

California/Arizona, May 2024



When we moved out to Victoria in 2014, one of the attractions for me was the increased proximity to the American Southwest. However, as so often happens, life got in the way and it wasn't until this spring that I made a high-speed road trip down to southern California and Arizona. The spring of 2024 has been surprisingly cool here on the west coast, which no doubt impacted some potential sightings, but in all it was a great trip, showcasing some fascinating species in often spectacular landscapes.

I caught the 1:00 pm ferry to Vancouver and drove straight down the I-5, sleeping in the car at a highway rest stop just south of Eugene, Oregon. Eugene is best known as the setting for the classic 1978 film "Animal House", but I resisted the temptation to try to find some of the pivotal locations from the film and continued down to Point Reyes, arriving shortly after 6:00 pm. The only mammals seen during the drive were a small group of Mule Deer.

I met up with Paul Carter at our campsite in Samuel Taylor State Park and we headed in to Point Reyes National Seashore. We saw Tule Elk near Tomales Point and, back in the campground, found Gray Fox, Northern Raccoon and a Western Deer Mouse.



We left at 6:30 the next morning to go back to Point Reyes, where we saw more Tule Elk and Mule Deer, followed by Brush Rabbits, Northern Elephant Seals, and California Sea Lions. Paul got a brief look at a Harbour Porpoise and we saw a shrew run across the road, which was undoubtedly Trowbridge's Shrew. Back at Samuel Taylor campground we found a confiding Sonoma Chipmunk. In the late afternoon, we drove down to Marshall Point Road and found a Bobcat hunting pocket gophers. Overturning some abandoned boards revealed a California Vole with young, while a second Bobcat appeared beside the road further along the way. On our return, we stopped to check out a bridge and were rewarded with several Yuma Myotis and a Pallid Bat prior to getting back to the campsite about 11:00 pm.





We made an early morning trip to the visitor centre the next morning and got good views of Botta's Pocket Gophers on the grounds, then headed back to the campground to pack up, drove to San Francisco Airport where Paul dropped off his rental car, did a quick grocery shop, and reached Pinnacles National Park about 4:00 pm. Fortuitously a few campsites were still available. While setting up camp we had views of California Condors circling in the sky overhead in the company of Turkey Vultures, which allowed us to appreciate the longer and much wider wings of the condors as well as their overall greater bulk than the vultures.

Around the campground we were able to find Eastern Fox Squirrel, California (Beechy's) Ground Squirrel, Merriam's Chipmunk, Desert Cottontail, and Black-tailed Jackrabbit. We had a brief glimpse of a Gray Fox as we were leaving to drive up to Bear Gulch parking lot. California Myotis were flying around the parking lot as we waited for the arrival of Venkat and Nicole at about 9:45 pm. The ensuing night walk was filled with life, including numerous Dusky-footed Woodrats, Big Brown Bat, Fringed Myotis, Pinon Mouse, California (Parasitic) Mouse, Western Bonneted (Mastiff) Bat, Yuma Myotis, a Brush Mouse and Bryant's (Desert) Woodrat. In addition, we found an Arboreal Salamander and several Sierran Treefrogs. We arrived back in camp about 3:00 am, exhausted but elated.



After coffee and cereal the next morning we headed back to Bear Gulch. The weather was cold and gray, but we managed to find some Townsend's (Western) Big-eared Bats in day roosts in rock crevices. We said goodbye to Venkat and Nicole and drove to King City for gas. The weather started to clear, so we decided to camp at Sweetwater BLM campground up in the hills. All the sites were occupied, but a

friendly woman offered to let us camp at her site. The ground managed to be either incredibly hard, making pegging the tents challenging, or incredibly muddy, with mud so tenacious that our boots weighed several kilograms each by the time camp was set up. The temperature dropped to about 4-5 degrees Celsius and we saw virtually no wildlife, which did little to improve the experience. We were up early the next morning and drove to Point Lobos State Reserve, where we observed Harbour Seals, Sea Otters and California Sea Lions, before heading to Monterey and a night at the Travelodge. Rarely has a shower and shave felt so welcome.

The next morning we were up early for an eight-hour boat trip with Monterey Bay Whale Watch. Despite having perhaps the internet's least compelling website, this is a great operation, run by Nancy Black and familiar to many readers on mammal-watching.com. Southern Sea Otters and California Sea Lions were present in the harbour prior to our 8:00 am departure. The day was sunny and clear with a light breeze and the sightings were prolific. The final tally by Monterey Bay Whale Watch included 1000 Pacific White-sided Dolphins, 1500 Northern Right Whale Dolphins, 20 Risso's Dolphins and 7 Humpback Whales. I can't speak to the statistical validity of these numbers but suffice to say that "cetacean soup" was a fair description of the bay that day. After returning to the wharf, we left for Carrizo Plain. Two traffic accidents and the resulting congestion slowed our progress, but we arrived at Carrizo Plain before 9:00 pm. We saw a number of Giant Kangaroo Rats, several pocket mice, a Pronghorn and a possible coyote prior to arriving at the KCL campground about 10:15 pm. At the campsite, we had close views of a Gambel's Deer Mouse and a Desert Cottontail.





KCL is a very peaceful campground, so we managed to sleep in until 6:30 am or so. A morning drive produced Beechy's (California) Ground Squirrels, numerous Nelson's Antelope Squirrels and a Black-tailed Jackrabbit. Reptiles were more diverse, including two Gopher Snakes, many Side-blotched Lizards, Western Whiptail Lizards and Western Horned Lizards. After lunch and a lie-down, we went back out and found a family of San Joaquin Kit Foxes near the campground entrance. According to a chap who was capturing drone footage of Kit Foxes, they had just moved in about three weeks prior, excavating and expanding the burrows of a Giant Kangaroo Rat. We drove up to the north end of Soda Lake Road and spotted Agile Kangaroo Rats, Heerman's Kangaroo Rats, San Joaquin Kangaroo Rats and a Southern Grasshopper Mouse. We also managed to find another Kit Fox. Several pocket mice remained unidentified to the species level.







A Botta's Pocket Gopher was visible around the campsite the next morning. Only previously-seen species were apparent on our drive out of Carrizo Plain. I dropped Paul off at a Starbuck's on the outskirts of LA, an area which includes much of southern California, and then continued on to Anza Borrego State Park. The rush of spring visitors looking at wildflowers had passed, so the campground was surprisingly quiet. A Coyote called loudly close-by, then appeared on the hillside just behind my tent. After supper, I observed some White-tailed Antelope Squirrels in the campground, then hiked up to Palm Canyon. A Western Yellow Bat was flying around the palms and a Cactus Mouse appeared amongst the rocks while I was waiting futilely for Desert Bighorn Sheep to appear. I did get a distant look at a Kit Fox on the walk back and then drove up to the Culp Valley. Merriam's and Dulzara Kangaroo Rats crisscrossed the road, along with a San Diego Pocket Mouse and a variety of unidentified small rodents.



I headed to a nearby slot canyon before it became too warm the next morning. I didn't see any mammals there, but did have a quick view of a Chuckwalla lizard. After the mid-day heat had waned, I drove down the S22 and S2 highways, seeing a few Desert Cottontails and Black-tailed Jackrabbits. I spent the evening trying to capture photos of pocket mice and kangaroo rats, generally without a great deal of success.

The next day was a driving day featuring mostly manmade attractions. I bypassed the Salton Sea and Slab City for fear of accidentally ending up in a reality TV show but did slow down to look at the "Center of the World" pyramid and church in Felicity, California. Apparently this site is officially recognized by France and a few other EU countries as the centre of the world, perhaps to be contrarian, as it is clearly the centre of nothing. Not much further along was an area that should be recognized as the centre of the dormant aircraft world, full of hundreds of commercial aircraft being stored out in the desert due to the low rain and humidity. Then came a centre of the climate change world and the incredible heat of Yuma, Arizona. Reaching Madera Canyon in the late afternoon and feeling the temperature moderate as I ascended in altitude was a relief. Coues White-tailed Deer appeared along the roadside. Given its unappealing name, I had expected the Bog Canyon campground to be underutilized but it was full, so I did a brief hike at the end of the road and then found a spot to pitch a tent in the Proctor Road dispersed camping area. A night drive revealed a Gray Fox and a Kit Fox but little else, perhaps due to the volume of Friday night traffic on the road.

Arizona Gray Squirrels were feeding at the Santa Rita Lodge bird feeders in the early morning and remarkably tame Wild Turkeys patrolled the road. I left about 8:30 am and reached the Southwestern Research Center (SWRC) by noon. The SWRC is a great place to stay in Cave Creek Canyon – comfy rooms, good food, and people used to the curious hours of researchers and mammal aficionados. I ate a picnic lunch in the parking area near Cave Creek trail and was treated to the sight of a White-nosed Coati crossing the road nearby. A walk along the trail produced Rock Squirrels and a large striped brown snake which was too quick for me to photograph. During dinner I met Larry, Dan and Mark, three birders who also turned out to be physicians in various stages of the retirement process, who I quizzed for tips on navigating the next phase of life.





I left about 7:20 pm for a lengthy night drive. Portal Road was quiet apart from a couple of small Western Diamond-backed Rattlesnakes, Desert Cottontails and a pocket mouse. I drove over to the Animas Valley and headed south, eventually encountering my main target species for the night, a White-sided Jackrabbit, in addition to a couple of Banner-tailed Kangaroo Rats. On the return drive I came across a Black-tailed Jackrabbit, which made a nice comparator for the White-sided one. I then drove around Paradise and Turkey Creek, but saw remarkably little wildlife, mainly additional Desert Cottontails.

An early drive the following morning produced a Coyote, Mexican Fox Squirrels, Cliff Chipmunks and a Collared Peccary by the road right in the hamlet of Portal. After breakfast, I drove to the South Fork Road and hiked the eponymous trail at the end. I had a nice sighting of an Elegant Trogon and encountered a few Cliff Chipmunks. I returned to the South Fork Trail in the afternoon and had a brief sighting of a White-nosed Coati but little else. After waiting for a while at the hummingbird feeders for Nectar-eating Bats which failed to materialize, perhaps due to the unseasonably cold temperatures, I drove down the Portal Road and then on to Rodeo. I saw a number of Desert Cottontails and Black-tailed Jackrabbits and another western Diamond-backed Rattlesnake, but no additional kangaroo rats.





There were nine Collared Peccaries by the Portal road the following morning and the usual Cliff Chipmunks and Mexican Fox Squirrels in the woods near the SWRC. After breakfast I noticed a pocket gopher just outside my room. My understanding is that only Botta's Pocket Gophers occur here, although Southern Pocket Gophers have been found elsewhere in the "sky islands".



At the turnoff to the main highway gas was \$3.19 a gallon with free coffee or soda, the cheapest gas I encountered on the trip. I drove to the golf course in Willcox to look for Spotted Ground Squirrels but didn't arrive there until 11:00 am. The ground squirrels failed to make an appearance, likely due to the mid-day heat. Back to the Interstate and the drive to the Grand Canyon, where I arrived about 7:00 pm.

The United States does a great job when it comes to promoting attractions, many of which fail to live up to the hype. The Grand Canyon is different. Photos do a poor job preparing you for the sight that awaits when you look out from the South Rim viewpoint. I watched the play of light over the rocks, then headed to a campground in the Kaibab National Forest just south of the park.

After a quick and fruitless stop at the Grand Canyon Airport to look for Spotted Ground Squirrels I was back at the Grand Canyon before 7:00 am. Cliff Chipmunks, Rock Squirrels, Elk and Coyotes were all easily visible. There appears to be some variability in the pelage of the Cliff Chipmunks here. I've included photos of a couple of them, below.





I picked up supplies from the local grocery store including some smoked salmon for which I had misread the price and hence ended up with probably the most expensive sandwich I have ever eaten. A walk failed to produce the hoped for Abert's Squirrel and I continued over to the north rim, observing some White-tailed Antelope Squirrels along the way. I arrived at Bryce Canyon National Park in the late afternoon and saw a couple of Uinta Chipmunks, one at the visitor centre and the other at one of the canyon overlooks. The Utah Prairie Dogs had already retired to their burrows for the night, so I headed out of the park to Red Canyon to camp.

The Utah Prairie Dogs were out in the sunshine the next morning although very wary. I drove north all day, seeing one large shrew on the road and little else in the way of mammals. I camped that night in a BLM campground near Hell's Canyon in Oregon, well-populated with Mule Deer. Driving north the next day, I noticed some small ground squirrels beside the interstate. Turning off Interstate 84 near North

Powder, I drove down a small road flanked by ground squirrel colonies, whose inhabitants turned out to be Columbia Plateau (Merriam's) Ground Squirrels. I stopped in Prosser to look for the Townsend's Ground Squirrels previously seen on the grounds of the Snoqualmie Winery but no ground squirrels were visible there, although I did see a Yellow-bellied Marmot on a lawn close by. That turned out to be the last new mammal of the trip, as I passed through the Cascades into Seattle and the drive back to Vancouver.



A big thanks to Paul Carter and Venkat Sankar for joining me for part of this trip, for their energy and enthusiasm and their assistance with identification. Venkat provided so much site information prior to the trip that the biggest challenge was paring the itinerary down to something vaguely manageable. As always, please feel free to contact me at ibtson@yahoo.com with any questions or identification suggestions.

Ian Thompson

Victoria, BC

List of mammal species seen:

1. Black-tailed Jackrabbit – *Lepus californicus*
2. White-sided Jackrabbit – *Lepus callotis*

3. Desert Cottontail – *Sylvilagus audubonii*
4. Brush Rabbit – *Sylvilagus bachmani*
5. Trowbridge's Shrew – *Sorex trowbridgii*
6. Yellow-bellied Marmot – *Marmota flaviventris*
7. Utah Prairie Dog – *Cynomys parvidens*
8. Eastern Fox Squirrel – *Sciurus niger*
9. Mexican Fox Squirrel – *Sciurus nayaritensis*
10. Arizona Gray Squirrel – *Sciurus arizonensis*
11. Nelson's Antelope Squirrel – *Ammospermophilus nelsoni*
12. White-tailed Antelope Squirrel – *Ammospermophilus leucurus*
13. Rock Squirrel – *Otospermophilus variegatus*
14. California (Beechy's) Ground Squirrel – *Spermophilus beecheyi*
15. Columbia Plateau Ground Squirrel – *Spermophilus canus*
16. Sonoma Chipmunk – *Neotamias sonomae*
17. Merriam's Chipmunk – *Neotamias merriami*
18. Uinta Chipmunk – *Neotamias umbrinus*
19. Cliff Chipmunk – *Neotamias dorsalis*
20. Botta's Pocket Gopher – *Thomomys bottae*
21. Merriam's Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys merriami*
22. Banner-tailed Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys spectabilis*
23. Giant Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys ingens*
24. Agile Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys agilis*
25. Heermann's Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys heermanni*
26. San Joaquin Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys*
27. Dulzara Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys simulans*
28. San Diego Pocket Mouse – *Chaetodipus fallax*
29. Dusky-footed Woodrat – *Neotoma fuscipes*
30. Bryant's Woodrat – *Neotoma bryanti*
31. Western Deer Mouse – *Peromyscus sonoriensis*
32. California (Parasitic) Mouse – *Peromyscus californicus*
33. Pinon Mouse – *Peromyscus truei*
34. Brush Mouse – *Peromyscus boylii*
35. Gambel's Deer Mouse – *Peromyscus gambelii*
36. Cactus Mouse – *Peromyscus eremicus*
37. Southern Grasshopper Mouse – *Onychomys torridus*
38. California Vole – *Microtus californicus*
39. Yuma Myotis – *Myotis yumanensis*
40. Fringed Myotis – *Myotis thysandodes*
41. California Myotis – *Myotis californicus*
42. Big Brown Bat – *Eptesicus fuscus*
43. Pallid Bat – *Antrozous pallidus*
44. Western Bonneted Bat – *Eumops perotis*
45. Western Yellow Bat – *Lasiurus xanthinus*
46. Townsend's Big-eared Bat – *Corynorhinus townsendii*

47. White-tailed Deer – *Odocoileus virginianus*
48. Mule Deer – *Odocoileus hemionus*
49. Elk – *Cervus canadensis*
50. Pronghorn – *Antilocapra americana*
51. Collared Peccary – *Dicotyles tajacu*
52. Bobcat – *Lynx rufus*
53. Coyote – *Canis latrans*
54. Common Gray Fox – *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*
55. Kit Fox – *Vulpes macrotis*
56. Northern Raccoon – *Procyon lotor*
57. White-nosed Coati – *Nasua narica*
58. Sea Otter – *Enhydra lutris*
59. California Sea Lion – *Zalophus californianus*
60. Harbour Seal – *Phoca vitulina*
61. Northern Elephant Seal – *Mirounga angustirostris*
62. Pacific White-sided Dolphin – *Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*
63. Northern Right Whale Dolphin – *Lissodelphis borealis*
64. Risso's Dolphin – *Grampus griseus*
65. Harbour Porpoise – *Phocoena phocoena*
66. Humpback Whale – *Megaptera novaeangliae*