

## Short trip to California

My wife Kristi and I just had a long weekend in California, and I somehow talked her into spending much of it mammal watching. Typically, Kristi would take the wheel while I manned the spotlight and/or thermal scope. This trip report doesn't have any groundbreaking tips but might be useful for anyone planning to take a very short trip to California that mixes some scenic drives with mammal watching.

We flew into LAX on Thursday February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025, rented a car and drove to a motel near Carrizo Plain National Monument. The next morning, we slowly drove Soda Lake Road from the South/West to the North/East, starting at around 4AM. We saw a **San Juaquin kit fox** shortly after turning on to Soda Lake Road, before we first got to the sign for Carrizo Plains (although it was not a great sighting). We also saw several **Giant kangaroo rats** prior to sunrise. One froze in the car's headlights, but I still somehow managed to NOT get a decent photo of it! We watched a **Coyote** for several minutes as it was hunting, had brief views of a couple of **Desert cottontails** and perhaps a black-tailed jackrabbit (although I was not certain of the jackrabbit sighting). We also had a good sighting of an **American badger** a little to the west of Traver Ranch.



I managed to approach it for a minute before it ran into its hole. A little while later we got a quality sighting of a second **kit fox**, just past the KCL campground. It was relaxing outside of its den, within 20 feet of the road. I only had time to take one clear photo before it darted back into its den.



Around this area (just west of Soda Lake) we saw a lot of **Elk**, 100's of individuals in multiple herds, and sadly also an injured calf that had been abandoned.

We then did a scenic drive towards Monterey, first stopping at Elkhorn Slough (near Moss Landing), where we rented a kayak to view **harbor seals** and **sea otters**. This is a great way to get good photos of these animals, but if you don't want to rent a kayak you can just stop where Route 1 crosses the Slough, and multiple otters should be visible from the bridge.



We also saw a **California ground squirrel** at the Marina there. When we arrived in Monterey, we watched several harbor seals basking on the rocks near Fisherman's Wharf.

The next day, I took a tour with Monterey Bay Whale Watch to see **gray whales**. We saw four or five gray whales during the tour. The views were not great, as the whales are just passing through in their migration and appear to be in stealth mode (presumably to avoid Killer whales). I also saw a few sea otters and many **California sea lions** at the pier. Later, while walking to the aquarium, we saw a **fox squirrel**.

The next morning (March 2<sup>nd</sup>) we left for Point Reyes, taking Route 1. We again saw sea otters (about half a dozen) where Route 1 crosses Elkhorn Slough at Moss Landing. A short

time later we encountered a Coyote off Route 1, and then another two coyotes near Davenport beach. We briefly stopped at Pigeon Point lighthouse and saw a **bottlenose dolphin** and a harbor seal there as well. The dolphin was a lucky sighting as we were only there a minute and the woman who works there said that they only see them once every couple of months.

Although it was on the way, we didn't stop at Año Nuevo Coast Natural Preserve to see the Northern elephant seal rookery there. It was still breeding season, so the park requires visitors to purchase tickets for a guided walk, which is generally sold out in advance (and we didn't book anything in advance). I have been there in previous years, however (outside of the breeding season), and it's generally always worth stopping in to get good looks at the elephant seals.

We stopped in San Francisco for lunch and then went to Pier 39 to see the California sea lions (and surprisingly, a hummingbird right next to the pier). On Route 1 in Marin we saw a **mule deer**. At Point Reyes we first went to Chimney Rock to see the **Northern Elephant seals** hauled up on the beach there. I also looked for Botta's pocket gopher near the Chimney Rock trailhead (I had seen one on that trail a few years ago, and there are still holes there...but I didn't see any this time).

After checking in at an Airbnb in Novato, we went back to Point Reyes for a night drive along Marshall beach road, with the goal of finding a bobcat. We saw a coyote walk around another animal, but the other animal was further away so we could only see its eyeshine. 10 minutes later we caught a quick view of what might have been a bobcat (but I could not confirm it). We also saw two **Brush rabbits** there.

The next morning (March 3<sup>rd</sup>) was our last chance to find a bobcat as we were to fly back to New York in the Afternoon. We again started at Marshall Beach Rd. where we saw two coyotes hunting, an unidentified rodent near the trailhead, and a brush rabbit. We also spotted another Brush rabbit while walking Abbott's Lagoon trail, but saw no sign of the otters that are reportedly found at the lagoon. While driving around other parts of Point

Reyes we encountered several mule deer and many **Tule Elk** (most in the Tule Elk Reserve area). We also saw two additional coyotes, one walking very close to our car.



With time running out before we had to leave for the airport, we made one last stop at Marshall Beach Road and got our bobcat sighting!



We watched the bobcat casually hunting for several minutes, until it saw another bobcat approaching and quickly ran away. A great way to end the trip!

