

SW Great Basin mini-trip report

Vladimir Dinets

In late May 2015 I took Steve Linsley on a mini-tour of the SW part of the Great Basin. Steve is an experienced mammal watcher, so he was looking for uncommon species rather than a high species count. The trip proved to be a pleasant, relaxing experience: we would set traps in the evening, spotlight until after midnight, get up at dawn, pick up the traps, sleep until the hotel checkout time, then drive to another location and get another nap in the afternoon. We ended up seeing only about 30 species, but got a few that are generally difficult to see in the area. The moon was near full, but it didn't seem to have much effect. If you'd like me to take you on a similar trip, the cost is \$950-1200 pp, depending on the number of participants (4 max).

A few days earlier I did a scouting trip to Mono Lake and Tonopah area, and found that, unlike in lowland California, the rodent numbers were generally high. Three hours of night driving between Coaldale and Mono Lake produced a dispersing juvenile **Botta's pocket gopher**, **Ord's kangaroo rat**, **long-tailed pocket mouse**, a few **deer mice**, and a possible **Merriam's shrew**. Twenty traps set in sagebrush desert S of Mono Lake for half a night got three **deer mice**, two **little pocket mice**, two **Great Basin pocket mice**, and one **Panamint kangaroo rat**. I also noted some **snowshoe hare** tracks along the road to Saddlebag Lake near Tioga Pass. That was good news: the place is out of range according to some sources, and I expected the Sierra Nevada subspecies to be on the verge of extinction following three years of abnormally low winter snow cover in the Sierra.



Botta's pocket gopher

May 29. We met in Davis in the afternoon and made a couple stops before leaving town to get up-close views of **Mexican freetail**s at our local colony and of a **California vole** at my stakeout site. Then we headed to Mono Lake with a brief detour to Yosemite Valley, where we walked the lower part of Vernal Falls Trail looking for skunks and ringtails, but saw only a **brush mouse** and a **Northern raccoon**. We also saw a dispersing juvenile **mountain pocket gopher** on Hwy 120 near the NW park entrance. Then we drove across Tioga Pass, seeing a few **deer mice**, a few **mule deer**, a **coyote** and, surprisingly, three Sierra **snowshoe hares** – more than I've seen in a few hundred hours I've spent hiking and driving in High Sierra.

After getting to S side of Mono Lake, we set traps (although only 2 hours of darkness remained), and walked a short trail, getting good views of **little pocket mice**, **Ord's** and **Panamint kangaroo rats**, a **brush mouse** and a few **black-tailed jackrabbits**. We spent the rest of the night in a terribly overpriced hotel in Lee Vining.



Little and long-tailed pocket mice

May 30. In the traps there were two **deer mice** and three **little pocket mice**; we also saw a **least chipmunk** in the area. We drove to Tonopah, NV, checking out Chidago Canyon and the ghost town of Coaldale along the way. Chicago Canyon looked like a good place to look for desert woodrat, ringtail, and canyon mouse at night, but we had to move on. Coaldale had no mammals in abandoned buildings, and no signs of their presence.

After some rest in Tonopah, we set traps, splitting them between an area of sand dunes and more typical gravelly desert. Then we did a few hours of night driving around town and got lots of **Merriam's kangaroo rats** (one of them outstandingly cooperative), one or two possible **Ord's kangaroo rats**, one large, beautiful **desert kangaroo rat**, one **dark kangaroo mouse**, one very cute baby **canyon mouse**, two **American badgers** (only one seen well), a few **coyotes**, a few **pronghorn**, and countless **black-tailed jackrabbits**.



Merriam's kangaroo rat

May 31. About half of the traps set in gravel desert had **Merriam's kangaroo-rats**, and a couple had **chisel-toothed kangaroo rats**. In the dunes we got a few more of the former (much lighter-colored and generally looking more like Ord's, except for the toe number) and one gorgeous **desert kangaroo rat**.



Deer mouse and Panamint kangaroo rat

We drove to Mono Lake, and after checking into a hotel at June Lakes set most of our traps in mixed gravel/sand desert with lots of sagebrush N of the lake, and a few in a tiny patch of sand dunes S of the lake. We walked the boardwalk at the NW corner of the lake and saw the usual **mountain cottontails** (including a few babies), **Belding's ground squirrels**, and **montane voles**.



Belding's ground squirrel and montane vole

We walked for about two hours at and after (gorgeous) sunset on the S side of Mono Lake, and saw a lot of **black-tailed jackrabbits**, one **desert cottontail**, two **Ord's kangaroo rats**, and two **long-tailed pocket mice**. Somewhat surprisingly, we never saw a pygmy rabbit on that trip, although I've never failed to find them in that area before and their tunnels and droppings were present. Either full moon interfered, or it's not a good year for them.



Black-tailed jackrabbit

Then we drove up to Saddlebag Lake and Tioga Pass, seeing two **deer mice** and, incredibly, four more **snowshoe hares**, a number unbelievable for anyone familiar with Sierra fauna. We walked to a small area where some heather vole runways and burrows were present in 2014, but didn't find any sign of them. On the way back we got good views of a **white-tailed jackrabbit** just E of Lee Vining; this species is near-extinct in California. Despite missing the pygmy rabbit and making no effort to look for pika, we had five species of lagomorphs in one day: possibly a world record. We also saw another **brush mouse** near June Lakes. We set two remaining traps near an aspen-lined stream there. The night, although very beautiful, was cold and windy, but there were small bats (possibly **California myotis**) flying around at June Lakes.



Mountain cottontail and Great Basin pocket mouse

May 1. We picked up two empty traps at June Lakes and drove to Mono Lake, seeing a few **mule deer** along the way. The traps sat in the dunes had two **deer mice** and one **pale kangaroo mouse**, North America's cutest rodent and the one species I'd never seen well before. Just like the very similar pygmy jerboas of Central Asia, it is very tame and would sit on your hand. It was nice to finally find their habitat at Mono Lake after so many failed attempts. The traps set in gravelly desert had more **deer mice**, lots of **Great Basin pocket mice**, and two beautifully marked **Panamint kangaroo rats**. We stopped again at the boardwalk to look at nesting Virginia rails and other birds, and I unexpectedly saw a **bushy-tailed woodrat** there in broad daylight. The woodrat would be easy to see if we could wait until dusk, but we had to drive home. We saw a few **California ground squirrels**, one possible **Allen's chipmunk** and a sandhill crane (likely part of a nesting pair) while crossing the mountains. In Davis we made a quick stop to look at a larger colony of **Mexican freetails** under I-80 bridge.



Pale kangaroo mouse