

Western USA trip report, June, 2025.



Somewhat unexpectedly, my partner Tracey had to go to Ontario for family reasons this past month. My son was busy working and spending time with his girlfriend, and my daughter had just started clinical rotations in Vancouver. Which meant that some white space appeared on my calendar, a situation that to me screams, “ROADTRIP”! I packed the evening of May 29 and caught the earliest ferry off Vancouver Island the following morning.

The first mammal of the trip was an introduced Eastern Gray Squirrel by the side of the road on the way to the ferry. The border crossing involved more questions than on previous trips, including such ones as, “What are all those papers in the file there?”, referring to trip reports from mammalwatching.com which I had hastily printed, but was otherwise uneventful. Between North Powder and Baker City some Merriam’s Ground Squirrels appeared by the side of the road, but little else. I arrived in Snake River Birds of Prey Conservation Area in Idaho about 9:00 pm and found a free campsite close to the Twin Falls Dam.



The next morning, I was awake at 5:30 and left shortly afterwards. A cooperative Mountain Cottontail was waiting for me at Deception Point, after which I headed north to Emmett. A first pass along the road north of Emmett about 8:00 am was concerningly free from any wildlife apart from a Sage Grouse, but a second drive along the same road an hour later revealed at least half a dozen Southern Idaho Ground Squirrels, the main target species in the area. I drove on through Payette National Forest to the Lost Lake Reservoir and a spot with an interpretive panel on Northern Idaho Ground Squirrels. Walking the trail here revealed some Columbian Ground Squirrels and a flash of movement which might have been the Northern Idaho GS, but was too brief to tell. Least Chipmunks and Red Squirrels were also in evidence. A call to Matt Miller, patron saint of mammal-watchers in Idaho, resulted in detailed instructions for other potential sites. I drove to the Price Valley where I had a couple of brief views of the Northern Idaho GS, and then a better view as one ran across the road. I also had a brief view of a Yellow-Pine Chipmunk. Flushed with success, I forgot to refuel before entering the Payette National Forest and had to resort to coasting down the hills to make it to the next available gas station, which I'm sure didn't endear me

to the drivers behind me on the highway. Back at the campsite a Western Deer Mouse appeared briefly, as well as a racer.



I had a meet-up scheduled with Matt Miller the following morning. If only every state could have a Matt Miller. Matt is the go-to guy for mammal-watchers wanting to see Idaho's wildlife, a font of knowledge and an exceptionally nice person to boot. I met him at Bowler Park just after 8:00 pm. Bowler Park has a colony of Townsend's Pocket Gophers, so we opened up the entrances to a few burrows and eventually one turned out to house an active and fastidious pocket gopher, giving us a brief view of his head. We then headed over to an area close to Matt's house which held a colony of Northern Pocket Gophers. Again, one of the gophers was very active and soon showed its head near the opening of the burrow. Our final target for the morning was Piute Ground Squirrel in an area west of Boise. Unfortunately, since Matt had last visited the area had been turned into a shooting range. Rightly or wrongly, we figured the folks there might not be receptive to people showing up who wanted to watch and photograph ground squirrels, so we watched the birds at a nearby reservoir for a little and then parted ways. I stopped at the Silver Creek Preserve near Picabo which occasionally has population explosions of montane voles but saw little in the way of mammals.



Entering Craters of the Moon National Park I saw a couple of Yellow-bellied Marmots along the entrance road. A quick hike around the Devil's Orchard trail in the mid-afternoon didn't produce any mammals so I went over to the lava tubes, where several bats were flying around. A return visit to the Orchard Trail revealed several Craters of the Moon Chipmunks as well as a couple of Least Chipmunks. I hiked the same trail after dark and saw eyeshine but the owner disappeared before I could identify it. A Coyote further along the trail was more cooperative. A walk around the campground later that night did not turn up any additional species.



A return visit to the Devil's Orchard trail the next morning produced both Least and Craters of the Moon Chipmunks. I drove to Fossil Butte National Monument in Wyoming, coming across some Wyoming Ground Squirrels on the entrance road to the park. White-tailed Prairie Dogs were apparent along the road inside the park on the way to the picnic area. After a late lunch I headed back down to the visitor centre. A White-tailed Jackrabbit appeared in the parking lot, followed by another and then several more. Several grayish Least Chipmunks also put in appearances. After pitching my tent on adjoining BLM land I returned to the visitor centre about 9:00 pm, finding a Mule Deer and lots of additional jackrabbits.



I awoke shortly after 5:00 the next morning and debated whether or not to get up, as the temperature was below zero. I managed to drag myself out of the sleeping bag and drove to the visitor centre. Walking along the verandah in front of the centre I was jolted out of my daydreams by the sight of a Pygmy Rabbit sitting beside its burrow just below the boardwalk. It allowed a few close photos to be taken then moved away a little. Pygmy Rabbits had not been seen at Fossil Butte for several years, but had reappeared this past winter. A park interpreter with whom I spoke suspected a Long-tailed Weasel had taken out the individuals that previously occupied the burrows close to the visitor centre but had since moved on. I drove back to pack up camp, passing the now familiar suite of ground squirrels, prairie dogs and jackrabbits. A Pronghorn appeared close to the left side of the road and then I noticed something moving on the right. This turned out to be an American Badger with two young, a nice daytime sighting, although a little distant.



I left the park and drove south. The Echo Rest Area in Utah provided a convenient lunch stop, accompanied by lots of Wyoming Ground Squirrels. I arrived at Capitol Reef National Park about 5:00 pm to find the campground full and the interpretive centre closed. Fortunately, I remembered passing a campground on BLM land some distance back and

drove to Sunglow Camping area to snag the last available campsite. A short walk revealed a Cliff Chipmunk, after which I set up camp and then drove back to Capitol Reef. I hiked into Main Wash but saw only some early bats flying around.



On the following morning's drive through the Waterpocket Fold, I saw a Hopi Chipmunk on the road, followed by a couple of ground squirrels just north of the turnoff to Natural Bridges Monument. An additional Hopi Chipmunk was also seen later. The day's drive, through Bear Ears National Monument and Monument Valley was spectacular and I arrived in Flagstaff about 3:20 pm. I met up with Jose Gabriel, well-known to many folks on this site. We walked around the arboretum and then drove over to a nearby forested area, stopping on the way at a small colony of Gunnison's Prairie Dogs that had made their home near the university in a scrap of land by a busy intersection. At the community park, we found a couple of Tassel-eared Squirrels and had a few brief views of Gray-collared Chipmunks. I camped on BLM land in open Ponderosa Pine forest just outside the city.



The air-conditioning in the car had been particularly anemic this trip, an annoyance in the northern Great Basin but potentially fatal in Death Valley, so, after a coffee with Jose, I dropped by a Jiffy Lube to get a new cabin air filter before stocking up on supplies for the next few days. I ended up driving through the Aubrey Valley in the middle of the day and, not surprisingly, saw little on the mammal front. I made it to California City by the evening. California City started out as a social experiment and has ended up about as well as most social experiments do. It was laid out in the 1950's as the third largest city in California by area, but surprisingly few people wanted to live in the Mojave desert, so it now consists of 15 000 people largely living in shacks and broken-down trailers spread over 200 square miles of desert. The main employer is the local federal prison, which I think gives a certain

feel to the town. I headed out to the Desert Tortoise Natural Area, passed by two Sheriff's SUV's. I caught up with the sheriffs stationed outside what looked like a Hell's Angels clubhouse which had fallen on hard times and decided I would drive a bit further before camping. I drove onto some federal land adjacent to the Natural Area and camped beside the sandy track a few kilometres along it. On a walk after dinner, I came across a Kit Fox and a likely Panamint Kangaroo Rat but little else.



I drove back to California City the next morning, seeing a Gopher Snake, several White-tailed Antelope Squirrels and a Desert Cottontail on the way, as well as a California (Beechy's) Ground Squirrel and another Desert Cottontail in the parking lot of the town library. I did some reconnaissance for the night's drives and hiked the trails at the Desert Tortoise Interpretive Centre. I drove to Cameron Canyon, just east of Tehachapi Pass, arriving about 9:00 pm. Walking along the trail for an hour and a half produced Desert Cottontail, Mule Deer, a Coyote and an unidentifiable mouse. I then drove along Neuralia Road, but there was lots of Friday night traffic and no mammals.

I walked the Animal Trail at the Desert Tortoise Natural Area early the next morning, then headed off to the site south of Red Mountain where Venkat had seen Mojave Ground Squirrel last year. Just south of his site, a Mojave Ground Squirrel crossed the dirt road. I drove up and down the road a couple of times, but didn't see any further Mojave Ground

Squirrels. On the drive out, I did see a couple of White-tailed Antelope Squirrels and several lizards, including a horned lizard.

I departed that afternoon for Death Valley, arriving at Furnace Creek Visitor Centre about 3:30 pm in 46 degree heat. Wildrose Campground, at 1250 metres elevation, looked like it would be a more comfortable spot to camp, so I drove back up into the Panamint Mountains, seeing feral donkeys along the way. Wildrose turned out to be lovely, especially considering the price (free), with picnic tables and a clean washroom.

The night's drive, along Emigrant Road, was outstanding. I saw a few Canyon Bats flying before nightfall, a total of 40 Black-tailed Jackrabbits over the space of two hours, a Long-tailed Pocket Mouse, two Desert Woodrats, both Chisel-toothed and Merriam's Kangaroo Rats and a Little Pocket Mouse, along with other rodents glimpsed too briefly to be identified. The sound track at the campsite when I returned included donkeys braying loudly and a couple arguing about one camper's dog, but I slept soundly nonetheless.

I drove to Stovepipe Wells the next morning, seeing Black-tailed Jackrabbits and White-tailed Antelope Squirrels along the way, as well as one small gray mouse by the roadside, (perhaps a young Western Deer Mouse, of which there were a couple of dead ones on the road). Speaking of which, the number of road-killed mammals was surprising considering how little traffic is on the road, but it did allow the opportunity to check some ID's from the previous night.



I visited a couple of the scenic highlights in the park, then retreated to the air-conditioned visitor's centre for several hours, including a nap at the back of the theatre showing a film on Death Valley. I drove back to Wildrose as the temperature reached 47 degrees C, thankful I had put a new air filter in the car for the air-conditioning. There were several Mountain Cottontails around the campsite as I ate dinner, then a parade of Black-tailed Jackrabbits, a Long-tailed Pocket Mouse, Western Deer Mouse, Little Pocket Mouse, and Desert Woodrat on the night drive. The highlight of the drive was actually a reptile, a beautifully patterned black-and-white California Kingsnake just beyond the turnoff to Emigrant Road.



Leaving early the next morning, I crossed into Nevada and drove south to the Spring Mountains, reaching an elevation of about 8 000 feet. I hiked the Lower Bristlecone Trail and saw a couple of Palmer's Chipmunks, then checked out the McWilliams Campground and Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard area, and saw Red Squirrels but no chipmunks. I returned to the trail and walked it for a couple of hours, seeing at least six Palmer's Chipmunks.



Heading north again, I stopped at Beatty, Nevada, where I had gotten gas that morning and chatted with a war veteran tending the yard around the local library. He had mentioned a dinner at the local Seniors' Centre that night, so I stopped in for a meal of barbecued chicken and salad and the opportunity to chat with a diehard Trump supporter. Afterwards I continued north to Tonopah. Feeling grubby and weatherbeaten, I went to the Dream Inn and had a shower and shave before heading out for a night drive. I found several Black-tailed Jackrabbits but little else, perhaps due to the full moon, so gave up and returned to the motel about 11:00 pm.

The next day's drive took me into California. I drove to Saddlebag Lake as the road was fortunately open even though the campgrounds had not yet opened for the season. Hiking over the dam, I saw a Yellow-bellied Marmot and then, on the scree slopes west of the lake, an Alpine Chipmunk. I had planned to walk to Greenstone Lake, but there was lots of

snow on the west side of the lake so I soon abandoned the attempt. I drove down to the Sawmill Walk-in Campground and got some photos of Belding's Ground Squirrels scampering around. I then continued down Tioga Road to the east, stopping at several of the campsites where Panamint Chipmunks were visible. A circuit of the June Lake Loop produced a Coyote with a vole in its mouth and several more chipmunks. I set up camp in an OHV area in the national forest, surrounded by large Ponderosa Pines, then headed to Benton Crossing Road for a night drive. On the way, I pulled in at Crestview Rest Area, which turned out to be a great stop, complete with Yellow-pine Chipmunks, Lodgepole Chipmunks and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels. Benton Crossing Road was quieter than I had hoped it would be, but I did see a Coyote, a couple of Mule Deer, a Great Basin Pocket Mouse, a deer mouse of some sort and lots of Black-tailed Jackrabbits.



I returned to the Crestview Rest Area the next morning and shared breakfast with Dave, an artist and avid fisherman from LA, who I think was entertained by someone going on safari after chipmunks and ground squirrels. A family of very cute baby Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels provided additional company. I drove the Tioga Pass Road and stopped to hike the Dog Lake trail as well as the Tuolumne Grove of ancient Sequoias. Numerous Long-eared Chipmunks were seen on this latter hike, along with some California Ground Squirrels. I drove through the stunning Yosemite Valley and ate supper at Cathedral Meadows, where a couple of Douglas's Squirrels appeared at the picnic site. I drove to Glacier Point for a magnificent sunset view of the Yosemite Valley, then headed south out of the park and into Sierra National Forest. I saw a Black-tailed Jackrabbit and a *Peromyscus* before camping by the side of the road.





I realized the next morning on the way out that I had driven further into the national forest than was necessary and had passed lots of nicer camping spots along the way. Most sites were unoccupied, despite the number of people in the national park. I stopped for supplies in Oakhurst and decided to take the scenic and shorter, but more time-consuming route north over Ebbett's Pass. I stopped at Calaveras Big Trees State Park to see the sequoias, which were spectacular, and also saw California Ground Squirrels, chipmunks and Douglas's Squirrel. I drove around the west side of Lake Tahoe and arrived at Lower Truckee Campground about 6:30 pm. A night hike along the river was exceptionally quiet.

I crossed the Nevada border the following morning to stock up on gas, seeing California and Piute Ground Squirrels along the way, then continued on to Wendel, looking very desolate and half-abandoned in the harsh sun. I had a nap and scouted out possible campsites before dusk, then started driving the Wendel Road. After a few Desert Cottontails and Black-tailed Jackrabbits, I saw my first kangaroo rat at 9:10 pm, and then not another until 10:15 pm. Then lots. Most appeared to be Merriam's Kangaroo Rats, along with at least one larger, pale Desert Kangaroo Rat and several Ord's Kangaroo Rats. I also saw what appeared to be a Western Harvest Mouse, although the habitat didn't look optimal for them. I arrived back at the Honey Lake Wildlife Area about 11:30, set up camp and quickly fell asleep.



The next morning, I drove to the other Wildlife Management Area at Honey Lake, which produced Desert Cottontails, Black-tailed Jackrabbits, California Ground Squirrels and Mule Deer. I stopped for lunch at Lassen Volcanic National Park where Douglas Squirrels were easy to see. The afternoon's drive lay beside the Trinity River, a spectacular river, full of whitewater. I made it to Willow Creek, then drove to Horse Linto campsite, about 20 minutes away, to set up camp. After dinner I struck out on a drive along the Friday Ridge Road. Although the hoped-for Pumas and spotted skunks didn't make an appearance, I saw two American Black Bears, a Common Raccoon, and two Gray Foxes along with the usual jackrabbits, deer and deer mice.

I had condensation inside the tent the next morning for the first time in days, which necessitated some drying out and hence a leisurely breakfast. I passed another Black Bear and a group of Mule Deer on the way back to town and then crossed the Klamath River heading to Fish Lake Campground. A first pass around the campground didn't reveal any mammals, but a second circuit produced the hoped-for Siskiyou Chipmunk. I drove back to Willow Creek and then south to Humboldt Redwoods State Park. After a hike on the Dray-Chancy Grove Loop I continued to Hidden Springs Campground for the night. I did a nocturnal hike, seeing one Woodrat, likely Bushy-tailed.



I drove down the road towards Albee Creek Campground looking for more chipmunks. Walking around the Big Trees area and the campground revealed some California Ground Squirrels, but no Yellow-cheeked Chipmunks. Likewise, no chipmunks appeared at the California Federation of Women's Clubs Grove despite me furiously rustling a bag of chips. I drove north to Redwoods National and State Parks and hiked around Elk Prairie, which produced nice sightings of Elk and Mule Deer but no chipmunks. I camped for the night in the Smith River Natural Recreation Area, down a steep dirt track close to the river.

I drove back to Elk Prairie the next morning and watched a Coyote hunting rodents in the long grass, but again came up empty-handed in the chipmunk department. Heading north, I drove through the Jedediah Smith Redwoods Park, had lunch at Cave Junction and dinner at the Peter Skene Ogden Rest Stop and Scenic Viewpoint. This rest stop combines a picnic area with views over a hundred-metre-deep gorge of the Crooked River and a colony of Belding's Ground Squirrels to boot. I was tempted to stay but wanted to put myself closer to tomorrow's search for Townsend's Ground Squirrels so I pushed on. By midnight I was starting to see little gnomes crawling across the road and figured I should stop before I drove off the road. Fortunately, the Selah Rest Stop soon appeared. I lay out a Thermarest in the car and quickly fell asleep.



I awoke feeling surprisingly rested and continued on to the Eastbound Ryegrass Rest Stop which had lots of Least Chipmunks running around but no ground squirrels. I drove to the next town and turned around to investigate the westbound rest stop. Again, lots of Least Chipmunks were in evidence but nothing else. Giving up, I walked past the restroom and suddenly noticed a Townsend's Ground Squirrel sitting up beside its burrow. I went back to the car for my camera but the ground squirrel scuttled into its burrow as soon as it saw me returning. Fortified by this sighting I decided to try for the Washington Ground Squirrel further east. I drove around the area west of Moses Lake for a couple of hours but it was mid-day now and I unsurprisingly saw nothing. I headed west and arrived back in Vancouver at my daughter's place by mid-evening.

My heart-felt thanks to Matt Miller, Jose Gabriel Martinez-Fonseca and Venkat Sankar for their assistance in planning, locating and identifying various species. As always, please feel free to e-mail me at ibtson@yahoo.com with questions or comments.

Ian Thompson

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List of mammal species seen:

1. Black-tailed Jackrabbit
2. White-tailed Jackrabbit
3. Mountain Cottontail
4. Desert Cottontail
5. Pygmy Rabbit
6. Yellow-bellied Marmot
7. White-tailed Prairie Dog
8. Gunnison's Prairie Dog
9. Columbian Ground Squirrel
10. California (Beechy's) Ground Squirrel
11. Columbia Plateau Ground Squirrel
12. Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel
13. Southern Idaho Ground Squirrel
14. Townsend's Ground Squirrel
15. Belding's Ground Squirrel
16. Wyoming Ground Squirrel
17. White-tailed Antelope Squirrel
18. Mojave Ground Squirrel
19. Piute Ground Squirrel
20. Golden-Mantled Ground Squirrel
21. Least Chipmunk
22. Yellow-pine Chipmunk
23. Alpine Chipmunk
24. Lodgepole Chipmunk
25. Long-eared Chipmunk
26. Siskiyou Chipmunk
27. Palmer's Chipmunk
28. Panamint Chipmunk
29. Hopi Chipmunk
30. Cliff Chipmunk
31. Gray-collared Chipmunk
32. Craters of the Moon Chipmunk
33. Eastern Gray Squirrel
34. Tassel-eared Squirrel
35. Douglas's Squirrel
36. Red Squirrel

37. Northern Pocket Gopher
38. Townsend's Pocket Gopher
39. Ord's Kangaroo Rat
40. Merriam's Kangaroo Rat
41. Desert Kangaroo Rat
42. Chisel-toothed Kangaroo Rat
43. Panamint Kangaroo Rat
44. Long-tailed Pocket Mouse
45. Great Basin Pocket Mouse
46. Little Pocket Mouse
47. Desert Woodrat
48. Western Deer Mouse
49. Western Harvest Mouse
50. Canyon Bat
51. Mule Deer
52. Elk
53. Pronghorn
54. Feral Burro/Donkey
55. Coyote
56. Common Gray Fox
57. Kit Fox
58. American Badger
59. Northern Raccoon
60. American Black Bear