

## COLORADO 21-25 JUNE 2021

I visited Colorado in June 2021 to visit a friend who had started a job at the Denver Zoo. Instead of a day by day diary, I will touch base on the places we visited.

On a side note the Thirteen-Lined Ground Squirrel colony that previously lived by the Denver zoo entrance is no longer. The zoo had a program to eradicate some of their relatives, and unfortunately the squirrels took the bait as well.

### 1. ROCKY MOUNTIAN NATIONAL PARK

We visited several spots in the national park. Mule deer were pretty much in all the habitats we visited. This was the same for the Rocky Mountain Elk.



My main target was to see a Wyoming Ground Squirrel. A ranger tipped me off that Sheep Lakes had an active colony. The colony is in the field directly in front of the parking lot if you have your back to the mountain. We saw several above ground but at a slight distance. The Moraine Nature Store had a very confiding individual living in the building to the left of the outside bathroom entrance. Finally the Glacier Basin Campground on the fields to the right and left right before the entrance ranger pay station also has a very active colony with several individuals allowing me to get close.





The park is currently requiring people to make reservations to get into the park during different time segments of the day. The second day around 8 am while waiting at the Fall River Entrance in a car line up, a Long Tailed weasel ran right to our guard station. I got out trying to photograph it, then it ran back into the woods when it saw me. Sadly, it was not impressed with my squeaking skills. I told the also excited ranger about it, and cue the weasel running across the road in front of both of us. A fun sighting regardless. Two overlooks also had good mammal numbers.



The first being Rainbow Curve. We saw very habituated Golden Mantled Ground Squirrels, Least Chipmunks, and American Pika. The ranger there also said it was a good place to look for LT weasel.

My favorite overlook was the Rock Cut Overlook. There were MANY American Pika, golden mantled ground squirrels and a very relaxed Yellow Belly Marmot family. The marmots were constantly wrestling with each other. I also watched in horror (sadly with my camera down) as a large bird of prey almost grabbed one of the marmots. I think the the screaming noises, which I had never heard a marmot make, made the bird only inches from grabbing it away change its mind.



The overlook is also a great place to look for Bighorn Sheep.





Run off from one the human drop toilets created a nice salty muck pile that on both days we saw the sheep licking away at the dirt.



We saw one individual Bighorn on the mountain by Sheep Lakes. The Kawuneeche Valley was hit hard by fire last year so much of the landscape was burnt trees. However, the moose numbers there were impressive. In two days we saw nine moose, including three females with young calves.



2. Staunton State Park - I really wanted to see an Abert's Squirrel. My friend had recommended this state park as she had seen the species there twice. Also, if you google Colorado Park and Abert's Squirrel, this park always comes up. Despite the species being listed in RMNP, none of the rangers I asked had ever seen one. The Park is located about 40 miles from downtown Denver in Pine, Colorado. Despite being there mid week,



there were a good number of visitors. People can also bring dogs which usually makes me nervous when trying to wildlife watch. They have a small visitor center with knowledgeable staff. The ranger seems confident we would see one and recommended hiking the Davis Ponds Trail located adjacent to the visitor center. It is roughly a two mile walk along even terrain with plenty of Ponderosa Pines, the preferred habitat of the species. We saw plenty of Golden Mantled Ground Squirrels, a very relaxed Pine Squirrel,



and right before the end of the trail an Abert's Squirrel. I think the squirrel had never seen a human look at it. It gave me a very disapproving glance and tried to flatten itself on a branch thinking I could not see it. If we had not seen it on the ground first, I think we would have missed it. The species does not make alarm calls like other squirrels and blend in REALLY well with the pines. We also saw a muskrat in a pond on the way to the park



3. Garden of the Gods - this park is located near Colorado Springs and contains about 1300 acres of sandstone formations. The park was beautiful but had way to many tourists for me. We also only saw a single Desert Cottontail and several very habituated Mule Deer.





4. Red Rock Canyon Open Space - the park is located about 15 minutes from the Garden of the Gods. I-naturalist has several sightings of Northern Pocket Gopher in a large field across from the pond in the space. I saw what looked like many gopher diggings in the field, however none looked super fresh. We did look at this area for an extended time with no gophers.

5. Paint Mines Interpretive Park - located about 1 hour (30 minutes) from Colorado Springs in Calhan, Colorado. On 24 East on the drive in we saw several Pronghorn. This was my favorite place we visited, mainly from a geological perspective. The park itself is about 750 acres and has four miles of trails containing grassland habitats as well as rock formations



known as hoodoos, colored clay and sandstone-capped spires. Pets are not allowed and when we first got there few people were visiting. We saw several mule deer and Desert Cottontail around the main rock formations.



The reasoning for the visit however was to see Thirteen- Lined Ground Squirrel. If you park in the main parking lot with the small bathroom, there are squirrels near the picnic table and also along the grass to the right of



trail if you are walking towards the rock formations. The squirrels were very relaxed and obliging for photos.



6. Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge - the park is located in Commerce City on the outskirts of Denver. It is one of the main sights where Black Footed Ferrets were released in the United States. 32 ferrets were originally released in October 2015, followed by an additional 22 in

September 2016. However the reserve is only open sunrise to sunset so actually seeing one is difficult. The reserve does have a Ferret House exhibit next to the visitor center which contains “retired” ferrets for visitors to see. We saw many Black Tailed Prairie Dogs (the favorite prey of the ferrets) as well as Mule Deer. They also have a fenced in area containing a herd of Bison. The Bison were released onto the reserve in 2007 and are easy to see on the one way Wildlife Drive.





Species seen -

1. Black - Tailed Prairie Dog - *Cynomys ludovicianus*
2. Mule Deer - *Odocoileus hemionus*
3. Least Chipmunk - *Tamias minimus*
4. Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel - *Callospermophilus lateralis*
5. Wyoming Ground Squirrel - *Urocitellus elegant*
6. Abert's Squirrel - *Sciurus aderti*
7. Pine Squirrel - *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* species
8. Rocky Mountain Elk - *Cervus canadensis nelsoni*
9. Moose - *Alces alces*
10. American Pika - *Ochotona princeps*
11. Desert Cottontail - *Sylvilagus audubonii*
12. Long -Tailed Weasel - *Mustela frenata*
13. Muskrat - *Ondatra zibethicus*
14. Yellow -Bellied Marmot - *Marmota flaviventris*
15. Bighorn Sheep - *Ovis canadensis*
16. Pronghorn - *Antilocapra americana*
17. Thirteen- lined Ground Squirrel - *Ictidomys tridecemlineatus*
18. Bison - *Bison bison*