

California micro-trip, 13-15 May 2016.

VLADIMIR DINETS

This short trip with Hari and Venkat Sankar, was unusual: we found a few rarities, but missed or almost missed many species that are normally abundant, particularly on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada.

Our first stop was at Tehachapi Pass, where we spent an hour before midnight and saw a **deer mouse**, a few **agile** and **Panamint kangaroo rats**, two very rare **white-eared pocket mice** (along Cameron Canyon Rd. ~1.8 mi from Hwy 58 junction), and two **black-tailed jackrabbits**.



Agile kangaroo rat

We proceeded to Desert Tortoise Natural Area and drove around the perimeter fence, seeing a **kit fox**, two **desert kangaroo rats**, dozens of **Merriam's** and **Panamint kangaroo rats**, one **little pocket mouse** (hand-caught), and, again, a few **black-tailed jackrabbits**. We set 21 Sherman traps for the remaining three hours of the night, but caught nothing – apparently, there was too much food in the desert following a rainy winter.



Little pocket mouse

At dawn we started looking for **Mojave ground squirrels** and saw two in 2.5 hours of walking (at approximately 35.1834N, 117.8824W). At 9 am the reserve opened, we informed the rangers of our sightings, and caused a lot of excitement. As we were told, the species had failed to recover from a catastrophic population crash caused by the unprecedented drought of 2012-2015, and was feared extinct. Ours were the first

sightings of 2016, long after the peak activity season (February-April). We then found a tortoise, a few desert horned lizards and other herps, and some **white-tailed antelope squirrels** in and around the reserve.



Desert horned lizard and desert tortoise

Then we drove to Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, where we saw a few **golden-mantled ground squirrels** (mostly juveniles) and **Panamint chipmunks** (unusually scarce).

We spent the rest of the day and the first part of the night checking out a few sites in and around Deep Springs Valley where spotted bats have been recorded in the past. We didn't see or hear any of those, but saw a **canyon bat** (unusually friendly and allowing close-up views in flight), a **silver-haired bat** (caught at Cottonwood Creek near Oasis), plus a few **Merriam's** and **Panamint kangaroo rats**, one **desert kangaroo rat**, a **desert woodrat** (on Hwy 168 above Zurich), a small number of **black-tailed jackrabbits**, a **desert cottontail** (amazingly, the only one seen on the trip) and a few **mule deer**.



Silver-haired bat

At midnight we got to Mono Lake, set our Sherman traps at two locations south of the lake, and spent a few hours spotlighting by car and on foot. The moon was past the first quarter and was already setting, but we saw very few animals: one large reddish-colored **bobcat**, a few **Ord's** and **Panamint kangaroo rats**, less than a dozen **black-tailed jackrabbits**, and one **white-tailed jackrabbit**, but no mice or pocket mice at all. We also drove the first ten miles of Hwy 167 north of the lake, and saw two **chisel-toothed kangaroo rats** and one

pygmy rabbit (suddenly running onto the road in front of the car). Our initial plan was to set a few pitfall traps near Tioga Pass, but the night was too cold for that.



Dark kangaroo mouse

In the morning we checked the traps and found all but one empty. The only catch was a **dark kangaroo mouse**, about 10 m from the place where I caught a pale kangaroo mouse a year ago. We went to the county park on the northern shore and saw a few **mountain cottontails** (mostly babies), a small number of **Belding's ground squirrels**, one **Piute ground squirrel** (at the nearby cemetery), and one **deer mouse** (nesting in a bird nestbox that had fallen off a tree). There were lots of wintertime nests and runways of montane voles along the boardwalk, but no voles. Broad-footed mole numbers seemed much lower than usual, and there was no sign of mountain pocket gophers anywhere. I suspect that some extreme weather event, most likely a joot (thawing and re-freezing of the snow cover), has killed most small mammals in the area sometime in late winter. Another sad surprise was seeing a few **California ground squirrels** in the county park and in Lee Vining. I've never seen them at Mono Lake before, but apparently they are spreading south along the eastern side of the Sierra. We also saw a few **least chipmunks** and one **lodgepole chipmunk** in Lee Vining.



Baby mountain cottontail

We tried looking for western heather voles at Monitor Pass, but it was too overgrazed; we saw only one **California ground squirrel** there, plus a **yellow-pine chipmunk**, a **coyote** and a roadkill bushy-tailed woodrat on the way down. Finally, we spent half an hour looking for other chipmunks at a few locations along Hwy 50 from Echo Lake to Kyburz, but saw only lots of mountain pocket gopher tunnels and one **Douglas's squirrel**; perhaps the chipmunks didn't like the cold, partly cloudy weather.