

Trip Report – California April/May 2016

Summary: we took **14 days** for mammal-watching around central/west California and saw **40 species**, helped by a brilliant whale-watching trip from Monterey with highlights of fin whales and northern right whale dolphins, and a great two nights at Point Reyes, where highlights included a bobcat and long-tailed weasel.

I'll get this out of the way: we saw **California ground squirrels** at every single location we visited, except for Monterey Bay! They also do impressions of various chipmunks, gophers and other squirrels when they pose just right.

Our first stop was Carrizo Plain, where we tried an afternoon drive, a night drive and a morning drive. We had planned 2 nights, but the full moon was so bright I could drive happily without headlights (I said could, not did!) so we left after one. The Cayuma Buckhorn in New Cayuma is a great budget motel with bags of character, only 15 minutes drive from the south entrance of Carrizo, if you're not camping.



San Joaquin antelope squirrel snacking on a cricket

There are **San Joaquin antelope squirrels** and **desert cottontails** living immediately around the visitor centre – we saw the former in the heat of the day, the latter early morning. Had a good daylight view of a **black-tailed jack-rabbit** on the Elkhorn road but otherwise saw nothing there. At night we saw a couple more jack-rabbits and plenty of rodents crossing the road: definitely **giant kangaroo rats** along with smaller kangaroo rats we weren't savvy enough to identify and more than one mouse, also too quick to ident. Zero predators, not even a coyote. Full moon, and moonrise was before sunset!

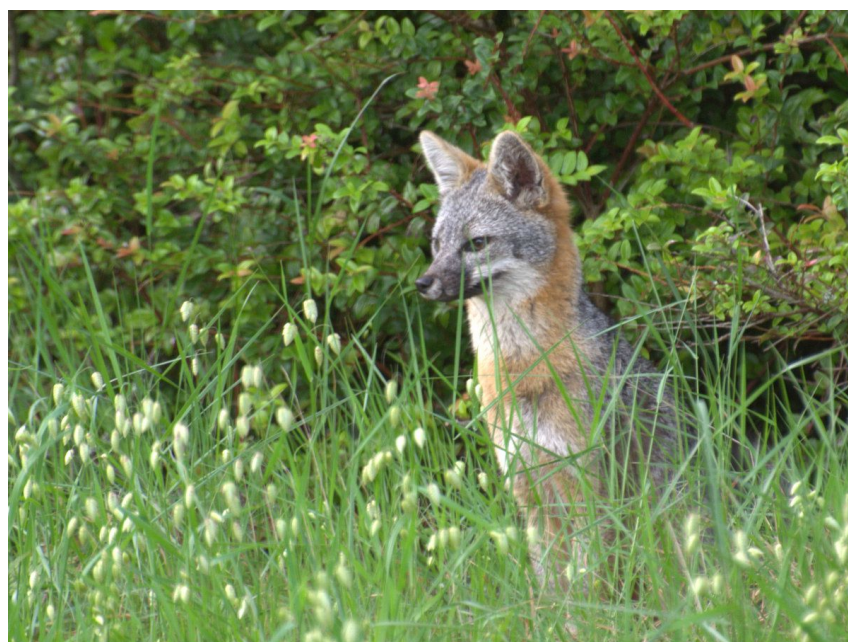


Coyote in Yosemite Valley

Next we shot up to Yosemite, to mix mammal watching and hiking. It really is pointless talking to visitor centre park rangers at these big parks! Anywhere particularly good for bears lately? “Well, they like the orchard car park, you know, because of the apples.” And this in April. We gave up trying to get information.

We saw two **coyote** on a morning walk at Wawona meadows, and four more in daylight and at night around the valley. We also picked up a **grey fox** spotlighting at night in the valley, apparently a rarity for Yosemite. April is too early for the golden-mantled ground squirrel, and apparently too early for chipmunks too; three separate stops to stake out the Merced Grove trailhead showed nothing, nor any in the Tuolumne Grove. We finally got an **Allen's chipmunk** at Hetch Hetchy, on the rocks as you literally step out of the tunnel beside the dam. On hikes and in the valley we saw several **western grey squirrels** and **douglas squirrels** and plentiful **mule deer**. But that was it for Yosemite – I suspect the Tioga Pass road being closed reduces a lot of opportunities, and I think all the hard work put into dissuading people from leaving food out might have made bears less inclined to visit the valley, we certainly didn't overhear anyone talking about bear sightings in our 3 days there. Plus the full moon (some kind of commiseration: beautiful moonshine photos from Glacier Point!).

On our way towards the coast we stopped at Grizzly Island reserve. It's a really unpromising place, but by driving along the dirt road and stopping at every bridge and corner you can actually get incredibly long views down the dead straight slough. Sure enough, we spotted a **North American river otter** fishing his way up, and waited on our little bridge until he fished right underneath us. Oh, and we spotted a **California sealion** while crossing the Sacramento River.



Grey fox, plentiful at Point Reyes

So we reached Point Reyes, after a brief stop at Jenner further up the coast where there's a **harbour seal** overlook where sometimes sea otters and river otters are seen – but neither on this occasion, just seals. Point Reyes is a great place. We checked out the **northern elephant seals** and the sealion haul-out but I think April is the wrong time of year for Stellar's sealions, anyway we saw none.

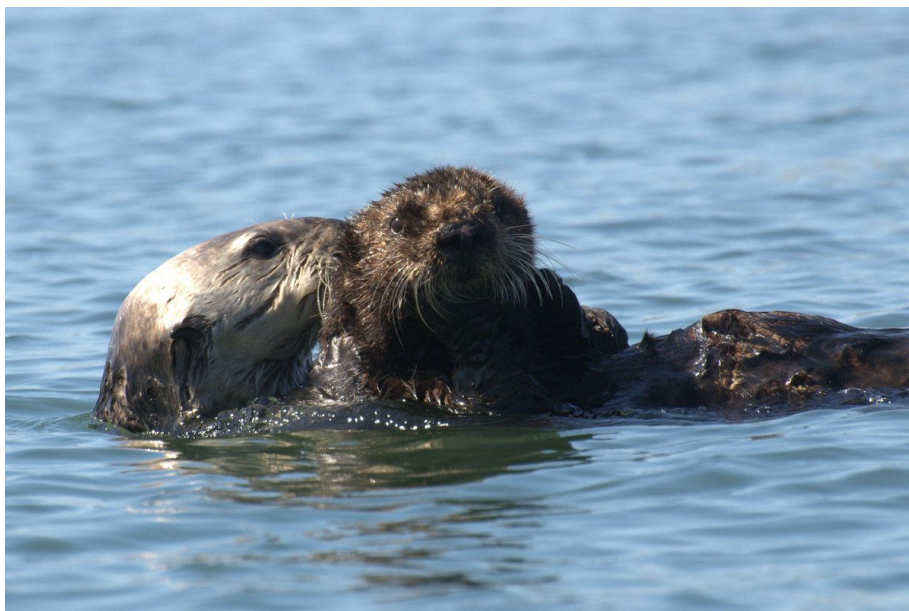
Our night drives seem to bear out other reports of foxes doing well this year – we had 7 grey fox sightings, including one in daylight, compared with only 4 coyotes. The visitor centre area is good for foxes, mule deer and **northern raccoons**, we saw a couple there and another along the road nearby. We saw another river otter at Abbott's Lagoon, along with a couple of **brush rabbits**, which we also saw on the road up to the summit where we scouted unsuccessfully for sewellel. On the Pierce Point Road in the Abbot's Lagoon vicinity we also had a **long-tailed weasel** cross in late afternoon, and a **striped skunk** in the morning who trotted cheerfully ahead of our car for a few minutes before deciding to head off into a meadow full of flowers. Definitely Pepe Le Pew! On our second night drive, along the road to the Estero trailhead, we finally spotted our **bobcat** in a shrub-filled gully. Also saw a black-tailed jack-rabbit on the same piece of road. Finally, **tule elk** were easy to see in the evening at the end of Pierce Point Road. So with the ever-present ground squirrels that's 11 mammals for 2 nights at Point Reyes – lovely spot.



Pepe le Pew! Striped skunk in flowers

We tried the Muir Woods for Sonoma chipmunk, but only had time to wander a bit and stake out the visitor centre picnic deck. I suspect sterling efforts by the park authorities to dissuade people from feeding the little fellas mean this is no longer a reliable spot for them.

In Monterey we had an **eastern fox squirrel** in the garden of our little apartment in town. We just took one half-day whale watching trip, in the morning, but it was a good'un. Three **fin whales** were a highlight, so was a big pod of **northern right whale dolphins** playing around the boat, mixed with **pacific white-sided dolphins**. There was another pod of **risso's dolphins** and several **humpback whales**. As a bonus there was a tiny **northern fur seal** looking very lost in the open ocean, and a young elephant seal. Add to that the ubiquitous sealions, harbour seals and **sea otters** in and around the harbour and we had 10 mammals in one 4 hour boat trip!



Sea otter & pup, cuteness overload, Elkhorn Slough

Just up the coast at Moss Landing we went kayaking on Elkhorn Slough, which is just amazing for the close-up views of sea otters. You can see them almost as close from the car park down Ferry Road, too. There were sealions and harbour seals too, and a desert cottontail in the dunes by the car park.

Along the Big Sur we didn't do any more than look out for migrating **grey whales**. There is a pull-out on Grimes Point, 2 miles south of Nepenthe, which is the absolute best spot (as local whale watchers hanging out there told us). Look for the whales really close to shore, as in they quite often swim right through the kelp beds. We saw two pairs of mother

and calf beautifully from above.

Inland we explored the Pinnacles area, including a night drive along Panoche Road. First we took a long afternoon drive until twilight along the Old Hernandez Road and saw nothing other than a couple of mule deer and a cottontail. I think knowing the right parts of the road might help! Our night drive was windy, a kinda choking experience spotlighting along the gravel section. We were able to distinguish **Heermann's kangaroo rat** from **San Joaquin kangaroo rat** by finally getting a long enough view of their tails (thanks to Brian and Venkat for help!), and we saw more giant kangaroo rats too. A couple more mice crossed too quick for us to identify, but there was one that definitely fit **San Joaquin pocket mouse**. We also saw a fox – the tail was foxy rather than coyote-y but in torchlight we struggled with sizing it or seeing which part was black. However, I'm told grey foxes don't exist up there, so I'm taking a **San Joaquin kit fox** finally!

Walking in the Pinnacles, we saw **Merriam's chipmunk** easily, especially at the picnic spot in the Bear Gulch area. In the talus caves on the Balconies trail we found two different bats, and with photos the (much more helpful!) park ranger was able to confirm **small brown myotis** and **Townsend's big-eared bat** for us.

Our final stop was Ventura, to visit Santa Cruz Island. On the island we had no difficulty seeing the **Santa Cruz island fox**; there were 3 somewhat tatty specimens that are totally habituated and hang around the campsites, and we saw 2 other better looking foxes – still in the valley where the campsites are, though. Also, on the way out there was a small pod of **bottlenose dolphins** at the harbour entrance and a huge group of **long-beaked common dolphins** in the channel. We passed through this group again on the way back, feeding along with several humpback whales.



Grey whale & calf, Highway 1 near Malibu

Continuing down Highway 1 back to LA airport, we got one more great view of two pairs of grey whales; this time we were only a few yards above the sea, and they were surely less than thirty metres from the shore.

So we got a total tally of 40 mammals, which is great for 14 days. Of those, we add 26 to our life list which is brilliant. Notable misses: still haven't seen an American badger, would have loved a Stellar's sealion, and our main jinx is still the beaver – after three trips to the US we've never seen one!

Species	Number	Where seen
California ground squirrel	Millions!	everywhere
Bobcat	1	Point Reyes
Long-tailed weasel	1	Point Reyes
Grey fox	8	Point Reyes, Yosemite
Coyote	9	Point Reyes, Yosemite
Santa Cruz island fox	5	Santa Cruz island

San Joaquin kit fox	1	Panoche Road
Striped skunk	2	Point Reyes
Northern raccoon	4	Point Reyes
North American river otter	2	Grizzly Island, Point Reyes
Sea otter	> 50	Elkhorn Slough, Monterey, Big Sur
California sealion	> 50	Monterey, Point Reyes, Ventura
Harbour seal	> 40	Elkhorn Slough, Monterey, Jenner
Common bottlenose dolphin	6 or so	Ventura
Long-beaked common dolphin	> 400	Ventura
Risso's dolphin	20 or so	Monterey whale-watch
Pacific white-sided dolphins	> 40	Monterey whale-watch
Northern right whale dolphins	> 30	Monterey whale-watch
Northern elephant seal	> 30	Point Reyes, Monterey whale-watch
Northern fur seal	1	Monterey whale-watch
Fin whale	3	Monterey whale-watch
Humpback whale	> 8	Monterey whale-watch, Ventura
Grey whale	8	Big Sur, Malibu Bay
Little brown myotis	1	Pinnacles NP
Townsend's long-eared bat	1	Pinnacles NP
Tule elk	20 or so	Point Reyes
Mule deer	> 30	Yosemite, Old Hernandez Rd, Pinnacles NP, Point Reyes
Black-tailed jackrabbit	4	Carrizo Plain, Point Reyes
Brush rabbit	6	Point Reyes
Desert cottontail	8 or so	Carrizo Plain, Panoche Road, Elkhorn Slough
San Joaquin antelope squirrel	> 6	Carrizo Plain
Douglas squirrel	3	Yosemite
Eastern fox squirrel	2	Monterey
Western grey squirrel	5 or so	Yosemite
Merriam's chipmunk	6	Pinnacles NP
Allen's chipmunk	2	Yosemite
Giant kangaroo rat	5 or so	Carrizo Plain, Panoche Road
Heermann's kangaroo rat	> 3	Panoche Road, probably Carrizo Plain
San Joaquin kangaroo rat	2	Panoche Road, maybe Carrizo Plain
San Joaquin pocket mouse	1	Panoche Road