

Madera Canyon and Tucson - December 2019
Charles Foley

In December I spent a couple of nights in the Tucson area, spending one night with friends from Tanzania (David and Jeanette) who live on the outskirts of Tucson, and another night at the Santa Rita lodge in the Madera Canyon. My main goals were to see the Antelope jackrabbit at Continental that John Fox had written about, and to track down a Ringtail at the lodge.

I arrived in Tucson in the late afternoon, and headed to Continental (only about 30 minutes from the Tucson airport) to look for the Antelope jackrabbits. I drove through Continental and turned right on the last road before entering the long stretch towards Madera Canyon - it has a small sign saying 'baseball field'. The tarmac road eventually petered out and turned into a rough dirt road with various off-shoots. I was losing my light when I saw a Jackrabbit about 20 meters away under a bush. This species is a brute of a rabbit, with absolutely massive ears. When it runs it flashes white along its side - apparently in similar vein to a Pronghorn antelope flashing its rump at predators - hence the name. I also saw several Desert cottontails along the same road, and several Mule deer on the road towards the Canyon.



Antelope Jackrabbit - all photos by David Bygott

Once back in Tucson at my friends' house, I had just gone to bed when I heard David calling me, and went out to experience one of my more bizarre mammal sightings. A herd of 10 Collared peccaries of different sizes had entered his tiny

garden, and he was trying to shoo them out with a broom, with limited success! The disgruntled porkers eventually left, but not before I'd had a good laugh. On a walk along a dry river bed next to his house the next morning, we saw a pack of 3 coyotes and a Black tailed jackrabbit.



Peccaries on the rampage

The following David and I drove to Madera Canyon and checked into the Santa Rita lodge. As others here have described, the lodge is a small collection of cabins on the edge of the main road, and the owner puts out numerous feeding stations for birds and beasts. Anyone can stop and look at the feeding stations, and plenty of birders passed by when we were there. In addition to lots of humming birds and large flocks of turkeys, there were typically also three or four Rock squirrels and a couple of Arizona grey squirrels running around the feeding area.

In the late afternoon we drove back down out of the canyon onto the plains. There are a couple of roads on the left shortly after leaving the reserve that have signs saying they belong to the University of Arizona. We drove along both of these roads, among vegetation that looked very similar to parts of East Africa. The roads were generally in good condition although there were a couple of small river crossings, so having a vehicle with a bit of ground clearance helped. We didn't see much while driving, but at one point we left the car and walked for about 500 meters parallel to the road, and in that brief walk we saw 3 Antelope jackrabbits. Clearly they are abundant in the area, but during the day you need to flush them up to see them.



Arizona grey squirrel

We returned to the lodge shortly before nightfall, as the receptionist told us that the Ringtail often showed at around this time. The animal was apparently denning in the tall oak tree next to Casita #10, and I got a few snatched glimpses of it through the thermal scope climbing down the tree just as it turned dark (at around 6pm), but then it disappeared. At 8.30 pm I was checking the bird feeders (which the lodge fills before dark), and there it was again, hanging from one of the feeders and slurping down the sugar water. It seemed totally unperturbed by the light, and indeed it proceeded to walk right past me before sauntering off into the bushes. Clearly an animal well used to humans. David later heard it running on the roof of our cabin at 1.30 am, and got up to take some pictures as it played on the porch. If you're visiting the lodge specifically to see the Ringtail, then I suggest you stay in one of the Casitas instead of the other bungalows which are a little distance away.

Given that I visited in mid-December, I was not expecting to see any bats, but there were many bats drinking from the feeders in the early part of the evening. David got some good pictures of them and identified them as Mexican long-tongued bats, based on the fact that they have a small tail (the long-nosed bats are tail-less).

The receptionist at the lodge told us that the picnic sites and campsites in the Madera Canyon were good places to see Spotted skunks, and she estimated that she saw roughly one every week on the main road at night while driving back to

the lodge. She said she would see them all year round. We had seen a dead Hognose skunk on the road just above the lodge, and I set off at about 9 pm to see if I could find any skunks (of any description). I tried all the picnic spots and campsites without success and then headed down towards Continental to try my luck in the lower plains. As I drove past one of the turn-off's to the University of Arizona roads that we had taken early in the afternoon, I saw a skunk crossing the road. I turned out to be a hog-nosed skunk, giving me the full, tail-up warning signs. Anxious to get a picture of it, I parked the car and headed after it. I lost it within a few meters, but then saw a movement under a bush about 10 meters to my left. I shone the torch on it, but instead of seeing the skunk, I saw a bobcat crouching down and watching me. It wasn't quite sure what to do, so it just hunkered down and let me watch it for a full five minutes before slowly slinking away. So I think the moral of the story is 'if you see a skunk crossing the road, chase after it'. And don't forget to report back here on how you got along.



Dead Hog-nosed skunk

The following morning at about 8 am the male White-nosed coati that frequents the lodge showed up at the bird feeders and proceeded to drain one of them. It must have downed quite a few feeders in its time, as it was a massive animal with more than a passing resemblance to a bear cub! Back at David's house in Tucson I saw a Harris' antelope squirrel, which are apparently also quite common in the grounds of the Desert museum.



Ringtail at casita #10



Mexican long-tongued bat



White-nosed coati