

California 24th February – 2nd March 2024

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Trip Report by: John Wright

Photos by John Pilgrim and John Wright

I was in California for three weeks in October 2023 (trip report on mammal watching website). But an opportunity arose to join a friend John Pilgrim (JP), in California. It was just for a week, and I decided to go again with my main aim of seeing Grey Whales. John Pilgrim was already in California arriving the week before with a friend of his. On the same day his friend flew back to the UK from San Francisco Airport, John picked me up.

The weather in California this year had been stormy and very wet. JP had three days in a row of torrential rain during the first week. Our second week was kinder, but we did have some heavy rain showers but fortunately they were mainly when we were driving or late at night.

Saturday 24th February

I flew from London Heathrow Airport and landed at San Francisco Airport around 16:00. We left the airport around 17:00 and drove south to Monterey Bay, arriving after dark.

Sunday 25th February

A four-hour pelagic with Monterey Bay Whale Watch starting at 09:00.

The usual suspects were in Monterey Harbour – Sea Otters, California Sea Lions and Harbour Seals. The pelagic was better than we had both hoped for, in calm conditions we had excellent views of Grey Whales. Some loafing quite close to the boat floating upside down with flippers and flukes waving about and noses pointing skyward. There was also a good number of Humpback Whales which were back in the area earlier than usual. Really pleased to see a huge pod of Pacific White-sided Dolphins which included Northern Right Whale Dolphins. One of which was a 'swirling' colour morph with the white underparts extending higher onto the face and onto the front pectoral fins.

Monterey Bay Whale Watch official count: 26 Grey Whales; 22 Humpback whales; 2000 Pacific White-sided Dolphins; 600 Northern Right Whale Dolphins.

After the pelagic we drove south to Ventura, arriving just as it was getting dark.



Above Californian Sea Lions. Below Grey Whales





Grey Whale

Monday 26th February

In the early morning, we had a look around Ventura beach and sand dunes where we saw three Brush Rabbits.

We were booked on the Island Packers boat trip to Santa Cruz Island (Channel Islands National Park). A 09:00 sailing from Ventura Harbour. A quiet crossing with only a few California Sea Lions seen and no cetaceans. On Santa Cruz we saw six Island Grey Foxes.

It started raining early in the afternoon. We set off from the Island at 15:30 and about halfway back to the mainland we came across a small pod of Bottlenose Dolphins which performed superbly.

On arrival back in Ventura we headed straight off towards Panamint Springs adjacent to Death Valley where we stayed in a tent for two nights. All we saw on route was a rodent sp.



Humpback Whales



Pacific White-sided Dolphin



Northern Right Whale Dolphins (video grab)



Northern Right Whale Dolphins (video grab)

Tuesday 27th February

We drove east through Death Valley National Park. A very interesting place to explore and as we weren't finding any mammals, we decided to look at some fish! We took a walk to Salt Springs River to look at the Salt Springs Pupfish. We crossed the state line into Nevada and had a look around Ash Meadow Wildlife Refuge where we saw Devils Hole Pupfish. Nearby we checked out a small pool to see Ash Meadow Pupfish. An information notice said to look for Bighorn Sheep on the adjacent rocky hills - we looked but unsurprisingly we didn't see any. Not sure how often Desert Bighorn Sheep are seen here or just how many are in the area, not many I'd guess.

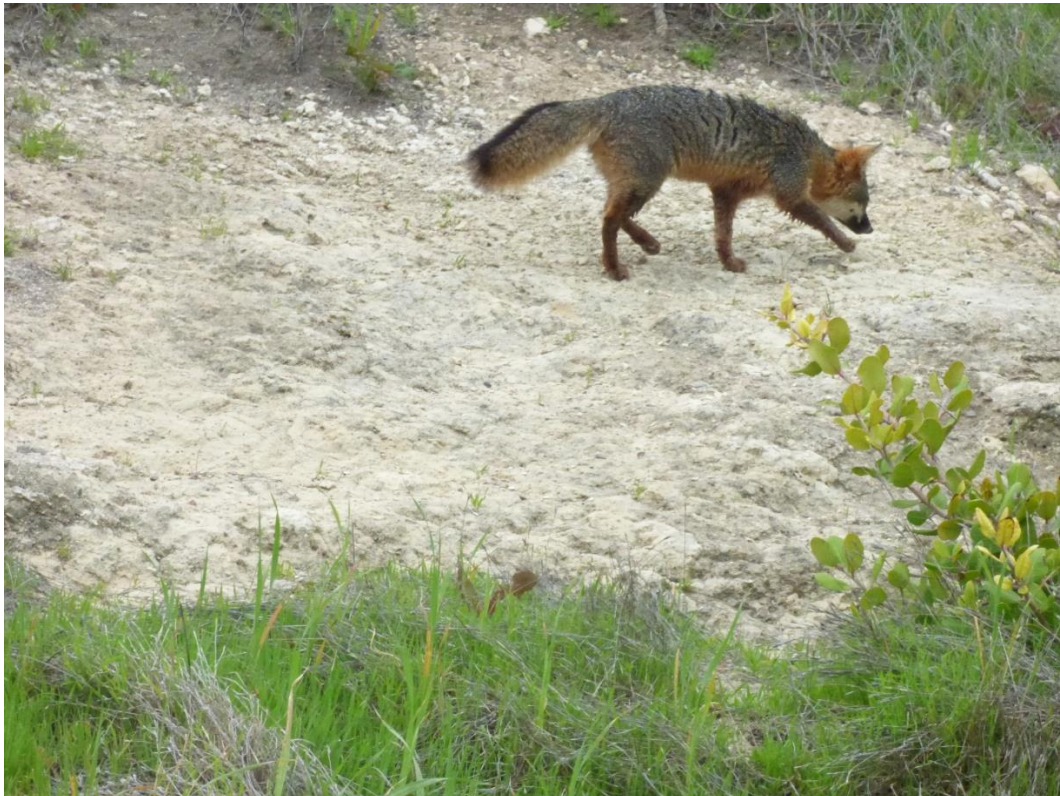


Late afternoon back in Death Valley we came across a Coyote trotting along the side of the road. At dusk we were at the extensive sand dunes just east of Stovepipe Wells Ranger Station in the hope of Desert Kangaroo Rats. Apparently, the only Kangaroo Rat species found in the sand dune habitat. The dunes nearest to Stovepipe are heavily walked over by people during the day so we went to the eastern end of the dunes that aren't disturbed and have some vegetation growing on them. Before it was dark a bat flitted by but went off before we had the bat detector out. After that we didn't have a sight nor sound of any bats. After a couple of hours searching, we had only seen one Desert Kangaroo Rat and that was in the thermal, it disappeared in the vegetation or down a burrow before we could get a spotlight on it. We found plenty of burrows, so we were a little surprised and disappointed we didn't come across anymore Desert KR's.

We then slowly drove the road towards a different habitat to look for Panamint Kangaroo Rats, at ~1,500m. A Kangaroo Rat ran in front of our vehicle, sadly it wasn't fast enough, and we ran it over. Checking its corpse, we confirmed it as a Panamint Kangaroo Rat. We also saw a Black-tailed Jackrabbit which I'm pleased to say we didn't run over. We didn't find any other mammals, so we returned to our tent. JP was briefly joined by an American Deer Mouse in the toilet block.



Island Grey Fox



Wednesday 28th February

We left Panamint Springs around 08:00 via Panamint Valley heading towards Taft and the Carrizo Plains National Monument. On route we saw a Desert Cottontail and by Searles Lake a White-tailed Antelope Squirrel ran across the road. We stopped and searched the immediate area but didn't find any more.

We arrived at our motel in Taft in the early afternoon. At around 17:00 we were in the Carrizo Plains. Before it got dark, we saw three Mule Deer and a few Californian Ground Squirrels. A few hours after dark the temperature dropped to just above freezing. However, by the time we left the plains to go back to our motel at 22:30 we had seen the following using a combination of thermal scopes and spotlights: Giant Kangaroo Rats, Heerman's Kangaroo Rats, Kangaroo Rats sp., Southern Grasshopper Mouse, a probable Little Pocket Mouse – difficult to be sure on biometrics but it's small size and long tail pointed to this species, Desert Cottontails, Black-tailed Jackrabbits, Tule Elk and two Kit Foxes.

Thursday 29th February

We were heading to Delano today but before we set off we had a mid-morning drive through the Carrizo Plains. We saw Californian Ground Squirrels, Nelson's Antelope Squirrels and Tule Elk.

We arrived in the Delano area early afternoon and explored the Pixley Wildlife Refuge where there was plenty of wildfowl, waders and cranes but no mammals. We moved on to Kern National Wildlife Refuge where again there were plenty of wildfowl, the only mammal we saw was a Coyote.

We returned to Delano and checked into our motel. At dusk we were in an area south of Kern NWR along the Orcoran Road/Dairy Ave. The habitat here is (or was!) just right for San Joaquin Kangaroo Rat most of it fenced off with Ecological Protected Area notices.

We stood by the side of the busy road and when it was dark were pleasantly surprised by just how many Kangaroo Rats we picked up in our thermal imagers. We also saw quite a few rodents and got a good view of a couple of Southern Grasshopper Mice. The KR's often ran across the road as did the rodents. Despite spotlighting the KR's we couldn't positively id them as San Joaquin as Heerman's are also here. Apparently along with subtle changes to the habitat the Heerman's now dominate and are out competing the San Joaquins so they may now be very rare here or may have gone completely from this area.

After nearly two hours we packed it in and instead drove up and down the road a couple of times and checked the freshly killed KR's. We checked seven corpses, and all were Heerman's which is rather telling! We also found a squashed Western Toad and an injured Gopher Snake which we moved to the grass verge – hope it survived.

Friday 1st March

We departed Delano and headed for Mount Diablo State Park, arriving there early afternoon. We didn't go there for anything particular but wanted to be in the general area of the eastern side of San Francisco. When we arrived at the Northern entrance gate the weather was poor, being windy, cloudy and showery, so we decided not to enter the park. There were a couple of

Californian Ground Squirrels in a field adjacent to the entrance gate. We then drove to our motel a few miles away in Concord, and checked in.

Mid-afternoon we drove to Grizzly Island Wildlife Area (N.E. of San Francisco) where the main purpose was to look for River Otters. We saw Californian Ground Squirrels, a Coyote and a herd of Tule Elk. We drove slowly along a track that ran alongside a channel that to us certainly looked otter friendly. It wasn't long before we were watching a River Otter fishing in the channel. It swam on ahead of us and then crossed the track in front of our vehicle and into another channel where it was lost to view. We drove on and five minutes later JP casually announced there were three otters in the channel. We then spent a very enjoyable ten minutes watching the three otters fishing and occasionally 'huffing' at us. When they eventually turned back the way they had come we decided to leave them to it and drove on. By now it was late afternoon and had started to rain so we headed back to our motel.

Saturday 2nd March

There was torrential rain before dawn, and we thought we were in for a washout day. But fortunately, the rain stopped and held off all morning.

We first stopped at Huckleberry Botanical Refuge. We saw a few Mule Deer and an Eastern Fox Squirrel. As the name of the refuge suggests there were some interesting and rare Californian coastal plants and shrubs.

We then went on to the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge which is a wetland mainly for wildfowl and waders although it does have Salt-marsh Harvest Mice. The Harvest Mice can sometimes be seen on the very highest tides when they are pushed to the top of the vegetation. It was low tide when we were there! We did see quite a few Californian Ground Squirrels in the drier areas of the refuge.

Next stop was the Palo Alto Baylands Nature Preserve, which is another wetland reserve mainly for birds. But also has Salt-marsh Harvest Mice. A very nice reserve but we didn't see any mammals.

In the early afternoon, just as it started to rain, we headed to San Francisco Airport for our flight back to the UK.



Death Valley, looking rather green.

Systematic List (27 species)

California Ground Squirrel

Spermophilus beecheyi

White-tailed Antelope Squirrel

Ammospermophilus leucurus

Nelson's Antelope Squirrel

Ammospermophilus nelsoni

Eastern Fox Squirrel

Sciurus niger

Panamint Kangaroo Rat

Dipodomys panamintinus

Desert Kangaroo Rat

Dipodomys deserti

Heermann's Kangaroo Rat

Dipodomys heermanni

Giant Kangaroo Rat

Dipodomys ingens

American Deer Mouse

Peromyscus maniculatus

Southern Grasshopper Mouse	<i>Onychomys torridus</i>
Brush Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus bachmani</i>
Desert Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>
Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>
Mule Deer (Black-tailed Deer)	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>
Elk (Tule Elk)	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>
Kit Fox	<i>Vulpes macrotis</i>
Island Grey Fox	<i>Urocyon littoralis</i>
Northern River Otter	<i>Lontra Canadensis</i>
Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>
California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Pacific White-sided Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>
Northern Right Whale Dolphin	<i>Lissodelphis borealis</i>
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>
Grey Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>

The End.