

California Coastal Mammalwatching

By Bryan Kao

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Mission: Marine Megafauna

In the past few months I revisited California with a greater focus on wild mammals, with the primary goals of photographing more pinnipeds and getting more cetacean lifer ticks. My mission was to make up with improved views of two species I had seen before but left me wanting: **Northern Elephant Seal** (*Mirounga angustirostris*), of which I had only seen two captive rescued pups at the Marine Mammal Care Center in San Pedro in 2023; and **Gray Whale** (*Eschrichtius robustus*), which I had once briefly seen moving through Los Angeles Harbor in 2018, before my mammalwatching years. Therefore, I wanted proper encounters and good views of these iconic and marvelous marine megafauna, must-see for mammalwatchers visiting California.

First, I went with friends to San Diego for Christmas 2025, mostly for captive lifers in zoos and aquariums but we also made room for whale watching and tide pool exploration. I followed up with a February 2026 weekend road trip to San Simeon, Big Sur, and Monterey in search of my main target species, successfully getting nice views. Since I'm also an avid birder, this trip report also mentions some of the more noteworthy non-mammals I encountered on my trips.

San Simeon

As a kindergartner watching nature documentaries on Animal Planet, the sheer might and brutality of brawling elephant seal beachmasters really made an impression on me, like two sumo wrestlers colliding in a ring. Then in high school, I learned in AP Biology that the Northern Elephant Seal was almost hunted to extinction, having recovered to Least Concern from fewer than thirty individuals, including only one male progenitor! With so many fascinating stories about them from both natural history and human history, this pinniped became my favorite member of Carnivora, and I knew I had to see a big male seal in the wild someday. My dream came true when I cruised along California Highway 1 along the coast and stopped in the tiny town of San Simeon. This place is known for media mogul William Randolph Hearst's Hearst Castle and the feral population of Plains Zebra (*Equus quagga*) established from a founder population released from his private zoo during the Great Depression. I didn't see any of those, nor did I really make time to search. However, the convenient Elephant Seal Vista Point in early February more than exceeded my expectations! Seldom have I had better views of a wild mammal.

Pulling into the parking lot overlooking the Pacific Ocean, I already found what I was looking for. A handful of adult males, though far from the largest, were sporadically bobbing up and down, spyhopping and splashing in the surf. I presumed these were the ones who had lost their battles and failed to breed this season, though they could still have a chance, as sneaker males tend to stealthily mate with females beneath the beachmasters' notice. One of these medium-sized bulls majestically surfaced and hauled out onto a tiny parcel of sand under a cliff, meeting a female and a pup. Apparently he had strategically stashed his mate and offspring on a

hidden sandy inlet far from the main beach, perhaps a clever way to protect his family from being crushed by larger bulls!

On the main beach of the preserve's observation deck, I was treated to a breathtaking panorama straight out of the nature documentaries I loved in my childhood. Every corner from the surf to the sand was absolutely inundated with these massive pinnipeds floppily strewn about, from the humongous beachmasters I had hoped to see the most, to the sunbathing short-snouted females, to plenty of newborn pups with dusky fur coats nursing from their mothers. A few weanlings in gray hairless coats were already present, their mothers having already returned to sea. Most of the seals were constantly flicking sand onto their backs with their formidable flippers, the main method they used to keep cool. Others, mostly females and their young, had found some debris-littered puddles, remnants of recent rainstorms, and they were wallowing placidly in the shallows. The air was permeated with a primeval marine stench like a muskier fish market, reminiscent of both fish and land mammals.



During the winter, rookeries are completely plastered with elephant seals of all sizes and ages, with plenty of newborns and some weanlings.

Although I was too late in the season to witness any bloody battles between the males, it was still amazing to see some old, battle-scarred survivors rear up, curl their snouts, and bellow out gurgling, bubbling roars for all to hear their pompous, bombastic might.



A bull Northern Elephant Seal places the tip of his proboscis in his mouth for more resonance in his roars, much like a French horn player sticking his hand in the bell of his instrument.

To my delight, other mammals were very easy to spot at this site, too! Ubiquitous around any patch of California coastal land, from lawns to cliffs, were **California Ground Squirrels** (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*), with spotted dappled coats, broad bushy tails, and alert, inquisitive dispositions. Unafraid of humans, I suspected that many tourists have been feeding them against park rules. Also lurking in the bushy hedgerows on the side of the boardwalk opposite the elephant seal rookery was a lifer I had missed out on in other parts of California, a cautious **Brush Rabbit** (*Sylvilagus bachmani*), endemic to coastal regions of western North America. This wary bunny, distinguishable from other cottontails by its small size, short ears, and dark coat, spent most of its time darting behind low foliage to avoid birds and people.



This California Ground Squirrel boldly approached me on the boardwalk trail.



Shy and secretive, Brush Rabbits prefer shaded chaparral scrubland with thickets to hide in.



The *Black Turnstone* (*Arenaria melanocephala*) is a rocky outcrop-loving shorebird that forages by, you guessed it, turning stones.



Brewer's Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) are a common sight around North American waterways. This is a male, with a piercing gaze from his white eye.

Around the beaches at dusk, I also saw numerous unidentifiable **vesper bats** (Vespertilionidae) fluttering about overhead and foraging for airborne insects.

Monterey

Renowned for its world-famous Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey is a key locale for marine biology research. With deep-sea abyssal canyons running along the seafloor rather close to the land, it is a prime location for migratory cetaceans passing through and a reliable place to spot Gray Whales in winter and spring, transient Orcas (*Orcinus orca*) in late spring that come to prey on Gray Whale calves, and Blue Whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) in summer. My goal was to find the elusive Northern Right Whale Dolphin (*Lissodelphis borealis*), which sporadically but unpredictably shows up in massive pods up to two thousand strong to devour bait balls. Monterey Bay Whale Watch, which claims to be the original whale watching company in Monterey's Fisherman's Wharf, has had a track record of finding these "flying eyebrow" dolphins a couple times a month in winter, and frequently in spring.

Unfortunately for me, luck was not on my side. The one day I went didn't yield any Northern Right Whale Dolphins, as the boat crew decided not to go so far offshore. One crew member said my target species tended to appear farther off the coast in areas of strong upwelling, accompanied by Pacific White-Sided Dolphins (*Aethalodelphis obliquidens*). Instead, they spent all of four hours pursuing and getting close views of Gray Whales on their southbound migration to Baja California. The first few sighted in coastal waters off of Big Sur proved to be skittish and elusive, diving down after mere fleeting views. Only near the end of the tour did the crew settle upon a more curious pod, offering excellent views of spouts and flukes. Besides Gray Whales, the only other mammals I saw in Monterey Bay that morning were several **Southern Sea Otters** (*Enhydra lutris nereis*) drifting near the wharf and between the bay's buoys, and an abundance of **California Sea Lions** (*Zalophus californianus*), mostly females, huddling beneath a pier and on top of buoys. After the boat ride, I found an inlet park with some boulders where **Pacific Harbor Seals** (*Phoca vitulina richardii*) were hauled out and sunning themselves. As Monterey Bay is the only place on Earth with reliable iNaturalist pins for Northern Right Whale Dolphins, it looks like I have no choice but to go back there again someday to get it as a lifer!



Dorsal view of a Gray Whale.



When sunlight hits a Gray Whale's spout, it can make for a captivating rainbow!



Side view of a Gray Whale's scarred, calloused fluke.



This dapper *California Common Murre* (*Uria aalge californica*) came close to the boat.

Point Lobos State Natural Reserve

Named after sea lions and not literal wolves (the original Spanish name was *Punta de los Lobos Marinos* - Point of the Sea Wolves), Point Lobos State Natural Reserve is a popular hiking destination south of Monterey. It features pine forests, sea cliffs with magnificent views, and kelp forests that are part of the Point Lobos State Marine Reserve and the Point Lobos State Marine Conservation Area.

From the rocky cliffs of the coastline I saw a raft of Southern Sea Otters, floating specks bobbing up and down in the waves. A team from the Marine Mammal Center went to check on one lone otter that was wandering on a sandy beach, but by the time they got there it had already dove back in the water. Sleeping California Sea Lions covered the tops of big rocks in the distance like snowcaps on a mountain, and Pacific Harbor Seals perched atop inshore boulders in sequestered coves. However, my goals here were to find small land mammals - there's many iNaturalist pins here for **Western Gray Squirrel** (*Sciurus griseus nigripes*), California Vole (*Microtus californicus*), and more Brush Rabbits. I only had a couple hours, and had to leave the park before sundown, so unfortunately I did not have the chance to encounter the vole and the rabbit here. Good thing I already found a Brush Rabbit at San Simeon!

Having done prior research, my impression of Western Gray Squirrels was that they were far more skittish and shy than their Eastern Gray or Fox Squirrel counterparts. At the entrance to the park I asked a staff member what trails they are typically sighted on, and he pointed me to all the trails with pine trees and pinecones. I spent an hour and a half traipsing around all the forested trails and asking fellow hikers in English and Spanish if they've seen squirrels or *ardillas*. Nobody did. Interns told me to look for squirrels closer to the beach, but I knew undoubtedly they were referring to California Ground Squirrels with that kind of habitat. Luckily, as I was returning to the trailhead without anyone nearby, I glimpsed a bushy gray tail behind some pine trunks and logs at a distance. Far away, it was my lifer Western Gray Squirrel, scampering around and foraging among the foliage, albeit too distant for a focused photo. Still a success. The only land mammal providing a good view there was a **Columbian Black-Tailed Deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*) doe. However, the birds were far more cooperative.



A coastal view at Point Lobos State Natural Reserve.



The forest canopy on the hiking trails.



Fellow hikers weren't actually particularly enthused to see this Columbian Black-Tailed Deer.



A gorgeous *Steller's Jay* (*Cyanositta stelleri carbonacea*) drinking from a puddle.



Large and loud, *Band-Tailed Pigeons* (*Patagioenas fasciata monilis*) roost in barren treetops.



Gregarious flocks of *American Bushtits* (*Psaltriparus minimus minimus*) forage in coastal shrubs.

Morro Bay

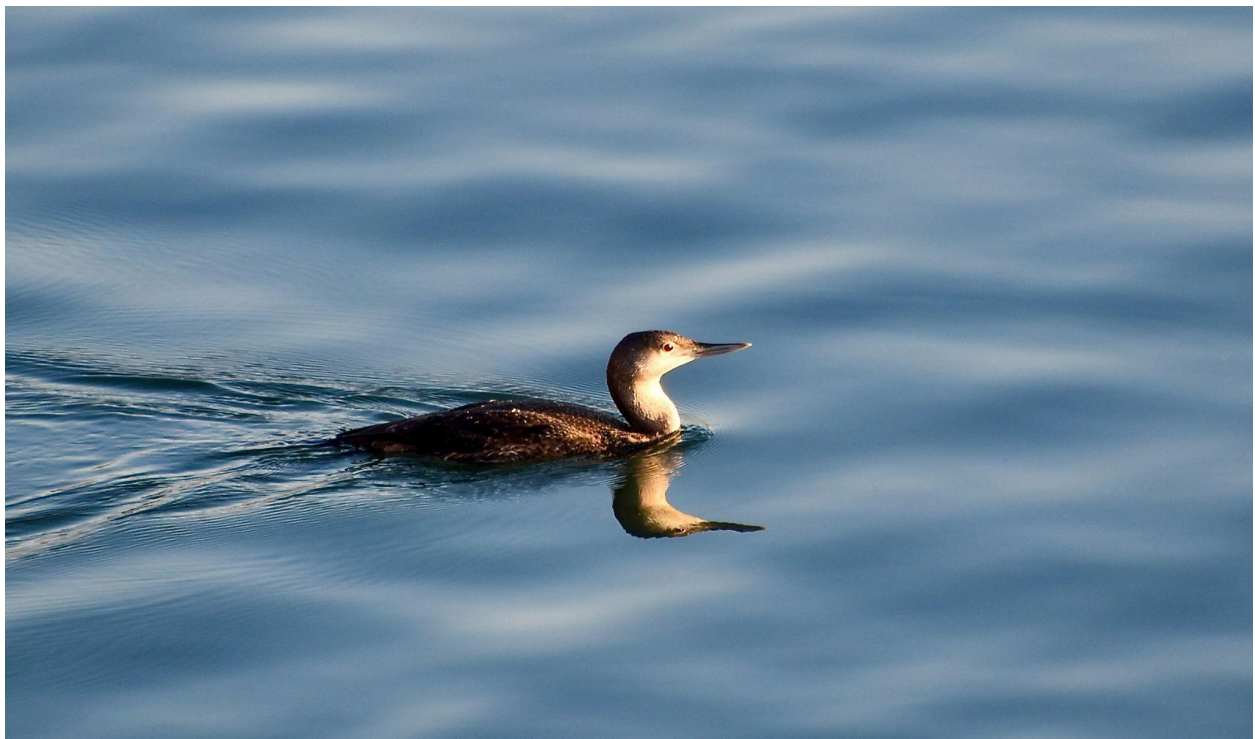
For an even better view of Sea Otters, I drove south to Morro Bay, a scenic coastal town. *Morro* is Spanish for hill, and this bay's view of an immense volcanic plug, Morro Rock, doesn't disappoint. Historically, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built an artificial harbor in the natural bay for a calm place to dock commercial and small crafts, linking Morro Rock to the mainland with a breakwater. This town's main industries are tourism and fishing, and there's plenty of touristy seafood restaurants from upscale to no-frills right on the docks. But when it comes to mammalwatching, a T-shaped pier here provides unparalleled close views of Southern Sea Otters, which drift around on their backs and pass by the dock, leaving the remains of their half-eaten sea urchins floating in the harbor. A mother and her nearly-adult pup floated very close to me. By dusk, the otters prepare for bed and entwine themselves in kelp, right next to sailboats moored to the marina. For a species that once almost went extinct due to man's greed for its fur, it sure was heartening to see populations adapting as urban wildlife. This site also had California Sea Lions; I saw some females swimming in the distance, closer to Morro Rock.



The scenic Morro Rock at sunset.



A Southern Sea Otter at sunset eating dinner and wrapped in kelp, in front of a sailboat.



A Red-Throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) in winter plumage cruising past the otters.

San Diego - Mission Bay

Mission Bay is an artificial bay and municipal park complex built in San Diego, near the San Diego International Airport, for the sake of recreational activities. SeaWorld San Diego is right by here, and the beaches, piers, and marinas offer lots of sports such as surfing, wakeboarding, jet skiing, sailing, roller skating, and skateboarding. The week of Christmas, I went with avid birder Yusuf Jassim and his brother Imran on a morning tour with Legacy Whale Watch. It was their first time going on a whale watch and they were very excited to search for wild cetaceans, and I was curious what I could add to my lifelist. Having already seen Gray Whales and Humpback Whales among the rorquals, I felt embarrassed that I hadn't seen any members of genus *Balaenoptera* yet, but ironically already got all other members of that family. Another target Yusuf and I really wanted was the **Eastern Pacific Long-Beaked Common Dolphin** (*Delphinus bairdii*), a handsome dolphin restricted to the west coast of North and South America. I had previously missed out on it in Long Beach (see my Los Angeles trip report from Fall 2025), as all my photos of Common Dolphins from there came up short-beaked (*Delphinus delphis*).

Although that week San Diego was beset with several floods and rainstorms, and the sky was severely overcast the morning of our whale watch, the marine life still turned up that day! After leaving the marina with several expected sightings of California Sea Lions, an hour out at sea the tour guide suddenly announced “**Fin Whale!**” (*Balaenoptera physalus*). We turned our heads towards the stern of the boat to glimpse the black back and iconic tiny sickle fin rise up twice, then dip down out of sight. Unfortunately this “Greyhound of the Sea” lived up to its reputation and disappeared too quickly, too far away for photos, but at least we met one of our goals, meeting the world’s second-largest mammal! The boat crew gave up trying to relocate the leviathan and we moved on to spend the next hour surrounding ourselves with an epic pod of Eastern Pacific Long-Beaked Common Dolphin, including some juveniles and calves. What an amazing view! Finally, on the way back to the inlet of Mission Bay, in the final hour of our tour we encountered a small pod of **Pacific White-Sided Dolphins**, one of which dove down right in front of the bow. A great but unphotographable view. Three cetaceans and one pinniped made for a successful whale watch experience for us and a great first trip for my friends.



The Eastern Pacific Long-Beaked Common Dolphin (*Delphinus bairdii*) was declared a full species in 2024. Gregarious and playful, pods of over a hundred strong made the water look like it was boiling, and they rode the bow and wake of our vessel in a cinematic experience.



One of the male California Sea Lions greeted us as we returned to the marina waters.



One of the notorious “pirate birds,” the *Pomarine Jaeger* (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) robs gulls and terns of their caught fish.



An acrobatic diver, *Cocos Booby* (*Sula brewsteri*) males have white faces.



Graceful in flight, the *Black-Vented Shearwater* (*Puffinus opisthomelas*) travels surprisingly close to the San Diego shoreline for a pelagic tubenose bird. Photo by Yusuf Jassim.



The *Reddish Egret* (*Egretta rufescens dickeyi*) hunts small prey in mudflats. First photo by Yusuf Jassim.



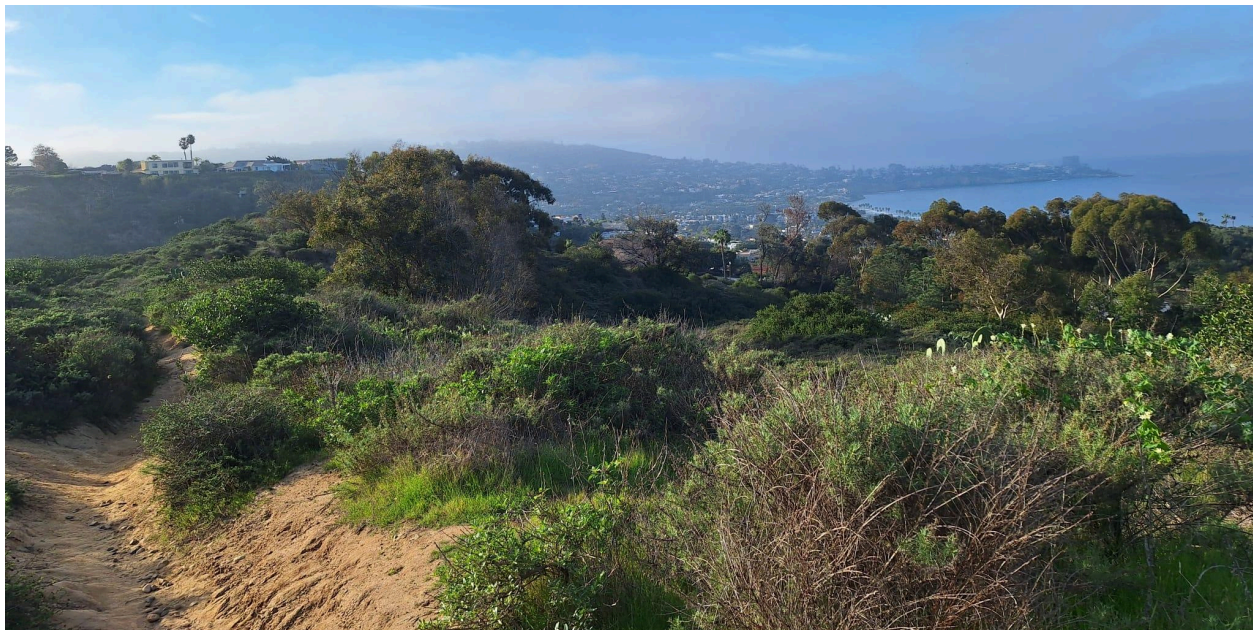
The *Marbled Godwit* (*Limosa fedoa beringiae*) is the largest godwit and an adorable sight.



The *Long-Billed Curlew* (*Numenius americanus*) uses its sickle bill to grab crabs out of mud.

La Jolla

A luxurious seaside community and popular tourist attraction, La Jolla, San Diego is a gorgeous place with sea cliffs and plenty of tide pools for marine biology adventures. Some notable landmarks here are the University of California, San Diego, and its excellent Scripps Institute of Oceanography, which maintains the public-facing Birch Aquarium that displays excellent exhibits of live coral, seahorses, and local California fishes and invertebrates, including many rarities. I met with Yusuf, Imran, and San Diego wildlife artist, illustrator, and naturalist Sam Scälz (<https://www.facebook.com/ScalzNatureArtist/>) to explore the tide pools at low tide, to fruitful results. We also enjoyed seeing an array of shorebirds. When it comes to mammalian wildlife, the sea cliffs of the Children's Pool are notable haul-out zones and rookeries for rotund, relaxed Pacific Harbor Seals, which congregate and raise their pups on a sandy beach with several observation decks, as well as raucous and bellicose California Sea Lions, which cluster along the tops of big rocks. Undermining the foundation of the cliffs, though, are the resident population of California Ground Squirrels, whose tunneling and burrowing could one day collapse some of the notable promontories.



View from the tranquil scrubland hillside trails on the sea cliffs above the coves. Great birding!
Photo by Yusuf Jassim.



View from the Children's Pool tidepool at low tide, with mussels galore. Photo by Yusuf Jassim.



California Ground Squirrels were friendly at La Jolla, and tourists broke rules to feed them.



During pupping season, this scenic beach in the Children's Pool is fenced off and converted into a viewing station for Pacific Harbor Seals.



California Sea Lions squabbled and dueled in the surf. Photos by Yusuf Jassim.



Black and blue *Brandt's Cormorants* (*Urile penicillatus*) perform a charming courtship dance.



Highly migratory, *Hudsonian Whimbrels* (*Numenius hudsonicus rufiventris*), an elegant curlew are a fine sight.



Fearless and bold *Heermann's Gulls* (*Larus heermanni*) sport bright red beaks and white heads.



A female *Taiga Merlin* (*Falco columbarius columbarius*) taking off from her perch.



A deft-handed beachcomber picked up this crafty *California Two-Spot Octopus* (*Octopus bimaculoides*) and we watched it change color and slither its way back into the tide pools. Second photo by Yusuf Jassim.



Woolly Sculpins (Clinocottus analis) camouflage well among algae in tide pools.



Striped Shore Crabs (Pachygrapsus crassipes) sequester in caves and crevices at low tide.



The *Starburst Anemone* (*Anthopleura sola*) is a ubiquitous wavy sight in California tide pools.



Dictyota cyanoloma is a brown algae with a beautiful iridescence.

San Diego Zoo Safari Park (including Bonus Captive Mammals)

Yusuf, Imran, and I went to San Diego Zoo Safari Park to enjoy the tram ride and view their epic collection of mammals, especially their Platypus and Nilgiri Tahr, as well as some hoofstock species that have become very rare in zoos worldwide. The only wild mammal species we encountered was a herd of **Southern Mule Deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus fuliginatus*) browsing on the hills as viewed from the safari tram. According to staff, the space between the safari field exhibits is a reliable place to see these cervids. One male even hopped into the Asia Plains exhibit and basically became part of the park's captive collection!



The Southern Mule Deer ranges from southern California to northern Baja California, spanning the border.



The gorgeous Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*), which I deem the “Panda of Goats,” isn’t even displayed in any public zoo in its native India. San Diego Zoo Safari Park has been breeding these caprines in its Asian Plains field exhibit.



San Diego Zoo Safari Park is the last place to see Nubian Red-Fronted Gazelles (*Eudorcas rufifrons laevipes*) outside Africa.



For a clear view of the Duck-Billed Platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*) at San Diego Zoo Safari Park, it is best to visit after dusk on a day when the park is open for extended hours, so the lights are on in the nocturnal house exhibit.



A showy wild bird, the *Allen's Hummingbird* (*Selasphorus sasin sasin*) boasts an orange gorget.

San Diego Zoo (including Bonus Captive Mammals)

Although the world-class San Diego Zoo, one of my favorite zoos of all time, provided excellent views of its bounteous captive mammal collection, I don't have much to say about here in terms of wild mammals. But Sam, Yusuf, Imran, and I spent the whole day exploring the extensive bird and reptile collections. Outside the zoo I ran into an introduced **Fox Squirrel** (*Sciurus niger*) and after dusk I encountered a bold little **House Mouse** (*Mus musculus*) in front of the cheetah exhibit.



The Allen's Swamp Monkey (*Allenopithecus nigroviridis*) is adapted for a semiaquatic lifestyle.



The endangered Speke's Gazelle (*Gazella spekei*) is endemic to the Horn of Africa.



The Southern Gerenuk (*Litocranius walleri walleri*) is famous for its browsing prowess.

San Diego - Other

Yusuf and I also went birding one morning near Balboa Park in a neighborhood called South Park (yes, that is its name) to find some birds he sought out on iNaturalist. We met all our targets there and left satisfied!



Left: The *California Gnatcatcher* (*Polioptila californica*) is endemic only to southernmost California and the Baja Peninsula. Right: The *California Thrasher* (*Toxostoma redivivum*) digs for food in leaf litter with its curved bill. Bottom: Anna's Hummingbirds (*Calypte anna*) are common in the American West but always a delight to see! Photos by Yusuf Jassim.

Final Note:

If I had to make a “Big Five” mammal list of five iconic marine mammals in California that tourists should see, I’d count Gray Whale, Northern Elephant Seal, Southern Sea Otter, California Sea Lion, and Pacific Harbor Seal. Would you switch up any of these species for others?

Mammal Species Count:

Wild lifer, Total lifer

1. **Northern Elephant Seal** (*Mirounga angustirostris*)
2. **California Sea Lion** (*Zalophus californianus*)
3. **Pacific Harbor Seal** (*Phoca vitulina richardii*)
4. **Southern Sea Otter** (*Enhydra lutris nereis*)
5. **Gray Whale** (*Eschrichtius robustus*)
6. **Fin Whale** (*Balaenoptera physalus*)
7. **Eastern Pacific Long-Beaked Common Dolphin** (*Delphinus bairdii*)
8. **Pacific White-Sided Dolphin** (*Aethalodelphis obliquidens*)
9. **Mule Deer**, including both **Columbian Black-Tailed Deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*) and **Southern Mule Deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus fuliginatus*)
10. **California Ground Squirrel** (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*)
11. **Western Gray Squirrel** (*Sciurus griseus nigripes*)
12. **Fox Squirrel** (*Sciurus niger*)
13. **House Mouse** (*Mus musculus*)
14. **Brush Rabbit** (*Sylvilagus bachmani*)
15. **Vesper Bat sp.** (*Vespertilionidae*)

Mammal Order and Family Count:

1. Artiodactyla
 - a. Cervidae
 - b. Balaenopteridae
 - c. Delphinidae
2. Carnivora
 - a. Mustelidae
 - b. Otariidae
 - c. Phocidae
3. Lagomorpha
 - a. Leporidae
4. Rodentia
 - a. Sciuridae
 - b. Muridae
5. Chiroptera
 - a. Vespertilionidae

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