

A Bobcat Safari in Central California – April 2-3 2015 (by Venkat Sankar)

Living in the San Francisco Bay Area, I see a lot of Bobcats regularly while hiking and wildlife viewing through Central California, especially in Point Reyes and the Diablo Range around Mt. Hamilton, Henry Coe State Park, and Panoche Valley. Recently, I became aware of Brent Paull's (see www.amwestphoto.com) photo safaris targeting Bobcats in a remote area of San Benito County, near the Fresno County border on Coalinga and Old Hernandez Road. While Brent is primarily a photographer, he sees a LOT of Bobcats on his trips (15 sightings in a day is his record), and I figured this might be the perfect opportunity to see a bunch of bobcats and maybe get some good pictures for once.

I met Brent at 7:30 AM on April 2nd at the Harris Ranch Chevron having spent a night at the hellish and stinky Motel 6 nearby (all the other hotels were booked!). We set off into the Diablo range via Old Coalinga Rd through Old Coalinga Canyon, stopping at different spots to look for wildlife. March/April is not the ideal time to look for Bobcats as many of the females are pregnant at this time, reducing the potential number of animals you might have the chance of seeing; however, the ranchers here treat bobcats well (Bobcats keep the ground squirrel population in check), so they are still reasonably easy to see. We saw nothing on Coalinga Rd (no Tule Elk in Hernandez Valley either), so drove up Old Hernandez Rd (there is a 'road closed sign' due to a washed out ford, you will need a pickup or heavy 4WD for this road). On one pass of this road, we found 3 **Bobcats**, with 2 pretty close to the road, and a Golden Eagle. After driving through a few more private ranches in Topo Valley, we then went to Pinnacles NM. We drove around looking for a Bobcat in the campground, which was already somewhat crowded, so looked around a little, seeing a Northern Pacific Rattlesnake, then went back to Old Hernandez Road. It had heated up quite a bit by this time, but we still saw 2 **Coyotes**, many **Black-tailed Deer**, lots of the usual **California Ground Squirrels**, and 1 **Merriam's Chipmunk**. We headed back to Pinnacles for lunch and found a cool Coast Horned Lizard. Afterwards, we returned to Old Hernandez Rd, finding only 1 Coyote, many Western Pond Turtles, and a Ring-necked Pheasant. From here, we drove up La Gloria Road, seeing little besides a **Black-tailed Jackrabbit**, more deer, and many Lawrence's Goldfinches before driving to Hollister via CA-25, seeing our 4th Bobcat along the way.

The next morning, we drove through Pinnacles, seeing a **Brush Rabbit** and a **Desert Cottontail** before driving back to Old Hernandez Road, where we found a Lewis's Woodpecker and then 2 more Bobcats. We then drove to Panoche Valley, finding a Desert Cottontail, Prairie Falcon, and a Coyote along the way, but missing the Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizards in the wash along Yturiarte Rd (we found 2 Yellow-backed Spiny Lizards instead). We had lunch in Paicines at the general store, and then returned to Pinnacles, but saw very little (it was too hot for most wildlife here); however, we did find 4 California Condors. At this point, we started the drive back to Coalinga via Old Hernandez Road, seeing 1 final Bobcat, and continued onto Coalinga Road, where we found a Valley Garter Snake and a Black-tailed Jackrabbit, but missed any Tule Elk. We said goodbye to Brent and drove back north to the eastern (gravel) side of Panoche Rd from I-5. We drove the gravel to an area of stables just before Jackass Pass to look for San Joaquin Antelope Squirrel, but saw only 1 California Ground Squirrel and a Greater Roadrunner.

On our way down through the river valley, I spotted one **San Joaquin Antelope Squirrel** dash into a burrow underneath a sagebrush shrub right as I was about to give up hope. From here, I drove back home.

All in all, it was a fun trip and I'd highly recommend it to anyone interested in seeing Bobcats. Even in the off-season, we found 7 animals and if you came in winter, you'd very likely see 2-3x that in a two-day trip. Brent knows the roads here very well and has been running trips since 2008, so has a detailed knowledge on which areas will yield cat sightings, and also knows locations for a number of other mammal, bird, and reptile species if you are interested in seeing them. For those interested in Bobcats, I'd recommend a 2-day trip anytime between late October and February.

Mammal List:

1. Bobcat – 7 (6 Old Hernandez Rd, 1 CA-25 near Paicines)
2. Coyote – 4 (3 Old Hernandez Rd, 1 Panoche Rd)
3. California Ground Squirrel – many (everywhere)
4. Desert Cottontail – 3 (2 Pinnacles, 1 Panoche Rd)
5. Brush Rabbit – 1 (Pinnacles)
6. Black-tailed Jackrabbit – 3 (1 Pinnacles, 1 Gloria Rd, 1 Coalinga Rd)
7. Black-tailed Deer – many (everywhere)
8. Merriam's Chipmunk – 1 (Old Hernandez Rd)
9. Nelson's Antelope Squirrel – 1 (Panoche Rd)

Notable misses: American Badger, Gray Fox, Tule Elk, and Raccoon are seen reasonably often; I didn't put in effort for San Joaquin Kit Fox and nocturnal rodents in Panoche Valley as our trip coincided with a full moon.

Honorary Mammals (interesting birds/reptiles):

Southwestern Pond Turtle (Old Hernandez Rd)
Coast Horned Lizard (Pinnacles NM)
Northern Pacific Rattlesnake (Pinnacles NM)
Valley Garter Snake (Coalinga Rd-Laguna Mountain)
Yellow-backed Spiny Lizard (Panoche Valley)
Golden Eagle (Old Hernandez Rd)
California Condor (Pinnacles NM)
Lewis's Woodpecker (Old Hernandez Rd)
Lawrence's Goldfinch (Gloria Rd)

Notable misses: Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizard (Panoche) and Two-striped Garter Snake (Coalinga); Wood Duck, Peregrine Falcon, and many owl species (Burrowing, Long-eared, Great-horned, Barn, and Northern Pygmy) are seen often on Brent's Bobcat photo safaris