dipped again on the river otters (no luck with these guys although we went there on 3 different days!). We came back to Marshall Road: we were alone this time and were very lucky to see in full daylight a **striped skunk** who was very busy foraging the ground in search of food. Although he clearly saw us, we could approach him on foot very closely, but he did not pay attention to us. What a cool observation! Around noon, we came back to the area near the Cemetery where we saw again a **bobcat** (probably the same individual we saw there on the previous days). We parked our car on a side of small track hoping to see him walking towards. We stayed in the car, a bit lazily, but also to stay protected from the strong wind. The bobcat did not show up but during the wait, we saw as a nice surprise a **Botta's pocket gopher** emerging from his burrow that was merely one meter from the car. How nice to watch this little critter for a long time without any disturbance! Later in the day, we decided to come back to Marshall Road where we saw again a couple of **bobcats**, including one that was resting or slowly moving along a fence. We could approach him fairly easily: he was clearly relaxed although we were 5 persons looking at him with big lenses. One 3 days spent in Point Reyes, I was amazed by the number of bobcats we could see (13 observations in total of probably 6 or 7 different individuals) and how easy it was to find them and how tame/habituated some lynxes were. This park is clearly a great place to observe such cat species and on top of that, it has some nice landscape and is rich of fauna (both mammals and birds). Mammal watching opportunities were clearly night and day compared to what we experienced the week before in Minnesota 😊

It was time on the following day to move to another place... We however decided to visit one last area of the park near the Bear Valley visitor center surrounded by forests. Because of the storm that was still active, many trails around the visitor center (and even the Limantour Beach Road) were closed due to fallen trees and hazardous conditions. We had time to do 2 small hikes where we could see more **mule deers** but also one **Western gray squirrel** and one **Sonoma chipmunk**.

We then drove from Point Reyes Station down to our next stop in Monterey where we would spend the next 3 days / nights. The 3h long drive was uneventful although we had some snow on top of the mountains north of Santa Cruz. Amazing weather! We stopped enroute to Moss Landing, a nice place we visited a few years ago, where we could watch **harbor seals** and **California ground squirrels** (and of course many shore birds). We stayed at the Pelican Inn in Monterey. I really like this town: very clean with beautiful real estate and a very scenic costal landscape. In addition, the shore inside and around the town is rich in wildlife: many birds but also mammals with **sea lions**, **harbor seals** and **sea otters** that we could easily observe from the wharfs, piers or recreation trails. We were so happy to observe for a long time one evening what I consider to be the cutest of cuteness: a sea otter with her pup frolicking and eating mussels just on the side of the Coast Guard Pier.

Of course, we went to Monterey for whale watching and we had originally booked 4 trips. However due to the bad weather conditions with strong wind over the 3 previous days, the ocean was obviously very rough and several trips were cancelled. We could

only do the ones in the mornings but the trips were not relaxing. Indeed, good that we don't feel seasick easily unlike many other guests on the boat. In addition to the rough rides, the sea conditions were obviously not optimal for cetacean observations and as a consequence, we could only observe a few **gray whales** during all the trips we could do. We were happy to see gray whales as this was a lifer for us (and we could also see an unusual breach for such a species) but taking photos was a nightmare and we were globally disappointed by the sightings quality and diversity knowing from past reports that Monterey Bay could offer much more!! As a matter of fact, a few days after we left Monterey, they had a super rare encounter with a Pacific Right Whale.

Because the afternoon whale watching trips were cancelled, we had some time to visit other places and one day we drove to the Pinnacles National Park. This is a nice park we already visited a few years ago but we underestimated the driving time to get there and therefore we arrived at the park quite late in the afternoon to really enjoy it. We stayed until dark to try for gray foxes but we saw none. We only saw ground squirrels and deers. Since we were in the area, we decided to continue for a spotlighting session along the Panoche and Little Panoche Roads but this turned out to be a bad decision: in between wind, snow and fresh temperature to say the least, we saw nothing except for 2 **giant kangaroo rats**. Definitely not the best weather conditions (and probably time of the year) for such an experience there...

Anyway, after this second week in California, our US trip came to an end. We drove back to San Francisco airport to take our long flight back to France, our eyes full of beautiful observations especially for both bobcats and Canadian lynx that were our main targets. We had many miss during that trip since I really expected to see moose in Minnesota and much more sea mammal species in California but we know from past experience what nature can be. Well, this will be an excuse to come again to the USA in the coming years 😊

Mammals with photos or well seen (lifers in green)				
Species	Espèces	Latin Name	Where seen	Pic
American Red squirrel	Écureuil roux américain	Tamiasciurus hudsonicus	Commonly seen along the Gunflint trail and in Sax-Zim Bog	X
Northern bog lemming	Campagnol-lemming boréal	Synaptomys borealis	Given the shape and dark color, probably this specie. Observed one on the side of a small road next to Gunflint trail	
Snowshoe hare	Lièvre d'Amérique	Lepus americanus	One briefly seen at night on the road near Gunflint lodge	
Red fox	Renard roux	Vulpes vulpes	One individual seen very well resting on a field West of Grand Marais	X
Canadian lynx	Lynx du Canada	Lynx canadensis	One fantastic observation of a mother and her 2 cubs crossing and walking along a road in the Western part of Superior Forest for about 15min in front of our car	X
White-tailed deer	Cerf de Virginie	Odocoileus virginianus	A few observed in Sax-Zim Bog	
Bobcat	Lynx roux	Lynx rufus	Excellent observations of this beautiful cat in Point Reyes. 13 observations in total! of probably 6 or 7 different individuals.	X
Tule Elk	Wapiti de Tule	Cervus c. nannodes	Common in Point Reyes	X
Mule deer	Cerf mulet	Odocoileus hemionus	Common in Point Reyes	X
Coyote	Coyote	Canis latrans	Regularly observed in Point Reyes. Surprisingly tame for some we could approach very close.	X
Brush rabbit	Lapin de Bachman	Sylvilagus bachmani	A few observed in Point Reyes on the track to Abbott's lagoon	X
Botta's pocket gopher	Géomys	Thomomys bottae	One seen very well in its hole close to our car while we were waiting for a bobcat	X
American badger	Blaireau d'Amérique	Taxidea taxus	One seen briefly crossing the road in front of our car at night during a spotlighting session along Pierce Point Road	
Douglas's squirrel	L'écureuil de Douglas	Tamiasciurus douglasii	A few seen in Sebastopol	X
Striped skunk	Mouffette rayée	Mephitis mephitis	A beautiful observation during daylight in Point Reyes and sadly several dead bodies seen on roads of California	X
Western gray squirrel	Ecureuil gris	Sciurus griseus	One seen during a short trail done next to the Bear Valley visitor center in Point Reyes	X
Sonoma chipmunk	Tamia de Sonoma	Neotamias sonomae	One seen during the same trail done next to the Bear Valley visitor center	

California ground squirrel	Spermophile de Californie	Otospermophilus beecheyi	Several seen in Moss Landing and on the fields driving towards Pinnacles National Park	X
Giant kangaroo rat	Rat-kangourou géant	Dipodomys ingens	Only 2 observed during a spotlighting session done along Little Panoche and Panoche roads	
Northern elephant seal	Éléphant de mer du nord	Mirounga angustirostris	A colony seen in Point Reyes NP including one male mating	X
California sea lion	Otarie de Californie	Zalophus californianus	Common in Monterey and several seen in Point Reyes NP	X
Harbor seal	Phoque commun	Phoca vitulina	Several observed in Moss Landing and Monterey	X
Sea otter	Loutre de mer	Enhydra lutris	Several seen well in Monterey including the cutest of cute observation: a mother with her baby playing and eating mussels next to the Coast Guard Pier in Monterey	X
Gray whale	Baleine grise	Eschrichtius robustus	A few individuals observed, including one performing an unusual breach, during 3 whale watching sessions booked in Monterey	X
Total Species Recorded = 24				
Below another specie that I don't count given the observation circumstances				
Raccoon	Raton laveur	Procyon lotor	Sadly one dead body seen on the road near Grand Marais	

I'm adding to this report a few pictures of some of the iconic species we observed during that trip or that were new to me.



Canadian Lynx



Canadian Lynx



Bobcat



Bobcat



Coyote



Red Fox



Tule Elk



Mule Deer



Striped skunk



Brush Rabbit



Botta's pocket gopher



Douglas's squirrel



Western gray squirrel



Northern elephant seals mating



Harbor seal



Sea otter



Gray whale





...and Canadian Lynx again