

North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia Trip Report

Since the beginning of the year, my dad and Alex had been planning a trip to North Carolina. The reason will be obvious to anyone familiar with them: birds. Meanwhile, I was extremely excited by the possibility of seeing Gervais's Beaked Whale and Red Wolf, so of course I came along. Those were my two main targets, along with Appalachian Cottontail, Southern Flying Squirrel, and Atlantic Spotted Dolphin.

Cape Hatteras:

This was a part of the trip I was very excited about. Jon Hall had seen both **Gervais's Beaked Whales** and **Atlantic Spotted Dolphins** here before, and I was eager to see both these species. This would also be a good pelagic for my dad and my brother, Alex, who are both sea bird lovers and they had some lifers too. The pelagic was long, around 10 hours, and rougher seas made cetacean viewing more difficult. The seabirds were decent for my dad and Alex, but for most of the day the only mammals we saw were some **Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins**. Feeling a bit disappointed and quite seasick, I went to take a nap in the cabin. In a happy coincidence, they announced a pod of **Atlantic Spotted Dolphins** at the bow right as I woke up. We were returning at that point and the seas had calmed, so I was easily able to jump up and sprint over to the bow. We had exceptional views of several dolphins, and this is easily my favorite dolphin sighting ever. Not only because of the prolonged and close views, but also because these dolphins are simply gorgeous. Unfortunately, no **Gervais's Beaked Whales**, so there will certainly be a return trip in my future.



Atlantic Spotted Dolphins, courtesy of Paul Linton

Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge:

Ever since I learned of the existence of **Red Wolves**, I've been extremely eager to see them. This was also a mammal that my dad was very excited about and even Alex was interested in seeing. Aside from **Red Wolf**, my other targets here were **Marsh Rabbit** and **North American River Otter**. We spent two days here and we were determined to make the most of it. Even though our main target was **Red Wolf**, we had an exceptional amount of **Black Bear** sightings. The first day we had seventeen separate **Black Bear** sightings in the park, and six in the park the next day plus one alongside the highway as we were heading out. They are definitely unmissable here. We spent the majority of our time driving, but we did walk Sawyer Lake Trail. This trail yielded **four Eastern Gray Squirrels**, and a **Marsh Rabbit**. The **Marsh Rabbit** sprinted across the boardwalk and Alex got the best views of it. He felt sure it was a **Marsh Rabbit** and I felt confident with my brief look. The **Marsh Rabbit** was at the beginning of the

trail, and we didn't see another one, so I'm not sure about the reliability of the rabbits or how viewable they are here. We did go to another location nearby called Palmetto Peartree Preserve which was better for this species, which I'll discuss later.

Throughout both days we drove alongside many of the canals and creeks and watched carefully for otters, but we didn't see any. We later spoke to a ranger who told us the water levels were low at that time and the otters weren't using the canals as much. Furthermore, many side roads which provided better views of the canals were closed. I was disappointed to miss this species, having tried for it a few times now, but I'll just have to keep looking.

We'd focused our wolf searching to Long Curve Road, which has the most open fields in the park and many wolf photographs have been taken here. It was around eight in the evening of the first day and the refuge was closing in thirty minutes. We were all feeling a bit despondent after not seeing a hide nor hair of a wolf, as we only had two days at the refuge. Obviously, we would have to come back the next day and desperately hope we saw one. It was right at that moment that as I was looking at a field on the road, I spotted a **Red Wolf** trotting along. I shouted in excitement and both my dad and Alex were able to get on to it and see it before it disappeared into the thick vegetation which separates each field. The same ranger who'd given us the unfortunate otter news came by and told us the wolf would probably pop out on the other side and to keep watch. We watched both sides until 8:30, but by then it was getting too dark, and the wolf had not come back out. It could've still been in there or traveled up through the vegetation and moved out too far in the distance. So definitely a species to put on my want better views list, but I'm still exceptionally pleased to have seen it! We searched again the next day but did not see another wolf. While the mammal watching was great, owl watching was good too. We had a young Barred Owl right by the road and two separate sightings of Great Horned Owl. I'm always happy to see owls so these were good bird sightings for me too. Ultimately, we found two out of my three targets, which resulted in two new lifers. Yay!



Black Bear, courtesy of Alexander Linton



Barred Owl, courtesy of Alexander Linton

Palmetto Peartree Preserve:

This location was about 25 miles northwest of Alligator River and we went there twice. My dad and Alex were searching for a rare species of woodpecker on Loop Road. This road looked a bit rough, so we parked the rental car and they decided to walk down. I decided to stay in the car because it was attack of the insects there. The sheer volume of horseflies was staggering and about five managed to get in the car in the minute the door was open as dad and Alex prepared to leave. While they braved the psychotic bugs, I hunkered down in the car with the horseflies who'd ended up inside. We held a tentative truce, where I let them hide from the dragonflies devouring their friends outside and they didn't bite me. It was actually going very well and despite the multitude of bugs outside, I found myself relaxing. In a stroke of luck, a **Marsh Rabbit** hopped out of the bushes onto the road in front of me and I got prolonged views for about 10 minutes. It hopped off the trail and I assumed it'd headed deeper into the forest,

when dad and Alex came walking back up the road and startled it into dashing back across. This was good for my dad as he'd missed the rabbit we'd seen in Alligator River. My dad and Alex both returned there the next day and saw another **Marsh Rabbit** this time further down Loop Road, so this may be a reliable spot for them. Although I would not get out of the car if I were you.

Shenandoah National Park:

We went to Virginia for the next part of our trip and headed for Shenandoah. We only spent one full day here, but it was an amazing park. Definitely one of the most beautiful places I've been to in the US. The most common mammal was **White-tailed Deer**, which were hanging along the sides of the road and seemingly contemplating a suicidal dash, so I'd advise you to drive carefully throughout the park. My main target here was **Southern Flying Squirrel**, and I also had hope of an **Appalachian Cottontail**. We went to South River Picnic Area early in the morning and saw two **Eastern Chipmunks**, but we didn't have particularly good or prolonged views of them. Next, we headed to Dark Hollow Falls Trail which my dad had read to be a good spot for wildlife sightings. This trail was full of **Eastern Chipmunks**. We saw six total along the trail, and they were very accommodating. They seemed pretty used to people, so we got very good views and some photos. This trail isn't very long, but it was exceptionally prolonged because the birders stopped every few inches to photograph the birds. Meanwhile, I moved up 100 levels on my word game.

Once we got to the end, I decided to walk back by myself. Along the walk back, I was stopped by another hiker who mentioned that he'd just seen a **Black Bear** with two cubs along the trail walking away and advised me to be careful. Obviously I was driven into intense paranoia at this but encountered enough people walking back that I felt mildly safe. Meanwhile, Alex and dad had a real-life Disney princess moment when a **White-tailed Deer** fawn began attempting to play with them. We went spotlighting that night first by the visitor's center picnic site. We saw a **Gray Fox** who was likely looking to steal some food from the nearby campground. We looked around for **Southern Flying Squirrels** but found none here. Shortly after driving away from the visitor's center, at a place called Tanner Ridge Overlook, we spotlit a **Red Fox**. We then returned to South River Picnic Area to look for **Southern Flying Squirrels** and we certainly heard them, but we couldn't get our eyes on them. We did have a nice, long

look at a **White-footed Mouse** hanging out underneath a dumpster here and Alex even managed a photo.



Eastern Chipmunk, courtesy of Alexander Linton



White-footed Mouse, courtesy of Alexander Linton

Bramble Hill and surrounding area:

According to Amiel Hopkins trip report from 2023, Bramble Hill was a good spot to look for **Appalachian Cottontail** and he'd had success with a sighting here. While my dad and Alex searched for Golden-winged Warbler I looked around but unfortunately didn't see a Cottontail. We then drove around the surrounding area and had a brief view of a **Groundhog** along Wimer Mountain Road. We also saw a lot of **Eastern Gray Squirrels** and **Eastern Chipmunks** sprinting across the road. There were also many **White-tailed Deer** in the surrounding fields. The highlight of the day though was an **Appalachian Cottontail!** I was really excited but unfortunately it ran off the road too quickly for us to get a photo. It was still an awesome sighting.

Cranberry Glades (Monongahela National Forest):

Our final stop was in Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia. My final target for the trip, **Southern Flying Squirrel**, was what I was focusing on. I assumed **Southern Flying Squirrel** were the species here but after researching I realized that **Northern Flying Squirrel**, specifically the West Virginia subspecies, occurred here. I focused my attention on a place called Cranberry Glades, which was a very cool location in it's own right. It had a boardwalk we walked around that night while spotlighting. In the late evening before the sun set, we saw two **Red Squirrels** chasing each other on the boardwalk. Happily, we saw a flying squirrel within a few minutes of the sun setting. This view was extremely brief, but it was clearly a flying squirrel, which must've been northern. We walked the rest of the boardwalk and heard some more squirrels but didn't see any. My dad and Alex saw a mouse jumping through the spotlight which I somehow missed despite staring in the same direction. This was either Woodland or Meadow Jumping Mouse. We also picked up a lot of rodent activity but the vegetation here is so thick we couldn't see any. We also heard movement further within the vegetation, which was too loud for a rodent, but we couldn't see whatever it was. On the drive back from the Glades, we saw some more **White-tailed Deer**, which was our final mammal of the trip.

Overall, a fantastic trip! We had a total of 14 mammal species, with 6 lifers for me. I saw nearly all my main targets and I can't be upset about missing Southern Flying Squirrel when I got to see Northern. It was a bit of a blow to miss the River Otter, but I'm certain I'll see it eventually. It was also my first time in all three states, and it was great to explore more of the US.