



Cartoon Critter Caper

South-east Arizona 9th-14th August 2023

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Like most kids growing up in Australia, I had a steady diet of American cartoons on TV and of course enjoyed the critters they starred. When I started visiting the United States, I looked forward to seeing their wild prototypes. Despite visiting Los Angeles every year for the past decade or so, as well as some other trips to the USA, I had seen no cartoon critters. As far as mammals went, a handful of common squirrels, three deer species, a couple of rabbits and a few marine mammals was about it. At least on my visit last year, I had seen chipmunks for the first time, cartoon critter #1.

Once again last August, I headed across to LA for my annual business trip. LA is somewhat limiting for wildlife, especially in August, and I doubted I could see much more than what I had seen on my previous trips. I looked elsewhere in California but there seemed to be little to gain for the complications involved, especially at that time of year. South-east Arizona seemed promising and so I put together a two-stop itinerary out of Tucson. I was especially hopeful of a few new families.

First stop was to be Portal and the Cave Creek Canyon. I booked into the Cave Creek Ranch for two nights. My flight into Tucson was a little late so by the time I was driving down New Mexico route 80 it was dark, and there were plenty of **black-tailed jackrabbits** along the side of the road. The only other sign of local mammals was some speed traps courtesy the local Sheriff's Department. I learnt later that Hidalgo County is the poorest in New Mexico and traffic fines are a major source of income. Fortunately, I did not have to contribute.

The next morning, I was up early for a bird tour with a local guide. I was worried when he did not appear at the appointed time and then not at all till over three-quarters of an hour later. Turns out my phone was on New Mexico time, an hour earlier than Arizona due to daylight saving. A common problem there, apparently.

Birdwatching is the major industry in Portal, and many residents open their yards to visitors to sit and watch their feeders. They are distributed across the various habitats and at different elevations. There is no charge, although donations are usually requested.

Touring the feeders, I picked up **Harris's antelope squirrel**, **cliff chipmunk**, and **rock squirrel**. I also saw my first rattlesnake at one of the feeders, a western diamondback. Also seen while driving between birding spots were **white-tailed** and **mule deer** (the latter occurring at higher elevations) as well as **desert cottontails**. However, the highlight was a young **black bear** that crossed the road in front of us, then watched us for a few moments from behind a bush at the side of the road. Cartoon critter #2.

That afternoon I had the chance to catch up with Reed, the owner of the ranch. Reed is reliably only in the office between 4 and 6pm to check guests in, and I was in too late the previous night. Reed was full of information regarding possible locations for various mammals,

including Mexican fox squirrels, grey foxes, ringtails, and racoons. He also mentioned bobcats and pumas, and that night I heard a bobcat call.

As dusk fell, I did try to check out some of the spots but soon became engrossed with two **hooded skunks** that came out from behind the office. They put on quite a show with their erect tails. Cartoon critter #3. There were also **long-tongued** and **lesser long-nosed bats** at a feeder on the office veranda.



I then took a drive, partly to look for herps but also any mammals. Nothing of note was seen until driving back into the Ranch I saw a

Merriman's kangaroo rat running around in a tight circle on the road as if trying to corkscrew a burrow into the road. After a couple of minutes, it obviously realised the futility of this activity and scooted off into bushes.

Next morning, I was up early to check out the waste bins outside the Portal store, apparently a good spot to see peccaries, but none were present. However, driving back up to the ranch, I did see a **yellow-nosed cotton rat** cross the road. I sat outside the office eating breakfast and was treated to the arrival of a **striped skunk**, not as entertaining as the hooded skunks the night before though.

Portal and Cave Creek Canyon is an excellent site and fascinating area, and I wish I had an extra night there, or at least had arrived early enough to talk to Reed on the first day. However, I had to leave for my next destination, Madera canyon. I decided to stop for lunch in Tombstone, a town that is famous for a thirty-second gunfight. There were plenty of ways to spend your money there, but I was happy to wander through the historical area, grab a bite to eat and move on. Next stop was Patagonia, a rather quaint town with a slightly alternative feel and a small grocery store for supplies.

I was booked into the Santa Rita Lodge for three nights. The recommendation in reports on Mammalwatching.com is to stay in Deluxe Apartment 18 as a ringtail lives in the roof and the apartment provides good viewing potential. I think that perhaps sitting on the front porch of Casita 2 would also give a good view however I was booked in Casita 14 right at the back. I did consider hanging around in the carpark after it got dark but as the casita was occupied by a single woman and the apartment by a young family, thought I might get into trouble if I did.

Later, spending some time at the hummingbird feeders, I did get good views of a **white-nosed coatimundi** on the back porch of the apartment. A little later I watched it cross the carpark and the next day it passed by the back window of my casita.



Next morning on my early morning walk I came across my first **Arizona grey squirrel**, which I saw several times during my stay. The only other squirrel I saw was the rock squirrel, and they were far less common.

Cabins at both locations were self-catering, and I was not very successful at this, so I decided to go to Patagonia for a decent meal. I used the mountain road through the Box Canyon, which was certainly passable, but I would not have liked to have been caught on it during a thunderstorm. What was interesting was the number of amateur naturalists stopped by the road looking for various creatures.

After lunch I visited the nearby Las Cienegas NCA as pronghorns had been reported there in iNaturalist. I didn't see any and probably needed to visit in the evenings. The area is also a release site for black-tailed prairie dogs. With thunderstorms threatening I decided to skip the mountain road and drive back via Nogales on the Mexican border. Lucky I did, as driving into Nogales a **collared peccary** ran across the road in front of me. It was a species I had expected in Cave Creek Canyon but missed.

The trip progressed without further incidence besides the expected thunderstorms and a Border Patrol checkpoint. Driving across the flatlands just before entering the canyon, a **coyote** crossed the road. This was my second ever coyote, the first being one I saw just four days prior working its way across a golf course behind my LA hotel. I had also seen roadrunners at Cave Creek so that meant cartoon critters #4 and #5.

That evening, I watched for bats at the hummingbird feeders. They were the same species as at Cave Creek Ranch but far more numerous and sustained. Watching them in the thermal scope was particularly entertaining. I then drove up to some of the picnic grounds, in the hope I would see some scavenging. Only mammals I saw were two **cats**, which may have been feral but which I did not count. I did talk to a guy using a light trap to trap insects. He said the sheet he collected insects on was frequently raided by racoons, ringtails, and coatis.

Next morning, I was walking one of the trails down by the creek when I noticed a man dressed in khaki carrying a cage about 100 metres behind me. That had to be interesting. So, I slowed down and let him catch up. When he did, he asked me if I had ever seen a ringtail. It turns out he was the groundsman at a residential estate, and one of his jobs was to trap and relocate ringtails that entered the ceilings of houses. This was his release site. I was able to get a good look at it within the cage and as it bolted out of the cage and up a nearby tree. However not an observation I felt I could count.

I spent most of the rest of the day searching for the elegant trogon, without success. I did see some other nice birds, though. On my last evening I went back to the feeders to see the bats again, and there finally was a **ringtail**, working its way around the feeders and any food on the ground. It was my last mammal, next morning I returned to the airport for my flight back to LAX and from there a flight back to Melbourne.

The trip was very satisfying. Over what was effectively four days, I had seen 19 mammal species, of which 14 were new, with six new families. As well as that I saw 68 bird species, most of them new. To top it off I saw four new cartoon critters.

List of mammals seen, new species in **bold**.

Merriman's kangaroo rat *Dipodomys merriami* (new Family)

Yellow-nosed cotton rat *Sigmodon ochrognathus* (new Family)

Harris's antelope squirrel *Ammospermophilus harrisii*

Cliff chipmunk *Neotamias dorsalis*

Rock squirrel *Otospermophilus variegatus*

Arizona grey squirrel *Sciurus arizonensis*

Black-tailed jack-rabbit *Lepus californicus*

Desert cottontail *Sylvilagus audubonii*

Long-tongued bat *Choeronycteris mexicana* (new Family)

Lesser long-nosed bat *Leptonycteris yerbabuenae*

Coyote *Canis latrans*

American black bear *Ursus americanus*

Hooded skunk *Mephitis macroura* (new Family)

Striped skunk *Mephitis mephitis*

Ringtail *Bassariscus astutus* (new Family)

White-nosed coatimundi *Nasua narica*

Mule deer *Odocoileus hemionus*

White-tailed deer *Odocoileus virginianus*

Collared peccary *Pecari tajacu* (new Family)

That's all, folks!