

CENTRAL WASHINGTON

Venkat Sankar, Nicole Haseley, and Alex Sowers
May 30-June 1, 2025 (2 nights)

Nicole and I teamed up with my friend Alex Sowers, a birder and mammal enthusiast currently studying at WSU in Pullman, for a weekend focused on the arid shrub-steppe habitats of the Columbia Plateau in central Washington. Alex has extensive experience with Washington's mammals; he's one of the few other mammal enthusiasts I know with deep expertise in their home region's mammal fauna, and I'd been keen to visit him in Washington since we first corresponded. We had an excellent time!

My top targets were the endemic mammals of the Columbia Basin: Washington and Townsend's Ground Squirrels, Coulee Chipmunk, and Columbia Plateau Pocket Mouse. We also had an eye out for regional specialties that are otherwise difficult to find in WA, such as White-tailed Jackrabbit, Pygmy Rabbit, Northern Pocket Gopher, Ord's Kangaroo Rat, Sagebrush Vole, Northern Grasshopper Mouse, Western Small-footed Myotis, Pallid, Canyon, and Spotted Bats, and American Badger.

Nicole and I spent Friday morning on our own exploring a couple of sites around Spokane. 1.5h (8-9:30AM) at Turnbull NWR did not produce Moose or North American Porcupine (both regular here), though we did see **American Red Squirrel** (*streatori*), 4 **Columbian Ground Squirrels**, a family of 4 **Yellow-pine Chipmunks** (*canicaudus*), ~10 probable **Least Chipmunks** (ssp. unclear), 2 **Elk**, and (nearby) a **Coyote**. In 2 quiet midday hours (11:30-1:30PM) at Mt. Spokane, we saw 3 **American Red Squirrels** (*streatori*) and a **White-tailed Deer** (*ochrourus*), but only a brief, unsatisfying glimpse of the target **Red-tailed Chipmunk**; thankfully its bright orange undertail was distinctive as it darted across the road in the dense forest near the hairpin loop.



Columbian Ground Squirrel and White-tailed Deer in the Spokane area

We met up with Alex around 3PM near Spokane airport and drove to Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area, located in the middle of nowhere in Lincoln County. A large expanse of typical Channeled Scablands, this is prime habitat for the endemic, recently-described (2022), and enigmatic Coulee Chipmunk. Even Alex had never seen this species before despite spending plenty of time in its range – it certainly seems quite low-density and localized. We explored the HQ area for ~2h (4-6PM), seeing several **Mule Deer**, 4 **Yellow-bellied Marmots**, 6 **Columbian Ground Squirrels**, an (introduced) **Eastern Cottontail** hiding under tin, and the highlight – a wonderful **Long-tailed Weasel**. But no chipmunks. We explored surrounding roads for another 2h, where I eventually spotted 2 **Coulee Chipmunks** as we were leaving the area. A lifer for all of us (and Alex's 90th WA mammal!), this distinctive species is really tiny and morphologically similar to Least Chipmunk but completely lacks yellow tones to its fur even in its bright summer coat, with pale gray pelage and well-marked black and white dorsal stripes.



Long-tailed Weasel and the poorly-known Coulee Chipmunk at Swanson Lakes WA

We continued to Lower Crab Creek Rd (adding **American Beaver** en route), arriving around 10PM. Thorough coverage of the road (10PM-12AM) produced **Mule Deer**, 3 **Mountain Cottontails**, 8 **Western Deer Mice**, **Ord's Kangaroo Rat**, and most importantly 2 **Columbia Plateau Pocket Mice**. The latter two species were in the very sandy habitat in the 3mi paved section at the W end of the road. We did not find Northern Grasshopper Mouse here, very rare in WA, though this site represents suitable habitat. The Old Vantage Hwy (12:30-1:30AM) produced 2 more **Columbia Plateau Pocket Mice**, 2 **Western Deer Mice**, and a very cool Desert Night Snake but no Northern Pocket Gopher as hoped, which Alex has seen on previous visits. A visit to a bridge in this area yielded **Western Small-footed Myotis** and ~10 **Yuma Myotis**, all night-roosting. In this area it would've also been good to visit Frenchman Coulee, which has great bat potential (including Spotted Bat).



Western Small-footed Myotis and Columbia Plateau Pocket Mouse

We saw 2 **Yellow-bellied Marmots** and a **Mountain Cottontail** at our campsite in Rocky Coulee and continued to the Westbound Ryegrass Rest Area off the I-90, arriving at 8:30AM. We quickly found 2 **Townsend's Ground Squirrels** (*nancyae*) and 3 **Least Chipmunks** (*scrutator*), only found W of the Columbia River in this region and showing yellowish sides. We continued to Lind Coulee, arriving around 10AM, and spent 2h looking for **Washington Ground Squirrels**. We quickly heard one at close range but frustratingly could not see it (as is typical with this tricky species); thankfully, Alex spotted another distant individual right as the heat picked up. We also saw **Mountain Cottontail** and a roadkill American Mink in this area. After lunch and some rest, we drove to Jameson Lake, arriving around 6:30PM. Despite gusty winds, we saw a huge number of Great Basin Gopher Snakes and Northern Pacific Rattlesnakes on the road, many sadly DOR. Beginning just after sunset (8:30PM), we saw several **Canyon Bats** (localized in WA, and a key target for Alex) well in flight at the S end of the lake and 5 **Common Muskrats**. We also recorded Little Brown Myotis and Hoary Bat here. Driving out on Jameson Lake Rd, we missed White-tailed Jackrabbit (a rare mammal in WA) but were more than compensated with incredible views of **Sagebrush Vole**! A long night drive through Moses Coulee (10PM-12:30AM) all the way to Palisades was pretty quiet, only producing a few **Columbia Plateau Pocket Mice** and **Western Deer Mice**. We had an ear out for Spotted Bat and spotlighted and checked potential night-roosting sites for Pallid Bat, but came up empty on both, only seeing ~5 **Western Small-footed Myotis** in flight. We ended the night at 2:30AM, later than expected as our planned campsite (Ancient Lakes) was on fire! We did however see 2 *Microtus* voles while searching for a campsite near Crescent Bar. Both Montane and Western Meadow Voles (endemic ssp. *kincaidi*) are known from the area, but are extremely difficult to separate externally. Based on habitat (not in a marsh) and coloration (not dark brown), I'd lean toward Montane Vole.

Due to the very late finish last night, we had to abort a planned early start (5:30AM) in the Beezley Hills for Pygmy Rabbit, only beginning the search around 8:30AM. Despite spending 2h walking through tall sagebrush, we had no luck with the rabbits, but did enjoy prolonged views of **Washington Ground Squirrel**. The Beezley Hills are a great area for this species, and Alex has seen them here before. We also saw a baby **Coyote**. We left the area around 11AM and drove 2h back to Spokane, where we parted ways with Alex and flew home. Overall, a short but excellent trip with great teamwork and far more special sightings than any of us had expected.



Sagebrush Vole, Least Chipmunk (*scrutator*), Townsend's Ground Squirrel (*nancyae*), and a poor record shot of Washington Ground Squirrel

SPECIES LIST:

1. Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) [introduced]
2. Mountain Cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*)
3. American Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*)
4. Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*)
5. Columbian Ground Squirrel (*Urocitellus columbianus*)
6. Townsend's Ground Squirrel (*Urocitellus townsendii*)

7. Washington Ground Squirrel (*Urocitellus washingtoni*)
8. Yellow-pine Chipmunk (*Neotamias amoenus*)
9. Coulee Chipmunk (*Neotamias grisescens*)
10. Least Chipmunk (*Neotamias minimus*)
11. Red-tailed Chipmunk (*Neotamias ruficaudus*)
12. American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*)
13. Ord's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys ordii*)
14. Columbia Plateau Pocket Mouse (*Perognathus parvus*)
15. Sagebrush Vole (*Lemmiscus curtatus*)
16. Common Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*)
17. Western Deer Mouse (*Peromyscus sonoriensis*)
18. Western Small-footed Myotis (*Myotis ciliolabrum*)
19. Yuma Myotis (*Myotis yumanensis*)
20. Canyon Bat (*Parastrellus hesperus*)
21. Long-tailed Weasel (*Neogale frenata*)
22. Coyote (*Canis latrans*)
23. Elk (*Cervus canadensis*)
24. Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)
25. White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)