

Trip Report: Idaho and Oregon

By Ellen Linton

I have been practically drooling over Idaho since I got into mammalwatching. The chance to see four different species of ground squirrels in the surrounding areas of Boise simply makes it a top tier destination for squirrel lovers such as myself. However, I thought it would be an unfortunately long time until I was able to visit despite my proximity to the state. But after my friend Bailey and I began discussing going on a road trip together, a plan began to form in my mind. What started as a road trip to Oregon featuring a few mammals began to grow as I added Idaho to the itinerary and learned more about the potential mammals in Oregon. And so, a lovely trip was born! All the information in this trip goes by location with my sightings for the area recorded underneath.

Elko, Nevada:

Elko is not a top tier mammalwatching destination at the moment, although I personally believe it has good potential. I'd taken a short trip here last September with some decent success. One mammal from Elko we had been unable to see was the **Wyoming Ground Squirrel**. In my mind, ground squirrels are like the Goldilocks of the mammal world. If it's too cold or too hot they're out of sight. September was a bad time for ground squirrels and so I hadn't made an effort to see them. But now we were visiting in late May, perhaps the most ideal time for ground squirrel watching as that is the time of year they consider just right. There are a few records on Inaturalist from the area of **Wyoming Ground Squirrel**, three of which are in a similar area. Our first attempt started at Lamoille Highway, specifically the part of the road between two churches. However, despite there being a record here, I found the vegetation fairly thick, and the road was

quite busy. We struck out here and continued to Clubine Road. To get to Clubine, simply continue down Lamoille Highway and then take a left at Crossroad Lane, before finally taking a right onto Clubine. It is a dirt road that goes through farmland. This road had a bit of traffic but was much less busy. After about a minute driving down the road, on our right side I spotted ground squirrel burrows. We stopped and waited for about ten minutes but there was no activity around the burrows. Since we were on a tight schedule, we would have to make one last attempt at South Fork Reservoir nearby and see if we could spot one walking around before we had to leave Elko to begin our drive to Craters of the Moon National Monument. But after we had turned around and began driving back up the road, Bailey spotted something strange in the road. As we got up to it, I realized it was a **Wyoming Ground Squirrel**! In Elko, it's fairly easy to identify this species as no ground squirrel it overlaps with here is similar looking. The orange all over it's flanks, legs, and chest make it a dead giveaway. We saw the squirrel for about a minute after he ran away from the road and then stood up checking out the landscape in some grass by the road. Unfortunately, I couldn't get a photo, but it was still a great encounter!

Craters of the Moon National Monument:

We visited here to try and track down the recently split **Crater Chipmunk**. We immediately saw a chipmunk once we drove into the campsite sitting on top of a rock. I couldn't get a good look at the colors with the distance, so I attempted to get closer, but it took off. We kept looking but didn't see any more chipmunks. I've decided to record this as a **Crater Chipmunk** because it was on the rocks in the craters while the **Least Chipmunks** in the area should only be in the sage. I also want to note that this area was really cool, and Bailey and I had an amazing time despite the lack of chipmunks.



Craters of the Moon National Monuments

Silver Creek Preserve:

We stopped at this lovely location on the way to Boise so that we could see a **Columbian Ground Squirrel**. We saw some immediately in the field next to the visitor's center. They were super cute and very active. Bailey and I went into the visitor's center and were treated to a tour of the, thankfully, air-conditioned building. We'd got there just in time because after we left the visitor's center to continue on to Boise the squirrels were all gone, probably due to the intense heat that day. **Columbian Ground Squirrels** are outrageously cute, and we had a great time here.



Columbian Ground Squirrel

Boise:

I had high expectations for Boise, and I can happily say it exceeded them! I must thank Matt Miller who was extremely helpful with all his information before the trip and for taking Bailey and I gopher watching! I've compiled all the places I visited under Boise, but all are fairly close to Boise. First was Mud Flat Road where I was trying for **Merriam's Ground Squirrel**. I had to drive pretty far down the road well past the point of it turning from gravel to dirt. I saw several squirrels, most of which were **Belding's**. All the squirrels were very skittish which made it hard to identify them. There was one at the very beginning that looked different from the other **Belding's**, as it was lighter and smaller than the others I saw. This was right for a **Merriam's**, and I was sad I couldn't find another one as I didn't get a good look. I stayed a couple of hours to try and see another one but all the other squirrels I identified were **Belding's**.

Next I went looking for the newly split **Snake River Plains Ground Squirrel**. The Snake River Birds of Prey Conservation Area was a good spot to look for them but the day I tried was unsuccessful. The first day there was an intense wind blowing. I drove the main road in Snake River and walked Dedication Point Overlook but nothing. On advice from Matt Miller, we tried for them at Indiana Creek Truck Stop on our last day but didn't find any, which was probably due to an intense heat wave hitting Boise.

One of the highlights of the trip for me was learning the art of gopher watching. Essentially, get a stick or pole and hunt down fresh gopher burrows, and then repeatedly poke the burrow until you find a tunnel and remove the dirt by sticking it in there. This doesn't harm the gophers, but it does annoy them and bring them to the surface to plug the hole up. We were looking for two species of gophers: **Northern** and **Townsend's**. We tried for **Townsend's** first at Bowler Park and they were very tough. Matt said they're usually easier to see but for whatever

reason on this particular day they were not coming out easily. We opened up a lot of burrows and had a few that had been sealed and so we reopened them and waited. However, many would not seal the burrows a second time and the ones that would were pushing the dirt ahead of themselves preventing me from seeing the animal. Three hours later, we had still not seen the gopher. I didn't mind the wait, but I could sense that Bailey was slowly being driven into gopher insanity despite her trying to be a good sport. I'd found a very active burrow that had been sealed a few times as I kept removing the dirt, but I still couldn't see it. So, I decided to lay down and shove my face as far into the hole as possible and I stared down it. It was a few minutes of my face in this hole before a flash of fur showed itself when it came to seal the burrow. Success! With that, we left triumphantly, and Matt took us to the **Northern Pocket Gopher** spot in his neighborhood. We opened a few burrows and pretty quickly had an active one which Matt then reopened. I watched it for a while and then a **Northern Pocket Gopher** showed well in the hole before sealing it, allowing me to see this adorable cutie! This was much quicker than the **Townsend's**, thankfully, because it was very hot. Thanks again to Matt for being so helpful and being great company!

On our last day, we stayed in Boise the whole day despite checking out of our hotel in the hopes that the evening would bring cooler temperatures and hopefully **Idaho Ground Squirrels**. Staying all day did allow us to stumble upon a fabulous apothecary but the temperatures did not decrease as I'd hoped. We tried along Van Deusen Road but there were no squirrels 😞 This became an even bigger blow when Matt told me that Ian Thompson had seen many **Idaho Ground Squirrels** the very next day.



From left to right: Bailey, me, and Matt

Portland:

Every location visited for mammalwatching purposes in Portland is compiled in this section. I had found a seemingly good location for **American Mink** on Inaturalist that I wanted to investigate. It was in Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge, so I visited early in the morning in hopes of tracking one down. Oaks Bottom has two entrances to the refuge, and I went to the wrong entrance initially where the only mammal I saw was a **Brush Rabbit**. I was relieved I could go to the other entrance as this spot was very sketchy, and the parking lot had multiple signs warning you that valuables should not be left in your car. Portland in general was very unnerving, especially when Bailey and I arrived at our hotel and witnessed a man using crack in

the park next to the hotel! Anyway, the other entrance was located by a park in a nice neighborhood so that was more comfortable to me. From there, to get to the spot for the **Mink** I went to the JEH trail to then get onto the Bluff Trail. I walked along the Bluff Trail watching the water but no **Mink**. I did see a **North American River Otter** off of the viewing platform a few minutes down the trail. I went back in the evening and saw the otter again in the same spot. Upon further reflection, the mink records had decreased recently on Inaturalist, and part of the reason may have to do with the otter. In the park at the entrance there were **Eastern Gray** and **Eastern Fox Squirrels**. I also saw **Western Gray Squirrels** along the actual trails.



North American River Otter



Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge

I visited Emerald Estates Park; a location where Jon Hall had seen **Camas Pocket Gopher**. Armed with a large stick and my newly acquired knowledge of gopher watching, I headed off. Unfortunately, all the burrows I found were quite old. There were a few that seemed a bit fresher, so I opened them, but no gophers showed up to seal the holes. Side note but there were plenty of people walking along the path and I'm sure it was very perplexing to see me wondering around with a big stick and staring very intensely at the ground.

Bailey and I visited the Oregon Zoo during our visit, and I noticed several fresh looking gopher burrows on the lawn across from the zoo. I had us return later to try and see a gopher. I presume these were **Camas** although I couldn't be sure as I didn't see one. Things looked promising as one burrow was literally moving as we approached it. However, these gophers proved to be just as shy as the **Townsend's**. We had several burrows reseal holes after we opened them, but they refused to seal them a third time. One came back for a third time, but it pushed the dirt ahead of itself and then never returned after I reopened it. This time the technique of shoving my face in the hole did not work.

The last mammal location I visited in Portland was the Bird Alliance of Oregon. There were a few **Townsend's Chipmunk** records from here, so I decided to give it a try. However, there were no chipmunks during my visit. I asked a volunteer who said chipmunks were extremely common but unfortunately not on the day I visited.

Yachats:

We visited Yachats just to add a night on the coast to our itinerary. However, upon arriving to our accommodation, the Dublin House Motel, we saw many gopher burrows in the lawn surrounding the accommodation and presumably these were **Western Pocket Gophers**. There was one burrow that was definitely active as a second one had been built next to the original one we saw overnight. However, despite how fresh these burrows were and how many there were, no gophers showed up to plug the holes. We theorized that it being so overcast meant the gophers couldn't see light coming into their tunnels and therefore didn't know that they needed to reseal their burrows. This is definitely a location I'd like to come back to because I think on another day this could be a very good spot for **Western Pocket Gopher**.

Oak Grove Rest Area:

We visited in hopes of tracking down a **Gray-tailed Vole** as Jon Hall had done the year prior. However, we had no rodent activity walking around and the only burrows we found seemed abandoned. Bailey and I did make quite a pair walking around the rest area with giant spotlights, especially when we were investigating near the bathrooms.

Crater Lake National Park:

This was the highlight of the trip for me as it was incredibly gorgeous! Truly epic and the coolest place I've visited so far. The mammalwatching wasn't very exciting though. We saw some **Mule Deer** in the parking lot of the lodge and a **Least Chipmunk**. We also heard some people at the lodge talking about seeing **Black Bears** on the road up to the lodge. We were targeting **Pacific Marten** but unfortunately we didn't see one. The most interesting thing we saw was a **Badger** on the snow in front of the overlook of Crater Lake at the lodge. It was shuffling along, and I was quite surprised to see one as they don't seem to be common in the area.



Crater Lake National Park

Oregon Caves National Monument:

This was the last mammalwatching location of the trip and I was feeling despondent. I had missed many mammals by this point and felt the only way for the universe to make it up to me was a **Siskiyou Chipmunk**. One the walk up to the caves we saw an adorable **White-tailed Deer** fawn which we spent some time cooing over. The caves were closed when we visited but no matter because the trail behind the visitor's center was open. It was full of bugs, with some being the fun kind of bug like butterflies, and others being the very annoying stinging kind. We walked around for a while without a chipmunk, and I grew more and more depressed. But then I noticed something scrambling along the trail near to the visitor's center and was excited to

realize it was a **Siskiyou Chipmunk**! This chipmunk was high on my wish list and a happy find considering all my misses on the trip. Aside from the chipmunk, we also saw a **Douglas's Ground Squirrel** on the drive out, which was another nice find. Bailey also had a ball getting butterflies to land on her fingers. It was her Disney Princess era.



White-tailed Deer

Conclusion:

This was both my and Bailey's first time traveling without our families. We were nervous about it, but we had an incredible time. The trip went off without a hitch and any problems we encountered were sorted out quickly. As for the mammals, there was a lot I missed. The weather was against me in Boise, and I got unlucky with both **Camas** and **Western Pocket Gophers**, **Townsend's Chipmunk**, and **Gray-tailed Vole**. My spot for **Mink** was excellent a few years ago but now not so much. Despite that I'm still pleased with how the trip went. I saw some incredible things and met some wonderful people. A huge thank you to Matt Miller for all his incredible advice and for taking the time to guide us on a gopher safari. And a thank you to Jon Hall for putting me in contact with him. And of course, a thank you to Bailey for being a great sport and never complaining, even when I dragged her out to multiple truck stops looking for voles and squirrels, forced her to spend three hours in the blazing sun staring into gopher holes, and brought her onto a bug infested trail for chipmunks. Thanks for reading and if you have any questions feel free to email me at ellenlinton1212@gmail.com 😊

Trip List (Lifers in Bold):

1. **Wyoming Ground Squirrel**
2. **Crater Chipmunk**
3. **Columbian Ground Squirrel**
4. **Merriam's Ground Squirrel**
5. Belding's Ground Squirrel
6. **Townsend's Pocket Gopher**
7. **Northern Pocket Gopher**
8. Brush Rabbit
9. Eastern Gray Squirrel
10. Western Gray Squirrel
11. North American River Otter
12. Eastern Fox Squirrel
13. Mule Deer
14. Least Chipmunk
15. American Badger

16. White-tailed Deer
17. **Siskiyou Chipmunk**
18. Douglas's Ground Squirrel