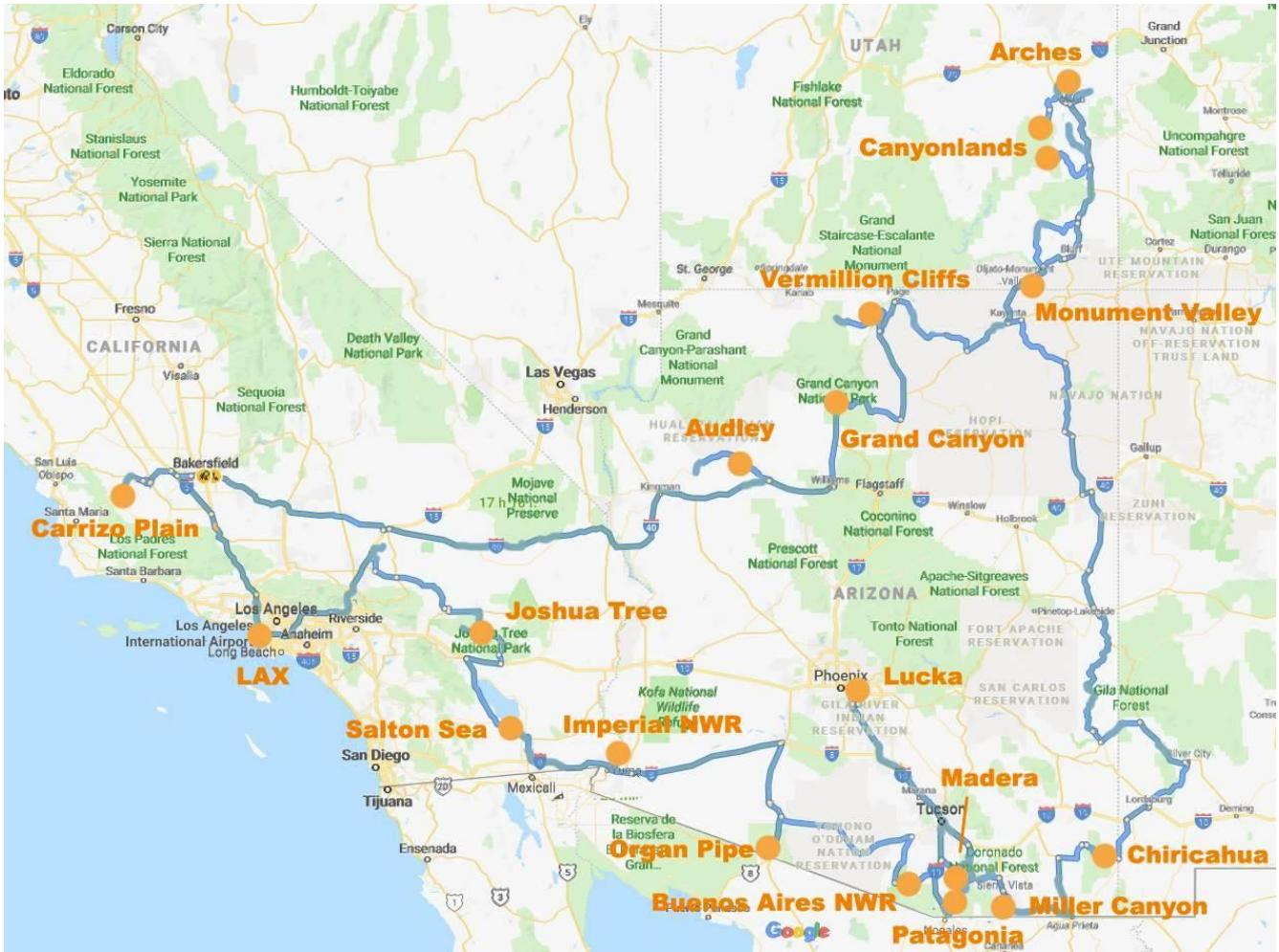


# Southwestern USA 24.3.–13.4.2019

# California – Arizona – Utah



The 2017 trip around the western US left us longing for more. Moreover, another friend of ours (Lucka), who was living in Phoenix at that time, was slated to leave soon and thus 2019 was the last chance to visit her there. With no outside time constraints, we have picked the best season for birding in southern Arizona and planned the trip accordingly – this choice has proven very good also because it gave us the spectacular spring bloom in Joshua Tree and the Sonoran desert, as well as the somewhat absurd “fake autumn” around the Sky Islands. In 2019 we were however also much deeper in mammalwatching and unlike on the previous US trip, we have planned specific locations and species to go after, chiefly with the help of Vladimir Dinets’ fantastic book on finding mammals in the US (which I recommend even if you are not planning to visit the US any time soon – it was a life-changing read for me). Moreover, we have purchased a much bigger spotlight, which could not be shipped easily outside of the US – but it was waiting for us at Lucka’s and we used it extensively in the second half of the trip. As the irony of life would have it, even with all those mammalwatching preparations, we have seen the exactly same number of species as in 2017 – 31, and this time only with 21 lifers. Notably, we still haven’t seen a single Black Bear in our lives even after visiting multiple hotspots for them and we also missed the Coatis despite searching for them around Cave Creek a lot.



*San Diego Pocket Mouse*

The iNaturalist link for the mammals from the trip is here:

[https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2019-03-23&d2=2019-04-14&place\\_id=any&subview=map&taxon\\_id=40151&user\\_id=opisska&verifiable=any](https://www.inaturalist.org/observations?d1=2019-03-23&d2=2019-04-14&place_id=any&subview=map&taxon_id=40151&user_id=opisska&verifiable=any)

and as usual, I will provide some brief description of the trip and then a handy list of sites and sightings – note that all this data is possible incomplete, as I am writing this two years later from photos and memory.



*Round-tailed Ground Squirrel*





*Collared Pecari*

This time, we rented a car commercially in LAX and just drove off some two hours to the nearest BLM land near Victorville, continuing in the well-proven strategy, which we developed in 2017, of camping wherever freecampsites.net tells us it's a good idea to do so. This area was a bit packed by campers, but gave us a White-tailed Antelope Squirrel to kick things off. In Joshua Tree, the spring was really enjoyable and even more enjoyable for us was the discovery of the “backcountry camping” rules – when you far enough from the roads to reach specific zones, you can pitch a tent wherever you wish to! That was something we wanted to hear and thus we set off to the “Pine city” rock formations, where we quickly found the promised California Chipmunks and continued a bit further into the wilderness to stay overnight, hoping to catch a glimpse of some mammals in the area at dusk. While sitting down at a vantage point and waiting what happens, we heard some noise and eventually we photographed the San Diego Pocket Mouse that was running around us. Other than that, only the expected Black-tailed Jackrabbits and Desert Cottontails were seen around.

At the southern end of Salton Sea, the agricultural land along the way to some birding reserve has produced a family of Round-tailed Ground Squirrel that could be well observed while chewing on said agriculture. Moving on to Arizona, our first stop was Organ Pipe, where we continued using the newly discovered option of backcountry camping – there, the system is more organized and you actually have to commit to a specific area beforehand to prevent accumulation of people, but there were still enough spots available even though we came late in the evening. The terrain in Organ Pipe is much less passable than that of Joshua Tree and thus getting to the required distance from the road was quite a fun adventure in avoiding cactus spikes. As it usually is though, both interesting mammal sightings – Antelope Jackrabbit and Coyote – happened from the car anyway, namely from the road to the Quitobaquito pond, a great little oasis right next to the Mexican border, which also has the super rare Sonoyta Mud Turtle.



*Ringtail*

Spotlighting in Buenos Aires NWR finally produced a Raccoon (I refuse to believe any stories about them being “common” in the US, as that was the only one we ever saw) near the headquarters and a Merriam's Kangaroo Rat deeper in the reserve. The rat run across a dirt road and disappeared in the vegetation, but after waiting for a few minutes, it emerged back and was relatively happily feeding itself despite our lights on it.



*White-throated Woodrat*



After this bit of a road trip, we arrived to the “Sky Islands” area of southern Arizona, where we spend quite a lot of time, as it was extremely promising for both mammals and birds – and it indeed did not disappoint on either front – I think even a staunchly anti-birding mammalwatcher’s heart must be moved by the variety of hummingbirds and other colorful birds that are very easily observed around the many private, but publicly accessible, feeders in the area. As for mammals, both our walks around the Sonoita Creek (in the “State Natural Area” below Patagonia lake and in Patagonia-Sonoita Preserve) produced Collared Pecaris and Arizona Gray Squirrels. In the nearby Madera Canyon we invested many hours into looking for the Elegant Trogons, but to no avail; besides some more common species, an evening walk in the Madera Canyon gave us a Gray Fox – a stunning species which, in my opinion, would deserve a more flashy name. One early morning, while driving into the Canyon from our wild campsite in the public lands to the NE, we run into a Bobcat feeding on a cottontail in the middle of a dirt road, but it run away before we could stop and photograph it (which has become somewhat of a theme of the trip). We were also made aware that there was a Ringtail den right next to the Santa Rita Lodge, but the filmmakers who had been trying to film it already for weeks kindly asked us not to disturb their activities trying to see it, and we obliged; it was probably observable from some rooms in the lodge during the filming, but that kind of accommodation was way above our typical budget of \$0 per night, so we had to hope we will get this species somewhere else – which we did just a few days later while walking down the Miller Canyon after dark, using headlamps to pick up eyeshine.



*Hopi Chipmunk*

If you know the geography of the area, you have probably realized that the stop in the Miller Canyon was on the way to our ultimate destination: the Chiricahuas. First, we did a half-day hike in the National Monument – while the rocks formations are absolutely awesome, it has to be noted that there wasn’t even a single chipmunk to be seen. In Portal, the bird feeders easily produced both Cliff Chipmunk and Harris’ Antelope Squirrel and a night spotlighting drive in the hills gave us a surprisingly obliging White-throated Woodrat. But even after considerable effort, both in daytime and

in the night, there were simply no Coatis and no Bears. To keep the theme of the trip, there was again a Bobcat on the road and again it disappeared before any pictures could be taken. An overnight trip along the main ridge of the mountains was fruitless for mammals, unless we are counting a large group of border patrols on foot looking for some immigrants to not welcome to the country.



*Kit Fox*

From Portal, we took a long drive north, on “main” roads, through the Gila National Forest, meeting only a big herd of Wapiti crossing the road north of Alpine. After a midday stop in the absurdly scenic Monument Valley, we finally arrived to the Moab area of Utah. Both parts of Canyonlands (Needles and Island in the Sky) as well as Arches were absolutely fantastic landscape-wise, but the mammal selection was limited to Hopi Chipmunks at several sites, Ord’s Kangaroo Rat (and the third non-photographed Bobcat) found spotlighting on the road from the Needles, Pronghorn neat the Anticline Lookout and two different kinds of bats in the Arches – presumably Canyon bats, hunting in broad daylight, and a larger and darker species (possibly Big Brown) flying at dusk. Nevertheless, I think this general area is quite promising, as it offers a multitude of options to go into total wilderness, we just didn’t really have the time for that.

It was the time to head back to LA. Well, first we casually stopped at this big valley they have along the way, Grand Canyon it’s called – but besides the stupidly great views of the famous hole in the ground, there were only White-tailed Deers and Wapitis to be found, despite our search for some local rodents. Another valley, far less touristy, for some reason, is found around Audley and there we finally saw the famous Prairie Dogs (of the Gunnison’s variety); a short spotlighting session failed to produce any ferrets, but we were not deeply surprised by that. Finally, we were able to squeeze a few hours before



the flight at Carrizo Plain, back in California, which brought Nelson's Antelope Squirrel in the evening and multiple Giant Kangaroo Rats and a Kit Fox (which came up to within a few meters of our parked car) in the night.



*Giant Kangaroo Rat*

### **California**

- BLM near Victorville - White-tailed Antelope Squirrel
- Joshua Tree - White-tailed Antelope Squirrel, Black-tailed Jackrabbit, Desert Cottontail, California Chipmunk, San Diego Pocket Mouse
- Salton Sea (south) - Round-tailed Ground Squirrel, Desert Cottontail
- Carrizo Plain - Kit Fox, Nelson's Antelope Squirrel, Black-tailed Jackrabbit, Desert Cottontail, Giant Kangaroo Rat

### **Arizona**

- Organ Pipe - Antelope Jackrabbit, Coyote, Desert Cottontail
- Buenos Aires NWR - Mule Deer, Raccoon, Merriam's Kangaroo Rat
- Patagonia Mountains (Harshaw) - White-tailed Deer
- Sonoita Creek - Collared Peccary, Arizona Gray Squirrel

- around Sonoita - Pronghorn
- Madera Canyon - Bobcat\*, Desert Cottontail, White-tailed Deer, Gray Fox, Arizona Gray Squirrel, Rock Squirrel, (filmmakers allegedly filming a Ringtail)
- Patagonia - Collared Pecari, Arizona Gray Squirrel
- Water Ranch Phoenix - Desert Cottontail, Rock Squirrel
- Reid Park Tuscon - Rock Squirrel
- Miller Canyon - Ringtail
- Cave Creek/Portal - White-tailed Deer, Cliff Chipmunk, Harris' Antelope Squirrel, Black-tailed Jackrabbit, White-throated Woodrat, Rock Squirrel, Bobcat\*
- Grand Canyon - Elk, Mule Deer
- Aubrey Valley - Gunnison's Prairie Dog

## **Utah**

- Canyonlands (Needles road) - Ord's Kangaroo Rat, Bobcat\*
- Arches - Hopi Chipmunk, Canyon Bat, some larger bat
- Canyonlands (Island in the Sky) - Hopi Chipmunk
- Moab - Mule Deer, Pronghorn, Black-tailed Jackrabbit



*Arizona Gray Squirrel*