

South-Western USA, February 2009.

By Michael Richardson

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Introduction

In early February 2009, Sarah and I left a cold and wintry England for a three week American road trip covering over 4,000 miles and five US States.

Neither of us had explored this part of America before and we were eager to see as many places as possible, perhaps at the expense of relaxation time. It goes without saying that we barely scratched the surface in most areas.

As with the majority of our holidays, wildlife watching was not the only objective. Several days were spent shopping and sightseeing in cities such as San Francisco and Las Vegas where mammal watching is somewhat limited. In California and Nevada in particular, the majority of our time was spent in built-up areas.

Nevertheless I was happy with what wildlife I did see. My USA bird list increased significantly and I encountered several mammal species that I have long wanted see in the wild. A low reptile species count was disappointing but expected. It was February after all.

California

The first three days of the holiday were spent around San Francisco and lack of hire car meant we were restricted to the Fisherman's Wharf area which suited me fine. The weather varied between rain showers and sunny spells, often with a cool breeze.

After checking into our hotel we visited Pier 39 to see the famous **Californian Sea Lions**. Impressive numbers of these creatures were hauled out on the platforms allowing for excellent views and photographs. A **House Mouse** was also seen later in the evening as it foraged for food under a popcorn stand.

A couple of days later we walked along the foreshore to Crissy Field Park where we found many birds. A single **Harbour Seal** was seen swimming around one of the marinas along the way.

After picking up a small SUV hire car we headed down the coast to Monterey where the weather seemed to worsen. This was unfortunate as the next day I had booked a whale watching trip with Monterey Bay Whale Watch.

Luckily the rain held off for the majority of the boat trip, although the wind and ocean swells tested my usually reliable sea-sickness medication to the limit. The rough conditions made it hard to spot cetaceans but we did see three **Grey Whales** which are pretty much expected in February. I also saw my first ever **Sea Otters** (both from the harbour and the boat) which compensated for the lack of dolphins etc. **Californian Sea Lions** were also noted.

Monterey Bay Whale Watch was recommended to me by several people and I was not disappointed with the service they provided. With luck and calm seas, a wide range of cetaceans are possible from their three/four hour trips including Orca, Blue, Humpback, Fin and Minke Whale, Long-beaked, Risso's, Common and Pacific White-sided Dolphins and Harbour and Dall's Porpoise.

Later in the afternoon we walked around Asilomar State Beach where we enjoyed excellent views of a family of **Sea Otters** as they hunted for food just beyond the surf.

The last full day in California was spent at the Pinnacles National Monument a couple of hours inland from Monterey. A very strong wind and persistent rain made birding hard. It also forced us to keep relatively close to the car in case the weather got any worse. A brief appearance by the sun brought with it a family of **Californian Ground Squirrels** which competed for my attention with various woodpeckers and towhees.

While walking the trails we found very fresh Coyote scat although no animals were seen. Bobcats are also frequently reported although we had to make do with a couple of **Mule Deer** as we departed the reserve.

The next day we headed for Las Vegas via the **Northern Elephant Seal** breeding colony at Piedras Blancas. Among the huge loafing adults were many pups begging the question how an animal so tiny and cute can grow into something so fat and ugly!

Along Highway 1 we kept an eye out for Brush Rabbit but I guess they were doing the sensible thing and keeping out of the rain.

Arizona

After a few days in Las Vegas (Nevada) we spent a night just outside a snow covered Grand Canyon National Park. I had planned a quick night drive around the forests in search of Elk but on entering the park I was pulled over by a ranger and cautioned for speeding. Tired, hungry and not wanting to antagonise the ranger further, we opted for pizza and an early night instead.

The next day we saw the Grand Canyon along with some good birds but unfortunately no mammals.

On the way the Phoenix we stopped at Montezuma's Castle where both Sarah and I were pleased to catch up with some real sunshine. I kept an eye out for Arizona Grey Squirrels but instead saw a **Rock Squirrel** which was a nice surprise.

The next morning was spent birding at the excellent Riparian Reserve in Gilbert, Phoenix. An outstanding selection of birds was observed including many waterfowl and waders. **Desert Cottontails** were common along the trails and although cautious, allowed a close approach for photography. I kept an eye out for Muskrats along the various marsh fringes but had no luck. Incidentally the reserve's population of Burrowing Owls has disappeared with feral cat or Coyote predation suspected as the cause according to a local birder.

The birding at Gilbert was so good that we left Phoenix way over schedule. Consequently we arrived at in the Chiricahua Mountains at dusk and after turning off the Interstate we saw our first **Grey Fox** and **Black-tailed Jack Rabbit** in quick succession. It was totally dark when we got to Cave Creek Ranch where we found a well equipped cabin and a **Striped Skunk** foraging around the grounds. Any species of skunk was high on my wish list so I was more than happy with our little welcoming committee.

I was up early to explore and was highly delighted to find our cabin was situated in an absolutely stunning setting, surrounded at all sides by mountains. The birds had started to wake up and descended on the feeding station in impressive numbers. While watching the birds I met the owner of Cave Creek who took great delight in filling me in on the recent mammal sightings, including the resident Bobcat, Ringtail and Javelina (Collared Peccary). He kindly gave me permission to spotlight the grounds at night as long as I didn't disturb the other residents and also suggested I place bait to try and attract an elusive Ringtail.

As our conversation progressed more and more wildlife appeared around the grounds. Gambel's Quail and **Cliff Chipmunk** scurried around my feet while a family of **Coues White-tailed Deer** fed directly off the bird table literally a few feet away.

Cave Creek is in South-East Arizona only a stones throw away from the New Mexico boarder and attracts many birds that normally winter in Mexico. Magnificent and Blue-throated Hummingbird are two such species I saw on my visit. Although interested in the birds, I really wanted to see some local mammals so returned to my cabin to bait the bird table that hung outside our window.

I could have stayed around the cabins all day but Sarah dragged me away to explore the surrounding areas. While loading our car I glanced back at the main bird feeders to see a very large family group of **Javelina** had suddenly appeared to feed on the seed.

The group consisted of adults, sub-adults and a couple of piglets and a clear pecking order seemed evident. One sub-adult, obviously bottom of the pecking order decided to investigate an alternate food source, and ended up walking towards our cabin and eating the Ringtail food trail I had so carefully set up minutes earlier. From then on I made sure I left no more food within Javelina reach.

We spent the rest of the day hiking in the Chiricahua Mountains unsuccessfully looking for the resident Black Bears and White-nosed Coatis. Both these species have actually been recorded on Cave Creek Ranch property but would require a great deal of luck to see in a one day period. We did see more **White-tailed Deer** and a **Rock Squirrel** and several birds high on my wish list.

Our last evening at Cave Creek consisted of a brief spotlighting session in which I found a couple of **Striped Skunks**, some bats (Western Pipistrelle?) and nothing else. Problems with my battery meant I had to give up early despite plans to stay out later. I had hoped to see some owls as well as mammals but all I heard was a distant Great Horned Owl.

I checked the baited bird table throughout the night and was disappointed not to have attracted a Ringtail or even a Raccoon. Perhaps I would have had more luck if I had left the food out over several nights, however we had to leave the ranch that morning and drive through New Mexico to Texas.

I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Cave Creek Ranch (www.cavecreekranch.com) to anyone with an interest in nature. The owner is very accommodating and the cabins represent excellent quality and value for money. Both the mammal and bird-lists for the property are impressive and the surrounding mountains contain a wealth of wildlife including Mountain Lion. My only regret is I only booked two nights!

We took a back road through New Mexico (US Highway 9) in order to see more wildlife and we weren't disappointed. **Black-tailed Jackrabbits** and Roadrunners kept us entertained while a roadside Golden Eagle was the highlight. The US Border Patrol was very active along the route highlighting our close proximity to the Mexican boarder.

Texas

We arrived in Fort Davis at dusk and after checking into our hotel decided to make the half-hour drive to Alpine for some dinner. **Mule Deer** seemed fairly numerous on the roadsides, even venturing into the yards of Alpines' residents.

The next day we made a second trip to Alpine as the supermarket was closed the previous evening. By now I was keeping my eye out for Pronghorn Antelope as I thought the ranch land habitat looked good for this species.

Driving back to Fort Davis I saw what looked like a fresh road-killed antelope and about two minutes later found a small group of **Pronghorn** feeding near to the road. Although wary, they allowed us to take some photographs before bounding off.

The rest of the day was spent exploring the Davis Mountains via the Fort Davis Scenic Loop. While walking the trail from the Lawrence E. Wood Picnic Grounds Sarah saw a mammal which I managed to miss- probably a packrat of some description. Mule Deer were also seen.

After a decent meal at the Indian Lodge in the Davis Mountains State Park (where a Mountain lion was seen days earlier) we returned to the Scenic Loop for a night drive. **Mule Deer**, singles of **Grey Fox** and **Javelina**, and a Great Horned Owl were our sum total. I had hoped to see a Porcupine or Hooded Skunk but I wasn't going to complain.

Leaving Fort Davis the next morning we saw a **Javelina** feeding on the roadside and a small herd of **Pronghorn** between Alpine and Marathon. One of my old bird guides mentioned a prairie dog town just a few miles off our route. With nothing to lose I decided to check it out, although I was not overly optimistic of success.

A lucky turn of events followed. While driving to the site we found our third group of **Pronghorn** only yards from the highway. Moments later while scanning for the 'town' I noticed two **Coyotes** slinking across the horizon. Finally seeing this relatively common creature was a huge relief. In the previous two weeks I had found fresh scat, heard them howling on several evenings, and seen countless road kills.

After the Coyotes had disappeared I returned to my prairie dog hunt with renewed enthusiasm. The Coyotes were probably heading for lunch so I drove down the road in the same direction and soon found my target. I set my scope up and watched good numbers of **Black-tailed Prairie Dogs** as they went about their business.

Incidentally, the Prairie Dog town is located along the east side of US 385, seven miles north of US 90 just past Marathon. There is a wind-powered water pump right in the middle of the colony.

We made one last stop before we headed to Big Bend. 'The Post' is Marathon's recreational area and is well known for its birds. While driving down the long entrance road we came across a large group of **Javelina** drinking out of a spring. These animals were much more timid than the Cave Creek animals and quickly ran for cover when I stopped the car.

The next four nights were taken up by Big Bend National Park, one of the most spectacular places I have ever visited. The temperatures remained high throughout our stay which was an added bonus.

We actually stayed outside the park at Lajitas Resort, an expensive but delightful place about a half hour drive away.

Lajitas is situated on the banks of the Rio Grande and while birding the area early in the morning I found many signs that Raccoons inhabited the area. I did intend to spotlight the riverbank at night but decided against it when I thought about the prospects of attracting unwanted attention from the Border Patrol. After all I have seen many Raccoons in the past. Incidentally, a healthy population of American Beaver inhabit the Rio Grande although they are rarely seen.

Our time at Big Bend was spent hiking the trails during the afternoon, followed by a meal at the Chisos Lodge in the Chisos Mountains and finally a night drive home. Naturally throughout our time in Big Bend we kept an eye out for Black Bears and Mountain Lions, but the closest we came was fresh bear scat on the Basin Loop trail. Sightings of both species are regular and details can be found at the information centre at Panther Junction.

With the exception of two **Coyotes** seen late afternoon at the Rio Grande campground, most mammal sightings were confined to early evening and night. A typical night drive would involve several **Javelina** sightings, the odd **Gray Fox** and many **Black-tailed Jackrabbits and Desert Cottontails**. A single **Eastern Cottontail** was seen at Green Gulch together with a **Carmen Mountains race of White-tailed Deer**.

The mammal highlight was a **Bobcat** that bounded across the road one night near Dugout Wells much to my delight. Unfortunately the sighting was brief and it wasn't until the animal had disappeared that I realised what I had seen.

Several rodents were also seen including what looked like a pocket mouse and some type of packrat. Unfortunately I wasn't able to make any positive identification down to species level as sightings invariably consisted of a tiny, brown shape running very fast across the road, barely illuminated by the car headlights.

Both Sarah and I thoroughly enjoyed our time at Big Bend, not least due to the fantastic scenery and varied wildlife. We reluctantly left for El Paso for the remainder of our holiday via Balmorhea Lake north of the Davis Mountains.

While driving to Balmorhea our satellite navigation system took us off the main highway and down a back road. When the tarmac turned to a rutted dirt track we nearly turned around but decided to press on as it would have taken an extra hour via the highway. It was on this road that we saw our second **Bobcat** as it casually trotted across our path before leaping a high stock fence flushing flocks of Meadowlark and Scaled Quail as it went. I was more than satisfied with this sighting and relieved I could leave America having seen a Bobcat properly. The same road also proved good for raptors with Cooper's Hawk, Northern Harrier and five Harris Hawks all seen well.

We aimed to spend the last full day of our holiday shopping in El Paso, but quickly changed our minds and headed to the Franklin Mountains that overlook the city. It was at the state park that we saw our last mammal in the form of a couple of **Texas Antelope Squirrels** that frequented an excellent bird feeding station along the nature trail.

The next day our adventure came to an end and we left El Paso destined for England. In total we had seen over 25 different mammals, with 22 identified to species level. With better luck on our whale watch we could have increased our tally with several more cetaceans. Similarly if we had visited the USA later in the year and included Yosemite National Park into our itinerary, we may have added more squirrels, chipmunks and marmots to our list and perhaps even a Black Bear. Unfortunately work commitments dictate when I travel, and while none can be described as rare or hard to find, I am delighted to have seen a number of mammal species that have fascinated me since childhood.

Both Sarah and I thoroughly enjoyed our time in the South-Western USA and we are already talking about our next visit.

Species List

Species	Location
Desert Cottontail <i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>	› Several seen at the Riparian Reserve, Gilbert, Phoenix, Arizona. › Common in Big Bend, Texas.
Eastern Cottontail <i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	› One individual at Green Gulch, Chisos Mountains, Big Bend, Texas.
Black-tailed Jackrabbit <i>Lepus californicus</i>	› Common in desert scrub habitat of Arizona and Texas (mostly early evening and night).
Black-tailed Prairie Dog <i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>	› Colony observed near Marathon, Texas.
Rock Squirrel <i>Spermophilus variegates</i>	› One individual at Montezuma's Castle, Arizona. › Two seen in Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona.
Californian Ground Squirrel <i>Spermophilus beecheyi</i>	› Fairly common in the Pinnacles National Monument, California.
Texas Antelope Squirrel <i>Ammospermophilus Harrisii</i>	› Two around the bird feeding station in the Franklin Mountains State Park, El Paso, Texas.
Cliff Chipmunk <i>Tamias dorsalis</i>	› Common around Cave Creek Ranch, Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona.
House Mouse <i>Mus musculus</i>	› One seen at Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco, California.
Bobcat <i>Lynx rufus</i>	› Brief view of one crossing road at Big Bend, Texas (night). › Excellent view of one crossing dirt road between Alpine and Balmorhea, Texas (early afternoon).
Coyote <i>Canis latrans</i>	› Two north of Marathon, Texas. › Two in campground at Rio Grande Village, Big Bend, Texas.
Gray Fox <i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>	› One observed near Portal, Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona (night). › One seen briefly on Fort Davis Scenic Loop, Texas (night). › Several seen in Big Bend, Texas (night).
Sea Otter <i>Enhydra lutris</i>	› Common in Monterey Bay, California.
Striped Skunk <i>Mephitis mephitis</i>	› Three individuals seen around Cave Creek Ranch, Arizona (night).
Californian Sea Lion <i>Zalophus californianus</i>	› Large colony around Pier 39, Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco, California. › Small numbers in Monterey Bay, California.
Harbour Seal <i>Phoca vitulina</i>	› One seen swimming in a marina, San Francisco, California.
Northern Elephant Seal <i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>	› Breeding colony observed at Piedras Blancas, Route 1, California.
Pronghorn <i>Antilocapra Americana</i>	› Three small groups seen around the Alpine area, Texas.
Javelina (Collared Peccary) <i>Pecari tajacu</i>	› Common both day and night in Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona; Davis Mountains, Texas and Big Bend, Texas.
Mule Deer <i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>	› Two seen at Pinnacles National Monument, California. › Very common in Davis Mountains, Texas.
White-tailed Deer <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	› Coues subspecies (<i>couesi</i>) common around Cave Creek, Arizona. › Carmen Mountains subspecies (<i>carminis</i>) seen in Chisos Mountains, Big Bend, Texas.
Grey Whale <i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>	› Three seen off Monterey Bay, California.