

Minnesota and the Dakota's/ 2021

2021, 6 days in total, 15 species, 7 lifers

I have grown up around the world and have written in the past of my ancestry in Tanzania and the years I spent there that led to my love of wilderness and mammal watching. Another place to which I have family connections is Minnesota and the Midwest in America. Just as I have seen the vast herds of wildebeest in East Africa, I have always wanted to see the masses of bison thundering across the plains in the US.

A trip to Yellowstone was canceled in 2020 due to COVID-19. But, in the summer of 2021, we headed back to my father's homeland, Minnesota, and ventured to a series of national parks across the region. (I once recall seeing a stoat near my father's childhood home back in 2019 and have always enjoyed visiting the state. Tanzania and Minnesota are dear to my heart.)

I wanted to go back and revisit our trip in this report.

Wood Lake Nature Center

Even when in the city and the suburbs in Minnesota, there can be a lot to see given all the lakes and the local and state parks. We drove across the country from Virginia and through Chicago. I had some science and bird camps that summer but the mammal watching didn't really start until we went to Wood Lake Nature Center, a small park near the airport in the suburb of Richfield. The nature center is a marshland with two ponds. In Virginia, they might have called them lakes but in the Land of 10,000 Lakes, they are merely ponds. We saw **muskrats** straight off swimming. We also saw the regular suburban culprits near Minneapolis: **white tailed deer**, **red fox**, **grey squirrel**, **eastern cottontail**, and a **raccoon** perched on its hind legs in a trashcan digging for food. It's also a solid spot for birding, and we saw a **trumpeter swan** pair nesting in the middle of the pond. It's a nice place for an afternoon hike.

Voyageurs National Park

Voyageurs National Park takes its name from the French word for travelers. It consists of a conglomerate of large lakes and islands beside Canada and near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA). My father grew up going to the BWCA almost every summer when he was younger, and he said it's probably one of the reasons that he ended up working in wildlife conservation and natural resource management.

The park is home to tons of loons, seagulls, and beautiful warblers that roost here for the summer. The only way to truly explore the park is by traversing the several lakes and islands in search for wolves and moose. We canoed for a full day (my arms burned!) and came to Dry Weed Island, a medium-sized island in Lake Rainy, a famous body of water. Despite being in the state with the second highest wolf population in the country and the seventh highest moose population, we missed out on both. We didn't spend much time other than on the island and

might need to go back some day. While I only saw more grey squirrels and a **least chipmunk**, my father saw **river otters** swimming by the camp while he made breakfast and coffee. Early birds see mammals? Maybe I should start drinking coffee even though I'm 13. Being in the North Woods made me think of Finland, Norway, and Scandinavia. I definitely have to put more time in mammal watching in Minnesota, as I want to see wolves, moose, lynx, and martens there one day. But back on this trip, we moved onto the Dakotas.

Theodore Roosevelt National Park (South Unit)

After a day of driving, which helped me add some bird species to my life list, we finally arrived at the campsite. It was like most campsites in the U.S in the summer and quite packed. It didn't matter, we still would get good sightings of classic prairie animals. We set off early the next morning just before dawn. I was able to wake up, no coffee needed just the thrill of seeking mammals. We went looking for the massive bovine beasts of the prairie. It was a cloudy and cold morning with little sunlight. The buttes of the park only caught the small slivers of sunlight. I hope for the Big 5 Prairie Species: bison, pronghorn, prairie dogs, coyote, and black footed ferret. We saw a massive colony of **black-tailed prairie dogs** straight off and later in a loop **spotted mule deer** and a **mountain cottontail** on a hike.

But as we continued along the loop road, we, almost instantaneously became enveloped by a herd of **bison**. They reminded me more of cape buffalo and seemed as sturdy as tanks but they were less aggressive than I thought and practically brushed right up against our car. We were the only ones there! That was much better than being in Yellowstone in the middle of summer, where there are traffic jams and always idiots getting gored by bison because they don't know better. We later continued on the drive to see **feral horses** which I will count on my mammal list whether you like it or not. Hey, the descendants of horses introduced by Spaniards in the 1500s are pretty cool. At the visitor center the next day, a ranger suggested we go to the edges of the park near the ranches and, sure enough, there we found **pronghorn**. Watching them run was something else. I wish we could have gone out at night to see a **coyote**. Maybe next time. All in all, Theodore Roosevelt National Park is a great example of what the prairie should be as a vast and beautiful open grassland with buttes and scrubland.

Wind Cave National Park

Wind Cave National Park focuses on the caves, of course, but it also is a good place for mammal watching. The drive to the park was wonderful for birding and provided more pronghorn sightings than all the national parks in the trip. We saw 50 plus pronghorn in total just driving to the park. We took a detour to see Mount Rushmore as well and the Crazy Horse monument still in development. We were just passing through so we only saw the 3 species and usual prairie suspects: bison, pronghorn, and more prairie dogs. But it was a great side adventure.

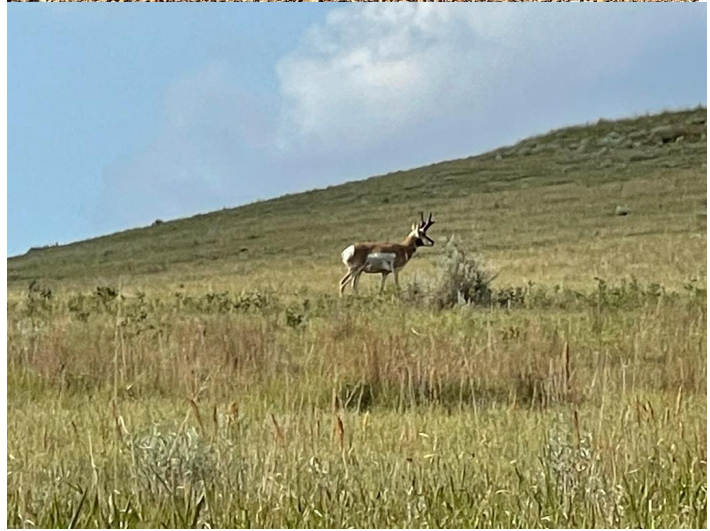
Badlands National Park

We only spent a night in the Badlands and mainly just wanted to see the views before we headed back to my grandmother's house and spent another night underneath the amazing starscape. But we did manage to spot a North **American porcupine** as we headed out of the campsite at about 4:30am. Definitely would return to the park to spend more time one day.

Species Missed

The problem with becoming a mammal watcher is that even after great trips, I always want to come back for more and see the things I missed, like those wolves and moose. Like Tanzania, Minnesota feels a little like home so I know I will be back and I am sure we will spend more time in the wilderness. The wolves and lynx and moose can't hide from me forever. It was still a wonderful trip and I would go back in a heartbeat.

	Common Name	Latin Name
1	Northern racoon	<i>Prycon lotor</i>
2	Eastern cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>
3	White tailed deer	<i>Odocoeileus virginus</i>
4	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes fulva</i>
5	Eastern chipmunk	<i>Tamias striatus</i>
6	Muskrat	<i>Ondatra Zibethicus</i>
7	Least chipmunk	<i>Neotamias minimus</i>
8	American red squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
9	American Bison	<i>Bison bison</i>
10	Black-tailed prairie dog	<i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>
11	Wild horse	<i>Equus ferus</i>
12	Mule deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>
13	Mountain cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus nuttallii</i>
14	North american porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>
15	Eastern grey squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>



From top left to bottom left. A younger, dumber me. Pronghorn in Wind cave national park. Bison and Prairie dogs in Theodore Roosevelt national park. Mount Rushmore. Pronghorn in Theodore Roosevelt National park.





From top to bottom Mountain cottontail, Feral horses, A younger, dumber me, and Bison in Theodore Rosvelt national park.