

A Long Weekend in California, August 2025 – Trip Report



An opportunity presented itself at the end of August to pop down to California for a four-day weekend and I hate to say “no” to opportunities like that. Venkat and Nicole were available and interested in visiting some of their favourite haunts and a plan was quickly formulated to visit a few different habitats while circumnavigating the Sierra Nevada.

Space was available on the 3:00 pm MS Coho ferry from Victoria to Port Angeles. A number of women dressed in similar unicoloured dresses and sporting identical hairstyles were on board, perhaps for the filming of an episode of “Sister Wives, The Maritime Edition”. A Harbour Seal was the first mammal seen on the trip. I made it to Eugene, Oregon, about 11:15 pm, slept in the back of the car for a few hours at a roadside rest area, and continued south. Driving on Highway 66 through the Klamath-Siskiyou National Monument I saw Douglas’s Ground Squirrels and a chipmunk, likely Siskiyou. Klamath National Wildlife Refuge was filled with both water and waterfowl.

The first mammal I saw in Lava Beds National Monument was a Mountain Cottontail by the side of the road. I cooked dinner quickly before the impending thunderstorm struck, watching some Mule Deer as they wandered through the campground. The campground here was lovely – spacious and occupied by only about four other groups of campers. I left just before nightfall and saw a Black-tailed Jackrabbit, then the first of numerous California Kangaroo Rats. Only one species of kangaroo rat occurs here, making identification far less taxing than is usually the case in California.

About 9:30 pm I entered Valentine Cave and startled a Bushy-tailed Woodrat, a creature I had always wanted to see. They occur in Canada, but despite lots of time in suitable habitat I had never managed to bump into one. The woodrat ran off, but had returned by the time I finished my tour of the cave and I was able to get photos on the way out. At least one Townsend's Big-eared Bat was flying around, in addition to other unidentifiable bats. Back on the road, the kangaroo rat action had increased tremendously. I also managed to see at least two Great Basin Pocket Mice and a Western Deer Mouse before I called it a night about 10:30.



The sky had cleared by the time I awoke the next morning and I packed up quickly and departed. I saw several Mule Deer and Douglas Ground Squirrels, as well as a Coyote hunting in a field by the side of the highway. In the appropriately-named town of Weed I called Venkat and made arrangements to meet in Santa Nella in a few hours' time. Not heard of Santa Nella? There actually is no saint named "Nella". In the best English tradition, *Rancho de Centinela* (Sentinel Ranch) was anglicized into the current name. The great thing about Santa Nella at present is that it is basically a giant truck stop where one can leave a vehicle unobtrusively parked for a few days. Venkat, Nicole and I fueled up with the ubiquitous meal of a California road trip, burritos, and headed south on I-5. We arrived at Sand Canyon Road near Tehachapi shortly after 9:00 pm. The area was much less windy than when I had visited a few months previously and noticeably more productive. We found three or four Agile Kangaroo Rats, a California Pocket Mouse, several Western Deer Mice, a Black-tailed Jackrabbit and at least one Western Harvest Mouse. We continued on to Cameron Canyon and added Desert Cottontail, Desert Woodrat and lots of Panamint Kangaroo Rats as well as

species we had seen earlier in the evening. By 4:00 am we were running out of steam so we headed over to a hotel in Tehachapi for a few hours' sleep.





The next morning started somewhat late and it was noon by the time we got away. After a surprisingly good Thai meal in Ridgecrest we headed up to the Fish Creek Campsite on the Kern Plateau, seeing California Ground Squirrel, Merriam's Chipmunk, Lodgepole Chipmunk and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel. The campground is magnificent, consisting of sites widely spaced amongst large trees. We had a nap until 7:00 or so and then went out for the night's drive, which was extremely productive and showcased the value of Venkat's extraordinary local knowledge of bat roosts and other likely productive spots. Species seen included a Douglas Squirrel seen just before departure, Gray Fox, Canyon Bat, California Myotis, California Pocket Mouse, Bryant's Woodrat, Pinyon Mouse, Brush Mouse, Large-eared Woodrat, a Long-tailed Vole, Gambel's Deer Mouse, Agile Kangaroo Rat, Mountain Cottontail, Long-legged Myotis, Yuma Myotis, Panamint Kangaroo Rat, Western Harvest Mouse, Mule Deer, Black-tailed Jackrabbit and Southern Grasshopper Mouse. We drove back to the campsite about 2:00 am. I was worried about disturbing other campers but need not have been, as the family in the neighbouring campsite was loudly chopping wood when we arrived and the dirt bikers were discussing how gnarly their day's rides had been in exhausting detail.



We left about 10:30 the next morning, seeing a Merriam's Chipmunk and then a Panamint Chipmunk on a Pinyon Pine. After a lunch stop for burritos in Bishop we continued north, reaching Lee Vining about 4:30 for ice cream at Mono Cones and then driving up Tioga Pass. We found Least Chipmunk and Belding's Ground Squirrel and saw a Yellow-bellied Marmot along May Lake Road. A stakeout for Mountain Pocket Gopher was unsuccessful - we found lots of fresh burrows but were unable to see the occupants.

By now it was dark and we started checking under bridges for roosting bats. California Myotis was the first species seen, followed by sightings of Spotted Bat and Mexican Free-tailed Bat in flight over Ackerson Meadow. A nearby bridge revealed roosting Fringed Myotis, Long-legged Myotis, Yuma Myotis and a single Big Brown Bat. We continued up to Crane Flats, finding Pinyon Mouse and a very tame young Gambel's Deer Mouse. Driving down towards the Yosemite Valley we noticed a snake on the road, a Rubber Boa. One of my most wanted North American reptiles was finally at hand! Incredibly, this was followed by another outstanding sighting. A Fisher was climbing through the brush on a steep hillside to the left of the road. It's not often Venkat sees a lifer species in California, so this was truly a cause for celebration. The carnivore sightings continued with a Gray Fox, a Bobcat, and, in the lower Yosemite Falls area, a Coyote. We stopped and went for a walk, finding two Big-eared Woodrats, lots of Brush Mice, Western Bonneted Bat and some Mule Deer. Back in the car, we left the park and drove through the Merced Gorge. The campground at Dirt Flat was closed due to fire restrictions so we continued along the main road to McCabe Flat campground, coming across a further five Gray Foxes and, best of all, a family of three Ringtails.







Given the long weekend, McCabe Flat was absolutely jam-packed with tents. The tag on campsite 3 had expired, so we paid our \$10.00, put up a new tag and somewhat cheekily pitched tents in front of the other tents at the campsite. Given that it was 3:30 in the morning, I figured we could sort out the situation in the morning if necessary.

I awoke shortly after 7:00 and wondered for a second if I had awoken en el otro lado, given the chorus of voices speaking in Spanish. By 8:30 it was getting warm, so we packed up quickly and headed out, arriving back in Santa Nella by 11:30 am. My car was fortunately intact and, after a quick burrito al pastor, I said goodbye to Venkat and Nicole and started the long drive north. I stopped at a rest stop following a tip about Allen's Chipmunk, but the rest area was closed and, given the number of CCTV cameras in evidence, I didn't push my luck. I figured I would keep driving until I got sleepy and then camp for the night. Except I wasn't that sleepy and kept thinking of reasons to keep going, like avoiding the Monday morning traffic in cities along the way. I ended up driving through Seattle at 3:15 am, happily noting that this was the least traffic clogged I had ever seen the interstate. From there it really wasn't that far to the Vancouver ferry I told myself, so I kept driving and arrived at the Tsawwassen ferry terminal at 5:10 am, after 16 hours and 10 minutes of essentially non-stop driving. I caught the 7:00 am ferry, fell asleep on the grungy floor of the ferry, and awoke just as we were pulling into the Swartz Bay ferry terminal and a short drive from home.

In all, it was a fun and productive weekend. Yosemite provides fantastic wildlife sighting opportunities in some of the most awe-inspiring scenery on earth. The plot-lines in the Netflix series *Untamed* may be easily forgettable, but the star of the series, Yosemite itself, really is that

beautiful. Many thanks to Venkat and Nicole for their enthusiastic company and unflagging good humour.

Ian Thompson

Victoria, BC

Mammal species seen:

1. Yellow-bellied Marmot – *Marmota flaviventris*
2. Douglas’s Ground Squirrel – *Otospermophilus douglasii*
3. California Ground Squirrel – *Spermophilus beecheyi*
4. Belding’s Ground Squirrel – *Spermophilus beldingi*
5. Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel – *Spermophilus lateralis*
6. Douglas’s Squirrel – *Tamiasciurus douglasii*
7. Merriam’s Chipmunk – *Tamias merriami*
8. Lodgepole Chipmunk – *Tamias speciosus*
9. Panamint Chipmunk – *Tamias panamintinus*
10. Least Chipmunk – *Tamias minimus*
11. ? Siskiyou Chipmunk – *Tamias siskiyou*
12. Great Basin Pocket Mouse – *Perognathus parvus*
13. California Pocket Mouse – *Chaetodipus californicus*
14. California Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys californicus*
15. Agile Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys agilis*
16. Panamint Kangaroo Rat – *Dipodomys panamintinus*
17. Western Harvest Mouse – *Reithrodontomys megalotis*
18. Western Deer Mouse – *Peromyscus sonoriensis*
19. Brush Mouse – *Peromyscus boylii*
20. Pinyon Mouse – *Peromyscus truei*
21. Gambel’s Deer Mouse – *Peromyscus gambelii*
22. Southern Grasshopper Mouse – *Onychomys torridus*
23. Bushy-tailed Woodrat – *Neotoma cinerea*
24. Big-eared Woodrat – *Neotoma macrotis*
25. Desert Woodrat – *Neotoma lepida*
26. Bryant’s Woodrat – *Neotoma bryanti*
27. Long-tailed Vole – *Microtus longicaudus*
28. Mountain Cottontail – *Sylvilagus nuttallii*
29. Desert Cottontail – *Sylvilagus audubonii*
30. Black-tailed Jackrabbit – *Lepus californicus*
31. Spotted Bat – *Euderma maculatum*
32. Mexican Free-tailed Bat – *Tadarida brasiliensis*
33. Townsend’s Big-eared Bat – *Corynorhinus townsendii*
34. California Myotis – *Myotis californicus*
35. Canyon Bat – *Parastrellus hesperus*
36. Long-legged Myotis – *Myotis volans*

37. Yuma Myotis – *Myotis yumanensis*
38. Fringed Myotis – *Myotis thysanodes*
39. Big Brown Bat – *Eptesicus fuscus*
40. Western Bonneted Bat – *Eumops perotis*
41. Mule Deer – *Odocoileus hemionus*
42. Bobcat – *Lynx rufus*
43. Coyote – *Canis latrans*
44. Common Gray Fox – *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*
45. Ringtail – *Bassariscus astutus*
46. Fisher – *Martes pennanti*
47. Harbour Seal – *Phoca vitulina*