

Colorado and Yellowstone NP – 44 mammals in April 2024

We had a wonderful time in the mammal rich “Mountain States” of USA in April 2024 seeing 44 mammal species in 3 weeks including both bear species, 4 canids (including Wolf), Long-tailed Weasel, 8 grazing animals, 5 Rabbits/Hares and dozens of rodents including Ord’s Kangaroo Rats and a Northern Pocket Gopher. Only one night was spent spotlighting which revealed 10 species in 4 hours.

The impetus for the trip was a 12-day trip in Colorado to see the lekking of various Grouse. The promise of many mammals along the way clinched the deal. As it turned out we saw 31 mammal species in this leg of the trip. Having flown a long way from Australia we wanted to add something to the Colorado trip and settled on a week of mammal watching and scenery around Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park where we saw 24 species. Of the 44 species seen overall 32 were lifers for John and 36 were lifers for Kathy, so a very rewarding trip, and we were very impressed with how many mammal species can be seen in these areas with relatively small effort.

Colorado

Our first morning in Denver revealed a stunning back-drop of snow-clad mountains as we headed into the “Rocky Mountain Arsenal Reserve” – a huge tract of prairie reserve on the edge of suburbia. The first exciting find (to us at least) was a dog-town with **Black-tailed Prairie Dogs** carefully watching out from the entrances to their burrows. Little did we know that we would see quite a lot of them at different times over the coming days, however being the first mammals on our first visit to North America in 20+ years was pretty good. There were also **White-tailed Deer** and reintroduced **Bison** in this reserve.

Our tour headed to Wray in eastern Colorado on a fine day with extreme wind warnings – not very pleasant out of the vehicle. Along the way we passed **Pronghorn** feeding in the distance, **Eastern Cottontail** at a roadside rest area, a **Thirteen-lined Squirrel** in a field and more **Prairie Dogs**. The second day had much improved weather and we headed into the far SW corner of Nebraska (with a lovely Beaver dam across the Airikaree River but no Beaver visible) and then down the western side of Kansas to Scott City. Our mammals for today were **Coyote** on 2 occasions – the first was on a Greater Prairie Chicken Lek where the Coyote had no chance of getting a feed of Chickens – it was too exposed.

On the way to the hide for Lesser Prairie Chicken in the pre-dawn the next morning a possible Swift Fox ran across the road (but too fast for us to be positive on ID). On the ranch with the lek we saw **Mule Deer**. There were more **Prairie Dogs** at Neenoshe Reservoir on our drive to our overnight stop in southern Colorado. Casey and Laneha Everett were spectacular hosts and offer some highly recommended accommodation on their Ranch. Their ranch is beef cattle oriented and adjacent to some canyon-country. Our 4 hours spotlighting here revealed 10 mammal species starting with access onto a private property nearby, which Casey organised for us, to see **Ord’s Kangaroo Rat**. Driving the nearby roads we saw **Pronghorn, Big Horn Sheep, White-tailed Deer** and **Mule Deer, Black-tailed Jack-**

Rabbit and Eastern Cottontail, Northern Grey Fox on 3 occasions and a Silver morph Red Fox, Striped Skunk and Northern Raccoon. Just an amazing night.



Ord's Kangaroo Rat

After this we headed back into the Rockies, seeing more **Black-tailed Prairie Dogs** on the way and **Wapiti / Elk** in the distance near Gunnison. Next day a **Coyote** was again wandering around fruitlessly on a Grouse Lek with **Elk/Wapiti** on a hill in the distance and **Mule** and **White-tailed Deer** near town. A **Colorado Chipmunk** kept bouncing around in the Sage near the hide giving us prolonged views. As we headed west we passed a dog town of **Gunnison's Prairie Dog** before ending up at the very spectacular Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. Around the Visitor's Centre and nearby lookouts we found **Common Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Common Rock Squirrel and Least Chipmunk** in the middle of the day. USA certainly has a lot of diurnal mammals.



Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel

Continuing further west, we passed a dog-town of **White-Tailed Prairie Dogs** near Fruitgrowers Reservoir – fantastic, we'd seen 3 species in the first week. Leaving Powderhorn Resort next morning, we again saw **Least Chipmunk**, before visiting the backyard of friends of our guide in Grand Junction where they had **Desert Cottontail** and **White-tailed Antelope Squirrel** which came down off the mountain to the water and feeder. **Wapiti, Mule Deer and Pronghorn** were visible from the road as we went to Carbondale and saw an **Eastern Fox Squirrel** (my information suggested this was west of their usual range however iNaturalist has quite a few records for this part of this valley and as it was at our guide's house we accepted the ID).

Around Snowmass Ski Resort we saw **Common Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Least Chipmunk, North American Red Squirrel, Wapiti and Mule Deer**. Heading further north to Craig we passed **Pronghorn** and dog-towns of **White-tailed Prairie Dog** a couple of times. In the Sage country around Craig we saw **White-tailed Jack rabbit, Wyoming Ground Squirrel, Common Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Pronghorn and Mule Deer**. Another Coyote was wandering the fields in hope of a feed. In a different area we saw 2 **Yellow-bellied Marmots** and an extremely distant Common Muskrat (which was too far away for us to count). We headed into the Rockies again to stay in the delightful town of Georgetown, deep in a steep-sided valley. Here we saw **Rocky Mountain Goat, Big Horn Sheep, and another Eastern Fox Squirrel**.



Least Chipmunk



Eastern Fox Squirrel

As we headed back east to the front range our lunch spot (Flying J Ranch) had **Colorado Chipmunk, North American Red Squirrel and Wyoming Ground Squirrel**. The famous concert site of Red Rocks showed us **Common Rock Squirrel** and the Cherry Ck Reservoir near Denver had **Eastern Fox Squirrel, Eastern Cottontail and more Black-tailed Prairie Dogs**. An unbelievable 13 days with so many mammals and such stunning scenery.

Yellowstone

From Denver, in freezing weather, we flew to Bozeman in Montana for a week's mammal watching in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. These National Parks aim to open a number of roads on the 19th April each year, so our timing was to arrive into Yellowstone on the 20th. The roads in the northern part of the park were open as planned whereas other roads would not be cleared of snow for some weeks. Apparently, the northern part of Yellowstone is the mammal-rich part in any case, partly due to the geo-thermal activity which means there is water flowing even through winter. Being early in the season a lot of mammals have just come out of hibernation and are easier to see in April, especially while they are still down low. Also, the crowds in this park during summer are reported to be astronomical so we were quite pleased with our choice of timing.

As we headed from Bozeman airport to our first night in Livingstone we saw **Richardson's Ground Squirrel, Mule Deer, Wapiti, North American Red Squirrel and Pronghorn**. On our way to breakfast next morning we saw a **Mountain Cottontail** before heading towards Yellowstone. Along the way we stopped at a little creek where an extremely obliging **Common Muskrat** swam below us for several minutes. We took some side roads getting to Gardiner, our base for a couple of days, seeing **Big Horn Sheep, Pronghorn, Mule Deer, Wapiti and a Coyote** pouncing on something which we think was a Vole. **American Bison** were feeding in the fields, slowly migrating back up into the mountains – a wonderful sight and such an iconic species.



Pronghorn

Once in the park, apart from the vast scenery and the amazing Mammoth Hot Springs, we saw **Uinta Ground Squirrel** in a couple of places, **Pronghorn**, **White-tailed Deer**, another **Coyote**, many **Wapiti herds** and many **Bison** herds (they look so tame lumbering up the road, just like domestic cattle, but apparently any number of tourists get injured each year by approaching too close and forgetting that they are wild and will charge you if they want). There were also a few very special sightings this afternoon (as if the above weren't already special). The first was an **American Black Bear** not far off the road. We had to climb a hill to see through the foreground foliage while she loafed about in the sun. A little while later, in the Lamar Valley, there were a dozen vehicles stopped to look at something so we got out too – halfway up a distant hillside were six **Grey Wolves** feeding on a new-born Bison calf. Luckily everyone has telescopes for these hillside sightings. Closer would have been nicer, however we were very pleased to see some of these iconic predators. A bit further on a pair of **Rocky Mountain Goats** were spotted high up on a cliff providing better views than in Colorado. And to finish the day a splendid looking **Red Fox** was walking in the snow beside the road. It looked magnificent in its immaculate coat. We watched it sniffing out various scents for 5 minutes or more. And as we left, there was a second one a few hundred metres along the road.



Red Fox

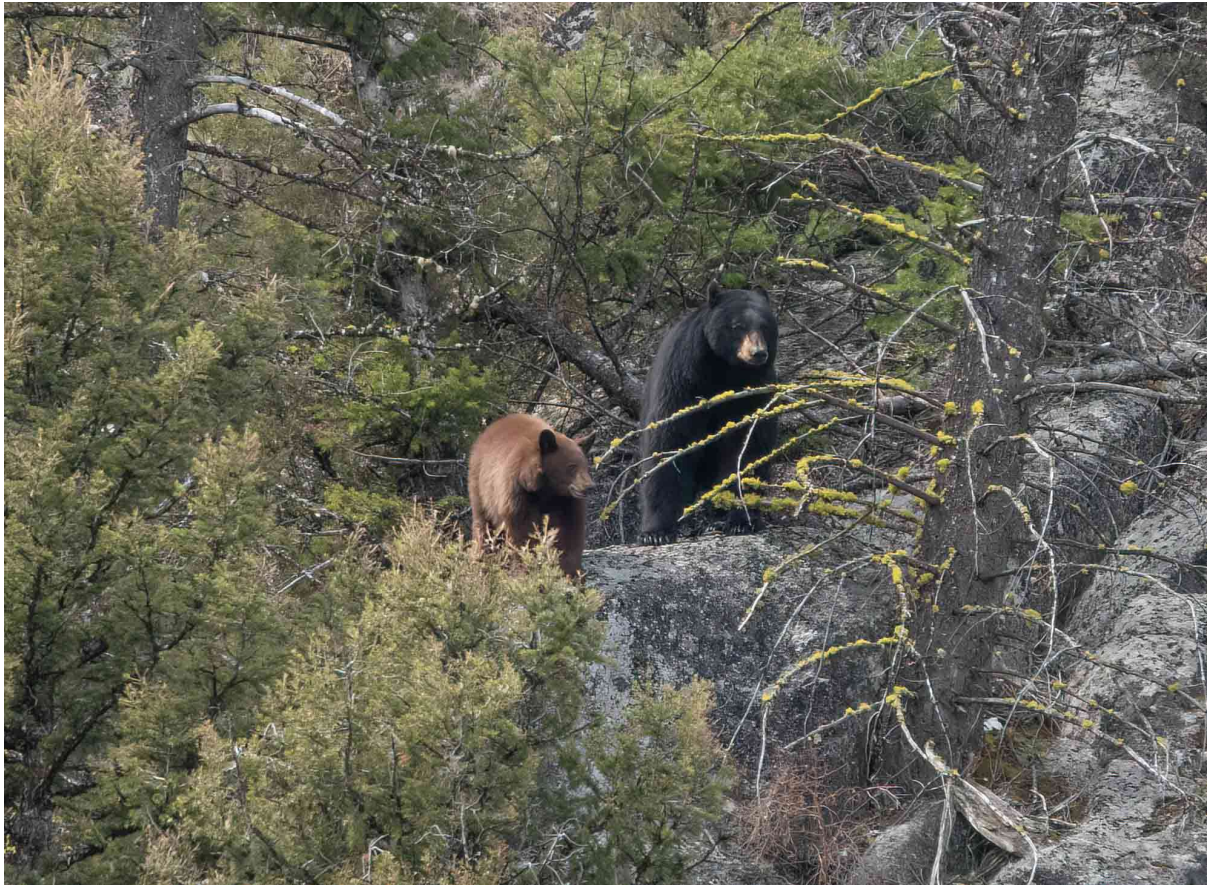


Grizzly



American Bison

The following day we went further through northern Yellowstone all the way to Cooke City, after which the road was still snowed in. Most of yesterday's mammals were repeated today with the addition of a few extras. As we cruised along slowly scanning for any wildlife we saw another big pile of cars parked on the side of the road. So we got out and scoped up a hillside about a km away, to see a female **Brown Bear** and 2 large cubs quietly feeding. Further in the distance we could see a large male jogging towards them. He got about 100m from the female and cubs before she spotted him and they bolted for their lives with him in hot pursuit. It was very dramatic. They raced across hill and dale for nearly a km, always with the same gap between them before she slowly started to get further from him (cubs in tow). After many minutes of this high speed pursuit she started opening up the gap and we finally lost sight of her when she crossed a distant ridge with a gap of 3-400m. He gave up the chase at about the same time. This amazing real wildlife drama came only minutes after our guide had finished telling us that he was leading a group the previous year who were all happily photographing a female Grizzly with cubs not far from them when a male Grizzly came charging in and killed the cubs right in front of them. They were left stunned for days. Apparently Brown Bear cubs stay with their mother for 2 and sometimes 3 years. If the male can kill the cubs then this brings her back into oestrus and the potential to breed much sooner.



Black Bear with cinnamon cub

We continued to the end of the road and returned slowly. The next highlight was a group of 5 **Moose** only a hundred metres from the road being very nonchalant. A fantastic sighting to see so many together. They were only just starting to grow new paddles at this time of year – they must be amazing looking creatures with their full head-gear. A little further on there was another **Black Bear** just across the river from the road with 2 cinnamon-coloured cubs. They were probably this year's as they were still a bit tentative at climbing over fallen trees. We watched them prowl about the forested hillside for half an hour. So many wonderful experiences in the one day.

The next day we continued across Yellowstone NP seeing some of the prime geothermal areas such as Grand Prismatic and Old Faithful as well as the usual range of mammals on our way through the Western Gate and to the town of West Yellowstone via the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone (and its waterfall with snow all around it). **Yellow-pine Chipmunk** was added near Swan Lake. Late in the afternoon we drove north of West Yellowstone on a nice sunny afternoon to Lake Hebgen. While admiring the view over the mostly frozen lake and thawing shoreline a little mammal scampered around some pontoons that had been dragged out of the lake. After much patient waiting, we were able to see it a couple more times and ID it as a **Northern Pocket Gopher**. An exciting and unexpected find.

The following day was a transfer day to get to Jackson Hole and the Grand Tetons via eastern Idaho. We saw a **North American Red Squirrel** in town before we left and a few **Moose** on the drive south. As we wound our way through some fields near Ashton some rodents were

seen in a field with many snow banks. We stopped for a look and they were Ground Squirrels. We thought they must be Idaho Ground Squirrels as we were now west of the Continental Divide. However, upon returning home the best I could find out was that Idaho Ground Squirrels were limited to just a couple of counties further west than where we were and further, that **Uinta Ground Squirrels** were recorded from this location. So we adjusted our records accordingly. While watching the Ground Squirrels another animal ran across a snow bank. It stopped to look at us and revealed itself as a **Long-tailed Weasel**. Another great find.



Uinta Ground Squirrel



Long Tailed Weasel

In Jackson (or is it Jackson Hole) our first stop was the National Museum of Wildlife Art – an amazing gallery full of fantastic paintings of wildlife (some of which are very famous) and outdoors there are numerous life size sculptures of classic large mammals. In the afternoon we did our first cruise of Grand Teton NP. Only some roads were open (most of the flat country was still snow covered), so our approach was to cruise slowly up and down these roads until we saw some wildlife. We saw a Coyote, a number of Red Fox as well as a good view of a **Musk Rat** at the Oxbow. **Moose and Mule Deer** were out on the flat plains. Grizzlies were reportedly seen 40 minutes before we got to one place – so “we missed out by that much”.



Moose



North American River Otter

Next day we repeated our cruising technique. The morning highlight was seeing a **Coyote** seriously chasing another coyote away from a recently killed carcass of something. In the afternoon we repeated the same couple of roads for a while without seeing anything and then changed tack by going along the main north road from Moran Junction in the hope of seeing something different. While standing on the side of the road admiring the snow-covered fields, low and behold there was a **grizzly** feeding in the snow, digging up roots. It was probably ½ km away, but still our best sighting so far. Grizzly #399 was well-talked about in town as being in this area, so we think this was probably it. Not as dramatic as our earlier sighting but a good deal closer. Having been satiated, we did one last cruise up our standard roads and stopped at Jackson Lake Dam. While we were staring at the river bank we noticed a **North American River Otter** cruising down the river (and various ducks taking flight as a result). There was some marshy ground near the dam so we poked around that for awhile and in due course found a **North American Beaver** chewing willow saplings. It was a bit shy but we stood still for awhile and eventually got some reasonable views through the vegetation. The day finished with 3 big bangs after also seeing **Mule Deer, Wapiti, Moose, Red Fox, Common Musk Rat and Coyote** through the day.



Musk Rat

On our last day in the Grand Tetons we started with another pass along our standard roads seeing **Yellow Pine Chipmunk, Coyote, Mule Deer, lots of Uinta Ground Squirrel** in and around some old farm buildings and another **North American River Otter**, this time walking around on the ice on a frozen bit of river – it seemed to be scent-marking the ice, or maybe it was just cooling off.

Our final morning we went from West Yellowstone through a big snow storm to Bozeman, seeing **Mule Deer** and **Richardson’s Ground Squirrel** along the way. Just as we were leaving a duck pond near Bozeman to go the airport our ever-attentive guide noticed a **North American Porcupine** waddling across a field. We got great views and finished our magnificent 3 week trip with another stunning mammal.



North American Porcupine

Many thanks to Dick Filby of Carbondale, Colorado (Wild Wing Tours, UK) and Forrest Rowland of Livingstone, Montana for 2 wonderful trips.

John GOLDIE and Kathy WALTER

Canberra, Australia, 5 June 2024

1	Coyote <i>Canis latrans</i>	Sightings on 3 days in Colorado, 2 in Yellowstone and every day in Grand Teton. Mostly single animals.
2	Grey Wolf <i>Canis lupus occidentalis</i>	1 sighting of 6 in Lamar Valley, Yellowstone
3	Northern Grey Fox <i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>	3 sightings around Everett Ranch, southern Colorado

4	Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	a Silver morph around Everett Ranch, southern Colorado + 2 in northern Yellowstone and daily in Grand Teton
5	American Black Bear <i>Ursus americanus</i>	2 sightings in Yellowstone (one of which had 2 “cinnamon” cubs
6	Brown Bear <i>Ursus arctos horribilis</i>	1 sighting in Yellowstone of a female with 2 large cubs (perhaps 3 rd summer) being heavily pursued by a male + 1 sighting in Grand Teton (possibly #399) digging in the snow for roots
7	Striped Skunk <i>Mephitis mephitis</i>	1 individual while spotlighting near Everett Ranch, southern Colorado
8	Northern Raccoon <i>Procyon lotor</i>	3 sightings while spotlighting near Everett Ranch, southern Colorado
9	North American River Otter <i>Lontra canadensis</i>	2 sightings in Grand Teton – 1 cruising the middle of the river, the other moving about on the ice over the river
10	Long-tailed Weasel <i>Mustela frenata</i>	1 scampering across a snowy field in eastern Idaho
11	Pronghorn <i>Antilocapra americana</i>	Many days in Colorado (the east, south and plains in the Rockies) and everyday in Yellowstone (none in Grand Teton)
12	Moose <i>Alces alces shirasi</i>	A group of 5 in northern Yellowstone. A couple of sightings as we drove through eastern Idaho and one in Grand Teton
13	Wapiti <i>Cervus canadensis canadensis</i> (= Elk)	Various Rocky Mountain sites in Colorado and everyday in Yellowstone and Grand Teton
14	Mule Deer <i>Odocoileus hemionus hemionus</i>	On the plains of western Kansas and southern Colorado + through the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and some days in Yellowstone and Grand Teton.
15	White-tailed Deer <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	Denver, Gunnison and Everett Ranch (Southern Colorado) + once in Yellowstone
16	American Bison <i>Bison bison</i>	Many small herds in northern Yellowstone – the first calves were being born.
17	Rocky Mountain Goat <i>Oreamnos americanus</i>	Near Georgetown, Colorado + northern Yellowstone
18	Bighorn Sheep <i>Ovis canadensis canadensis</i>	Everett Ranch (southern Colorado) + Georgetown, Colorado + near Gardiner, Montana
19	Black-tailed Jackrabbit <i>Lepus californicus</i>	Everett Ranch (southern Colorado)
20	White-tailed Jackrabbit <i>Lepus townsendii</i>	Near Craig, Colorado
21	Desert Cottontail <i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>	Grand Junction, western Colorado
22	Eastern Cottontail <i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>	3 days on the plains of Colorado
23	Mountain Cottontail <i>Sylvilagus nuttallii</i>	Livingstone, Montana
24	North American Porcupine <i>Erethizon</i>	Near Bozeman, Montana

25	White-tailed Antelope Squirrel <i>Ammospermophilus leucurus</i>	Grand Junction, western Colorado
26	Common Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel <i>Callospermophilus lateralis</i>	3 sightings in various Rocky Mountain locations + near Craig, Colorado
27	Gunnison's Prairie Dog <i>Cynomys gunnisoni</i>	Near Gunnison, Colorado
28	White-tailed Prairie Dog <i>Cynomys leucurus</i>	Between Gunnison and Grand Junction + 2 sightings near Craig, Colorado
29	Black-tailed Prairie Dog <i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>	Several sightings near Denver + eastern Colorado + southern Colorado
30	Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel <i>Ictidomys tridecemlineatus</i>	East of Denver
31	Yellow-bellied Marmot <i>Marmota flaviventris</i>	2 near Craig, Colorado
32	Yellow-pine Chipmunk <i>Neotamias amoenus</i>	Northern Yellowstone + Grand Teton
33	Least Chipmunk <i>Neotamias minimus</i>	Numerous sightings at various Rocky Mountain locations
34	Colorado Chipmunk <i>Neotamias quadrivittatus</i>	Gunnison + near Denver
35	Common Rock Squirrel <i>Otospermophilus variegatus</i>	Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP + Red Rocks Denver
36	Eastern Fox Squirrel <i>Sciurus niger shermani</i>	1 near Aspen + 1 at Georgetown + 1 near Denver
37	North American Red Squirrel <i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	Various Rocky Mountains, Colorado + in / near northern Yellowstone
38	Uinta Ground Squirrel <i>Urocitellus armatus</i>	Northern Yellowstone + eastern Idaho + Grand Teton
39	Wyoming Ground Squirrel <i>Urocitellus elegans</i>	Near Craig + between Steamboat Springs and Silverthorne + near Denver
40	Richardson's Ground Squirrel <i>Urocitellus richardsonii</i>	2 locations near Bozeman, Montana
41	North American Beaver <i>Castor canadensis</i>	Grand Teton
42	Ord's Kangaroo Rat <i>Dipodomys ordii</i>	1 individual feeding on corn beside a chicken coop near Everett Ranch, southern Colorado.
43	Northern Pocket Gopher <i>Thomomys talpoides</i>	A single animal darting across some recently thawed ground beside snow-cover and then sheltering against a pontoon that was out of the water.
44	Common Muskrat <i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>	An extremely distant and unsatisfactory sighting near Craig, Colorado. A fantastic sighting of one swimming up a creek just near where we were standing (near Yellowstone) + a couple in Grand Teton