

Channel Islands National Park 24 June 2013-28 June 2013

A good friend of mine moved to San Diego about 6 months ago and I was ready for a visit. I had been to the city multiple times in the past so I was looking for something different to do. After looking at everyone's trip reports on California, I locked in on Charles Hoods report about Santa Cruz island and seeing the island foxes. With limited time, and my friends lack of camping equipment a day trip was what I was able to do. Charles talked about in his report that most likely one would have a 25 +% chance of seeing a fox during the day. I called the national park visitor center and the ranger I talked to gave me a 75% chance of a daytime sighting. After doing some quick math ($25+75 = \dots$) I was in.

From San Diego one has to drive to Ventura as previously described. Along the way we decided to stop in La Jolla to see the California ground squirrels that were reported to live in the sandy cliffs along Coast Blvd. I had been to La Jolla about 20 years ago, but that was back in the day when I would not have given a squirrel more than a few second glance (I know crazy!) so could not remember if I had ever seen one. While driving to find a parking space I saw my first squirrels about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the start of Coast Blvd. Nervous that they would be the only squirrels I would see, I almost want to jump out the vehicle while my friend found a parking space. Little did I know that I would see about 400 squirrels that day, all along the sandy cliffs overlooking the ocean.

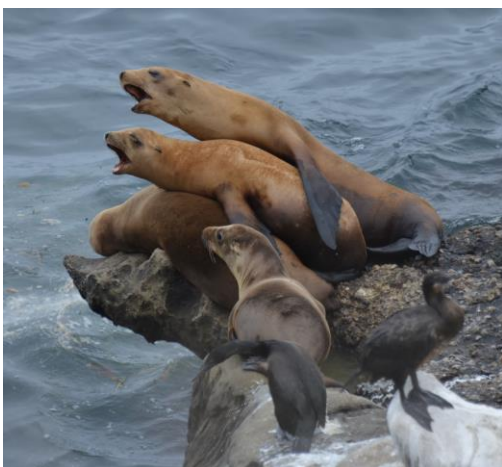




We also walked down to an area known as the Children's pool. Originally made as a beach area for children to swim in a small cove, it quickly turned into a haul out spot for pacific harbor seals and the occasional California Sea lion. While there is a small mesh fencing around the majority of the cove to keep over zealous pinniped lovers at bay, people are still aloud to swim there. At the time I went, there were about 4-5 people swimming in the cove. Two young harbor seals were hauled out when I was there as well. There were also about 100 western gulls on the beach at the same time. A small group of the gulls (4-5) were taking turns pecking at the seals off and on. The seals were a little too big for them to take down, but this did not stop them.

On a non mammal note I also saw my first every baby gulls here. I knew they had to exist.....

The majority of the rocks along the coast were covered in California sea lions.



The drive to Ventura was supposed to take about 3 hours “ish”, but being southern California traffic took over 5. I followed Charles advice and booked a ticket for the first ferry to east Santa Cruz from Ventura Harbor (8 am) and booked the last boat out (4:30 pm) to help optimize my chances. As previously described Island Packers still remains the concession. They have two ferry spots of departure, the Ventura harbor being the one to get to east Santa Cruz. At the end of the harbor the national park service has a beautiful visitor center about all the channel islands. It is worth a visit. The ferry trip took about 1 hour to get to east Santa Cruz. Along the way there were a few California sea lions on a buoy and we saw two small pods of common dolphins (unsure of which one). Once you get to Santa Cruz and exit the boat, you have still have to undergo a 5 minute talk about what to be careful with on the island. The fox only got maybe 45 seconds of the talk including there were a lot of kits around at this time of year and to keep food at the campgrounds in the fox safe metal containers at the end of the picnic tables.

What got about 3 minutes of the talk was how intelligent the raven population on the island had become and they were increasing their skills sets at a rapid pace. Opening back packs was the current trend. Almost on cue as we all turned around, a raven was on top of one of the day kayakers packs. Channel Island NP volunteers also offer a 1 hour guided walk to learn more about the island. I talked to the volunteer briefly who told me she sees foxes on every day trip she takes, but had never seen a kit. I was tempted to take the walk, however did not want to get distracted by any “flora” talk that I felt might happen.

Plus I had my fox mission. Leaving the dock it looked like you had two path options. To the left leads along the cove where you looked to a large hill overlooking the cove. To the right (take this one first) leads towards the scorpion ranch which has a small visitor center and some historical buildings about when the place was used for sheep farming. Just after the ranch leads a path towards the campground. There are two campground loops a lower and an upper. Again following previous advice (thanks Charles) we headed to the lower campground first, then took the the path to the upper campground. At 9:45 am on the path between the campgrounds we saw our first fox. The fox was standing still just at the edge of the path and was only giving us occasional glances. Upon a closer look we realized she was standing still

because she was nursing a very large kit! We watched her interactions with the kit for over 25 minutes. Neither of them seemed interested in us or were begging for food.



We headed up the scorpion canyon hike next. The path starts at the back of the upper campground (leading away from the direction of the cove). The hike is listed as “moderate to strenuous” by the park service. While there is a large uphill portion to the hike, the lack of shade and high heat the day I was there were the only difficult parts. Bring LOTS of water with you. We did not see any foxes along this hike, but did see a lot of evidence of them (scat and fox trails). About 1 hour prior to getting back on the boat we decided to head back to the campground area. Around 3:30 pm just by the edge of the upper campground we saw a lone male fox. He as well did not seem interested in our presence.



At one point he started pouncing on some grass then pulled out an endemic island deer mouse and quickly ate it. I saw it moving in his jaw for a few seconds so I am going to count it. On the inside of all the drop toilets on the island they have “DANGER! Keep away” signs about the island mice because of concerns with hanta virus (the fox obviously did not see this memo). The sign also states not to breathe in any areas where mice have eliminated. This was a little concerning for me as most of the toilets had small piles of mouse droppings in them. We followed the male to a small bush under which was laying another kit! I don't think the kit was the same one from earlier, but cannot be totally certain (the first one looked like it had an eye infection – something I alerted a ranger about who told me technicians had been treating a few kits with conjunctivitis from grass awns). The male

left the kit pretty much right in front of us and walked off, the kit then fell asleep. I could not have asked for a better viewing.

We found our final fox walking around the lower campground prior to leaving around 4:10 pm. The Thompson's Big-eared bats are also back. They had two roped off areas one in by a room just past the visitor center and a second by a small cave just at the base of scorpion ranch. They had turned of the electricity in the visitor center to not disturb the bats. No matter how much I positioned my neck in different positions I could not see one. The ranger I talked to about the fox told me the island was one of the few nursery sites on the pacific coast for the species so not disturbing them was very important. I also asked her about the spotted skunks. She told me she had never seen one during the day (as expected), but her best places were the trail leading from the scorpion ranch visitor center to the dock.



The next day we decided to take the Island packers humpback and blue whale boat trip. I did this to try to see a blue whale. Despite everywhere I have gone

to try to see one I never have. I have tried twice in the Monterrey Bay to see one and both trips ended up being more pelagic bird watching trips than marine mammal ones. According to the office sightings board they had not seen a blue in weeks so I was not optimistic. They did however have days where they wrote they saw 7600 common dolphins or 2058 common dolphins which I found very interesting. The boat trip takes you to the base of Santa Cruz Island and lasts about 8 hours. So getting back to the dolphins, Jon Hall had written “the sea was alive with common dolphins” on his ferry trip to Santa Cruz. This was an under statement. “THE SEA WAS ALIVE WITH COMMON DOLPHINS!!!” I have never seen so many dolphins in my entire life. At some points there would be a pod on the move so long it looked like it went on for miles. We also saw a lot of small groups creating bait balls to the delight of multiple brown pelicans, gulls and some humpback whales. The captain thought we saw 4,472 dolphins (not the hefty 7600 from a previous day). He stated for every dolphin that surfaces there are probably about 7 more under the water. With so many to choose from, I felt like the odds of seeing both a long beaked and short beaked were good and asked what was a good way to tell the difference. He told me he had been told behavior wise was a good way. The long beaked tend to be in the larger pods we saw and the short beaked the smaller. Not sure if this is true as I would think both types would have the breakaway groups that find food for the whole pod.

We ended up seeing five humpback whales on the trip doing all the behaviors any good mammal watcher loves. This included two younger whales lunge feeding a dolphin created bait ball, as well as a group of three whales that were breaching, lobtailing and fluke slapping at each other. As usual for me I dipped on seeing a blue whale.





A small pod (8-10) of risso's dolphins with two young calves were the last marine mammals we saw on the way back.



A couple thoughts about the Channel Islands. The foxes are present on six of

the eight islands, each having its own characteristics/is a different species. For example, the Santa Cruz fox is the smallest in size and has the shortest legs. Current estimates think there are about 1,354 foxes on Santa Cruz. An organization called Friends of the Island Fox with the Channel Island park Foundations works to help determine numbers, radio collar certain individuals ,as well as providing veterinary care. I talked to the rangers in the visitor center about how realistic it would be to see foxes on the other islands. If anyone knows differently I would love to know. I think San Clemente and San Nicholas would be next to impossible. I was told that the second best chance would be Santa Rosa by one of the campgrounds. The park service newspaper listed them “often seen”. There are a current estimated 637 foxes on this island. On Santa Catalina island there are an estimated 1,502 foxes. I got different answers from the rangers present. Some thought easy, others thought with the human population on the island it would be difficult. The Catalina Island Conservancy offers Jeep eco tours of varying time lengths and prices that do look for the foxes, as well as the endemic Catalina California ground squirrel and the feral bison on the island (left over from a movie set). I am not sure of the fox success rate with this trip. Finally ,there is a reported slim chance on San Miguel (estimated 540 foxes). What looks more appealing on San Miguel however is it contains one of the largest mix congregations of pinnipeds in the world. Up to 30,000 animals have been reported of five different species (California sea lions, northern elephant seals, pacific harbor seals, northern fur seals and the occasional Guadalupe Fur seal). It does however require a reported 15-16 mile ranger led strenuous hike to a place called Point Bennet.

Vladimer talks about it on the marine mammal section of his web page, so I think he had done it? It looks amazing. All in all more places to add to my already out of control list of places I want to visit!

Cheryl Antonucci

Species seen

1. California ground squirrel - "*Otospermophilus beecheyi*"
2. Pacific Harbor seal (common seal) - "*Phoca vitulina richardsi*"
3. California Sea lion- "*Zalophus californianus*"
4. Santa Cruz Island fox" - "*Urocyon littoralis santacruzae*"
5. Santa Cruz Deer mouse -"*Peromyscus maniculatus santacruzae*"
6. Common dolphin -possibly both "*Delphinus delphis*" and "*Delphinus capensis*"
7. Humpback whale - "*Magaptera novaeangliae*"
8. Risso's dolphin -"*Grampus griseus*"