

North Carolina and Florida, 2024

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This January, I spent a week driving from my home in Philadelphia, PA to Central Florida, stopping in a few other Southeastern US locations along the way.

Alligator River NWR, North Carolina



White-footed Mouse, *Peromyscus leucopus*

I arrived at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge just after dark on January 12th, and spent two nights at a hotel in the nearby town of Kill Devil's Hill (yes, that is a real place). Since it was after sunset, and the refuge closes after dark, I opted to spend a few hours driving a route down routes 64 and 264 between Old Ferry Landing Rd and Point Peter Rd, which seems to include the majority of places where you are likely to see the main target species here - the **Red Wolf** (*Canis*

rufus) - cross. I didn't see any canids the first night, but I did find a **White-footed Mouse** (*Peromyscus leucopus*) at the Borrow Pit Rd entrance to the NWR. As I got out of my car to take pictures, it decided to take an interest in me, and slowly approached before eventually stepping onto my shoe, and trying to take a bite of my laces! Being a climbing mouse, it made its way all the up to my knee before deciding to climb down and run away. Very cool! I didn't see much else that night (a roadkill Opossum that wasn't there the first time I drove 64 appeared the second time), and I decided to head back to the hotel to get ready for the next day.



Mouse Not Climbing a Tree

The next day, I was on the roads driving at about 6am, and drove the same route until sunrise when the refuge opened. I didn't see much on the roads, but shortly after entering the refuge, I found my first **American Black Bear** (*Ursus americanus*) at about 7:30 am. It swam across a canal from one of the soybean fields in the reserve, where the bears like to feed overnight, and walked across Grouse Rd before disappearing into the woods. After the bear, I went a very long time before much else interesting showed up. I drove through almost all of the roads in the main part of the reserve, and saw a whole lot of birds, turtles, and an Alligator, but very few mammals. In the early afternoon at the corner of Dry Ridge Rd and Possum Rd I had a brief view of an **Eastern Gray Squirrel** (*Sciurus carolinensis*), but didn't see any other mammals in the reserve that day. By about 3pm, the reserve was absolutely packed with birders - I drove around a corner at one point and found 30 cars parked in a line - all looking for a Pacific Golden Plover that had apparently turned up that day.



Faraway Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) #1

After sunset began to approach I left the reserve, and resumed my route of driving 64-264 as I was the night before. I saw more this time, with a couple of **Virginia Opossums** (*Didelphis virginiana*) running past on the road. I saw a few **White-tailed Deer** (*Odocoileus virginianus*) on the side of the road as well. At around 8:30 pm, on route 64 just before the junction with 264, I saw my first canid. It was about the size of a typical Coyote, but was clearly a juvenile - I watched it jumping around, and clearing otherwise playing on the side of the road. It wasn't wearing a radio collar, but did have the typical Red Wolf hue. It disappeared back into the woods before I was able to get a picture of it, or a good enough look to be certain either way, but in hindsight I do believe that this was a wolf. There have been a number of new pups born to the pack that lives in this area in the last few years, not all of which have been collared yet, and it seems to me that there is a good shot that is what I saw. Coyotes shouldn't be all that common in this area anyway, as they are purposefully removed where possible in order to reduce the potential for interbreeding.



Virginia Opossum, *Didelphis virginiana*

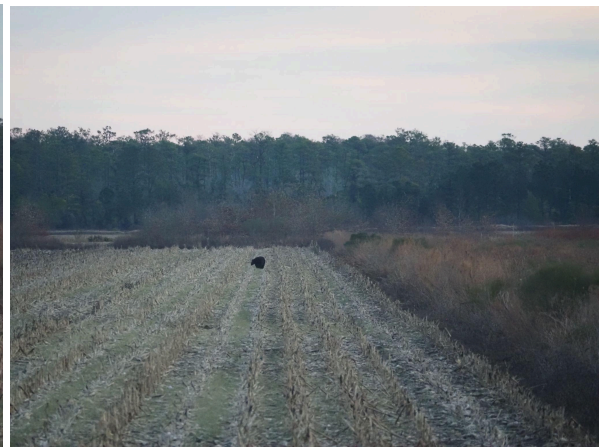


White-tailed Deer, *Odocoileus virginianus*

A little later in the night, at about 9pm, I saw a second canid. This one was larger, darker in coloration, and was wearing a collar. I pulled up next to it just in time to watch it slink away into the reeds, but was able to see it well enough to note that the collar was black - AKA, the color of collar they put on **Coyotes** (*Canis latrans*) that have been caught, sterilized, and released back into the reserve to prevent other coyotes from entering. This one was definitely a coyote, which made me feel a little more like the other may have been a Wolf, but I was still unsure. I continued to drive around until about midnight, but only saw the couple species mentioned earlier.



Faraway Bear #2



Faraway Bear #3

The next morning, I was back on the roads again at about 6am attempting to find what I could confirm as a Wolf. I didn't see much before entering the reserve, but after entering, I found two more bears in the same fields as I saw the first one. I watched them walk around and feed for a while before moving on towards my goal. After driving around for a good while, it was time to start getting ready to leave for my long drive that day. As I headed out of the Milltail Rd exit, across from the reserve buildings, I saw a small group gathered watching something out in one of the fields. I looked and saw a hawk out there, which I figured was drawing their interest, so kept moving. As I glanced back, though, I saw something larger, with four legs out there. I figured it was a Bear that they were looking out, and so figured I would get my binocs on it. That's when I noticed... it had a tail! I quickly hopped

out and asked the people with bigger lenses what it was, and sure enough, it was a **Red Wolf** (*Canis rufus*)!! They identified it as the mother of the recent pups that had been born, and we watched her walk through the fields along Milltail Rd for the next hour and a half or so. At some point she was joined by one of the yearling pups, and we watched both of them run and interact and play until the sun started to get high.



Faraway Red Wolves (*Canis rufus*) #1 and 2

At some point while watching them, someone asked me “Have you seen the Otter?” to which I replied “No!”, and they followed to point directly in front of me, probably about 3 meters away - and sure enough, there was a **North American River Otter** (*Lontra canadensis*) sitting on the opposite bank of the canal, eating a fish. Another very cool moment. After watching the Otter, and after the Wolves had moved on, it was time for me to move on as well, and so I left the reserve and drove down to Georgia.



North American River Otter, *Lontra canadensis*

Okefenokee NWR, Georgia

After spending so much time with the Wolves, I arrived well after dark to my campsite in Georgia. I saw a few **Eastern Gray Squirrels** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) at a rest stop in South Carolina, and a whole lot of roadkill mammals along I-95, but not much else interesting. While briefly being lost in rural Georgia (gulp) I saw a **Coyote** (*Canis latrans*) run across a dirt road, as well as a few **White-tailed deer** (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Then I finally found where I was staying, and went to sleep. In the morning, I woke up around sunrise to head to Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, looking for the outside chance of **Round-tailed Muskrat** (*Neofiber alleni*), but didn't see much of a sign of them walking the boardwalk near Suwannee Canal or the Chesser Island Boardwalk. There wasn't much around in general, and I didn't see any mammals until I was about halfway down the Chesser Island boardwalk, when I noticed something gray walking about 100m in front of me. I first thought it was a Raccoon, and got my binocs on it, only to notice - it was a **Bobcat** (*Lynx rufus*)!



Bobcat, *Lynx rufus*

I watched it quickly run off, and figured it had gone, but saw it again shortly later. That was when I realized that it was stuck on the boardwalk in the middle of the swamp, and had nowhere else to go. So, as I walked down this boardwalk, the Bobcat walked about 100m in front of me for nearly an hour, going slowly in and out of view as we went around turns. When we reached the end of the boardwalk, there was a deadend into an observation tower, and the Bobcat seemed concerned about me continuing to approach it as I approached the tower. As I came around the bend, I no longer saw it, and was unsure where it had gone. I climbed to the top of the tower, looked at the view, and heard a splash come from the swamp below. When I looked down, I saw a sopping wet Bobcat hop out of the water, shake off, and give me a nasty look before running off down the way, not to be seen again. A very cool sighting overall, and definitely one that will stick with me.



Soaking Wet Bobcat after Jumping out of Swamp | Wet Bobcat Tracks After Running Away

Guana-Tolomato NRR, Florida



Eastern Gray Squirrel, *Sciurus carolinensis*

After Okefenokee, I drove out to Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve on Florida's Atlantic coast. I was mainly looking for **Marsh Rabbits** (*Sylvilagus palustris*) around this area, but all I saw was a whole bunch of **Eastern Gray Squirrels** (*Sciurus carolinensis*). I saw a couple of Bat boxes, one in Guana River Wildlife Management Area and one next to the Visitor's Center, but the only things I saw in them were lizards. Other than that, I only saw a bunch of birds. From there, I drove to Tampa for the night for non-mammal related reasons.



Lizard in Bat Box

Tampa, Florida

In Tampa, after spending a night not related mammalwatching, I briefly walked around Cypress Point Park to look for rabbits, dolphins, or anything else interesting but saw only birds. I must admit, though, that there were a lot of interesting birds there, which was very cool. My Dad also flew into Tampa, and joined me for the rest of the trip. We drove out to Highland Hammock State Park, where we would stay the next few nights, and visit some other spots in central Florida from there.

Kissimmee Prairie Preserve SP, Florida



White-tailed Deer, *Odocoileus virginianus*

The next night, we drove out to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park in Central Florida, where we were looking primarily for **Eastern Spotted Skunk** (*Spilogale putorius*). While driving the road into the park just before sundown, we saw probably between 15 and 20 **White-tailed Deer** (*Odocoileus virginianus*) running back and forth along the entrance road. We walked one of the trails at the end of where you can drive to while the sun came down, but didn't see anything except for more deer. While driving back, using my thermal imager, I found a whole bunch of rabbits in the park, but from what I could tell all of the ones I was able to identify were **Eastern Cottontails** (*Sylvilagus floridanus*). We spent a while spotlighting and using the thermal on some of the roads near the entrance to the preserve, but only found more rabbits. At one point, when I stopped to check a thermal hit that ended up being a small bird sitting in a pool of water, I saw the eyeshine of something larger cross the road in front of me, but my light was not bright enough to see it well enough. Based on its size it was likely a fox or something of that sort, but I can't be sure. My dad started to get nervous when a pickup truck drove past us and stopped in the middle of the road when I was stopped to check something out, and so we ended up leaving before finding anything interesting.

Highland Hammock SP, Florida

The next morning, we woke up and explored the area around Highland Hammock State Park, where we were staying. We walked a number of the trails, boardwalk, etc. in a number of different habitats, but didn't find any mammals. In the Sandy Scrub area, I saw tracks from a number of different species, including Raccoons, Bobcat, and Coyote, but didn't see anything. There were a number of birds that we saw in different parts of the reserve.

Archbold Biological Station, Florida



Nine-banded Armadillo, *Dasypus novemcinctus*

I have a friend who has recently started working at Archbold Biological Station in Central Florida, which happens to be a very nice spot for mammalwatching, so I decided to go and visit her for the afternoon. We got there while she was still working, and so my Dad and I decided to walk the loop behind the visitor's center, where we quickly found a **Nine-banded Armadillo** (*Dasypus novemcinctus*) that ran across the trail. In talking to my friend later, I heard that earlier in the year she had seen a **Jaguarundi** (*Herpailurus yagouaroundi*) run across the main road into the station while driving in. There is known to be an introduced population of them at Archbold, but one has never been photographed, and they are very rarely seen, so this was a very cool thing to hear! I spent the rest of the evening walking around the different areas of the station looking out for any cats, or for the

endemic **Florida Mouse** (*Podomys floridanus*) that was also a target here, but didn't see either. I did see another rabbit, which I was finally able to photograph, and - based on the small tail hidden underneath the rabbit - I believe that this one may have been a **Marsh Rabbit** (*Sylvilagus palustris*). I am not 100% certain about this identification vs. it just being another Eastern Cottontail, so if you have any input, please let me know. While we were leaving the station, we saw a **Feral Pig** (*Sus scrofa*) on the side of the road just outside the entrance.



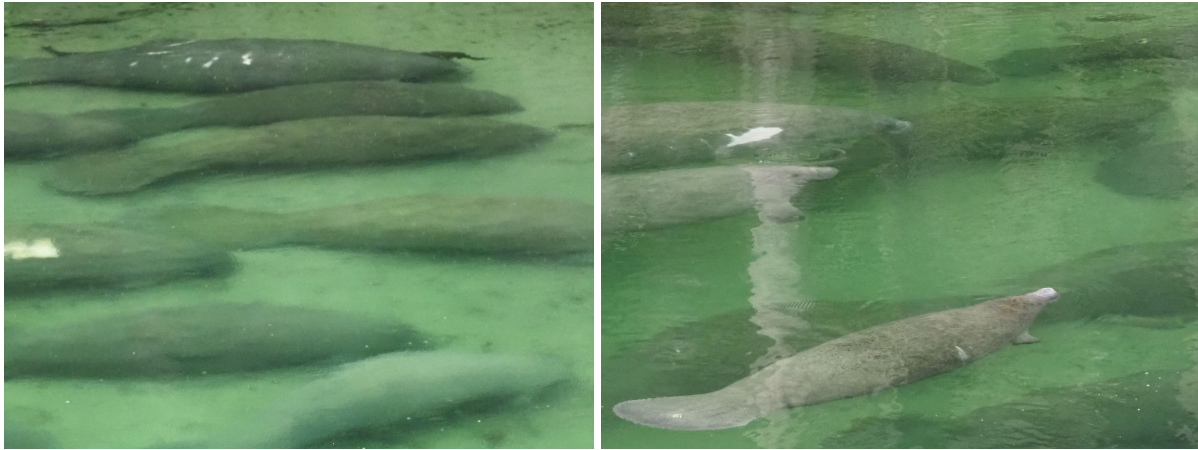
? Marsh Rabbit, *Sylvilagus palustris* ?

Blue Spring State Park, Florida



American Manatee, *Trichechus manatus*

The following morning was our last in Florida, and we would be driving back towards Philadelphia. After seeing a few **Eastern Gray Squirrels** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) in Highland Hammock State Park, we drove North to Blue Spring State Park in Orange City, Florida, to look for **American Manatee** (*Trichechus manatus*). There was a huge long line to get in, and sure enough, once we did there were literally hundreds of manatees in the spring. A sign showed that in 1970 there were 14 manatees counted in the spring; in 2005 there were about 200; and this year they had counted a high of 718 individuals at one time. A remarkable comeback story for this species, and a really cool site to see hundreds of them in a single place! There were also a few **Eastern Gray Squirrels** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) seen alongside the boardwalk.



Huge groups of manatee altogether

Conclusions

From there we drove pretty much straight on I-95 back to Philly, where I saw some **White-tailed Deer** (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and **Feral Hogs** (*Sus scrofa*) on the side of the road in Georgia. We took two nights, and stopped in South Carolina, but I didn't see any other mammals anywhere. Overall a pretty successful trip, with a number of cool mammals, and definitely made for a pretty fun road trip.

Species List:

DIDELPHIDAE

Virginia Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*)

DASYPODIDAE

Nine-banded Armadillo (*Dasybus novemcinctus*)

TRICHECHIDAE

American Manatee (*Trichechus manatus*)

LEPORIDAE

Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*)

Marsh Rabbit (*Sylvilagus palustris*) ?

SCIURIDAE

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

CRICETIDAE

White-footed Mouse (*Peromyscus leucopus*)

FELIDAE

Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*)

CANIDAE

Coyote (*Canis latrans*)

Red Wolf (*Canis rufus*)

URSIDAE

American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*)

MUSTELIDAE

North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*)

CERVIDAE

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

Non-native Species:

SUIDAE

Feral Hog (*Sus scrofa*)