

Mammal Big Day 2014

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We tried our third mammal big day on 23 August 2014, following a similar but slightly expanded route compared to our previous attempts on 24 September 2011 and 21 September 2013. These two big days yielded 16 and 17 native species, respectively, but this year we got more serious and organized, and found 27 native species! This seems like a good total for the route – we generally had good luck, except on the whale watching trip on Monterey Bay, which consumed about 6 hours, but only added two species.

At midnight, we headed out our door and quietly walked around the property, opening small mammal live traps that had already been positioned. We then drove to Quail Hollow Ranch County Park, where over many visits we have recorded 11 species of bats. At 1:04 a.m. we detected two bats, one right after the other: Yuma Myotis (#1 for the day) and Red Bat (2). The latter was perhaps our best mammal of the whole day. We heard what was probably Dusky-footed Woodrat foraging in the oaks, but were not confident of the identification and so had to let it go. We quit around 2 a.m., and then drove roads in the Santa Cruz Mountains, finding Striped Skunk (3) and Mule Deer (4), but missing Raccoon, which we also did not see at Pinnacles -- our worst miss for the day. Arriving home, we checked the traps and had one California Mouse at 3:30 a.m. (5). We set up the bat recording equipment on our deck, but added only Mexican Free-tailed Bat (6). A mouse scurried by several times, but we did not see it well enough to confirm that it was the expected species, Brush Mouse. The first of our large population of Merriam's Chipmunk (7) finally woke up at 6:50 a.m., after which we tore out of the house.

We drove the crest of the Santa Cruz Mountains but did not see Western Gray Squirrel as hoped. Staff at UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, where Eileen volunteers, were kind enough to let us in before the opening time, allowing us to find our only Brush Rabbit (8) of the day. A quick stop at Moss Landing on Monterey Bay netted Harbor Seal (9), Sea Otter (10), California Ground Squirrel (11), and California Sea Lion (12). The whale watching trip into Monterey Bay was great for Humpback Whales (13) but poor for diversity. We were on the way back with just one species added, when I spotted three large dolphins well behind the boat. I called to one of the biologists that it looked like Risso's Dolphins (14) in the distance, and to my surprise, they turned the boat around and in about 5 minutes we caught up with them. It turned out to be a pod of about 400 animals, the largest aggregation of this species that we have ever seen! They put on a spectacular show and the company gave me a lifetime 20% off pass for two in appreciation for spotting them!

After docking, we headed for the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, near Los Banos. On the way we stopped at San Luis Reservoir, where we finally flushed a Desert Cottontail (15). At the refuge, we saw the Tule Elk (16) herd. These animals are from a reintroduction, but because they are within the original range and habitat of this subspecies, we counted them as a native. We left the refuge around 5 p.m., and after checking in at the campground at Pinnacles National Park, we hit the trail. There are two excellent locations for bats in the park, between which we have recorded 15 of 16 species known in the park, but it is not possible to reach both in one evening. On the previous weekend, we had tried both locations on successive nights, and we used the lists from that weekend to choose which would be more likely to add more species today. The winner was the reservoir, a roughly one mile hike that we started around 7 p.m..

Our first bat, at 7:48 p.m., was Western Pipistrelle (17), followed in the next two hours by Western Mastiff Bat (18), Townsend's Big-eared Bat (19), California Myotis (20), Hairy-winged Bat (21), Silver-haired Bat (22), and Pallid Bat (23). Just after 10 p.m., we heard a beautiful Coyote (24) chorus, and at 10:30 we started packing up. We found fresh Gray Fox (25) scat on the hike back. We got to the truck with about 45 minutes left to drive the few, short roads in the park, before midnight. We added a Kangaroo Rat (26), probably Heermann's, at 11:33, then a Black-tailed Jackrabbit (27) at 11:39, our final species of the day. When we got to our campsite, it was covered with Raccoon tracks, and we wished we'd thought of sweeping the site when we arrived!

Overall, this was a very satisfying big day, and a great improvement over previous results! All the species we saw were at or near locations where we had found them before, so there were no real surprises, but just about half the species could easily have been missed. It was a lot of fun, but next year we have to figure out how to stock up on sleep ahead of time!