

# Central California Mammal Report: 20 – 31 October, 2015

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Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*)

## Introduction

California is widely considered to be a premier destination for the mammal enthusiast. The state is home to a high diversity of species, including several endemics. Many of these can be found against a backdrop of spectacular scenery and with little effort. Road networks are good and a plethora of mammal watching information exists, with up to date advice on finding most species readily available on [mammalwatching.com](http://mammalwatching.com) and in Vladimir Dinets's book.

In October 2015 I visited central California for 10 days. The trip was primarily a long promised vacation for my 15 year old nephew Christopher, his first out of Europe. Sarah came along to keep us out of trouble and to make sure that I didn't dedicate *all* our time to finding mammals. Despite devoting precious time to shopping and general sightseeing we managed to find and identify 43 mammal species including many of our targets.

## Travel details

By far my biggest headache when planning my trip was deciding which sites to visit with limited time. It was tempting to try and cover the whole state which would not have been practical, even on a dedicated mammal finding expedition. In the end I decided to limit our itinerary to three neighbouring regions in central California with the idea of exploring each one in relative detail and greatly reducing travel times between sites.

We flew direct from London Heathrow to San Francisco with Virgin Atlantic. Our hire car came from Alamo who upgraded us to a huge, white Chevrolet Suburban. Although fantastic to drive with loads of space, it was not the most subtle of vehicles when it came to sneaking up on wildlife.

### **San Francisco area: 20-23 October, 2015**

For the first three days of the trip we stayed in a nondescript hotel on the outskirts of Vallejo. Initially this seemed a good choice for a base as it was central to several sites I wanted to visit, including the town of Martinez (where a family of American Beavers had been showing well all year) and Grizzly Island Wildlife Area. Typically the beavers disappeared a month before our visit and then I found out Grizzly Island is closed through October for hunting. With hindsight we would have been much better basing ourselves closer to Point Reyes and thus limiting time on the congested highways.

Muir Woods National Monument ([www.nps.gov/muwo/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/muwo/index.htm))

Part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, this very popular park was our first port of call. Heavy traffic meant we arrived later than planned and already the main car park was full. In the overflow parking area we spotted our first mammal in the form of a **Western Grey Squirrel** and quickly found a second while walking to the entrance gate. Once in the park we made a beeline to the cafeteria where I expected to find our main target. Despite lots of signs warning against the feeding of chipmunks, I could not find my quarry despite a lengthy search.

Undeterred we decided to walk the Hillside Trail through the Redwoods and almost instantly glimpsed a **River Otter** across the creek. Obviously used to people, the otter began to hunt for crayfish in full view of the noisy line of spectators who had assembled along the bridge. Once the otter had disappeared further down the creek and out of view, we continued up the trail and finally found several **Sonoma Chipmunks** running around in the leaf litter. By 10am the tour groups were turning up so we quickly moved on to our next site.

#### Muir Beach

Despite its close proximity to the overcrowded Muir Woods, the Muir Beach car park was almost deserted. A short walk to the shore revealed a small pod of **Bottlenose Dolphins** which according to a notice board are now residing in the bay.

#### Horseshoe Bay

A quick visit to the vista point overlooking Horseshoe Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge gave us our first **Harbour Seals** and **California Sea Lions**.

Point Reyes National Seashore ([www.nps.gov/pore/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/pore/index.htm))

We stopped at this fantastic area on two consecutive afternoons although I could have easily have spent a full week exploring the various trails and side roads.

Our first visit was mainly a reconnaissance mission and after a quick look around the Bear Valley Visitor Centre we headed along Sir Francis Drake Boulevard and then on to Chimney Rock to observe the Elephant Seal colony. By now it was already late afternoon and the wildlife was out in force. Our first mammal was a roadside **Brush Rabbit**, closely followed by some **Tule Elk** and numerous **Mule Deer**. Shortly after the turn off to the Chimney Rock we spotted a **Coyote**, the first of several we found in the area.



Brush Rabbit (*Sylvilagus bachmani*)

While walking to the seal viewing area we noticed signs of rodent activity in the adjacent scrub. After a short wait I glimpsed a **California Vole**, an animal that seemed to be abundant throughout the Point Reyes area. Offshore a couple of **Harbour Porpoises** showed briefly in the calm waters and we watched our second **River Otter** of the day swimming in the surf directly below the path. Once at Chimney Rock the **Northern Elephant Seals** were easy to see, along with smaller numbers of **California Sea Lions** and a couple of **Harbour Seals**.

The last of the daylight was spent driving up to the Tule Elk Reserve at the end of Pierce Point Road. No new mammals were seen although I did spot another California Vole and we witnessed a young calf chase a Coyote across a paddock.

The next day we arrived much earlier and hiked the Abbott's Lagoon Trail in a fruitless search for Long-tailed Weasel. **California Voles** were seen in both the car park and from the boardwalk, along with **Brush Rabbit** and many **Mule Deer**.

As Point Reyes is reliable for Bobcats I promised Chris that we wouldn't leave the park until we had seen one. Slowly driving Pierce Point Road late afternoon seemed the best tactic and we soon found our **Bobcat** hunting voles in the pasture just north of 'J' Ranch. Although a little distant the cat showed well for several minutes before it disappeared into the scrub. Remarkably we found a second **Bobcat** much closer to the road as we headed back to Sir Francis Drake Boulevard.

Once it was dark we spent a couple of hours spotlighting seeing many Black-tailed Deer, several Brush Rabbits and a couple of Coyotes. The highlight was two separate **Striped Skunk** sightings. On the drive back to Vallejo both **Deer Mouse** and **Northern Raccoon** were seen.





Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*)

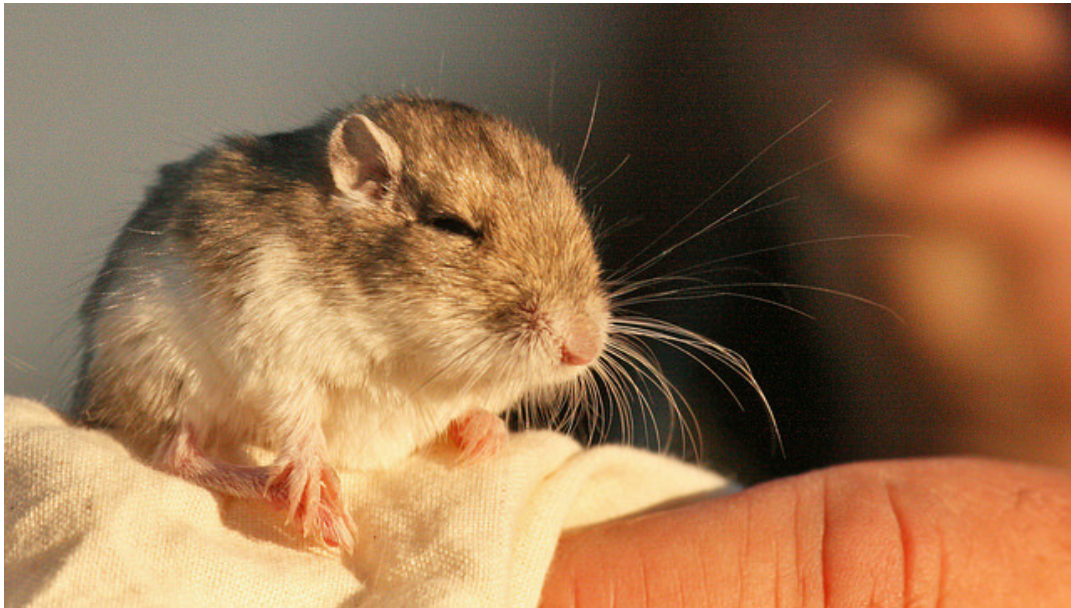
### **Mono Lake/Yosemite National Park: 23-27 October, 2015**

Our abode for the next four nights was a rented house in June Lake, a pleasant town located east of Yosemite National Park, on the edge of the Great Basin. With Mono Lake several miles north, and Mammoth Lakes twenty minutes south, our location proved to be a great base from which to explore the surrounding area.

#### Mono Lake

Pale Kangaroo Mouse along with some other interesting rodents can be found in the sagebrush desert around Mono Lake so I was particularly keen to explore this habitat. Fortunately for me Jon Hall was also in town the first couple of days and he kindly offered to share his traps and expertise.

On the first evening Jon and his children set up two trap lines, including one in a small sand dune south of the lake. The next day the traps contained several **Deer Mice**, a couple of **Great Basin Pocket Mice** and a fantastic **Panamint Kangaroo Rat**. A repeat the next night, with my own traps added to the mix, failed to produce any new species although the near full moon and freezing night temperature probably didn't help.



Great Basin Pocket Mouse (*Perognathus parvus*)

During daylight hours **Least Chipmunks** were common around the lake, while **Mule Deer** and **Black-tailed Jackrabbit** could be seen at dusk. Night drives weren't particularly productive apart from the first hour after sunset when two species of kangaroo rat could be seen from some of the dirt tracks south of the lake. The smaller of the two was most likely **Ord's Kangaroo Rat** and the larger one **Panamint Kangaroo Rat**. Good numbers of **Desert Cottontails** were also present in the same area, although I failed to find the Pygmy Rabbits around South Tufa.



Sunrise over South Tufa, Mono Lake

A boardwalk at Mono Lake Country Park (NW of lake) is usually a reliable place to see Montane Voles and Mountain Cottontails. Sadly it was closed for repairs throughout our visit although I did sneak on a couple of times at night to look for the voles. I was not successful despite searching under wood and other debris left by workman. Perhaps the dry conditions and continuous disturbance by the work party made them more elusive than usual. The **Mountain Cottontails** were also absent although they were common on Cemetery Road (north of lake) and around the town of June Lake.

Mammoth Lakes Scenic Loop/Devil's Postpile National Monument ([www.nps.gov/depo/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/depo/index.htm) )

A morning drive around the scenic loop produced good numbers of **Lodgepole Chipmunks** which are probably the only chipmunk species to occur in the vicinity. We also saw our first **Pine Squirrels** (formally Douglas's) of the trip. Moving on to Devil's Postpile we battled the Saturday crowds to hike the main trail seeing more Lodgepole Chipmunks and Pine Squirrels.

#### Saddlebag Lake

Located along the Tioga Pass, just outside Yosemite, we visited this pleasingly quiet area several times in a futile search for Alpine Chipmunks and Yellow-bellied Marmots (possibly already hibernating). We did however come across very fresh Black Bear tracks and a night drive up the entrance road produced fantastic views of a **Snowshoe Hare**.

Yosemite National Park ([www.nps.gov/yose/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yose/index.htm))

With so much to do around Mono Lake we didn't spend nearly enough time in this beautiful park. Despite it being the tail end of the tourist season, the weekend was still busy with visitors photographing the autumn colours. As a result we tended to avoid the Yosemite Valley and instead explored the quieter parts of the Tioga Pass.

A three mile hike up the Mono Pass Trail to the talus described in Vladimir Dinets's book failed to produce American Pika or Alpine Chipmunk despite a long stakeout. We did see **Pine Squirrel** and **Lodgepole Chipmunk** along with several other more flighty chipmunks which I failed to identify, in part due to their drab winter pelage. It is possible that the Alpine Chipmunks were already hibernating by late October although I did see one very distant animal which looked promising for this species.

On the advice of Jon Hall we called in at Olmsted Point, a viewing area on the Tioga Pass. Jon had seen several chipmunks here a couple of days earlier and it turned out to be a productive place to spend a little time. **Lodgepole Chipmunks** and our only **Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels** of the trip were active on the rocks below the watch point. Chris also spotted a **Black Bear** feeding on the opposite side of the valley, much to the delight of the other tourists.





Lodgepole Chipmunk (*Tamias speciosus*)

Amazingly we saw a second much younger **Black Bear** crossing the road ten minutes after we left Olmstead Point. Sarah and Chris jumped out of the car and were able to observe it for several minutes. Suddenly I was grateful to the Lee Vining highway patrol officer who had pulled me over for speeding earlier in the morning. Without the delay we would have missed two fantastic bear sightings!

Apart from the **Western Grey Squirrel** and **Long-eared Chipmunks** we saw around the Merced Grove trailhead on our way out of the park, the only other notable mammals we saw in Yosemite were **Coyote** (Tuolumne Meadow), Deer Mice and Mule Deer.



Long-eared Chipmunk (*Tamias quadrimaculatus*) – photo by Chris Pallister

## Monterey: 27-31 October, 2015

We spent the last four nights of the trip in a motel located several minutes from Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey.

Monterey Bay ([www.montereybaywhalewatch.com](http://www.montereybaywhalewatch.com))

A much anticipated four hour boat trip with Monterey Bay Whale Watch departed from Fisherman's Wharf where **Sea Otter**, **Harbour Seal** and **California Sea Lion** proved easy to see inside the harbour. Out in the bay we quickly found a huge pod (400+) of **Long-beaked Common Dolphins** which swam alongside the boat allowing for fantastic views. Next we found our first **Humpback Whale**, closely followed by a second, then a third. In total we observed 17 Humpbacks and witnessed some interesting behaviour. Returning to shore we came across a smaller pod of **Long-beaked Common Dolphins** ending a productive trip.



Long-beaked Common Dolphin (*Delphinus capensis*)

## Panoche Valley

A much nearer alternative to the Carizo Plain, we visited the Panoche Valley with high hopes of finding the same collection of grassland species that the former destination has become known for. After many months of drought, and with a near full moon, the timing of our visit was not great, however with some fantastic information courtesy of mammalwatching.com I knew we wouldn't come away empty handed.

We drove the Panoche Road mid afternoon seeing countless **California Ground Squirrels** along the western section (between Paicines and the Panoche Pass). Once we reached the Panoche Valley I was a little dismayed to find road works and a camp of construction workers along the areas where good populations of Kangaroo rats are known to occur. Once we reached the eastern, unpaved 'Jackass Pass' section of the Panoche Road and passed the corral we started to scan the scrub covered hillsides for our first target. It took well over an hour of careful searching before Chris spotted our only **San Joaquin Antelope Squirrel** of the day sitting motionless under a bush.



With road works on Panoche Road we decided to explore the Little Panoche Road and the gravel side road branching to the south (just passed Mercey Hot Springs and signposted 'Panoche Hills BLM Land') as suggested in Vladimir's book. This turned out to be a good move as in the first hour of darkness we slowly cruised up and down the track seeing countless kangaroo rats. It took a while to appreciate the often subtle differences between the species, however I'm sure we eventually identified several **Giant Kangaroo Rats**, many **Heermann's Kangaroo Rats** and at least one **San Joaquin Kangaroo Rat**.



Heermann's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys heermanni*)

After the first hour we stopped seeing Kangaroo rats and didn't spot another one despite continuously spotlighting the Panoche Valley (including the Panoche Hills) for another three hours! Fortunately the bright moon didn't seem to limit other mammal activity. Both **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** and **Desert Cottontails** were common throughout the valley, while **Coyotes** were seen in the pasture alongside New Idria Road. Best of all we found a **San Joaquin Kit Fox** at the junction of Panoche Road and Little Panoche Road, then a second individual along the unpaved 'Jackass Pass' section of Panoche Road.

#### Big Sur

Although better known for stunning views, this rugged stretch of coastline south of Monterey turned out to be a productive place to find some last minute mammals.

The Bottcher's Gap campground situated at the end of the Palo Colorado Road (accessed from Highway 1 approx. 11 miles south of Carmel) is a reliable place to find **Merriam's Chipmunk**. We found one on the road just before the car park, then several more when the camp caretaker invited us into his yard to view his bird feeders.



Merriam's Chipmunk (*Tamias merriami*)

A very long night drive on our last evening started at Andrew Molera State Park. Although officially closed at sunset it was possible to enter after hours and see the **Yuma Myotis** flying low over the creek. We also saw a family of **Northern Raccoons** in the car park. Continuing down the coast, up the Nacimiento-Fergusson Road and then onto the Cone Peak trail head was much less productive with no sign of the many interesting rodents that can be found in the area. In fact, apart from Mule Deer we didn't see a single mammal despite considerable effort. Back on Highway 1 things were a little more active with three **Grey Foxes** and a **Virginia Opossum** becoming the last additions to our trip list.

### Species seen

1.	<b>Virginia Opossum</b> <i>Didelphis virginian</i>	-One seen while driving through Big Sur after dark.
2.	<b>California Ground Squirrel</b> <i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>	-Good numbers seen along the Panoche Road.
3.	<b>Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel</b> <i>Spermophilus lateralis</i>	-A couple at Olmsted Point, Tioga Pass, YosemiteNP were surprisingly the only ones seen.
4.	<b>San Joaquin (Nelson's) Antelope Squirrel</b> <i>Ammospermophilus nelsoni</i>	-Single animal observed along gravel section of Panoche Road (Jackass Pass).
5.	<b>Least Chipmunk</b> <i>Tamias minimus</i>	-Common around Mono Lake.
6.	<b>Lodgepole Chipmunk</b> <i>Tamias speciosus</i>	-Common along Mammoth Lakes SL and in Devil's Postpile NM.  -At least one seen on Mono Pass Trail, Yosemite NP.  -A couple seen at Olmstead Point, Yosemite NP.

7.	<b>Long-eared Chipmunk</b> <i>Tamias quadrimaculatus</i>	-Several on start of Merced Grove Trail, Yosemite NP.
8.	<b>Sonoma Chipmunk</b> <i>Tamias sonomae</i>	-Six individuals observed in Muir Woods NM along the Hillside Trail.
9.	<b>Merriam's Chipmunk</b> <i>Tamias merriami</i>	-Several around Bottcher's Gap Campground, Big Sur.
10.	<b>Western Grey Squirrel</b> <i>Sciurus griseus</i>	-Two around car park of Muir Woods NM.  -Single animal at trail head of Merced Grove Trail, Yosemite NP.
11.	<b>Pine Squirrel</b> <i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	-Common along Mammoth Lakes SL and in Devil's Postpile NM.  -Also observed along entrance road to Saddlebag Lake and in various parts of Yosemite NP.
12.	<b>Great Basin Pocket Mouse</b> <i>Perognathus parvus</i>	-Several trapped around Mono Lake.
13.	<b>Ord's Kangaroo Rat</b> <i>Dipodomys ordii</i>	-A number of small, short-tailed Kangaroo Rats seen around Mono Lake are likely to be this species.
14.	<b>Panamint Kangaroo Rat</b> <i>Dipodomys panamintinus</i>	-One animal trapped near Mono Lake.  -A couple of pale, medium sized Kangaroo Rats seen around Mono Lake may also have been this species.
15.	<b>San Joaquin Kangaroo Rat</b> <i>Dipodomys nitratooides</i>	-At least one identified in Panoche Hills BLM Land.
16.	<b>Heermann's Kangaroo Rat</b> <i>Dipodomys heermanni</i>	-Common in Panoche Hills BLM Land the first hour after sunset.
17.	<b>Giant Kangaroo Rat</b> <i>Dipodomys ingens</i>	-Several seen in Panoche Hills BLM Land the first hour after sunset.
18.	<b>American Deer Mouse</b> <i>Peromyscus maniculatus</i>	-Several seen crossing road after dark in various places.  -At least ten trapped around Mono Lake.
19.	<b>California Vole</b> <i>Microtus californicus</i>	-Common in most areas of Point Reyes NSS and could be observed with patience.
20.	<b>Brush Rabbit</b> <i>Sylvilagus bachmani</i>	-Small numbers seen late afternoon and at night around Point Reyes NSS.



21.	<b>Desert Cottontail</b> <i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>	-Common dawn and dusk along the southern shoreline of Mono Lake.  -Many seen after dark in Panoche Valley.
22.	<b>Mountain Cottontail</b> <i>Sylvilagus nuttallii</i>	-Several observed north of Mono Lake.  -Common dawn and dusk around June Lake.
23.	<b>Snowshoe Hare</b> <i>Lepus americanus</i>	-One on Saddlebag Lake entrance road after dark.
24.	<b>Black-tailed Jackrabbit</b> <i>Lepus californicus</i>	-Small numbers seen at dusk south of Mono Lake.  -Several observed at night in Panoche Valley.
25.	<b>Yuma Myotis</b> <i>Myotis yumanensis</i>	-Several seen flying low over creek in Andrew Molera State Park, Big Sur.
26.	<b>Mule Deer</b> <i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>	-Extremely common in Point Reyes NSS, Yosemite NP, around Mono Lake and in Big Sur.
27.	<b>Tule Elk</b> <i>Cervus elaphus</i>	-Easily seen in Point Reyes NSS, especially in the Tule Elk Reserve at the end of Pierce Point Rd.
28.	<b>Bobcat</b> <i>Lynx rufus</i>	-Two sightings along Pierce Point Rd, Point Reyes NSS, late afternoon.
29.	<b>Coyote</b> <i>Canis latrans</i>	-Several sightings in Point Reyes NSS.  -One seen in Tuolumne Meadow, Yosemite NP mid afternoon.  -Two seen in Panoche Valley after dark.
30.	<b>Kit Fox</b> <i>Vulpes macrotis</i>	-One seen while spotlighting near junction of Little Panoche Rd and Panoche Rd, Panoche Valley.  -Second one seen in field around 'Jackass Pass' area of Panoche Rd, Panoche Valley.
31.	<b>Common Grey Fox</b> <i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>	-Three separate sightings along Highway 1, Big Sur, after dark.
32.	<b>Black Bear</b> <i>Ursus americanus</i>	-Prolonged sighting of adult bear feeding along mountainside opposite the Olmstead Point viewpoint, Tioga Pass, Yosemite NP.  -Second, much younger bear seen crossing road near Yosemite Creek, Tioga Pass, Yosemite NP.

33.	<b>Northern Raccoon</b> <i>Procyon lotor</i>	-Single animal seen at night several miles from Point Reyes Station.  -Family of three in car park of Andrew Molera State Park, Big Sur.
34.	<b>Striped Skunk</b> <i>Mephitis mephitis</i>	-Two separate sightings after dark in Point Reyes NSS.
35.	<b>Northern River Otter</b> <i>Lontra canadensis</i>	-Excellent views of individual hunting crayfish along creek in Muir Woods NM.  -One seen swimming in surf below Chimney Rock, Point Reyes NSS.
36.	<b>Sea Otter</b> <i>Enhydra lutris</i>	-Easy to see inside the harbour, Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey.
37.	<b>California Sea Lion</b> <i>Zalophus californianus</i>	-Several seen in Horseshoe Bay, San Francisco.  -Small numbers hauled out at Chimney Rock, Point Reyes NSS.  -Common in and around Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey.
38.	<b>Harbour Seal</b> <i>Phoca vitulina</i>	-Two observed in Horseshoe Bay, San Francisco.  -Small number hauled out at Chimney Rock, Point Reyes NSS.  -Small number seen inside the harbour, Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey.
39.	<b>Northern Elephant Seal</b> <i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>	-Easily observed from Chimney Rock, Point Reyes NSS.
40.	<b>Long-beaked Common Dolphin</b> <i>Delphinus capensis</i>	-Two pods (including one of 400+) seen in Monterey Bay on whale watching trip.
41.	<b>Common Bottlenose Dolphin</b> <i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	-Pod of three spotted from Muir Beach.
42.	<b>Harbour Porpoise</b> <i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	-Small pod seen from cliffs near Chimney Rock, Point Reyes NSS.
43.	<b>Humpback Whale</b> <i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	-A total of 17 individuals observed in Monterey Bay on whale watching trip.

## Conclusion

California may be the perfect place to combine mammal watching with other tourist activities. Despite only visiting a relatively small section of the state we observed at least 43 mammal species including key targets such as Kit Fox and Giant Kangaroo Rat. It was also fantastic to get outstanding views of Black Bear and Bobcat, two animals that Chris especially wanted to see.

Of course there were countless species that we missed. A visit slightly earlier in the year may have been more productive for high altitude species such as Alpine Chipmunk, American Pika and Yellow-bellied Marmot. Furthermore the full moon and cold temperatures probably made it more difficult to observe and trap rodents although to what extent it's impossible to say.

With so many Californian mammals left to see, I'm already looking forward to our next visit to what is unquestionably a top mammal watching destination.

## Useful Resources

Dinets V (2015) *Peterson Field Guide to Finding Mammals in North America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York.

Mammalwatching.com

<http://mammalwatching.com/Nearctic/nearctusacalifornia.html>