

Western USA 6.8.–2.9. 2017

California – Oregon – Idaho – Montana – Wyoming – Utah – Nevada



The occasion of the Great American Solar Eclipse passing near Yellowstone, combined with a conveniently timed meeting in San Diego at which I was asked to give a talk, presented us with a great opportunity to tour the American West. The timing was optimal neither for birding¹, which was our main passion at that time, nor for actually existing in the area, as it was exceedingly warm in some places and exceedingly smokey in others, but it was generally a great trip – and all the circumstances of it served to push us more towards watching mammals, which is always good. It was early in our mammalwatching “career” and so we did not spotlight and we did not even own an IR scope back then. Yet we have seen 31 mammal species – including 26 lifers, as we haven’t been much to the US before.

¹ Not only were breeding birds already heavily dispersed and autumn migrants not yet present, but all ducks were in *eclipse plumage* (pun intended, but not sure how easily understood for non-birdwatchers)

We have put all of the documented mammal sightings on iNaturalist, where they can be checked out using for example this link, which should show a search of mammals on my profile observed during the period of the trip:

https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2017-08-05&d2=2017-09-03&place_id=any&subview=map&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska&verifiable=any

Strictly speaking, this search shows you all you need to know about the trip – I strongly encourage anyone doing mammal trips to follow suit, because iNaturalist is a great way how to share such kind of information in an efficient way – and the report could have just ended here. For those who are more inclined to read some prose, or looking for practical tips, a few notes follow. At the end, I attach a list sightings for each site along the way as an additional source of information.



Douglas' Squirrel

I have started the trip in San Diego, where I lived in a small motel not far from the airport. As my conference required only minimal attention from me, I have spent several days mostly hiking around the city as there are many opportunities for that and a lot of destinations are – in a somewhat unamerican manner – easily accessed on public transportation. It was very productive for birds, but not for mammals; the biggest fun was the visit to La Jolla, where you can walk literally meters from California Sea Lions and Common Seals.

I then flew to San Francisco, met up with my wife and we borrowed a car from our friend Irenka, who lived in the Silicon Valley at that time (explaining the marker with her name on the map). The small Kia Rio served us well, even on some pretty rough dirt tracks – the singular problem encountered during the 9000 km journey was with a noisy wheel bearing and that was quickly fixed after we discovered some WD40 in the trunk.



American Bison

Before this trip, I have been a little wary of traveling in the US, because I heard stories about how the entire country is private land and you can't just freely move around and you especially can't wild camp. This has turned out to be completely false and now I consider the US (or at least the western half thereof) to be one of the best countries for free travel in the world, thanks to the extensive network of public lands – in particular National Forests and BLM managed lands – on which you can go as you please and very often also camp wherever you wish (or at least at many designated areas) for free or for a trivial fee. While the information about such sites is in principle available on the relevant websites, it's not very easy to collect and thus the website freecampsites.net, which does exactly that, has been an invaluable resource. During the entire trip we have only stayed in an organized campsite in Yellowstone (which had to be reserved well in advance due to the eclipse crowds) and the rest of the nights, we just fired up freecampsites.net in the afternoon and drove to a suitable site – as a bonus, we were completely alone at most sites.

From San Francisco, we headed north, visiting the coast at Point Reyes, the towering redwoods of northern California, and a few moderately interesting sites in Oregon, steadily progressing north towards the path of the total eclipse. From the mammalwatching point of view, the main topic here is squirrels and chipmunks as there is a surprising variety of species scattered across the area – besides those it's mainly Mule and White-tailed Deer and not much else. But even with not that many animals, the sheer size of the forested wilderness south of Mt. Hood was truly impressive – while we have not actually seen any bears, we have definitely imagined them behind every tree ... especially when going for a leak in the night!



Yellow-bellied Marmot

Continuing east through Oregon and Idaho, we visited the impressive Hell's Canyon (which is actually deeper than the Grand one), successfully observed the eclipse and gathered some more squirrels and the first Pronghorns along our passage through Montana. Along the way, we also got reunited by Irenka, who did not have enough time to take the entire trip with us, so she flew to Boise to meet us later and see how here car was doing.

And then we entered Yellowstone and for a few days, we just simply couldn't believe our eyes. The park is a "safari of the temperate zone" – Bisons, Pronghorns, Wapitis, Coyotes all seen at multiple sites were just the beginning. During a quick morning hike to Mt. Washburn we have seen Yellow-pine Chipmunk, American Red Squirrel, Yellow-bellied Marmot, Mule Deer, American Pica, Bighorn Sheep, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel – I think there were more species of mammals than birds on that walk!



American Pika

The absolute pinnacle was however the visit to the Lamar valley. After some cruising around, we found a large group of people parking at one spot and looking at something at that could have meant only one thing – indeed, there was a Grizzly Bear about a kilometer away, moving around the main river; to make it even more dreamy, it was accompanied (from a respectful distance) by a pack of wolves. Stunning! It's quite an interesting experience, because at first sight, the landscape in Yellowstone looks frankly a bit boring – a relatively flat area covered mostly in a rather ugly young pine forest. But the animals are not only plentiful, but also extremely used to people, so they just let you watch them so easily. And the geysers and other volcanic attractions aren't really bad either.



Bighorn Sheep

Moving on through Utah (where we dropped Irenka for another airplane) and Nevada (with a great stop to summit Mt. Wheeler) back to California was rather uneventful on the mammal front, save for squirrels, jackrabbits and some Pronghorns. Desolation Wilderness back in California offered a great overnight walk, but again only squirrels; seeing Yosemite was similarly great, but proper

mammalwatching would require more than a fleeting stop in the valley. San Luis NWR in California has a Wapiti subspecies (Tule Elk), but probably too captive to count; the small Weddell Creek area on the coast had at least Merriam's Chipmunk and Brush Rabbit. Finally, after returning the car back to Irenka, she took us for a night walk through the Stanford campus, where our unsuccessful search for a Raccoon (which we had to wait another two years to see) produced a surprising Striped Skunk.



Striped Skunk

The list of the sightings (that we could recover from photos and a little from memory after 4 years) follows:

California

- Tijuana Slough NWR - Desert Cottontail, California Ground Squirrel
- Torrey Pines - California Ground Squirrel
- La Jolla - Common Seal, California Sea Lion
- Point Reyes (road to lighthouse) - Mule Deer
- Humboldt Redwoods State Park - Yellow-cheeked Chipmunk, Mule Deer
- Shasta-Trinity NF East Fork Campground - Allen's/Shadow Chipmunk
- Mule deer family from a road while waiting for roadworks
- Lower Klamath NWR - Coyote
- Desolation Wilderness - Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Yellow-pine Chipmunk, Douglas Squirrel
- Mono Lake - Least Chipmunk, Black-tailed Jackrabbit
- Yosemite - California Ground Squirrel, Mule Deer
- San Luis NWR - Desert Cottontail, California Ground Squirrel, (Tule Elk), Mule Deer
- Weddell Creek - Merriam's Chipmunk, Brush Rabbit
- Pigeon Point - Common Seal
- Stanford University - Striped Skunk

Oregon

- Klamath Lake - Yellow-pine Chipmunk, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
- Crater Lake (Mt. Scott) - Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
- Newberry National Volcanic Monument - Douglas Squirrel, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Yellow-pine Chipmunk
- Mt. Hood NF (High Rock) - Douglas Squirrel, Wapiti
- Mt. Hood NF (Hideaway lake) - Townsend's Chipmunk
- Ecola State Park - Douglas Squirrel, California Ground Squirrel
- around Enterprise - White-tailed Deer family
- Hell's Canyon overlook - Yellow-pine Chipmunk, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel

Idaho

- Sawtooth NRA - Least/Yellow-pine Chipmunk

Montana

- Carmen (Hwy 93) - Pronghorns
- West Pioneer WSA (Lacy Creek) - Beaver dams, Mule Deer
- Wise River - Pronghorns
- near Red Rock Lakes NWR - Wyoming/Uinta Ground Squirrel

Wyoming

- Mt. Washburn - Yellow-pine Chipmunk, American Red Squirrel, Yellow-bellied Marmot, Mule Deer, American Pica, Bighorn Sheep, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
- Mammoth Springs - Wapiti
- Tower Junction - Pronghorn, Bisons
- Lamar valley (Rose Creek) - Brown Bear, Wolves, Coyote, Bisons
- Prismatic Spring - American Red Squirrel, Bison
- Fair Falls - Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, American Red Squirrel
- road south of Canyon Village - Coyote
- Yellowstone canyon - Least Chipmunk, American Red Squirrel
- South Entrance - Mule Deer
- West entrance, Sheepeater cliff, Lupine creek, Hayden valley - more Bisons
- Colter Bay - Wapiti

Utah

- Antelope Island - Pronghorns

Nevada

- Mt. Wheeler - Least Chipmunk, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
- lake near Ely - Least Chipmunk
- Spencer Hot Springs - Black-tailed Jackrabbit, Pronghorn