

## TRIP REPORT - MINNESOTA AND SOUTH DAKOTA - 4/6/2022 - 10/6/2022

One of my most long-standing travel goals is to visit all fifty of the United States. Number 49 on the list was South Dakota (which is actually a popular destination for American travellers from the Midwest). The Black Hills in Southwestern South Dakota are the farthest East extension of the Rocky Mountains, so they are the first sizable relief as you drive west across the vast, flat plains of the central United States.

I am extremely interested in America's prairie landscapes and ecosystems, so my wife Alison, young son Freddie, and I planned a trip to see each of the main divisions of America's prairie. The first stop would be Pipestone National Monument to see the best example of tall grass prairie in the National Park System. Next, we would visit The Nature Conservancy's Samuel H. Ordway, Jr. Memorial Prairie to see mid-grass prairie; a long drive across the state would take us to the short grass prairie of Badlands National Park. Our final stop was to be the Black Hills, which contains many other attractions.

The question addressed in this report is: can you miss every target species and not see a single new lifer, whether mammal, bird, reptile or amphibian and still consider it a successful wildlife watching trip? Scott Flamand's 2010 and Sjeff Ollers' 2017 trip reports on MammalWatching.com got me very excited about seeing my top priorities Black-footed Ferret and Swift Fox at Badlands National Park and Alison's target American Badger.

### ITINERARY:

3/6/2022 – Drive family car from Arlington Heights, a suburb of Chicago in Northeastern Illinois, to Pipestone National Monument in Southwestern Minnesota spend night at casino in Flandreau Indian Reservation in Southeastern South Dakota

4/6/2022 – Drive to Samuel H. Ordway, Jr. Memorial Prairie in Northeastern South Dakota, hike the preserve and then drive across the state to Wall in Southwestern South Dakota—spend night at Wall

5/6/2022 – All day visit to Badlands National Park—spend night at Wall

6/6/2022 – All day visit to Badlands National Park—spend night at Wall

7/6/2022 – Drive to Wind Cave National Park, take guided tour of cave, then visit Mt. Rushmore National Memorial—spend night at Legion Lake cabin in Custer State Park

8/6/2022 – Non-nature visit to Hot Springs, South Dakota; night drive in Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park—spend night at Legion Lake cabin in Custer State Park

9/6/2022 – Horseback ride near Crazy Horse Memorial, visit historic Gold Rush town of Deadwood, another night drive at Custer State Park—spend night at Legion Lake cabin in Custer State Park

10/6/2022 – Grueling 800 mile drive back home

NARRATIVE:

### Pipestone National Monument –

We hopped on the high-speed highway Interstate-90 a couple of miles from my house and drove through Illinois and Wisconsin and stopped for lunch in the scenic town of La Crosse, Wisconsin on the Mississippi River. To illustrate how bad high speed highways are for wildlife watching we drove through two states and did not see a single wild mammal in 260 miles (420 kilometers). Our consolation was that we had delicious sandwiches at the upscale butcher shop Schuby's Neighborhood Butcher in La Crosse. We crossed the river into a nicely wooded Minnesota state park and spotted one White-tailed Deer. Four and a half mammal-free hours later we turned off I-90 and drove the twenty miles to Pipestone, which we learned to our great disappointment closed at 4:30PM. Fortunately, the gate, parking lots and trail system were open so we took a very nice walk through this interesting park. The park was established to protect a pipestone quarry that has been worked by various people for a thousand years. Stone from this quarry has been found in archeological sites all around North America indicating that this product was distributed across a very wide trade network. According to the Nicollet expedition, who in 1838 were the first European American scientists to record a visit to the site; the Ottoe and Kiowa tribes were the miners then working the quarry. In 1836 the great frontier painter George Catlin rendered a nice painting at the spot where Joseph Nicollet and John Fremont carved an inscription in the stone.

Our first mammal was a Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel in the prairie at the beginning of the hike. Then we saw an Eastern Cottontail. This species has adapted to modern life very successfully and I routinely see it in our suburban neighborhood, but it was cool to see it in its original habitat foraging through the prairie next to a nice open oak wood, which grew on the rock ridge. Our next sighting was an Eastern Fox Squirrel, which are the less common tree squirrel in the Eastern United States and a handsome one at that, so I always enjoy seeing it. Soon after we saw an Eastern Chipmunk. As dusk was falling we walked the final stretch of the loop trail through the prairie, which was teeming with at least thirty White-tailed Deer. Five species of mammals, combined with some nice prairie birds like Bobolink, Dicksissel, Clay-colored Sparrow and Willow Flycatcher, plus ample

wildflowers make this preserve well worth a visit—if only it was not so far away from every other attraction.

### **Eastern Cottontail -**



### Samuel H. Ordway, Jr. Memorial Prairie -

Another three-hour drive through the South Dakota farmland brought us to this private natural area that is The Nature Conservancy's crown jewel of the mid-grass prairie. This was the first preserve where TNC reintroduced bison, and I did see one lone bull, along with a White-tailed Deer and a Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel. The feature here is the teeming prairie pothole birds—waterfowl, shorebirds, Yellow-headed Blackbirds and prairie sparrows. I was disappointed to dip on the Baird's Sparrow, which was my top target bird on the trip. I did see this Plains Garter Snake while scouring the grassland for the elusive avian lifer.

**Plains Garter Snake -**



**Lone Bull Bison against the Wide Open Prairie -**



Now, we had to move back to the south for another two hundred mile drive to Wall, South Dakota the gateway to Badlands National Park. In undistinguished farmland driving south on US-83 we saw a handsome Red Fox run across the road. We stopped for a very good hamburger at Big Tom's Diner in Pierre, South Dakota's capital. Once you cross the Missouri River in Pierre the landscape changes from row crops to mostly rangeland, and sure enough we saw our first Pronghorn as we drove southwest on US-14.

### Badlands National Park –

We checked into our motel in Wall, South Dakota and almost instantly left for our first night drive. The entrance to Badlands National Park is a short drive from the edge of town. The action begins immediately at an extensive prairie dog town that surrounds the park entrance. We saw scores of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs and several lone Bison. We turned to the right off the main park road and slowly cruised the unpaved, but very well maintained, Sage Creek Rim Road. At this point the scenery became stunning; to the right was a flat, lush prairie (this normally dry landscape had received above average early summer rainfall this year); to the left the prairie dropped off into jagged cliffs with multi-layered, heavily eroded soft stone, so instead of hills arising above the plain the relief actually fell away from the flat prairie table. I had never seen this unusual topographic configuration before.

We spotted two Pronghorn and more scattered Bison in the rich prairie. Next, we came to a vast prairie dog town and saw hundreds of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs and one Burrowing Owl. While we scanned for ferret, swift fox and badger more and more Bison kept roaming by, always heading in the same direction. We slowly moved on to the Sage Creek Basin Overlook and I understood where all of the Bison were going—it was dusk and the Bison were congregating in the sheltered basin, which was another prairie at the base of the rainbow colored crumbling cliffs. In the foreground I saw three browsing Mule Deer, and next to them a flock of Wild Turkey. I love seeing a vista with multiple species of large animals in one view—something I had enjoyed on an African safari and in Brazil's Pantanal, but something you don't see very often in the rest of the world. We decided to retrace our route when we got to Highway 502 and we scanned Robert's Prairie Dog Town on our return. We had high hopes when a squat mid-sized mammal ambled across the road (I thought: badger for sure), but it turned out to be a Raccoon. Well, at least I got another mammal for the list.

The next morning we got up early and picked up our complementary breakfast bags and free coffee and headed back to the park, except this time we stayed on the Badlands Loop Road. At the Pinnacles Overlook we saw a herd of Bighorn Sheep on a little knoll right where the trip reports of Jon Hall, Scott Flamand and Sjeff Ollers had all recorded seeing them. Our next stop was the Ancient Hunter's Overlook, another interesting archeological site—there is evidence of mass butchering of bison at the base of the steep cliffs that surround this little box canyon. The researchers believe that prehistoric hunters chased herds of bison towards the cliff

and then ate the ones that plunged to their death on the sharp drop-off below. Well, there were not any Bison in that part of the park anymore, and we did not see any other mammals, but we saw Brown Thrasher, Black-headed Grosbeak and Say's Phoebe so we were not completely shut out.

We left the Badlands Loop Road and went south on Highway 509 Conata Road, ate our breakfast at the extremely pleasant Conata Picnic Ground, then continued to a large prairie dog town on the southern border of the National Park. As we scanned the bustling town a Prairie Falcon swooped by, dove, and came up with a Black-tailed Prairie Dog in its talons and then was rude enough to land on a prairie dog mound and start eating its prey. Soon after we saw an adult Coyote with three mostly grown pups brazenly approach in plain view. The town went berserk with hundreds of rodents whistling in alarm. I could not imagine how the Coyote pups had survived with such an incompetent hunting teacher. The Coyotes then disappeared and then I understood the method in their madness. They had actually sneaked around the town in a hidden arroyo and made a much sneakier effort to ambush the prairie dogs from the west while the prairie dogs were warily scanning to the south. The Coyotes then tried to bluff the Prairie Falcon off its kill but the bird held its ground and the Coyotes wandered away.

That was the mammal-watching highlight of the day as the afternoon was beginning to heat up. We returned to the Badlands Loop Road and drove all the way to the end of the park. We saw a Prairie Rattlesnake on the Cliff Shelf Nature Trail and a Desert Cottontail at the Visitor Center. We left the park on Highway 377, returned to Conata Road via Highway 44 and returned to Wall without any new sightings.

We started our final day at Badlands driving the Sage Creek Rim Road—we casually asked the woman at the entrance booth if she ever sees a Badger in the prairie dog town. She laughed and said, "You should have been here yesterday, I saw a badger run right across the road in the middle of the afternoon!" That must be the world's most frustrating phrase for wildlife watchers. We then got stuck in a Bison jam with two other vehicles. To add to the excitement of being surrounded by dozens of calm bovines I saw a flash of white, which turned out to be the tail of a White-tailed Jackrabbit, an attractive hare that I have not seen in many decades. We finished strong by seeing a White-tailed Deer in the brush as we crossed Sage Creek. A Coyote was prowling the other edge of this lush wet meadow.

**Bison Bull with Cowbird -**



**Bison Jam -**



## **Bison Jam with White-tailed Jackrabbit -**



## Wind Cave National Park -

We reluctantly left the beauty and big-game abundance of Badlands and headed to Wind Cave National Park, the USA's sixth national park founded in 1903 to protect the namesake cave. Almost instantly upon entering the park on Highway 87 we saw Black-tailed Prairie Dog and small groups of Bison at the extensive short-grass prairie of Bison Flat. We picked up our pre-arranged tickets for our cave tour at the Visitor Center and spotted a Red Squirrel in the Ponderosa Pine trees as we waited our turn. Our tour guide was wonderful but at the natural entrance to the cave she



dashed my hopes of adding any bats to my trip list. Apparently very few bats roost in the cave because it is a dry cave. In fact, I did not see a single bat on the entire trip. We finished the day with a drive to the Mount Rushmore National Memorial, which is an iconic site for Americans, but was devoid of mammals because of a fierce hailstorm and drenching rain.

### **Mount Rushmore Carvings -**



That night we drove the Wildlife Loop Road in Custer State Park and then cut down on gravel Road 6 into Wind Cave National Park. We saw Pronghorn, Bison and many of both White-tailed and Mule Deer in both of the contiguous parks. We also saw what I believe was a Mountain Cottontail, based on its buffier color, lack of a rufous neck patch and pale ears. After dusk we cranked out our new thermal imaging scope (the Pulsar Axion 2 XQ35 thermal monocular) and scanned the two big prairie dog towns on the route. Again, we dipped on the Black-footed Ferret and Badger (Swift Fox have not been recorded in the parks). The highlight of the thermal scope was a large herd of Bison just off the road—their massive heads and bodies looked monstrous in the scope and their eyes glowed bright red, creating a very eerie effect. A Coyote crossing the road as we returned to Custer finished off the chilly night drive.

**Pronghorn -**



**Mountain Cottontail -**



The next two days did not involve wildlife watching—we visited Hot Springs, an old resort town that has been somewhat fixed up; and the next day we went horseback riding and then enjoyed a trip to Deadwood, a gold rush town that has been reimagined as a gambling resort. We did brief night drives after both of those

outings and saw more deer and bison but dipped again on ferret and badger. We did see another Desert Cottontail in the naturally landscaped backyard of the excellent coffee shop Miner's Cup in the town of Custer, our breakfast destination for the last three days of the trip. Our last new mammal for the trip was a Least Chipmunk on the loop hike around the gorgeous Sylvan Lake in Custer State Park.

### **Desert Cottontail**



(Images by: Alison Vanderpoel)

### **SUMMARY:**

I have to admit I was very disappointed in not seeing Black-footed Ferret, Swift Fox and American Badger. I am shocked that I did not see at least one lifer rodent. I thought the thermal scope would tip the scales in our favor. Nevertheless, I still greatly enjoyed the trip because I was so happy to see how well big game can recover if you protect habitat and limit hunting. Bison, Pronghorn and Bighorn Sheep were exterminated from South Dakota (and most of the rest of the United States) by the end of the nineteenth century. Bison were reintroduced to Wind Cave in 1913, and to Badlands in 1963. Pronghorn were reintroduced to Wind Cave in 1914 and returned to Badlands on their own after the park was established. Bighorn Sheep were reintroduced to Badlands in 1964. Seeing all of these majestic

mammals make a comeback and thriving in scenic national parks gives me hope for the future of wildlife.

I was also happy to see the three species of cottontails on one trip—I think I know them now—before I started reading Mammalwatching.com I would have just thought...“rabbits”.

#### MAMMAL LIST

1. Raccoon
2. Coyote
3. Red Fox
4. Blacktail Prairie Dog
5. Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel
6. Eastern Chipmunk
7. Least Chipmunk
8. Eastern Fox Squirrel
9. Red Squirrel
10. Whitetail Jackrabbit
11. Eastern Cottontail
12. Mountain Cottontail
13. Desert Cottontail
14. Mule Deer
15. Whitetail Deer
16. Pronghorn
17. Bison
18. Bighorn Sheep