Baja California Sur

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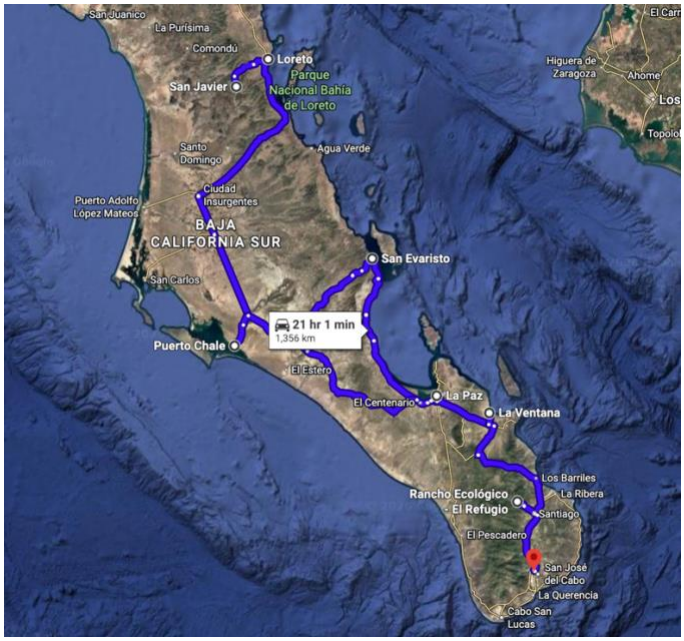
Despite living in CA nearly my entire life, I'd never visited Baja California. Over 1200km long, this impressively rugged and scenic peninsula encompasses numerous life zones over nearly 10 degrees of latitude with several unique habitats, particularly in the state of Baja California Sur (BCS). The neighboring waters of the Pacific Ocean and Gulf of California are some of the richest on Earth, with a huge diversity of wildlife including 30+ species of marine mammals. Many offshore islands contain a host of endemics, primarily in the Gulf of California off Bahia de los Angeles, Loreto, and La Paz. Despite having much lower mammalian diversity than mainland Mexico, the quality of mammals in Baja California is very high – it seems to be a particularly good place to see many charismatic species and holds several spectacular endemic mammal taxa. I'd just defended my PhD thesis and was due for a celebration, so with that in mind Nicole and I teamed up with our friend Juan Cruzado for yet another Mexican mammal adventure.



A rough map of our travels in Baja California Sur (plus Isla San Jose & Isla Espiritu Santo)

TRAVEL ADVICE

This trip was the most logistically complicated I've done in Mexico to date, so I've divided this section into 2 pieces, focused on travel logistics and mammal watching. Please note that this information primarily applies to Baja California Sur, as I've never visited the state of Baja California (BC), which comprises the peninsula's northern half.

Logistics

<u>Safety & security</u>

BCS is totally stable and unlike many parts of Mexico, can be considered completely safe for independent exploration. Historically, there have been very few narco incidents

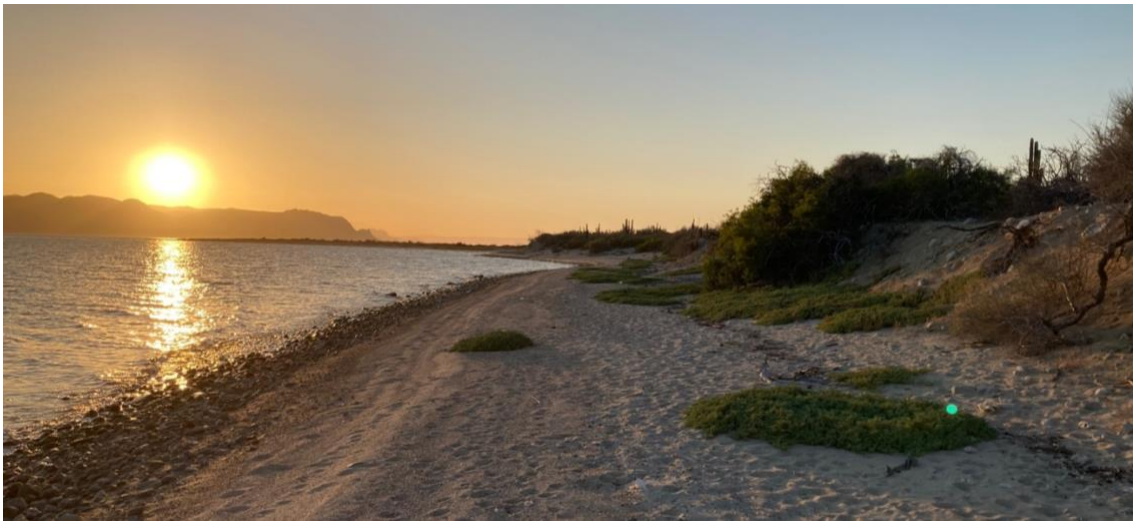
in BCS, and even the U.S. State Department does not enforce any travel restrictions on government employees in this area. This is not the case in the northern state of BC, where there are security issues in urban areas between San Quintin and the border.

Language

As always in Mexico, Spanish is preferred for communication, though I found English a lot more widespread than usual, especially in the Cape region (Los Cabos to La Paz) and Loreto. You could likely get by on it alone, even on an independent trip, unless you went to remote areas. Culturally, many places really felt like a mix of SoCal and Mexico.

Money

BCS is bloody expensive! Hotel and even at times food (in restaurants) prices were pretty similar to what I pay at home in CA, which was a real sticker shock for me compared to the rest of Mexico. While whale watching trips and boat charters (for camping on islands) are less than they would be the US, keep in mind the costs can really add up if you're trying to visit all the best sites. You'd likely be able to get cheaper rates for some trips if you ask around boatmen at the docks (your mileage may vary…), but even still this is not a place for a budget trip. Most operators want to be paid in pesos (and don't take credit cards), so make sure you have a steady supply in hand – ATMs are readily available in urban areas, with the notable and odd exception of La Ventana. In this case, you have to drive 15min to the ATM (Banorte) in Los Planes.



Sunset on an isolated beach on Isla San Jose

Driving

In general driving conditions in BCS seemed easier than those elsewhere in Mexico (this is second-hand, as Juan did all the driving, as usual). Highways were generally traffic free and even city streets were less chaotic and congested than I usually expect. Unlike elsewhere in Mexico, there are very limited toll roads in Baja, so be mindful of typical traffic hazards on Mexican free roads like speed bumps (*topes*), potholes, livestock, etc. while driving. This is especially true off the main Trans-Peninsular Highway (MX-1). Driving at night, even for long distances, is fairly safe security-wise, but ought to be approached with care for these other reasons.

With the exception of the Cape region, which has a more concentrated road network, the rest of the BCS has a very simple set of roads. The fast and well-maintained Trans-Peninsular Highway (MX-1) connects major towns like La Paz, Ciudad Constitucion, Loreto, and Guerrero Negro. Secondary paved roads and gravel highways of varying condition travel off MX-1 to smaller settlements, and are usually correct on Google Maps. Given the scarcity of settlements in Baja, be prepared for long distances without gas or services even on major roads. Travel to remote areas is quite time-consuming, involving very rough dirt tracks; fortunately, this is largely unnecessary from a mammal watching perspective.

The mountainous interior of BCS has crappy 4WD roads and several historic missions (here, San Javier)

Car rental

A light SUV (or any passenger car with decent clearance) is sufficient for visiting most of key mammal sites of BCS between Los Cabos and Loreto – I've listed exceptions below. Keep in mind, though, that if you want to go off the beaten path and traverse the mountainous spine of the peninsula, you will need a 4WD vehicle for those very rough, rocky dirt roads. We rented with Alamo (at SJD airport), who had fairly reasonable rates, relatively speaking. For just $10/day extra, they upgraded us to a GWM Tank, a fairly capable 4WD vehicle that proved useful on a few occasions.

Accommodation

Hotels are easy to find in towns, though prices usually seemed a lot higher than those elsewhere in Mexico. Camping is legal, easy, and usually safe in BCS, and seems to be a great alternative to cut costs. You can do so on public land (preferably out of sight of settlements or busy roads) or on private land (e.g., ranches), with owner permission.

Boats & islands

Unless you are only doing a short trip to tick the mainland endemics, most visits to Baja will likely involve a lot of boat trips. I divide these boat trips into 2 classes: whale watching and island visits.

Conventional group whale watching trips (like those you'd take elsewhere in the world) are largely only available in season for Humpback, Blue, and Gray Whales; these trips do not target, and are unlikely to find, any other species, and I know little about them. To target rarer cetaceans or for most whale watching at all outside the months of Nov-Apr,

you will likely need to charter your own boat. In the Cape region and Loreto, many fishing operators are branching out into ecotourism and are fairly knowledgeable about the marine mammals. A private 6-hour trip with such operators will generally run in the range of MX6000 (~350USD). There are also more expensive options, with English-speaking marine biologist guides – though since everyone is in radio contact, you would likely all be looking at the same whales, and I doubt they know the rare species better.

Huge pods of North-eastern Pacific Long-beaked Common Dolphin (*Delphinus bairdii*) are a common sight in the Gulf of California. Can someone please come up with a better name for this species?!

The logistics for island visits are more complicated. Many islands (notably Espiritu Santo/La Partida, Coronados, Monserrate, and Santa Catalina) are located within national parks, and you are required to take a certified guide with you. You cannot visit or camp independently. Visits to these sites are best organized through a tour company, or a boat captain permitted to operate in the park. At Espiritu Santo, there are a huge range of options available ranging from cheap day-trips (not recommended for mammal watching) to ultra-expensive “glamping” (with private chefs, walk-in tents, etc.). We found that the most budget-friendly option was to go with local tour companies, who would provide the boat & crew, while we brought all our camping gear and provisions. Other islands (e.g. San Jose, Cerralvo), are possible to visit more cheaply if you can hitch a ride on a fishing boat and camp, since they are not formally protected. In general, I would leave an extra day in your itinerary if you are visiting multiple islands to allow for some flexibility in case trips need to be moved due to weather/sea conditions.

Insular habitats of BCS: Isla La Partida (L) and Isla San Jose (R)

A mammal watching strategy for Baja California

The Baja California peninsula has a fair number of mammalian specialties, but planning a trip to find them all is very complicated for two reasons: logistics and taxonomy. On the taxonomic side, the species-level arrangement of Baja's mammals seems to be in constant flux. Many disjunct and highly distinctive species that were described decades ago, both on the mainland and adjacent islands, have been lumped in recent years with common, widespread species following increasing adoption of the phylogenetic species concept. However, most of these studies reached their conclusions using only genetic data (often solely based on mtDNA) and completely ignored marked differences in the morphology, ecology, and biogeography of these taxa. As a result, my impression is that the taxonomic arrangement of many of Baja's mammals continues to be in debate – particularly given the dire conservation status of many island endemics – and I would not be surprised if many of these forms become re-split in the future.

To ease the process for others planning trips to Baja, I'll outline the region's key endemics and provide my recommendations on a strategy to find them.

<u>Baja California</u>

This northern state has just 3 currently-recognized endemic mammal species: San Quintin Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys gravipes*), San Pedro Martir Mole (*Scapanus anthonyi*), and Vaquita. The sites for each – San Quintin, PN Sierra San Pedro Martir, and San Felipe – are all theoretically accessible within a long weekend's trip from San Diego, but very far from southern Baja. The former seems fairly straightforward to find, while the latter two are very difficult. The Sierra San Pedro Martir also holds two more forms, previously considered endemic, Mearns's Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus* [*douglasii*] *mearnsi*) and 'Miller's' Myotis (a dwarf form of *Myotis evotis*). Little Desert Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus arenarius*), endemic to the Baja California peninsula, also occurs at San Felipe and San Quintin. Most other mainland species are easily seen in southern CA.

Little Desert Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus arenarius*)

In the Pacific, Isla Cedros holds distinctive subspecies of Brush Rabbit (*cerrosensis*) and San Diego Pocket Mouse (*anthonyi*; formerly a full species); ~30km further offshore, the Islas de San Benito hold colonies of Guadalupe Fur Seal. Both sites can be accessed via a 2-day (overnight on Islas Cedros) boat trip from Bahia Tortugas; you would need a solid boat capable of handling rough seas well. If you're only interested in the fur seal, it would be much easier to see it on California pelagics. Fur seals (and often, Cuvier's Beaked Whale) used to be easy to see on multi-day shark diving trips to waters surrounding Guadalupe Island, though these trips have stopped indefinitely.

The Gulf of California side of BC is less interesting than that of BCS. Two endemics (*Neotoma insularis* and *Peromyscus guardia*) are now considered extinct, while the San Lorenzo Mouse (*Peromyscus interparietalis*; now lumped under strong evidence with Cactus Mouse) and San Esteban Mouse (*P. stephani*) are very challenging to access. Large colonies of Fishing Myotis roost on Isla Partida Norte and Isla El Pescador, off Bahia de los Angeles, though the species is more efficiently seen off Loreto in BCS.

Espiritu Santo Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus* [*leucurus*] *insularis*)

<u>Baja California Sur</u>

BCS has only ~90 mammal species, but has higher endemism than the northern half of the peninsula due to complex geography of the Cape Region and Sierra de la Giganta. On the mainland, 4 extant endemic mammals are universally recognized: Eva's Desert Mouse (*Peromyscus eva*) and Dalquest's (*Chaetodipus ammophilus*), Cerralvo (*C. siccus*), and Little Desert (*C. arenarius*) Pocket Mice. A fifth, Lower California Rice Rat, may be extinct, though I'm not so pessimistic… The small, pale nominate ssp. of Long-legged Myotis (also endemic) will likely be split, while the distinctive, endemic Baja California Rock Squirrel and Peninsular Myotis are currently ssp. of California Ground Squirrel and Cave Myotis, respectively. There is also the unique, pale 'Vizcaino' Kangaroo Rat (*D. simulans peninsularis*), endemic to fog deserts of the Pacific coast. All these mammals can be seen on an (intense) 4-night trip from Los Cabos/La Paz to Loreto. Fishing Myotis can be included easily via a day-trip to Isla Coronados from Loreto. Baja and Spiny Pocket Mice, Ticul's Desert Shrew, California Leaf-nosed Bat, Pocketed Free-tailed Bat, Western Yellow Bat, and perhaps Western Spotted Skunk are

easier to see in this region than elsewhere. Unique forms of California Chipmunk (ssp. *meridionalis*) and Pronghorn (ssp. *peninsularis*) are found in the RB el Vizcaino, while the crest of the Sierra de la Laguna holds disjunct endemic subspecies of Pinyon Mouse and Ornate Shrew; both areas are quite time-consuming to access.

Whale watching can be added to the above itinerary readily. Dwarf Sperm Whale is regular off Ensenada de Muertos from May-Aug on days with flat calm seas. Tours from nearby La Ventana to the Cerralvo channel can produce Bryde's Whale, Common Killer Whale (Eastern Tropical Pacific ecotype), and Sperm Whale at this season as well. Blue Whales are seen off Loreto from Feb-mid Mar, while Common Killer Whale and Short-finned Pilot Whale are reportedly frequent Nov-Dec. Feb-mid Mar is also the peak window for seeing Gray Whales close-up in lagoons along the Pacific coast of BCS. The most famous place is Laguna San Ignacio, in the RB el Vizcaino, and very distant from the other sites mentioned; Puerto Chale, however, is another good option and more efficiently added to the above sites.

Peninsular Myotis (*Myotis* [*velifer*] *peninsularis*) [Juan] and 'Vizcaino' Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys simulans peninsularis*)

Many interesting mammalian taxa are endemic to islands in the Gulf of California: I'll outline the most important ones here. The remarkable Black Jackrabbit (*L.* [*californicus*] *insularis*, though it may be split again) is readily seen on Islas Espiritu Santo and La Partida, alongside endemic forms of White-tailed Antelope Squirrel (formerly a full species, *A. insularis*) and Ringtail (ssp. *saxicola*). The distinctive San Jose Brush Rabbit (*Sylvilagus* [*bachmani*] *mansuetus*) and the rare Insular Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys* [*merriami*] *insularis*), both likely to be re-split, are endemic to Isla San Jose. Guadalupe Fur Seals haul out NE of the island on the Islas las Animales. Isla Santa Catalina (a.k.a. Isla Catalana) and Isla Monserrate can be visited via a (likely expensive) 2-night, boat-supported camping trip from Loreto; these islands hold *Peromyscus slevini*, the most interesting of Baja's island deermice, and the pretty *P. caniceps*, respectively. Landing on Catalina (as of 2020) requires a formal research permit from the PN Bahias de Loreto, which even Juan couldn't get. For mammal watchers keen to see Baja's island endemics, I'd prioritize these sites. *P. avius* is currently endemic to Isla Cerralvo, though this species may also occur on the mainland (like *Chaetodipus siccus*). Two more

endemic *Peromyscus* species are found on the much more remote Isla Tortuga (*P. dickeyi*) and Isla Santa Cruz (*P. sejugis*); a purely genetic approach would suggest subspecies status for both, though neither has yet to be lumped as they are highly endangered and very morphologically divergent. Lastly, Isla Coronados has a distinctive subspecies of *P. fraterculus* formerly called *P. pseudocrinitus*.

California Leaf-nosed Bat (*Macrotus californicus*) and Eva's Desert Mouse (*Peromyscus eva*)

Mammal watching tips

When to visit

Terrestrial mammals of BCS can probably be sought anytime from mid-March through October, and many species can likely even be seen year-round. So, the decision mainly comes down to targets at sea. If Blue and/or Gray Whales are a priority, I'd recommend the tail end of the season in March to allow for warmer weather (= higher mammal activity) on land. For a hardcore mammal watching trip involving islands and attempts for rare cetaceans, mid-May through mid-June is probably best. Marine waters are often very calm, improving the odds of rare cetacean sightings and safe crossings to islands, and terrestrial mammal activity is very high. The only exception was *Peromyscus*, which seemed very scarce on the Gulf of California coast of BCS; I don't know if they estivate, or if it was just a bad year. Another option would be the post-monsoon in October, which would have high rodent activity but potentially rougher seas.

Trapping & netting

Juan came prepared with 4 mistnets and 50 Sherman traps. We only set mistnets on 3 nights; the 2 monofilament nets dramatically outperformed the others, as expected, since most bats in BCS are vespertilionids, which can see and avoid thicker nets. We set traps about half the nights, but saw every trapped species *in situ* on night walks/drives too. For traps, my standard bait of oats, peanut butter, vanilla, birdseed,

and black oil sunflower seeds worked very well. Small mammal trapping in Mexico, as always, requires scientific permits, so you will need to work with Juan to do so.

Xantus's Hummingbird and Gray Thrasher are two of Baja's most well-known endemic birds

ITINERARY (June 5-14, 2026)

- 6/5: arrive Los Cabos (SJD) ca. 3PM, pick up rental car, buy mistnet poles & trap bait, and drive (~1.5h) to San Dionisio in the Sierra de La Laguna. Night work & camping (Rancho el Refugio).
- 6/6: AM Rancho el Refugio, then drive (~2h) to La Ventana. Netting & night work in the Los Planes Basin. Night La Ventana (Hotel ChangoMango).
- 6/7: 6AM boat trip (6h) out of La Ventana to the Cerralvo channel. PM rest & trapping near La Ventana. Night La Ventana (Hotel ChangoMango).
- 6/8: Relaxed morning, then drive to San Evaristo via La Paz (~4h). "Linner" then depart by boat for Isla San Jose (arriving 5PM). Trapping, night work & camping.
- 6/9: Early (7:30AM) return from Isla San Jose followed by long drive (6h) to Loreto. Night drive nearby. Night Loreto (Hotel Santa Fe).
- 6/10: AM boat trip from Loreto to Isla Coronados (~4h). Lunch & rest, followed by PM visit to San Javier, with netting & night work. Night Loreto (Hotel Santa Fe).
- 6/11: Relaxed morning, then drive to Puerto Chale (3h). Trapping & night work nearby. Night Puerto Chale (Hotel del Mar).
- 6/12: Drive to La Paz (2.5h) & lunch followed by 2PM boat to Isla La Partida, arriving 4PM. PM Isla La Partida, departing ca. 7:45PM to Isla Espiritu Santo. Night Isla Espiritu Santo (camping at Playa Candelero).
- 6/13: Early (7:30AM) boat ride (2h with stops) back to La Paz. Meal/rest followed by drive (1h) to La Ventana. Night work in the Los Planes Basin. Night La Ventana (Hotel ChangoMango).
- 6/14: 5:30AM boat trip (5h) from Ensenada de Muertos. Drive (2h) to SJD for departure flight ca. 3PM.

SITE ACCOUNT

Sierra de la Laguna (June 5-6)

This rugged mountain range, designated as a biosphere reserve, is located at the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula and contains an interesting mix of temperate and tropical habitats and species, with many endemics. We chose to visit the San Dionisio Canyon, located on the E slope of the range, as it contains permanent water – important finding mammals during this hot, dry time of year.

Most accommodation options were closed as June is the low season here, but Juan eventually arranged camping at Rancho el Refugio, one of many ranches set up for eco-tourism. It's about a 1.5h drive from Los Cabos. Although the ranch's friendly dogs and a pet lamb constantly followed us around (very cute, but not the best for mammal watching), we nonetheless netted several **Canyon Bats** over a river pool and saw **Dalquest's Pocket Mouse**, **Bryant's Woodrat**, and 2 **Gray Foxes** in the rocky riparian habitat. I wanted better views of the pocket mouse, a local endemic, so we did a short night drive, eventually getting excellent views of one in the flats at the canyon mouth (23.5177, -109.7669) as well as another **Gray Fox**. Some bats (probably California Leaf-nosed) were night-roosting in the open-air dining area. Western Spotted Skunk may be seeable at night on the road up the canyon.

Bryant's Woodrat (*Neotoma bryanti bryanti*) and Canyon Bat (*Parastrellus hesperus*) [Juan]

20 Sherman traps set around a roadside fig tree didn't yield any captures the next morning. The ranch's friendly owner told us he'd seen bats "5 min away" in a riverside cave. After 30 minutes' (admittedly very scenic) scrambling, we arrived at a rocky crevice to find no bats. When will I ever learn.

On the drive out, we stopped at an impressive cave (23.529972, -109.677611) nearby at Las Cuevas, which had a spectacular colony of several hundred **California Leaf-nosed**

Bats, a key target for both Nicole and Juan. Lesser Long-nosed Bat, Mexican Funnel-eared Bat, and ‘Peninsular’ Myotis were also present in April, but not currently.

La Ventana & Los Planes (June 6-8 and June 13-14)

A 1.5h drive took us to La Ventana, a smallish beach town located on the E side of the Cape region. There were plenty of foreign tourists here for all sorts of water-based adventure activities. La Ventana is a good base for both land-based mammals and cetaceans; we had great luck with the former, and very poor luck with the latter.

Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus peninsulae*), Pallid Bat (*Antrozous pallidus*), and California Myotis (*Myotis californicus stephensi*) [Juan]

We cleaned up all the key terrestrial species here within a night. There are two key targets – the ‘Peninsular’ Myotis (formerly a Cape region endemic, but now considered a subspecies of *M. velifer*) and Cerralvo Pocket Mouse (endemic to Isla Cerralvo and Los Planes). Juan had found both in 2022 (with Jon Hall) on a ranch in the E part of the Los Planes basin, but just prior to the trip he was told we no longer had access! A quick search on Google Maps revealed another nearby ranch with a cattle tank (23.902750, -109.907306) – fortunately Gerardo Martinez, the owner of Rancho San Patricio, was happy to let us look for mammals when we arrived in the afternoon.

Pocketed Free-tailed Bat (*Nyctinomops femorosaccus*) and the spectacular Ghost-faced Bat (*Mormoops megalophylla*) [Juan]

As I'd hoped, a single 12m monofilament net over the cattle tank produced 3 **'Peninsular' Myotis** within minutes. This turned out to be the start of an exceptional night of batting. Over the next 2 hours, we added 4 **Long-legged Myotis** (of the BCS endemic ssp. *volans*, likely an undescribed species), 3 **Big Brown Bats**, 2 **Pallid Bats**, 2 **California Myotis**, a **Pocketed Free-tailed Bat**, and a spectacular **Ghost-faced Bat**. We also captured a **Western Yellow Bat**, but it escaped from the net while Juan was removing another bat, so we weren't able to photograph this beautiful species. The ranch was crawling with pocket mice, and we had good views of at least 4 **Baja Pocket Mice** and 9 of the endemic, skittish **Cerralvo Pocket Mice**, my key target. We also saw a *Peromyscus* near the nets; recent studies suggest that the 'cactus mice' in the E part of the Basin are not *P. eva*, but either Northern Baja Mouse or (perhaps more likely) Cerralvo Mouse (*P. avius*). Driving to and from the ranch, we saw **White-tailed Antelope Squirrels**, **Black-tailed Jackrabbits**, and a single **Mule Deer**.

For our second night, we set a line of 50 Sherman traps along a rocky wash N of La Ventana (24.1268, -110.0066); this site yielded a single **Eva's Desert Mouse** and 3 **Spiny Pocket Mice** (a much paler form than those I've seen in CA). We spent our final night (6/13) walking arroyos near Rancho San Patricio in the (likely unrealistic) hope of lucking into a Ticul's Desert Shrew, which seem common in the Los Planes area. Unsurprisingly, no dice, though we did see a **Desert Woodrat**, **Merriam's Kangaroo Rat**, many more **Baja** and **Cerralvo Pocket Mice**, and a San Lucan Rattlesnake.

Spiny Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus spinatus peninsulae*) and Cerralvo Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus siccus liaae*)

We did 2 whale watching trips in the area, which were much less productive than we'd hoped. We'd confirmed the first trip (for 6AM on 6/7) ahead of time with the same boatman who had taken Jon Hall out from Ensenada de Muertos to look for Dwarf Sperm Whales in 2024. At 10PM on the night before, he told us he'd moved our booking to a fishing charter out of La Ventana instead. This was very frustrating. While the new captain did his best, *Kogia* sightings are very rare out of La Ventana and we saw no

marine mammals besides some **California Sea Lions**. We managed to book another trip on 6/14, this time out of Ensenada de los Muertos with a new captain Chuy, aka Leonel (+52 612 203 4541; MX6000 for a 6-hour trip), who was very familiar with *Kogia*. He'd seen 2 groups (2+1) 3 days prior and thought we had good chances. Despite searching the right areas (a patch of water ~5mi off Boca de Alamo) for 5h, we dipped. The winds were low, but there was some swell, which was likely the issue. Anyway, all this is to say that even here the *Kogia* are not easy and the chances are probably 50/50 unless you have perfect conditions! Sperm, Bryde's, Short-finned Pilot, and Common Killer Whales (as well as Pantropical Spotted and Spinner Dolphins) are also regularly seen in the area, especially in the Cerralvo channel off La Ventana, but sightings of these species were (unusually) very sparse around the time of our visit.

Isla San Jose (June 8-9)

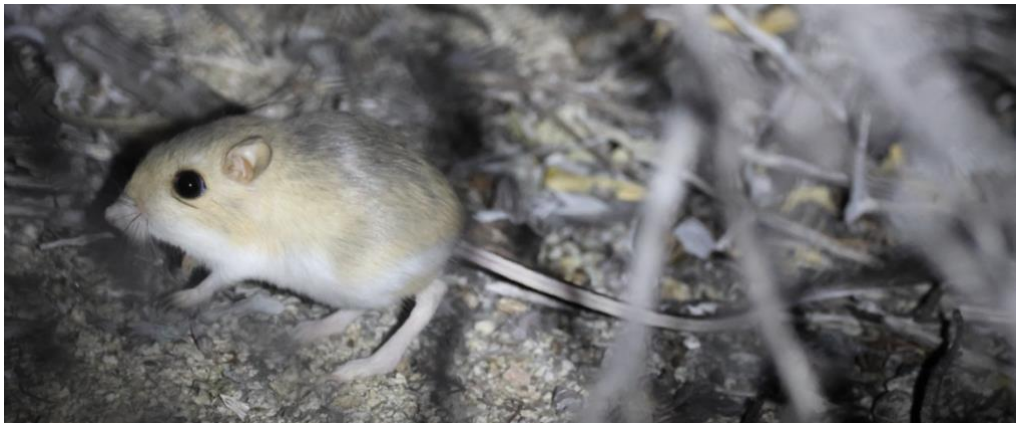
Although less than 10mi offshore from the quiet fishing village of San Evaristo, Isla San Jose is separated from the mainland by an impressively deep (nearly 500m) channel. The island holds 2 rare and distinctive endemic mammals, the San Jose Brush Rabbit and Insular Kangaroo Rat. Although described decades ago as full species, they were reclassified ~10 years ago as subspecies of Brush Rabbit and Merriam's Kangaroo Rat, respectively, though this may change in the future.

Although I didn't know anyone who had visited the island, getting there proved fairly easy. It takes ~3h to drive to San Evaristo from La Paz along a scenic coastal road. The route is paved until San Juan de la Costa, after which it transitions to well-maintained gravel until El Portugues. The road gets rougher afterward, but should still be doable in any car with decent clearance and careful driving. We arranged transport to the island with Barbarita Tours, a local outfit based in San Evaristo. Their communication was at times slow and inconsistent (due to connectivity issues), which gave Juan some anxiety, and the rate for boat transport was very steep, but in the end their arrangements were good. A fairly short panga ride from San Evaristo brought us to the island, and we camped alone on a gorgeous beach at (24.9461, -110.6537).

'Insular' Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys* [*merriami*] *insularis*) and the night sky on Isla San Jose

The best (nearby) site for mammals is the wash at (24.9470, -110.6417). We walked over at 5PM and set all 50 Sherman traps, targeting the rare 'Insular' Kangaroo Rat. Thinking we'd have little chance of seeing rabbits while noisily setting traps, I made the rookie mistake of leaving my camera at camp. Of course, we had great views of 2 **San Jose Brush Rabbits**! Very cool animals, totally unlike the Brush Rabbits I see at home in CA, and quite pale and long-eared. We returned at 8PM for a 3h night walk, seeing 2 more rabbits, many **Spiny Pocket Mice** (of the endemic ssp. *bryanti*), and eventually, a gorgeous **Insular Kangaroo Rat**. This animal looks nothing like any *D. merriami* I've ever seen, larger in size and pale creamy white in color with big ears. What a thrill, and my mammal of the trip alongside the Fishing Myotis!

Unsurprisingly, there were no kangaroo rats in the traps the next morning, but 5 more **Spiny Pocket Mice**. I'd brought my camera this time, but of course, we only had shadowy glimpses of 2 rabbits. Our ride back had almost arrived, but we'd forgotten the last trap in the line so Juan and Nicole went to pick it up and left me to give the rabbit one last try. Like clockwork, I spotted one within 2 minutes, crept up to it, and took several photos! The perfect end to a wonderful night on Isla San Jose.



Insular Kangaroo Rat (above) and San Jose Brush Rabbit (*Sylvilagus* [*bachmani*] *mansuetus*) (below)

Loreto (June 9-11)

We returned to San Evaristo in high spirits and set off on the long drive to Loreto by 10AM. Instead of the taking the coastal road back to La Paz, we took the “shorter” route over the mountains. The first stretch of road (4WD necessary) over the pass from San Evaristo to La Soledad was painfully slow, steep, and rocky, taking us almost 2h to drive ~20km. Fortunately the roads improved a lot afterward and after regaining the pavement at Las Pocitas, we could proceed at speed and reached Loreto around 4:30PM.

Little Desert Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus arenarius*) of the undescribed Loreto ssp.

Baja California Rock Squirrel (*Otospermophilus* [*beecheyi*] *atricapillus*) and the endemic BCS form of Long-legged Myotis (*Myotis volans volans*) [Juan]

We spent both nights exploring the road to San Javier, a historic mission in the Sierra de la Giganta located 40km by road SW of Loreto. Given the tiring drive, our first night’s session was fairly short. We had excellent views of 2 **Little Desert Pocket Mice** in the desert washes along the first 5km of the road; the Loreto population is isolated and rather different in appearance (more slender and brownish) from others. Deeper in the mountains, we added 7 **Spiny Pocket Mice**, **Bryant’s Woodrat**, and 3 **Gray Foxes** (including a tiny kit). On the second afternoon, we drove to the mission and easily found

4 **Baja California Rock Squirrels** at their usual spot, the stone walls in nearby crop fields, at 5PM. We netted a pond (25.859361, -111.545167) in the mission gardens from 7-9:30PM, hoping for Long-eared Myotis, a lifer for Juan. The form in the Sierra de la Giganta, smaller and with shorter ears than those in the US, may be allied to *milleri*, and occupies extremely atypical habitat. No luck, though we did capture several **Yuma Myotis**, a **California Myotis**, another **Long-legged Myotis**, and 4 **Pallid Bats** (with 2 more night-roosting nearby). A few locals were curious about what we were up to, and Juan had a great time teaching them about bats. A short trail through the gardens was excellent for night walks, with several **Spiny Pocket Mice**, at least 1 **Northern Baja Mouse**, and outstanding close views of **Ringtail**. Driving back to Loreto, we saw similar species to last night along with 15+ **Mule Deer** and several **Black-tailed Jackrabbits**.

The only planned activity during our time in Loreto was a boat trip to Isla Coronados to look for **Fishing Myotis**. Endemic to the Gulf of California, these huge myotis, with massive feet for trawling, are the only bats known to forage over open ocean and are one of the Americas' coolest. Colonies roost in the sea caves at the north of the island, and we located 10 in a low crevice (first finding their distinctive guano then hearing their loud chirps), enjoying great views. Nearby, and deeper in the cave, was a massive maternity colony of **Lesser Long-nosed Bats**. Boating around the island, we had excellent views of **California Sea Lions**, 5 **Common Bottlenose Dolphins** and then a pod of 100+ **North-eastern Pacific Long-beaked Common Dolphins**. Juan arranged the trip with Francisco "Panini" Talamantes (+52 613 124 1974). The half-day trip was very expensive, though we could've used the boat for the whole day if we wanted (if, e.g., we needed to visit a backup cave on Isla Carmen).

Fishing Myotis (*Myotis vivesi*), sea caves, and a Spiny Pocket Mouse who just *had* to eat a mesquite pod

Puerto Chale (June 11-12)

Since La Paz is a long (5h) drive from Loreto, we decided to break the journey with a stop along the way in the Magdalena Plain, located conveniently at the halfway point off

MX-1. Importantly, the area also has a high diversity of rodents. Checking specimen records, I chose to base ourselves at Puerto Chale. This proved to be an inspired decision. This small fishing village sees a lot of Gray Whale tourism in the winter months but is very sleepy outside that time; just 1 hotel and no restaurants were open.

We set two lines of 25 traps each near town: one in a grazed arroyo with mesquite (24.5395, -111.5035) and another in beautiful, fairly undisturbed fog desert (24.4515, -111.5161) full of rodent sign. The latter is a unique habitat of the Pacific coast of Baja, with small areas of windblown sand and ocotillos and cacti covered in epiphytes.

Adam's Trees covered in *Tillandsia* are a distinctive feature of Baja's Pacific fog desert [Nicole]

We spent ~3h driving at night on a road (24.583889, -111.483250) traversing coastal fog desert and more arid inland scrub, seeing an impressive number of rodents including 15+ **Merriam's Kangaroo Rats**, 2 **Dulzura Kangaroo Rats** (of the distinctive, remarkably pale ssp. *peninsularis*), **Dalquest's Pocket Mouse**, several **Baja Pocket Mice**, 4+ **Little Desert Pocket Mice**, and 4 **Eva's Desert Mice**. Walking in mesquite scrub near the arroyo trap line, we added more **Dalquest's** and **Baja Pocket Mice** and 2 **Bryant's Woodrats**. **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** and **Desert Cottontails** were common in the area.

Baja Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus rudinoris*) and Dalquest's Pocket Mouse (*C. ammophilus*)

In line with the night's sightings, trapping proved impressively productive. We had 10 captures in just 25 traps in the fog desert line: 1 **Merriam's Kangaroo Rat**, 2 **Dulzura**

Kangaroo Rats, 2 **Little Desert Pocket Mice**, 2 **Dalquest's Pocket Mice**, a **Bryant's Woodrat**, and 2 **Eva's Desert Mice**. The arroyo line was slightly less productive, with 1 **Baja**, 1 **Dalquest's**, and 3 **Little Desert Pocket Mice**. **White-tailed Antelope Squirrels** were also seen while checking trap lines. Overall, an impressive area to find such a diversity and abundance of rodents in a short time. The only rodent species we missed was Gambel's Deer Mouse, which I suspect is restricted to scrubby coastal dunes here. Kit Fox and American Badger are around too, but seem uncommon.

Isla Espritu Santo & Isla La Partida (June 12-13)

These two islands, connected by a narrow sandbar at low tide, are located in the Gulf of California offshore from La Paz. I'd wanted to visit the archipelago ever since I was a kid to see the Black Jackrabbit (*Lepus [californicus] insularis*), a spectacular animal and Baja's best-known insular endemic. The islands are accessed via a 1-2h (depending on the wind) boat trip from the La Paz marina; owing to the crepuscular nature of the rabbits and the islands' distance from La Paz, you need to camp overnight to see them.

We arranged our visit to Espiritu Santo through Barbarita Tours, the same company we used for Isla San Jose; their rate was pretty reasonable (MEX12000 total), considering we chartered a boat for nearly 24h and the friendly crew camped with us. You also need a national park guide (which usually costs extra), but Juan's friend Karen (+52 1 55 2696 5900), who guides in the park, kindly joined us for free. She also has permits to trap and mistnet on the islands, though we didn't use them.

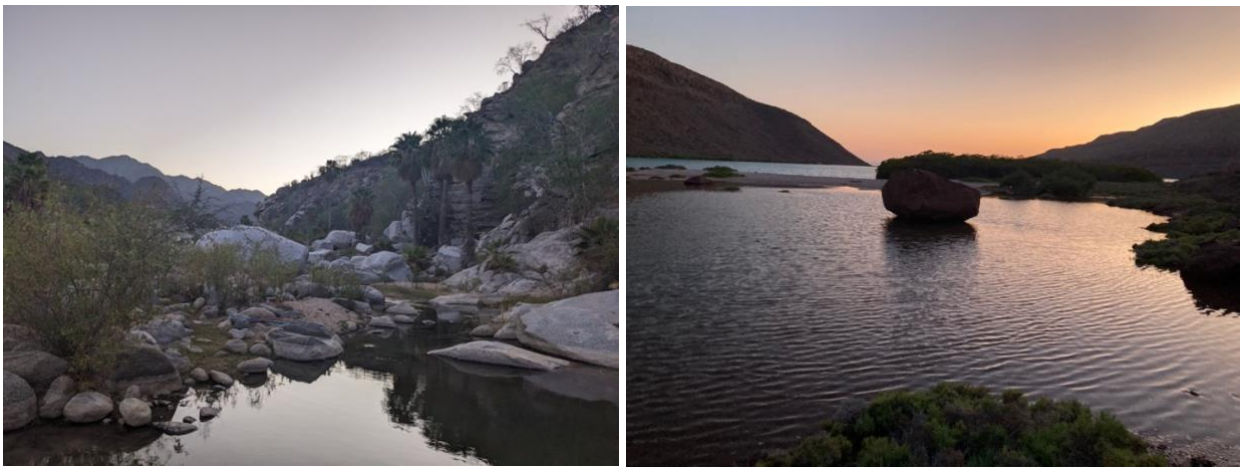
'Black' Jackrabbit (*Lepus* [*californicus*] *insularis*) and Ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus saxicola*)

The jackrabbits are mostly found in the flats, with the best site being El Cardonal on Isla La Partida. We arrived around 4PM and quickly saw the dark-colored **'Espiritu Santo Antelope' Squirrel**, formerly an endemic species but now a subspecies of *A. leucurus*.

The jackrabbits are wary but stand out like a sore thumb from their surroundings thanks to their black color; watching the flats from a viewpoint (24.5551, -110.3692), we saw 2 **Black Jackrabbits** well over 1.5 hours' sunset stakeout. We left La Partida around 7:30PM and sailed to Playa Candelero (24.509111, -110.384528), where the islands' endemic **Ringtail** subspecies (*saxicola*, locally called "babisuri") is easily seen (we saw at least 4). The last part of our boat trip was in the dark, and we were lucky to watch several **Fishing Myotis** trawling over the waves as we traveled through the inlet to Candelero. This was an amazing experience, and something I imagine very few people have ever seen. We also saw **California Sea Lions** around the islands, and some impressive seabird colonies.

SPECIES WE MISSED

This was perhaps my most successful Mexico trip to date, as with the exception of Dwarf Sperm Whale and the (difficult) Ticul's Desert Shrew, we saw literally all my target species. If we had glassy seas, I reckon the *Kogia* are very doable, while the *Notiosorex* would likely require a targeted effort with pitfall traps. Next time. Otherwise, I was surprised to see so few cetaceans (I'd hoped to run into at least one of Bryde's, Sperm, Short-finned Pilot, or Common Killer Whales), which I think was down to a bit of bad luck and more importantly, the extreme El Niño this summer. It would've been nice to see Long-eared Myotis, Mexican Funnel-eared Bat, or Western Spotted Skunk, though we didn't make a serious effort for any of them.



Canyons of the Sierra de la Laguna [Nicole] and sunset on Isla La Partida

SPECIES LIST (E/NE indicate Baja endemics/near-endemics)

1. Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus xanti*)
2. Black Jackrabbit (*Lepus [californicus] insularis*) **E**
3. Desert Cottontail (*Sylvilagus audubonii confinis*)
4. San Jose Brush Rabbit (*Sylvilagus [bachmani] mansuetus*) **E**
5. White-tailed Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus leucurus extimus*)
    a. Espiritu Santo Antelope Squirrel (*A. [leucurus] insularis*) **E**
6. Baja California Rock Squirrel (*Otospermophilus [beecheyi] atricapillus*) **E**
7. Insular Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys [merriami] insularis*) **E**

8. Merriam's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys merriami melanurus*)
9. Dulzura Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys simulans peninsularis*) **NE**
10. Dalquest's Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus ammophilus dalquesti*) **E**
11. Little Desert Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus arenarius*) – Loreto (ssp. nov.); Puerto Chale (*arenarius*) **E**
12. Baja Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus rudinoris extimus*) **NE**
13. Cerralvo Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus siccus liaae*) **E**
14. Spiny Pocket Mouse (*Chaetodipus spinatus*) – La Ventana (*peninsulae*); Isla San Jose (*bryanti*); San Javier (*broccus*) **NE**
15. Bryant's Woodrat (*Neotoma bryanti bryanti*)
    ? Cerralvo Mouse (*Peromyscus avius*) **E** ?
16. Eva's Desert Mouse (*Peromyscus eva eva*) **E**
17. Northern Baja Mouse (*Peromyscus fraterculus fraterculus*) **NE**
18. Ghost-faced Bat (*Mormoops megalophylla*)
19. Lesser Long-nosed Bat (*Leptonycteris yerbabuenae*)
20. California Leaf-nosed Bat (*Macrotus californicus*)
21. Pocketed Free-tailed Bat (*Nyctinomops femorosaccus*)
22. California Myotis (*Myotis californicus stephensi*)
23. Peninsular Myotis (*Myotis [velifer] peninsularis*) **E**
24. Fishing Myotis (*Myotis vivesi*) **NE**
25. Long-legged Myotis (*Myotis [volans] volans*) (if split, populations outside BCS would be renamed to *M. longicrus*)
26. Yuma Myotis (*Myotis yumanensis lambi*)
27. Pallid Bat (*Antrozous pallidus minor*)
28. Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus peninsulae*)
29. Western Yellow Bat (*Lasiurus xanthinus*)
30. Canyon Bat (*Parastrellus hesperus*)
31. Ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus*) – San Javier (*palmarius*); Isla Espiritu Santo (*saxicola*)
32. California Sea Lion (*Zalophus californianus*)
33. Gray Fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus peninsularis*)
34. North-eastern Pacific Long-beaked Common Dolphin (*Delphinus bairdii*)
35. Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)
36. Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus lagunae*)

INATURALIST

My observations from the trip: https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2026-06-05&d2=2026-06-14&user_id=vnsankar