

Four days in California.

Last October I had a chance to spend four days on a short mammal watching trip in California.

I started my journey in San Francisco airport. My itinerary covered Big Basin Redwoods State Park, Año Nuevo Wildlife Reserve, Andrew Morela State Park and Pinnacles National Monument.

a) Big Basin Redwoods

Big Basin Redwoods State Park is situated in Santa Cruz Mountains, 35 miles from downtown San Jose and less than 50 miles from San Francisco airport.

The park was created in early twentieth century with a purpose of protecting patch of giant redwoods - a fragment of unique ecosystem of rain forest dominated by world's tallest trees- redwoods (*Sequoia sempervirens*). Some of those trees might reach heights of 100 meters and be more than thousand year old.

Sadly more than 95% of redwood forest in Santa Cruz mountains have already been chopped. The fate of giant redwoods is somehow symbolic for our civilization, which did not hesitate to exterminate such magnificent long living creatures just for short term profit.

Happily for the Big basin Redwoods, noncommercial value of redwoods was recognized by some wildlife enthusiast who, acting under the umbrella of NGO called Sempervirens club (now Sempervirens fund), managed to convince California authorities to declare acquired forest as a state park.

The club is still active and busy to protect remaining redwood forest, which still unsecured, outside the park boundaries. Since its creation in 1900 the organization has helped to create and expand Castle Rock, Butano, and Portola Redwoods State Parks, protecting over 34,000 acres of coast redwood forests. Only in 2011 the club purchased a 8.500 acres in the vicinity of big basin redwoods State Park. The goal of the organization is to create a "great park" combining Big Basin Redwoods, Butano, Portola Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Castle Rock State Parks, along with Pescadero Creek County Park, Long Ridge, and Saratoga Gap Open Space Preserves, Sanborn County Park, Coast Dairies, Wilder Ranch, and Henry Cowell State Park

Anybody willing to help this right cause should consult the web site of the fund (www.sempervirens.org).

Big Basin Redwoods state park alone is now over 18,000 acres (73 km²) and covers not redwood forest as well as other types of California habitats including chaparral and riparian forest. What is more important the park is continuous with other protected areas, allowing animals to migrate freely along the Santa Cruz mountain chain.

The park has a reach mammalian fauna which includes, among others, Black-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*), Western Gray Squirrels (*Sciurus griseus*), Merriam's chipmunks (*Neotamias merriami*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), foxes, coyotes (*Canis latrans*), bobcats (*Lynx Rufus*), and Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*- introduced) and even Cougars (*Puma Concolor*). Grizzly bears are now extinct in the park (as elsewhere in California), but were numerous there the past. The same with black bears (*Ursus americanus*).

Recent reports about sightings of black bears in mountainous areas of Santa Cruz suggest gradual expansion of the species into territory which historically occupied by the now-extinct California grizzly bear. It's probably a question of time and Black Bears will reappear in Big Basin Redwoods.

Big Basin is well accessible from the west (sea shore) as well as from the east (Silicon Valley) by car. There are many rent a car companies in both San Francisco and San Jose airports which can provide a vehicle.

It is worth to remember, that Big Basin is relatively close to cities of San Francisco and San Jose. For that reason it is advisable to book the camping places inside the park at least during the weekends, in advance by Reserve America Web Page (www.reserveamerica.com).

There are several campsites in the park, mostly situated along the main road. All of them are with equipped with fire places, toilets and showers (remember to take quarter dollar coins!), but are situated quite far from the park headquarters and main trailheads.

As I had only one morning to explore the place I woke early in morning. To my surprise full camping sites (as was the case during my visit) didn't meant packed trails. On my hike I met another person only at midday!

I walked from Huckleberry campsite along the Sequoia Trail to Park Headquarters and then following Creeping Forest Trail, Middle Ridge Road, Meteor Trail. Most of those trails led among giant redwoods and allowed me to spot gray Squirrels, chipmunks and a group of black tailed deer.

Not much perhaps, but seeing magnificent redwood forest was definitely one of the highlights of my life.

Año Nuevo State Reserve

Although Año Nuevo State Reserve is continuous with Big Basin it formally constitute a separate entity. To make things more complicated the park is divided in three distinct units: Año Nuevo State Natural Reserve, Año Nuevo State Park and Año Nuevo State Marine Conservation Area. All managed as a one conservation unit and are accessible from one entry point. They also share a same visitor's Centre and the parking situated just west of California Route 1.

There are several reasons to visit the place from which the most important is probably the colony of northern elephant seal (*Mirounga angustirostris*). The seals occupy the beach on the top of Año Nuevo peninsula and can be seen from the main trail. The reserve which consist of several beaches, cliffs, sand dunes, islands and grassland host several other species of mammals including cougars, coyotes and sea otters which breed regularly in the reserve.

Great white sharks, attracted by seal colony, are also there, so be caution while swimming in the ocean.

It is worth to remember, that during the peak mating season the colony can only be visited in the framework of organized groups and in company of naturalist guide. That's also because of the aggression of male elephant seals. Out of the season, like in October, elephant seals might be visited freely. Volunteer guides provide interesting details on their biology and habits.

As I visited Año Nuevo midday the only mammal species I saw were elephant seals. Because of the period of the year most of them were young adults, taking the rest on the beach before the arrival of heavy weight males.

Tracks of other mammals (deer, coyote, raccoon) prove that the place might be much more interesting for mammal watching at night.

Andrew Molera State Park (Big Sur)

My next destination was Andrew Molera State Park situated on the Big Sur coast in Monterrey County, south of Carmel town.

The park is a splendid example of California wild rugged coast. It protects beaches, cliffs, coastal chaparral and oak forest and is home for several interesting species from which California sea otters and California condors are probably the most famous.

The park is continuous, but does not officially incorporated into Ventana Wilderness of Los Padres National Forest which is protected area of 971 km². That connection allows the wildlife to migrate freely to and from the Andrew Morela Park.

The history of the Park is interesting. Today's protected area was previously part of the large ranch that belonged to the Molera family. It was transformed into public park on the last owner's request and with the assistance of Nature Conservancy, leading American NGOs acting on behalf of wildlife protection. Another entity worth a support (www.nature.org).

For me the main reason to visit the park were sea otters. Unfortunately I was unlucky to see them despite hiking main coastal trails (Bluff and Panorama). I believe having a good binocular and a local guide is essential to see otters, as they tend to hide in the kelp forest and are hard to see from a distance.

The only mammals which I had a chance to spot in Andrew Molera Park were bush rabbits (*Sylvilagus bachmani*.)

Never mind. Views of the ocean were spectacular and a chance to see fishing pelicans worth an effort.

I strongly recommend to stay overnight in Park's campground anybody willing to explore the park. However it is managed under "first come first served" and filling up quickly especially on weekends.

After visiting Andrew Morela State Park I continued to drive along famous Cabrillo Highway on the Big Sur Coast.

Although I had no time to explore numerous state parks neither wilderness zone along the road, I made a short stop in Fernwood Resort, 5 km past Big Sur, to see a rare albino redwood tree. Because it lacks chlorophyll, albino redwoods live the life of parasite, receiving its nutrients from host trees. There are as few as perhaps 25 albino redwoods around the world and one of them grows just opposite the registration office in Fernwood Resort. Good reason to make a stop there and see that animal-plant.

Another emblematic species which I saw, while driving along Cabrillo Highway, was a California Condor sitting on a tree 50 m from the road. That bird, almost as rare as albino Redwoods (with no more than 200 individuals left in the wild) was a target of rapid decline in seventies and then successful, but prohibitively costly, captive breeding programme. Each condor released into the wild bore a yellow tag with a number. "Mine" condor hold number 6.

The story of California Condors is well presented in ornithological station in Andrew Morela State Park, entity run by Ventana Wildlife Society (www.ventanaws.org). Once again a group of good guys worth a support (also financial).

After leaving Big Sur I made a short stop in San Simeon state park to see another colony of Northern Elephant Seal. This place also hosts good number of California ground squirrels (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*).

Pinnacles National Monument

Pinnacles National Monument was the last wildlife spot on my California tour.

The park is situated in Salinas Valley, about 5 miles (8.0 km) east of Soledad and 45 km from King city. It was created in 1908, on the request of local activist by famous conservation pioneer- president Theodore Roosevelt, with the aim of protecting unusual rock formations and cave system.

Today the park has 98 m2 but is gradually extended. More than 80% of the park is designated as the Pinnacles Wilderness of 6,469 hectares. Pinnacles will probably soon receive full US National Park status as relevant legislation awaits the approval from the US president.

The park protects reach wildlife. It was one of the first release sites for California condors. It also host reach mammal life Forty-nine mammalian species are known to occur within the park, including black-tailed deer, pumas, ringtails, bobcats, gray foxes, raccoons, jackrabbits, brush rabbits, ground squirrels, chipmunks, badgers, coyotes and feral pigs. Pinnacles are also hosting 14 of the known 24 bat species of California. Checklist of species available at <http://www.nps.gov/pinn/naturescience/upload/MammalList-2.pdf>

Hiking in Pinnacles is very rewarding but might be difficult on midday due to the high temperatures and steep terrain. Best place to spend a night is Pinnacles campground close to visitors Centre. Park is famous for trails leading inside the cave system. Remember to take a torch to explore them.

As it often happens immediate neighborhoods of the camping ground proved to be the best place to watch wildlife. The place was grazed by black-tail deer, bush rabbits and black-tailed jackrabbits (*Lepus californicus*). A nearby creek bed was home to family of noisy dusky-footed woodrats (*Neotoma fuscipes*). Hike along the monument trails allowed me also to see California ground squirrels, Condors two groups of wild turkeys and colony of acorn woodpeckers busy maintaining its fantastic acorn granary.

Trip list

During my trip I saw 8 species of mammals:

| English Name | Latin Name | Place |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Mule (black tailed) deer | <i>Odocoileus hemionus</i> | Santa Cruz Mountains, Castle Rock State Reserve (along the road), Big Basin Redwoods State Park, Pinnacles National Monument |
| Western gray squirrel | <i>Sciurus griseus</i> | Big Basin Redwoods State Park, San Jose University campus |
| Merriam's chipmunk | <i>Neotamias merriami</i> | Big Basin Redwoods State Park, |
| Northern elephant seal | <i>Mirorunga angustirostis</i> | Ano Nuevo State Reserve, San Simeon Beach |
| Black-tailed jackrabbit | <i>Lepus californicus</i> | Pinnacles National Monument |
| Bush rabbit | <i>Sylvilagus bachmani</i> | Andrew Molera State Park, Pinnacles National Monument |
| California ground squirrel | <i>Otospermophilus beecheyi</i> | San Simeon Beach, Pinnacles National Monument |
| Dusky-footed woodrat | <i>Neotoma fuscipes</i> | Pinnacles National Monument |

Recognized and photographed birds

1. California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*)
2. Western scrub jay (*Aphelocoma californica*)
3. Canyon wren (*Catherpes mexicanus*)
4. Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)
5. Dark eyed junco (*Junco hyemalis*)
6. Acorn woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)
7. Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*),
8. Bewick's wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*),
9. Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*).

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