

Early Spring in Central Washington (Kittitas, Grant, Douglas) ~ 5/2-5/3

With my last final finished for the semester (WSU) on Thursday, once my shift at the Lower Granite Dam was finished on Friday, I headed over to Vantage, WA, to search for Sagebrush Vole, Ord's Kangaroo Rat, Northern Grasshopper Mouse, Pygmy Rabbit, and White-tailed Jackrabbit with my friend Liam Hutcheson. The first night was initially spent nightcruising for snakes before searching for rodents near Vantage and Mattawa. The second night was spent road cruising for Pygmy Rabbit and White-tailed Jackrabbit in the channeled scablands outside of Ephrata and Waterville.

of individuals

Individual sightings

White-tailed Jackrabbit	1 1
Eastern Cottontail	1 1
Mountain Cottontail	2 2
Fox Squirrel	5 2
Yellow-bellied Marmot	17 5
Washington Ground-Squirrel	2 1
Least Chipmunk	4 2
Ord's Kangaroo Rat	1 1
Columbia Plateau Pocket Mouse	2 2
Northern Pocket Gopher	2 2
Western Deer Mouse	3 3
House Mouse	1 1
Coyote	2 2
Pronghorn	2 1
Mule Deer	25 8



Ginkgo Petrified Forest (19:30-20:10)

As I waited for Liam to arrive, I walked around the boat launch in hopes of spotting a few birds or lizards before it got too dark. While there was little activity, some loud rustling in the canopy above me quickly caught my attention. Hoping for a porcupine, I wandered around below the rustling until I laid eyes on what to my surprise, unfortunately, was not a porcupine but rather a YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT. My first marmot in a tree! Searching around some of the rock piles shortly afterwards yielded about half a dozen marmots in presumed family groups keeping watch atop the rock piles. Their distinct, sharp call made it easy to detect new individuals.

Old Vantage Highway (20:20-22:00) SUNSET

Once Liam arrived right around sunset, we headed out for the Old Vantage Highway to start road cruising for reptiles and mammals. The night was perfect apart from constant 30 mph wind gusts. As it was the first 80°F day of the year, we were hoping to get many snakes and mammals on the warm pavement. Unfortunately, a backup on I-90 meant that large amounts of traffic were using this alternate highway as a detour. Not ideal for snakes! Despite making three or so passes of the best stretch of highway, we didn't see a single mammal on the road. However, we did encounter 2 juvenile Northern Pacific Rattlesnakes and 3 Gopher Snakes plus many DOR (dead on road) gopher and rattlesnakes.

Huntzinger Rd. (22:20-22:50)

While the wind was still whipping on Huntzinger Rd, we continued to have mixed success with reptiles and mammals hanging out on the pavement. Our first and only highlights on the road came within the first 10 or so minutes of road cruising when we spotted a small Gopher Snake hanging out on the median. Upon pulling over, we hopped out and immediately spotted a NORTHERN POCKET GOPHER also on the pavement. This guy was having a rough time with the wind and was prone to getting blown across the road a few feet every time the gusts picked up. Later, we had a WESTERN DEER MOUSE run across the road, though we were never able to refind it.

Lower Crab Creek Rd. (23:10-24:00)

Success was immediately apparent upon arriving at the beginning of Lower Crab Creek Rd. I've had kangaroo rats here in the past, and recently, Liam found a handful of other rodents while targeting the rats. So, we were pleasantly surprised to quickly spot a small brown mouse crossing the road about two minutes in. We quickly hopped out and confirmed the mouse as a HOUSE MOUSE. An introduced species, but a new year mammal for both of us! Continuing down the road, our next highlight was a single ORD'S KANGAROO RAT hopping in the sandy scrub along the road. We hopped out to try to get some photos, but it quickly made its way into the understory. No later than a minute or so, Liam spotted a small mouse disappear into a clump

of bunchgrass. I made my way over and peered into the clump where the small mouse was still hunkered down. To our delight, it was the first COLUMBIA PLATEAU POCKET MOUSE of the trip! Somewhere in between rodent sightings, we also had a brief view of a MOUNTAIN COTTONTAIL disappearing into the brush. While a few other presumed Western Deer Mice were seen on our returning pass, our only other highlights on the drive back included a Great Basin Spadefoot (toad), a Barn Owl, and a handful of MULE DEER.

Old Vantage Highway (24:20,01:20)

The final drive back to where we'd spend the night was somewhat slow apart from a large Gopher Snake and a DOR Northern Pocket Gopher. Before finding a spot to sleep, though, we decided to make one more pass at the Old Vantage Highway. With no success on the way out, we were pleased to spot another COLUMBIA PLATEAU POCKET MOUSE sitting in the middle of the road on the way back. It was getting blasted by wind, but was otherwise very cooperative for documentation! Our final mammal of the night was roadcruised only a couple hundred feet from where we were spending the night. This critter was a particularly large, and somewhat unhappy, Northern Pocket Gopher hanging out on the pavement in the road. A great finish to the night!



Columbia Plateau Pocket Mouse on the road along the Old Vantage Highway. You can see the disruption in it's pelage as a result of the heavy winds. 5/2/2025.

Westbound Ryegrass Rest Area (05:45-06:00) SUNRISE

Starting just after sunrise, we spent about 20 minutes scouring the sage around the bathrooms for Townsend's Ground-Squirrel and Sagebrush Voles. Despite a thorough search of the area, all we had was a few new year birds such as singing Sage Thrasher and Brewer's Sparrow. I've had Townsend's Ground-Squirrel at this spot consistently every year since 2022, so I have hopes we simply missed them this time.

Eastbound Ryegrass Rest Area (06:15-06:45)

With no success at the westbound stop, we headed east and stopped at the eastbound Ryegrass rest stop. While I've never seen Townsend's Ground-Squirrel at this location before, a friend of mine reported Sagebrush Voles from this location last Fall. With yet again no success with the target species, we were happy to get good views of multiple LEAST CHIPMUNKS. These individuals were some of the grayest chipmunks I've ever seen which raised the question whether or not they could be Coulee Chipmunks, a recently described species split from Least that inhabits Washington's channeled scablands. However, being west of the Columbia River, I assume this is impossible.

MID-DAY HIGHLIGHTS

The entirety of the remaining daylight hours were spent birding and driving roads that looked decent for American Badgers. However, despite a few interesting birds, very few mammals of interest were seen. Here are what we had for "highlights"

- New trip mammals FOX SQUIRREL and EASTERN COTTONTAIL were seen at Potholes SP. While both introduced, these species were nonetheless nice to add.
- More Mule Deer and more Yellow-bellied Marmots were seen during the drive north to the Waterville area.
- Our best mammal during the daylight hours of the day were a couple heard only WASHINGTON GROUND-SQUIRRELS in the sage just 20 minutes or so north west of Ephrata. We hopped out to take a look at a large adult Western Yellow-bellied Racer that was sunning itself on a remote gravel road, and to our delight heard the distinct, very high frequency call of Washington Ground-Squirrel! I'd seen them further down this road before, but it's always a treat to stumble upon such a localized nearly-endemic Washington state species.

With no success despite a thorough search at an excellent, though undisclosed, Pygmy Rabbit location, we took a short nap as the sun was setting and headed out to roadcruise more with White-tailed Jackrabbit in mind. While both jackrabbits are rare and have very limited ranges in the state, White-tailed is the considerably rarer species with only one Washington state iNat record prior to this year. With this in mind, Liam had stumbled upon one while birding a month

earlier in the Mansfield area, and I had seen scat at a couple locations in Douglas county. One of these locations, Jameson Lake, was a spot we had birded earlier in the day and had successfully found both jackrabbit and Bushy-tailed Woodrat scat. With this in mind, we decided to return to Jameson Lake at night in hopes of catching either species while active.

With just under an hour of driving time to reach the lake from the Pygmy Rabbit spot, we were focused on spotting anything else on the road en route. Much of the drive was through prime sagebrush habitat that I knew had jackrabbits given my success finding scat in the area. With a couple unsuccessful detours on dirt roads through prime habitat, our first “detection” occurred only minutes after turning back on the highway towards Jameson Lake. Perhaps we shouldn’t have taken so long poking around the dirt roads, as an ominous shape on the side of the road proved to be exactly what we both were and weren’t hoping to see. Luck wasn’t on our side for this one, as when we did a U turn and pulled up, it was clear that the very fresh roadkill we had driven by was in fact a mutilated White-tailed Jackrabbit.



White-tailed Jackrabbit foraging alongside the entrance road to Jameson Lake. This individual was intent on keeping us from driving further down the road. 5/3/2025.

Jameson Lake (23:00-24:15)

We arrived at the Jameson Lake entrance road around 11pm and started slowly rolling north towards the main lake. I was using my spotlight to scan from the right side, while Liam was using his thermal to scan the left side. We figured this method was as efficient as it gets, though

we still saw hardly anything during the first 20 or so minutes. It was about half an hour into our road cruise that finally Liam commented on seeing something far up on the left side of the road that looked like a jackrabbit making its way towards us. We stopped and had great views of the WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT slowly hop closer and closer to the car. We continued watching it and collecting documentation for a minute or so before beginning to roll down the road again. The rabbit stayed alongside the road moving up ahead of the car, but after a couple minutes or so it hopped into the sagebrush and vanished. We stopped to thermal and spotlight the spot it had disappeared into but it was nowhere to be seen. Content with our success (Washington mammal #89 for me!), we continued down the road not sure what to expect now. Ten or so minutes passed before I spotted what appeared to be another jackrabbit up ahead of us yet again on the left side of the road. We rolled up to it and, yet again, it started moving up the road with us staying only a handful of yards in front of the car. This time, however, we made a direct effort to get around it. Everytime we pulled up next to it and then rapidly accelerated in an attempt to leave it behind, it started running faster and faster so that it would stay ahead of the car. When we stopped to see if it would run ahead and out of the way, it stopped with us and went into what I assume is a cryptic posture (ears back). Finally, we were able to swerve around it and lose it for good. An excellent problem to have and one of my top mammal encounters in the state! We poked around a bit later in the area we'd seen Bushy-tailed Woodrat scat, but called it a day after having no success. On the way to where we planned to spend the night, we had one Western Deer Mouse cross the road.

5/4

Sunday was largely a travel day for us with pretty much the entire morning through early afternoon spent birding. With our decision to bird the morning along the Columbia River in Okanogan county, it only made sense to make a swing at Cameron Lake Rd too. Cameron Lake Rd is a large rural looping gravel road that encircles a large portion of the plateau positioned on the east side of the Okanogan river valley. This area is an excellent place to see "northern" raptors in winter (Gyr Falcon, Snowy Owl, Rough-legged Hawk) but it is also one of the few places in Washington state where you can see Pronghorn. Also, of note, many people have reported to me they have seen American Badgers while birding along this road, though I have personally never had any success.

Cameron Lake Rd. (10:40-15:00)

We started driving the Cameron Lake loop road in the mid morning, a time I always deem the best time to target badgers. While birding was our main focus and remained our main focus through the whole duration of our time spent on the road, we made sure to keep our eyes peeled for any tan ungulates with distinct white butts. Based on my experience and what I've heard from others, Pronghorn typically only occur along the final, south stretch, of Cameron Lake Rd. As we were starting from the south end, as soon as we crested the plateau it was critical that we kept an eye out for anything that resembled a Pronghorn. Noting a few notable birds for Okanogan county, such as Black-necked Stilt and American Avocet, we continued making our way down the loop. We stopped occasionally to listen or to scan habitat we deemed

good for specific target bird species, until maybe a mile or two up the road. Coming around a bend, I eased on the breaks and glasses a few tan colored shapes distant on my horizon. Despite the poor visibility due to the heat shimmer, it was apparent right away they were PRONGHORN! From what I could make out, it appeared to be two females - one of which was radio collared. It always seems to be a toss up of how many will be around, as in the past I've seen up to 21 here in November (I assume they congregate in the winter) and once I've only seen a single male in July. Happy with our luck, we birded until 5pm or so before parting ways and driving back to our respective homes. A great trip for mammals and a fun opportunity for me to see a few breeding birds in areas I've never seen before.

Happy Mammal-watching and Good Birding,
Alex Sowers