



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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POINT REYES, UNITED STATES

Date - April 2014

Duration - 6 Days

Destinations

San Francisco - Point Reyes National Seashore - Tomales Bay State Park

Trip Overview

A short trip, primarily to assess whether Point Reyes National Seashore might be a suitable destination for wildlife tours, as I used to travel a great deal in North America, but have recently concentrated on more remote areas, where the wildlife is not as strictly managed and there is less of the hunting mentality that pervades so much of this continent. Given that Point Reyes has a reputation as



being a good location to find bobcat, I was particularly interested to see how easy this member of the lynx family would be to observe and in all I made a list of 22 mammals that I thought I had a reasonable chance of encountering. As it was, the trip was so successful that I ended up seeing all 22 animals on my primary list, as well as a couple, fallow deer and pacific jumping mouse, that I had not anticipated. I was less fortunate with a secondary list of a few more elusive mammals that I knew occurred in the area, but, as this list included puma, long-tailed weasel, porcupine, spotted skunk and mountain beaver, my expectations were not high and I was not too disappointed. If I had visited a few of the surrounding regions I would have certainly increased the number of mammals observed and a marine trip in San Francisco could have easily added another four

or five species, but I decided that I would remain at Point Reyes for the duration of my stay in order to see exactly what the one specific area could produce. Despite heavy fog that would often linger for the majority of the morning, particularly at the higher elevations of Pierce Point Road and along the shoreline of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, I believe that it was probably the right decision, as I spent quite a long time looking for some animals and doubt that I would have seen all of these had I moved about a great deal. As I arrived fairly late on my first evening, having decided to explore the back roads on the way in instead of taking Highway 1, I had five full days in all and around ten hours on the day that I departed to fly home, when I did take the beautiful coastal drive along Highway 1 and back across the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco. I spent long periods in the field, sixteen and a half hours was my shortest day searching for wildlife and over eighteen hours was the longest, including at night when I would spotlight for several hours. Although there are numerous pretty and productive trails, many of which I did take advantage of, much of Point Reyes is accessed by car and a number of the resident animals are easier to spot from the road. I therefore probably spent around 70% of my time either driving or observing wildlife from my vehicle and the remaining 30% on foot exploring a variety of attractive trails. My first bobcat sighting actually took the best part of two days and I would definitely recommend at least a three-night stay if you have

set your heart on seeing this particular cat, as they may be easier to see here than anywhere else, but they are certainly not guaranteed, particularly if your visit coincides with the weekend, when the entire area is much busier and there is far more traffic on the road. I had just finished another sweep of Pierce Point Road and was pulling into the ranch car park at almost 7pm on day two when I spotted the first of five bobcats encountered throughout the trip. I was actually considering taking a break for a while and waiting for it to get dark enough to spotlight along the road back towards Inverness when I saw the bobcat sitting nonchalantly right next to the car park. Unfortunately it did not stay for long as I manoeuvred the car to take a photograph and although I followed slowly on foot for a few hundred metres, it eventually disappeared over a hill towards the coast. Most of my



bobcat encounters were similar, in that they always occurred when least expected and only once when I was scanning the landscape and actively searching for them. On day three I drove across one at the bottom of the road that leads to the Estero trailhead and on day four I had another, possibly the same animal that I had seen on my second day, walk across the road leading down to the lower car park at Pierce Point Ranch. The most exciting bobcat encounter occurred on my final full day as I was walking back along the Abbotts Lagoon trail and smiling at a large group of highly vocal California quail that were running along a boardwalk just ahead of me, complaining at my presence, but refusing to fly away. Distracted by the amusing birds, I briefly saw a fairly large animal disappear into some bushes to my left and knew that it either had to be a bobcat or a puma, as the vegetation around the area was not really suitable for deer. I walked off trail for a short period to see if I could identify what I was certain was going to be cat and when that did not work, I decided to retrace my steps along the boardwalk in case the animal emerged from the other side of the bushes. It was a good call, if a little late, as I could clearly see that the elusive animal was indeed a bobcat, but it must have left the cover of the vegetation whilst I was searching around the other side and was now looking back at me from a distance of about 50 metres. Luckily, this was another relaxed cat and, although it maintained a reasonable gap between us, it did not bolt and allowed me to follow at fairly

close quarters as it walked calmly towards a nearby meadow. I probably enjoyed around fifteen minutes with this beautiful creature, which was the longest I spent with any one bobcat during the trip, and whilst the cat was not as close as some of the others observed, it was a joy to finally follow one on foot. Within an hour I was watching my fifth and final bobcat, the only one I managed to find



whilst actually scanning an area and specifically looking for them. This one was lounging in a field in the sunshine and I had a nice clear view of a few half-hearted pounces in the grass after rodents before it walked away out of sight. Just five bobcat sightings in almost 100 hours of field time may not seem that impressive, but you could spend months looking for this animal in other reserves and when the cats were not being cooperative, there was a great deal of other wildlife to admire in what is undoubtedly a diverse and productive region. Deer, both mule deer and the local tule elk subspecies, were routinely observed in large numbers and it was lovely to see the impressive males with their antlers in velvet and to note the scruffy transition from their thick winter coats to the shorter, cooler adaptation for the approaching summer months. Coyotes, brush rabbits and jackrabbits were also relatively common during

the day, as well as a variety of pinnipeds that were easily observed from a number of viewpoints along the steep cliffs. Other animals were much harder to find and over the best part of six days I encountered just one western grey squirrel and one pocket gopher, which I actually stumbled upon completely by chance whilst looking for sonoma chipmunk. The chipmunks themselves were almost equally

elusive, for although I saw four in total, they were all either running across roads or trails and were one of the few animals that I was unable to photograph. I was far luckier with striped skunk and was privileged to spend over half an hour with one in broad daylight on the Abbotts Lagoon trail. I have often seen these animals during the day, but this one was incredibly relaxed and at one stage approached to within about three metres of me as I sat quietly watching in the long grass. Although it was at distance, I was also fortunate to spot a red fox, as these animals are very rarely seen at Point Reyes and one of the local rangers later told me that he had never seen one. Another ranger at the Bear Valley visitor centre was very helpful in terms of finding a few different species, particularly otter, as he advised that I spend time at a small lake behind Drakes Beach, which is not



visible from the road and that I was not aware of despite driving to the area on several occasions. It proved to be an excellent tip, as I spotted an otter swimming within about ten minutes of sitting down on the side of the hill overlooking the lake and spent almost an hour watching it glide through the water hunting and feeding. At first glance I thought that I had seen a pair of otters as I drove past a



pond just beyond the Abbotts Lagoon trailhead towards Pierce Point Ranch. However, as I approached on foot, I quickly realised that they were in fact muskrats and immediately sat down on the bank to enjoy prolonged views of both animals as they swam within a metre or so of me. To see so many different mammals so well was a real bonus that I had not really expected, as I was aware that all of these animals occurred at Point Reyes and that I might see them, but I did not anticipate spending long periods with the majority or getting so close to most of them. This was particularly the case in terms of my favourite encounter of the trip, bobcats aside, as I was hoping to see an American badger in daylight, but was concerned that the area might be too busy for these shy animals to leave their setts much before nightfall. This did almost prove to be the case, as I parked myself within a

few metres of an obviously active badger sett and was almost instantly rewarded by a badger emerging hesitantly in good light. Unfortunately, despite my wild gesticulations imploring her to change direction and to go round my car, a hiker continued along the road totally unaware of the badger, which of course disappeared back down its hole as soon as she approached. I thought that may be it for this particular mustelid, but happily, after an additional wait of almost an hour, the badger reappeared and I was able to spend a wonderful fifteen minutes watching it foraging and cleaning around its sett before ambling away into the night. As it was now dark and I had to watch the badger with the aid of a sympathetically positioned spotlight, I did consider returning the next night for another view, but I eventually decided that I would leave this sensitive animal in peace, largely because it had made its home in a popular area and I could imagine that it was probably going to be disturbed on a fairly regular basis. I have only seen a handful of American badgers in my life and to see one at such close quarters and for so long was a real thrill and a definite highlight of the trip. Most of my other great sightings came at night and included two Virginia opossums, one of which I got very close to as it climbed a tree, the same number of grey foxes, both of which were seen in or around the Bear Valley visitor centre, and three more striped skunks. I was slightly



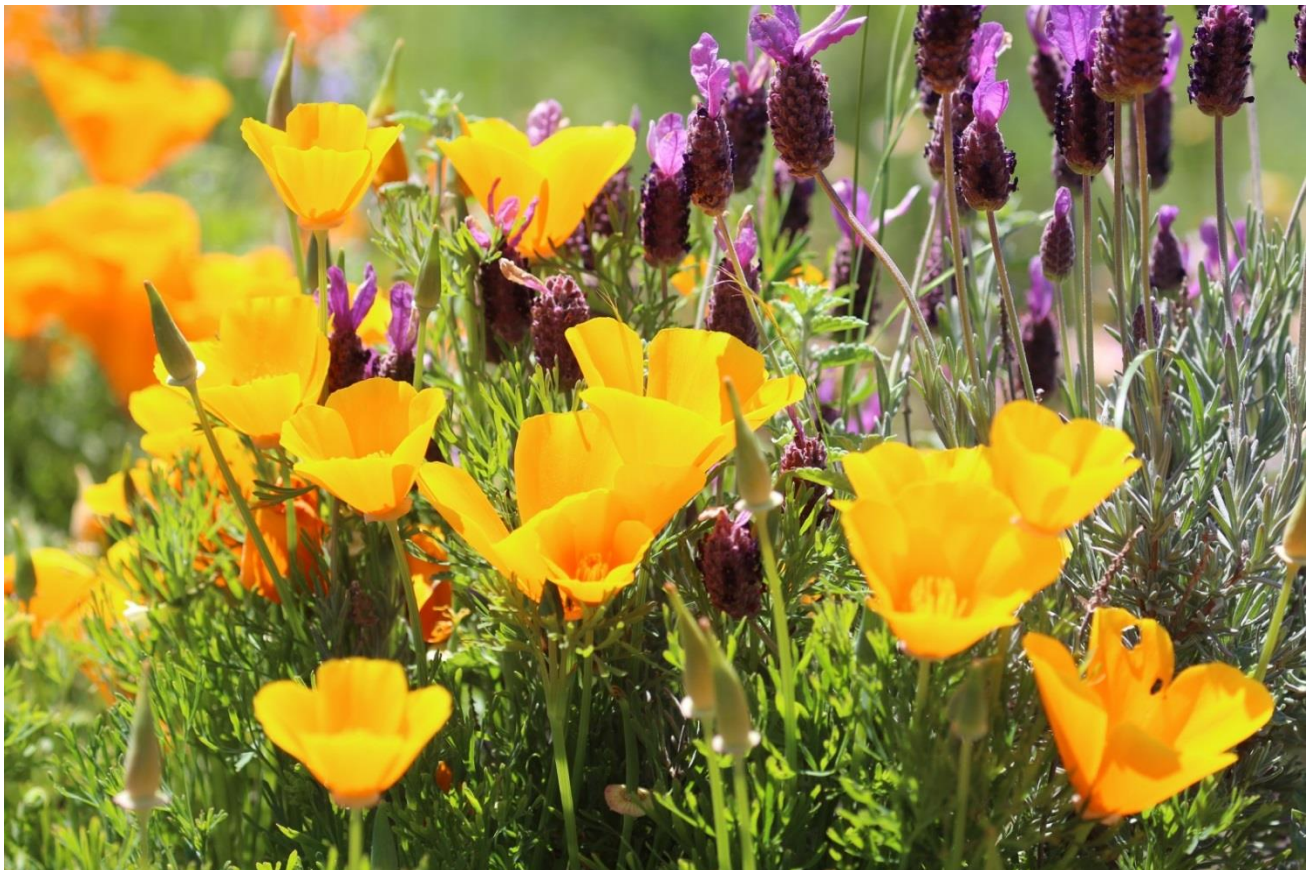
surprised to see raccoons only at night, as I am used to watching these endearing creatures well before dusk, but they appeared to be strictly nocturnal here and whilst I was attempting to photograph one individual at the base of a tree, I spotted a couple of pacific jumping mice running along the branches above. These were probably the fastest rodents I have ever encountered and it was impossible to even keep them in the spotlight beam for long, let alone photograph them. Deer aside, which I always do my best not to disturb with a spotlight whilst they are trying to sleep, black-tailed jackrabbits were the other common nocturnal sighting, although I also saw a group of four at H Ranch in broad daylight almost every day. Given the diverse habitats that Point Reyes protects, it was no surprise that the area supports a wonderful variety of birds and I easily spotted 50 or 60 species without even spending time specifically looking, from tiny hummingbirds to huge golden eagles and turkey vultures. Red-shouldered and red-tailed hawks were two of the more commonly observed raptors and I also had a superb view of a barn owl in one of the outbuildings at Pierce Point Ranch. Wild turkeys were easily seen on the rift trail and egrets, herons, pelicans, sandpipers and plovers were just a few of the many waterbirds observed congregating around the various rivers, lakes and ponds. When the sun shone, as it did for the majority of the time towards the end of my stay, several lizards and skinks also put in an appearance, as well as two snakes, one of which was clearly a gopher snake. I am not certain what Point Reyes looks like at other times of the year, but in spring it was sensational, with large areas carpeted by a dazzling array of colourful wildflowers and the deep blue of the Pacific contrasting beautifully with the imposing cliffs and green meadows. Even the early morning mist was atmospheric and when the veil eventually lifted each day, the superb afternoon light illuminated the breathtaking landscapes and the stunning animals that adorn them.





No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Bobcat	<i>Lynx rufus</i>	Five sightings, four on Pierce Point Road and one at the beginning of the road leading to the Estero trailhead.
2	Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>	Fourteen sightings, mainly on Pierce Point Road.
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Lone individual at distance in a meadow on Pierce Point Road, near the entrance to Tomales Bay State Park.
4	Grey Fox	<i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>	One sighting at the Bear Valley visitor centre and one at the bottom of Limantour Road.
5	North American Otter	<i>Lontra canadensis</i>	One swimming in a small lake behind Drakes Beach.
6	American Badger	<i>Taxidea taxus</i>	One at dusk at Pierce Point Ranch on the right side of the road leading down to the lower car park.
7	Striped Skunk	<i>Mephitis mephitis</i>	Four, two individuals at the Abbots Lagoon trailhead, one on the drive to Inverness and one at Drakes Beach.
8	Northern Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>	Several, all at night, mainly on the Bear Valley Road.
9	Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>	Common at various locations.
10	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Common on Pierce Point Road, including a herd of well over 70.
11	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	Just one tagged female seen on the drive to Inverness.
12	Virginia Opossum	<i>Didelphis virginiana</i>	One at the entrance to Pierce Point Road and one at Drakes Beach.
13	Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>	Four constantly viewed at H Ranch and several others at the Bear Valley visitor centre.
14	Brush Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus bachmani</i>	Over twenty seen at several locations.
15	Botta's Pocket Gopher	<i>Thomomys bottae</i>	One on a side trail towards the top of Mount Vision Road.
16	Western Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus griseus</i>	One seen driving down to the entrance of Tomales Bay State Park.
17	Sonoma Chipmunk	<i>Tamias sonomae</i>	One on the drive down Mount Vision Road and three running across a path on a hike off the same road.
18	Muskrat	<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>	Two swimming in a pond just past the Abbot's Lagoon trailhead.
19	Pacific Jumping Mouse	<i>Zapus trinotatus</i>	Two at night on Bear Valley Road whilst watching raccoon.
20	Grey Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>	A pair swimming at distance from the Sea Lion Overlook.
21	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Various locations, including the Estero trail and the road to Chimney Rock.
22	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>	Large number from the Elephant Seal Overlook towards Chimney Rock.
23	Steller Sea Lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>	At least two with the colony of California Sea Lions at Sea Lion Overlook.
24	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	Large colony from the Sea Lion Overlook and several swimming along the coast.





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