

Farallon Islands and Point Reyes Trip Report

Ever since I rediscovered my love of mammalwatching I've been very eager to see a Blue Whale. Who wouldn't want to see the largest animal to ever exist? So, when my dad recounted his and my brother's pelagic trip to the Farallon Islands two years ago in which they saw eleven Blue Whales, I instantly knew I wanted to go. Aside from the Blue Whales, Northern Fur Seals and Steller's Sea Lions are guaranteed at the islands, both of which would be lifers for me. Furthermore, a pelagic trip would also allow us to visit Point Reyes, which sounded like an amazing place based on the trip reports I'd read. Species like Northern Elephant Seal, North American River Otter, and Long-tailed Weasel were all supposed to be fairly findable, all of which would be amazing lifers. So, this trip just had to happen, and it was just as amazing as I thought it would be.

Ancil Hoffman State Park:

We visited this location on our first and last day, on the way to Sausalito and back. It was primarily for some birds, but there were some mammals around. There were a few **White-tailed Deer** hanging around and some **Western Grey Squirrels**. There were tons of **California Ground Squirrels** here which were very tame and relaxed. A nice place although it was very hot!

Farallon Islands Pelagic:

This was a real highlight of the trip. We used Alvaro's Adventures run by Alvaro Jaramillo. Alvaro is definitely an amazing guide, who while running a birding company is also very knowledgeable about mammals. I highly recommend him! Now before the mammals I wanted to mention some logistics when going to the Islands. First this pelagic trip was out of Sausalito rather than Half Moon Bay. Going out of Sausalito allows you to get to the Farallons quicker partly because of its location but also because Alvaro was using a quicker boat. I'm not sure if this boat is standard for his Sausalito trips. It was still a relatively long journey but ultimately faster than a Half Moon Bay trip. The pelagic was twelve hours and started out with some **Harbor Seals** relaxing at the dock before we headed out, along with a few looking exceptionally adorable on the rocks along the shore. The first lifer of the day came in the form of some **Harbor Porpoises** jumping around as we cruised under the Golden Gate Bridge. On the trip out we saw several **Humpback Whales**, one of which breached right next to the boat. There was also a buoy with some **California Sea Lions** and one **Steller's Sea Lion** which I couldn't get onto before it slipped into the water. No matter because there would be plenty of them to see on the islands. I was pretty excited once we arrived and even I was amazed by the sheer number of birds. Of course that wasn't nearly as interesting as the mammals though! There were plenty of **California** and **Steller's Sea Lions** to see and the highlight were the **Northern Fur Seals**. While we were looking at them, Alvaro came over the speaker and explained the difference between fur seals and sea lions, which just goes to show his mammal knowledge. After we left the islands, we spent some time on the continental shelf, which was where I saw my very first

Blue Whale! Leading up to this point there'd been several distant blows that seemed big enough to be a **Blue Whale**, but they were too far to go for so finally encountering one close by and getting a view was amazing. While I thought the **Blue Whales** would be the highlight of the pelagic I was very happy to be proven wrong. We were still cruising along the shelf when I noticed a black thing jumping out of the water. I thought it might be a dolphin when the call came over the boat: **Northern Right Whale Dolphins!** This was my most wanted dolphin species and one I hadn't expected to get on this trip as they seem to be uncommon around the Farallons. I sprinted up to the bow to get a look and had a magical encounter with them. They were mixed in with a group of **Pacific White-sided Dolphins**, a species I hadn't seen well before. I had fabulous views as both species bow rode and jumped out of the water nearby. Undoubtedly my favorite dolphin encounter ever! Heading back was fairly quiet although we did see a very relaxed **Sea Otter** and it was the farthest out to sea I've ever seen one. Aside from the mammals we saw a pretty cool Salmon Shark and a Mola-Mola. Overall, we had a fantastic day out at sea.



Many seals and sea lions, courtesy of Paul Linton



Steller's Sea Lions, courtesy of Paul Linton



Harbor Seals, courtesy of Paul Linton



Blue Whale, courtesy of Paul Linton



Northern Right Whale Dolphins, courtesy of Paul Linton



Pacific White-sided Dolphin, Paul Linton

Rodeo Lagoon:

While doing research for this trip, I read in Daan Drukker's Pacific Northwest trip report that **North American River Otters** were being consistently seen every morning at a place called Rodeo Lagoon. It wasn't too far from our accommodation, so I thought this sounded like a promising lead. Due to our limited time, we only had about half a day to spend in Point Reyes so even though the otters are seen often at Abbot's Lagoon I was nervous we didn't have enough time to look for them. Plus, many of the reports I'd read had missed otter there, so I wanted another location. Daan's report was published in 2019, so I was unsure if the otters were still around but it seemed like a promising lead and so we went for it. And I am so glad we did! We arrived pretty early in the morning, with the weather being very overcast and drizzly. However, as we were crossing the bridge from the road onto the beach which also goes over the lagoon, we saw a **North American River Otter** swimming around. Having missed this species a few times now I was very pleased to have seen it. It gave good views for about a minute before it dove under and resurfaced farther away swimming along the perimeter of the lagoon. Daan mentions that two individuals were being seen here prior so I'm not sure if the other otter was somewhere else or if just one otter is here now. Regardless, this seems to still be a reliable place to see **River Otter**.



North American River Otter, courtesy of Paul Linton

Pillar Point Harbor:

In Jon Hall's 2019 trip report from the Bay Area, he visited Pillar Point Harbor Beach and saw a few **Botta's Pocket Gophers**. Pocket gophers are a favorite mammal family of mine, mostly because of their ridiculous appearance. As I hadn't seen a pocket gopher yet it would mean a new mammal family for me, so I was particularly keen to see one. We visited mid-morning after Rodeo Lagoon, and it was still pretty overcast and cool. Dad and Alex were searching for a bird at the end of the pier, but I walked down to the beach and while I saw many burrows unfortunately none of the gophers were active. We did see a heron hunting amongst the burrows and watched it swallow a gopher which was already dead when we noticed it. So, I imagine the gophers were put off, to say the least. There were many **Brush Rabbits** around and they should be easy to see by walking alongside any of the bushes and vegetation and you'll usually startle them.



Brush Rabbit, courtesy of Paul Linton

San Pedro Valley County Park:

We visited this location because it was the only place nearby which had a few records of **Merriam's Chipmunk**. We were on the edge of the chipmunk's range, but I figured we might as well try for it. We visited about midday and while it was a nice place it definitely wasn't a mammal paradise. We walked several trails and found no chipmunks which culminated in a frustrating miss on Trout Farm Trail, near to the visitor's center. A **Merriam's Chipmunk** sprinted across the trail, and it was only seen by my dad and missed by Alex and I. Merriam's ought to be the only chipmunk here, so it was a blow. This park was very pretty but ultimately there are definitely much better places to see a **Merriam's Chipmunk**.

Point Reyes:

This section encompasses all the locations we visited within Point Reyes. Our first stop was to Drake's Beach to see the **Northern Elephant Seals**. We had to walk down the beach quite a ways to get a look at them as they were hanging out at the end of the beach. One was lying away from the others further up and taking a nap, so we were able to get fairly close and had great views. Elephant seals are truly fabulous mammals, and this was one of my favorite lifers of the trip. There were also **Humpback Whales** breaching out in the sea with some smaller cetaceans jumping around near them. We couldn't ID them as they were too far away. We continued to explore Point Reyes and as we were driving along Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, right before Estero, I had a brief look at a **Cougar**! It was extremely brief, and I only saw it's backside, but it was clearly a cat and with its color, tail length, and size it couldn't have been anything but a **Cougar**. It ran off and we couldn't turn around because there were other cars behind us. So, it's a species for the want better views list. Regardless, it was amazing to encounter such a rare animal and have such luck. We drove up to the Point Reyes lighthouse to wait until it got dark and allow other cars to leave before us so we could spotlight to our hearts content. While spotlighting, we saw several **Tule Elk** looking very majestic with their huge antlers. The highlights of the night were two **Striped Skunk** both of which gave good views, plus along with those we also saw two **American Badgers**, but they were very distant, and we couldn't get a great look. Another species for the want better views list. We also had a **Black-tailed Jackrabbit** sprint across the road. Later on, as we were driving out of Point Reyes we had another **Striped Skunk** this time running on the road and a **Raccoon** also out in the road. The next day we visited Bear Valley Trail to look for **Sonoma Chipmunk**. It took a while but eventually as we were walking back along the trail we briefly saw this chipmunk running on a branch. We did inquire about Long-tailed Weasel at the visitor's center, but they said they rarely saw them.



Northern Elephant Seal, courtesy of Paul Linton



Elk, courtesy of Alexander Linton

All in all, a fantastic trip! We saw a total of 24 mammals in three days which was much better than I thought we'd do. And of those 24, half were lifers. This trip was brilliant, but the highlights would have to be the truly fabulous Northern Right Whale Dolphins and finally seeing the adorable North American River Otter. I hope you found this helpful, and you can reach me at ellenlinton1212@gmail.com if you have any questions.