

ISLA GUADALUPE 8 SEPT -15 SEPT 2014

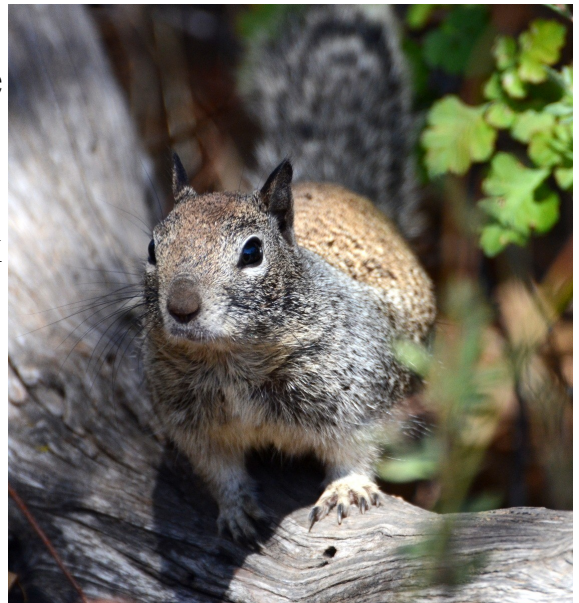
Besides being a junior mammal watcher, there are also a few non mammals that have always been high on my bucket list to see. Great White Sharks have always been on the top, and this year my friend Jyl from Michigan and I decided to travel to Guadalupe Island to go see some. I used a tour company called Great White Adventures that is based out of California and chose the Solmar V as the ship to use. They were the first ship that offered tours to the island, they had gotten good reviews, and the price was fair for what they offered. The trip starts out of San Diego with a 2.5 hour bus ride to Ensenada, Mexico where the ship is anchored for the Guadalupe trips.

I decided to go in a day early and visit my buddy that lives in San Diego and find a local area to do some hiking. I had seen the Cuyamaca Rancho State Park listed on this website as a reliable place to see Merriam's chipmunks. Considering if there was a contest here with who has seen the most chipmunk species I would lose ten times over, I decided to talk my friend into going on a chipmunk safari to beef up my numbers. Vladimir Dinets told me after I got back the chipmunks I was actually looking at were the California species as they tend to like the open areas with isolated trees and the Merriam's prefer shaded areas with dense overgrowth. I did a few Google searches on the park before I left and it also looked like a reliable place to see bobcat. This was a species that had eluded my friend multiple times (including one that ran in front of my car while I was driving and she was sitting next to me in Virginia), so I was able to use the bobcat incentive to convince her to look for chipmunks with me. The park is about a one hour drive from San Diego going east. It sits on about 24,700 acres of mixed oak and conifer forests with mixed meadows. On October 3, 2003 it was also the site of the biggest wildfire in California history after a lost hunter

lit a signal fire. There is still a lot of evidence of the fire, considering that 90% of Cuyamaca was reported to be burned and it took over 2 weeks to control the fire. Despite this, it turned out to be an excellent place to spend the day. The park is situated along route 79 and had three places that we concentrated our wildlife watching. The first is the lower Green Valley Campground, the second is the Visitor center with a country outdoor school area and the third is the Paso Picacho Campground. We were there on a Tuesday and tried to hit the visitor center first, but it was only open on the weekend. We decided then to head up to Paso Picacho and drop in the ranger station to ask about good areas to look for chipmunks. As soon as we stopped, my friend went to pay the day fee and on a tree no less than 4 meters from me, a California chipmunk was staring at me while shaking its tail. Excited, I squeaked at it, and to my horror, it bolted off the tree and went running away from me in a full frenzy. I felt like I had practiced my squeaking over the past year well, and had some positive results, but not here. I even tried the whole shaking my energy bar wrapper. No luck, it continued to run off. I went into the ranger station and was told that the chipmunks in all parts of the park can be pretty elusive, however after the ranger made multiple calls, she found out for me the upper loop in that campground (labeled day use picnic area on maps close to the entrance to the Paso Nature Trail) was the best place to look for them. We decided to head up to that area, hike the small trail, and look for chipmunks. At this point we also started to see what would become our first of what seemed like thousands of California ground squirrels, all busily gathering acorns. I also watched a couple sitting right next to day visitors while they were at picnic tables begging like small dogs.



As soon as we parked in the upper loop I started to look for chipmunks. We saw one briefly on the ground, but as soon as I tried



to approach it, it ran off. It was then that the trees in the area (mammal pause) got my attention. The trees lining the margins of the campground were full of holes that had acorns in them. Never having seen this before, it took me a minute to see who was responsible for this, the amazing acorn woodpecker. The trees were filled with 3-6 birds per tree busily moving acorns from one spot to another and working on new holes. Turns out the birds use the trees for generations as a grainery to dry out the acorns. They work in extended family groups of around 10 birds and each has there own territory. I easily took 20 minutes out of my prime

chipmunk watching time just staring in amazement at what they were doing. I didn't see any squirrels by any of the trees so I would assume the birds chase them off. It turned about the woodpeckers were all over the park, but here were the most impressive trees.



We hiked the Nature Trail, didn't see any animals, then decided to drive towards the Group camp sites A and B in the campground so we could hike the Azalea Glen Loop Trail. I saw another chipmunk running along a fence (also what looked like for its life), then finally saw a rather large chipmunk at the base of a tree with its cheek pouches full. I think the added weight was the only thing that slowed it down for a minute to allow me to get a picture. It also seemed quite terrified of my squeaking noises.

At the base of the trail was a small family group of 5-7 southern mule deer. As soon as we approached them however, they also ran off (no squeaking involved here). The trail is not very well marked and somehow we ended up on a fire trail about half way down. We also saw one chipmunk run across the trail that was in high shaded elevation so maybe a



Merriam's, but I can't be certain. In the afternoon we headed down to the Green Valley campground and decided to hike down to a small waterfall at the back of the campground (the trail just had a sign with an arrow towards the waterfall and recommendations not to dive). As soon as we parked the car, there was a large rock to the right of the parking area and a chipmunk ran to the top of it. I thought “this is the one!”, and tried to get out of the car to get better pictures, only to the chipmunks displeasure.

One thing to note about the park is every trail you go on there are mountain lion warning signs. I didn't see any evidence of any (scat or



footprints) but based on some of the habitat that we saw on our hikes, it looked like a good area for them. We finally decided to go back down to the visitor center area and do a final drive by. By the bathrooms we saw a lone brush rabbit that did not seem bothered by us.

We decided to drive down to the school area to make a full loop, and right by the outdoor seating area in the middle of the road a lone adult female bobcat was standing. We quickly parked, got out of the car and as she was slowly walking away I squeaked at her. This was the best reaction I have ever gotten and I now realize that I fully sound like a dying



or distressed rodent. She stopped, turned around, crouched, put her ears back and stared at us (mental note do not squeak with a mountain lion). This reaction was seconds after the noise I made as we were walking behind her for a bit before I vocalized. She then slowly walked off onto a large rock and just stared at us. We were able to get within 2 meters of her and she just went back and forth looking from me to my friend, clearly trying to figure out who was in the process of dying, and how much of a meal she would have over the following weeks. She finally grew bored of us and walked off.

I have had a couple of good bobcat encounters on foot in Virginia, but this by far was the best. On the way back to San Diego we saw multiple more mule deer trying to cross 79, and a lone coyote. I spent the night at



the downtown Hampton Inn which is the pick up point for the trip. Day 1 – an uneventful border crossing followed by the 2.5 hour drive to Ensenada. The Solmar V is a 112 foot live aboard dive vessel that had three dive masters, a naturalist, a university student studying the sharks and a small crew. There were a total of 19 divers. The boat has two cages each that hold 4 divers that they put off the back of the boat and a submersible cage that descends about 20-30 feet that can hold 2 divers and a divemaster. All the divers use a hookah system to breath. The boat itself was comfortable, but I do have to report that the room we stayed in was probably the smallest bunk I have ever been in, and my friend informed me when we walked in that it would be a good “test of our friendship”. The ride out takes about 19 hours and is about 400 km from Ensenada. We left the harbor around 3 pm and saw multiple California Sea lions along buoys and rocks around the harbor. My friend and I decided to sit along the bow of the boat to look for marine mammals. About two hours in my friend screamed out “whale” and in front of the boat I was finally looking at my nemesis mammal ,the blue whale.

It was overcast and we were not that close to it, so it took some convincing that it was what I was really looking at considering how many times I had dipped on the species. I was told prior to leaving

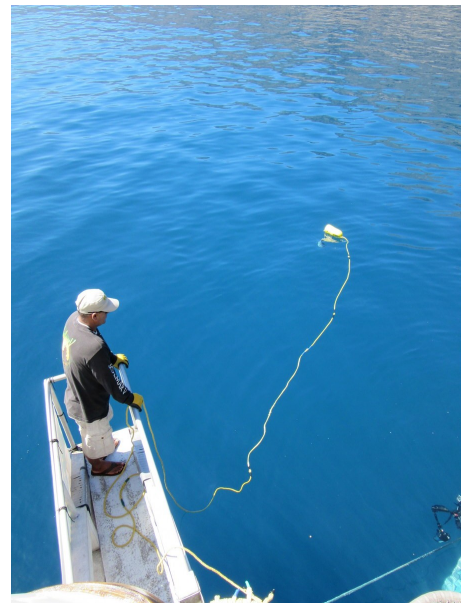


there was a good chance to see them near Ensenada and that they were the only large whales in the area at that time. Prior to sleeping we saw multiple long beaked common dolphins near the boat.

Day 2 – we woke up just prior to anchoring in a north east cove of the island. Along the way in multiple California sea lions were in the water as it was close to the northern point of the island where they have a colony. The island is about 35 km long and 9.5 km wide.

It was made a pinniped sanctuary in 1975 and except for researchers and a small group of fishermen, no one is allowed on the island. In 2001, after years of fishermen complaining of large sharks stealing fish off their lines, a company sent a boat down with some cages, some tuna to use as bait, and some divers and discovered the “large sharks” were great whites. A year later tourists started coming down and it is supposedly one of the better places (besides South Africa, Australia, and the Farralons) to see them because of the good visibility. The main season runs from August- Dec/January. I was told early in the season the smaller sharks (the fish eaters) are present, and later in the season the large sharks (the pinniped eaters) displace the smaller ones. Earlier also meant more sharks. When we anchored there were two other ships present, by the next day there would be four. There was also a great white researcher that was working on tagging sharks with a small boat and was going from ship to ship to see how viewing was going. They used small pieces of tuna on long lines as bait (that the sharks could easily pull off if they were able to grab it), as well as a chum box between the two main cages.

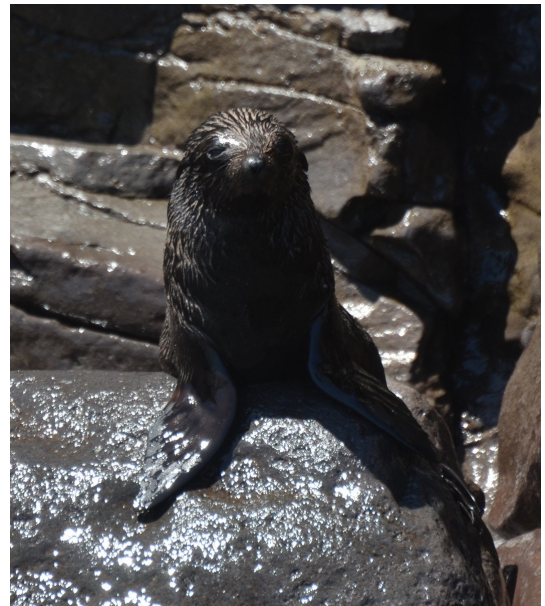
They would also throw small pieces of tuna in the water. No large buckets of blood were poured in the water at any time to fully “chum” it. Our boat was situated across from a beach with a haul out of about 15-20 northern elephants seals.





To the left of them and all along the rocks were multiple Guadalupe fur seals with pups who had been born two months before. I asked the shark researcher about the pinniped eating habits of the sharks and was told they will on occasion eat a fur seal, but that they tend to act that it was only worth a snack. The elephant seals were the main targets of the larger sharks. The hurricane that had gone through the area right before we got there created a small rock slide that killed a dozen fur seal pups. The researcher told me none of the sharks fed off any of the bodies.

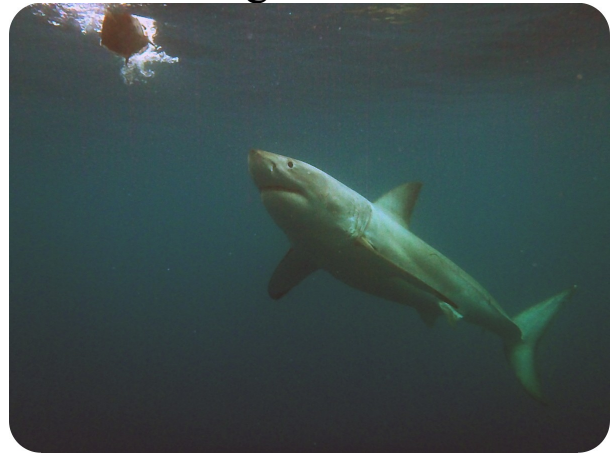
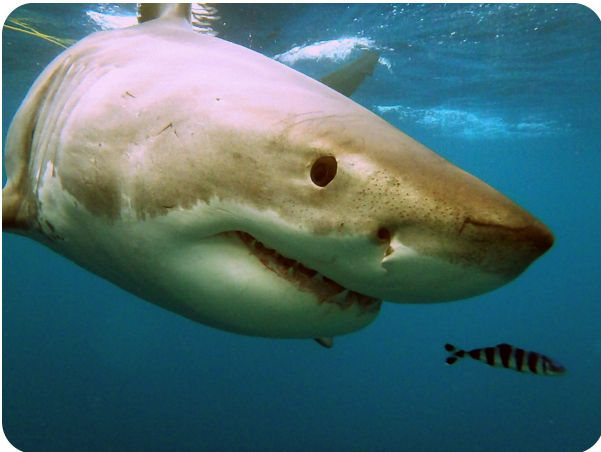




For the first dive I was put into the second group which had to wait an hour for the first group to finish. By minute 56 no sharks had shown up, but by minute 61, when it was time for our group to go in, three sharks were circling the cages. With the temperature of the water I had a 7 mm wetsuit on, boots, a hood, gloves and I was weighted down with ankle weights and a 45 pound vest so I wouldn't float (I maybe had a brief thought of isn't this how the mafia feeds fish.). I thought I might be a little terrified the first time I went in, but had the exact opposite reaction. We were told to not touch the sharks and at one point I had my arm rested on the cage side as a 10 foot shark while trying to lung for the bait, hit the side of the cage which included my elbow, so clearly sharks touching the humans was ok.



The people holding the lung lines would try to move the bait as the sharks lunged so the photographers could get the open mouth “money shot”. I have watched my fair share of cats in Africa and South America take down prey, but watching a large shark propel itself, then push out its jaw with very sharp teeth in a matter of what seemed like milliseconds was breath taking.



When you are not in the cage, you can also sit on the top of the boat to get views of the sharks at the bait. When we were briefed about what to do in case of emergencies, we were told on occasion that the sharks get their heads stuck in the cages and to stay calm. Sure enough on day 1, I watched from above as a shark lunged for the bait, missed then rammed into one of the cages. Sadly from a documentation point of view, I put my camera down as I was saying “holymother\$%\$#%” and watched as the three divers in the cage, dropped to the back, the shark shake the cage up and down multiple times, then dislodge itself. One of the divers in the cage at the time filmed the inside perspective and it turned out the shark has his mouth stuck for a few seconds on one of the viewing windows.



I think I maybe would have needed a break from the cage had I been in it, but amazingly the three divers stayed in the full hour. One of them had a large bruise on his arm where the shark had hit him when he got caught.



Day 3 -was spent all day in and out of the cage and watching from above. Two highlights included watching a California Sea lion bull come to the cages, snack out of the chum box, then proceed to swim next to a 12 foot shark and off and on harass him by biting his tail. I was told this was a common occurrence.

I was not in the cage at the time, but watched from above. In a few months when the large females come, I doubt he will do this. In the morning when I went out onto the deck ,and no divers were in the cages yet, I sat down, placed my camera down, and within



seconds a 12 foot shark completely lunged out of the water (whole body), grabbed the tuna bait and went off with it. It was one of those, why did I not have my camera ready moments. Myself, the dive master holding the bait line and another worker were the only ones to see it. I thought I would never get to see this unless I was in South Africa. It turned out it was a known shark named Mao who over the rest of the day did semi leaps but never his full body again. I would imagine that he is a very well fed shark and that seal is already on his menu.

Day 4 – our last morning to shark watch, prior to leaving ,we watched a group of 4-5 cuvier's beaked whales that were on the opposite side of the cove. Supposedly they are seen on most of the trips, but never close to the boat. We headed back to



Ensenada that afternoon for a 22 hour boat ride. We were warned

prior to leaving that the sea was going to be a little rough because of another hurricane that was getting ready to hit Cabo San Lucas. This was an understatement. It was probably the roughest boat ride I have ever been on in my life. I tried to sleep outside on the deck at one point instead of my cabin at the bottom of the boat, only to be defeated by the cold waves that crashed over me. I pretty much had to hold onto my bunk to stay in it and at times the boat was crashing into waves so hard that I was sure it was going to explode.

Day 5 back to Ensenada, saw more California Sea lions along the harbor, then drove back to San Diego for the night.

Day 6 -home

A couple thought about my trip -

-This was one of the best experiences of my life in the water. I have snorkeled with whale sharks and had a manatee try to steal my underwater camera from me, but nothing beat watching one of the world's ultimate predators. I never saw one at a kill, but again the sharks I saw were mainly still fish eaters and the large tuna population around the island is a good food source for them. I had wanted to see the sharks last time I was in South Africa, but friends and tour guides (obviously not involved with the industry) had negative thoughts on it and talked me out of it, with the whole making the sharks associate people with food and tempting sharks closer to shore. With the location of Guadalupe and lack of tourists along beaches, I didn't feel this way here.

-I obviously still need an instructional rodent squeaking video or I will remain at the bottom of the chipmunk species number list forever.

- while I did not get to see the large 20+ foot sharks, I saw 6 on the first day, 4 on the second and 3 on the last which was supposedly

the best of all the boats in the area. The largest shark we saw was a male named CC who was about 13 feet long. He was given that name I was told for multiple reasons, one of which was for when he got caught into a cage and bent it, then was called Cage Crusher. Mao was still the shark that was the most spectacular to watch above and below the water.

Mammal Species list Cuyamaca Rancho State Park

California Chipmunk “*Neotamias obscurus*”
California Ground Squirrel “*Otospermophilus beecheyi*”
Mule deer “*Odocoileus hemionus*”
Coyote “*Canis latrans*”
Brush rabbit “*Sylvilagus backmani*”
Bobcat “*Lynx rufus*”

Isla Guadalupe

Long beaked Common dolphin “*Delphinus capensis*”
Blue whale “*Balaenoptera musculus*”
California Sea Lion “*Zalophus californianus*”
Northern Elephant Seal “*Mirounga angustirostris*”
Guadalupe Fur Seal “*Arctocephalus townsendi*”
Cuvier's Beaked Whale “*Ziphius cavirostris*”

Honorary Mammals

Acorn woodpecker (just because) “*Melanerpes formicivorus*”
Great White Shark “*Carcharodon carcharias*”