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UNITED STATES ROAD TRIP

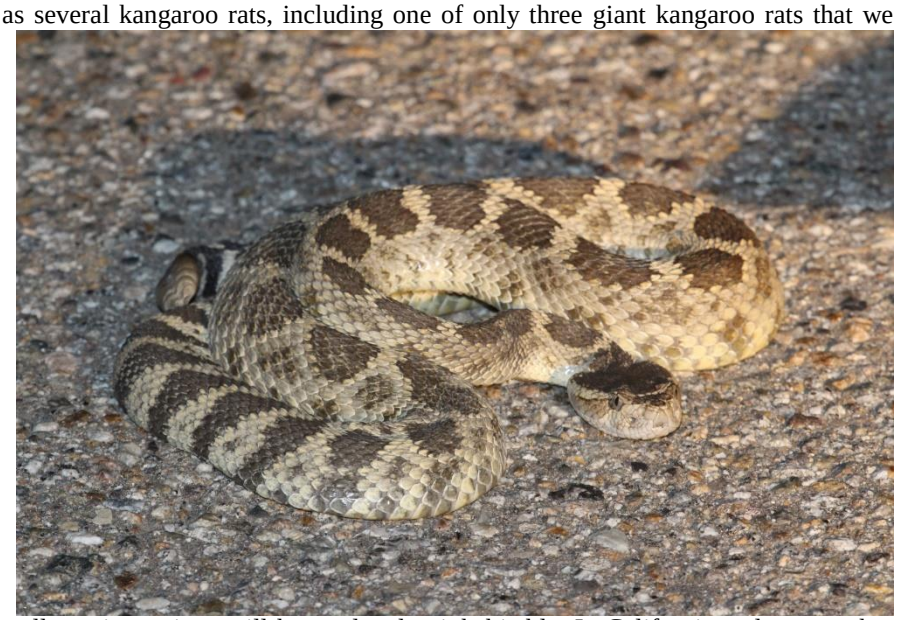
Date - May 2015

Duration - 21 Days

Destinations
Los Angeles - Los Padres National Forest - Carrizo Plain National Monument - Ventura - Channel Islands National Park - Santa Cruz Island - Joshua Tree National Park - Mojave Desert - Cibola National Wildlife Refuge - Seligman - Aubrey Valley - Sweetwater Wetlands Park - Tucson - Madera Canyon - Coronado National Forest - Chiricahua Mountains - Portal - El Paso - The Chihuahuan Desert - Carlsbad Caverns National Park - Rattlesnake Springs - Springer - Kiowa National Grasslands - Mills Canyon - Comanche National Grassland - Lamar - Zapata Ranch - San Luis Valley - Great Sand Dunes National Park - Mount Evans - Estes Park - Rocky Mountain National Park - Denver - Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge

Trip Overview

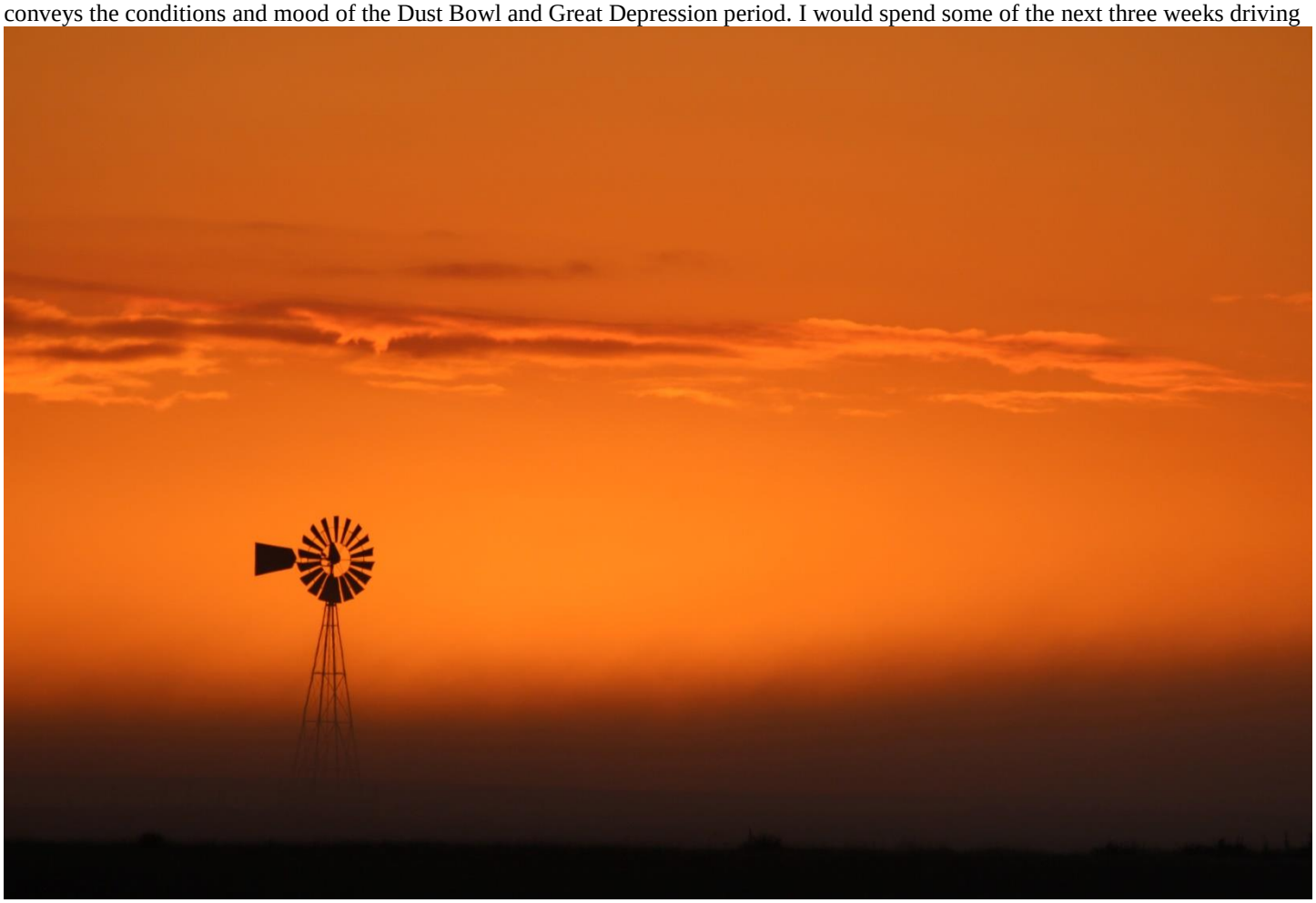
Having returned a year earlier for a brief but successful visit to Point Reyes, I have been intending to devote more time to the magnificent wildlife destinations of the United States and on this much longer trip I carefully selected a number of particular locations at which it would hopefully be possible to encounter one or more specific animals. Although there were of course various surprises throughout the trip, as well as a couple of major disappointments, most of the destinations, including a few that I had not previously visited, were highly productive and we enjoyed wonderful sightings of the vast majority of the species that I had either anticipated or at least hoped we would see. Once again I had my son James with me, who is fast becoming indispensable at night with a spotlight and just as proficient as a cameraman during the day, and I was able to photograph several species for my website, as I have not been in the United States a great deal since I switched to digital photography in late 2008 and consequently had very few pictures readily available of many of North America's most iconic species. I was able to rectify this to some degree in Canada in 2013 and whilst I missed a few shots on this trip that I was really hoping to take, equally, I was delighted to photograph an abundance of wildlife, including a couple of mammals that I had not seen before. Although it is a comparatively rare occurrence given the number of tours that I have been involved with over the years, it is always tremendously exciting to see a major species for the first time and I was fortunate that the new animals encountered also happened to involve two of the best and most relaxed sightings of the entire trip. Each of those encounters were on foot, but I knew that we were going to spend a great deal of time driving and that an off road vehicle was going to be essential in order to thoroughly explore some of the reserves that I had chosen, many of which had a number of trails only suitable for a 4x4 vehicle. This was an excellent decision, as we had the freedom to drive almost anywhere without restriction and the additional height that our jeep provided proved crucial on a number of occasions, both in terms of spotting and photographing wildlife. The extra space was also useful, as we would often spend most of the night spotlighting and the vehicle was perfect to grab some sleep in when it did not make sense to look for accommodation, the vast majority of which I had not booked in advance, simply to ensure that our rough itinerary could remain as flexible as possible. This was the case on our very first night, as we arrived in the dark and drove directly from the airport through Los Padres National Forest to Carrizo Plain National Monument, where we immediately started spotlighting for our initial target species, the kit fox. We did not have any success as far as the fox was concerned, but we did see a first coyote, as well as several kangaroo rats, including one of only three giant kangaroo rats that we would encounter during the entire trip. This was most worrying, as you would generally come across dozens of these distinctive rodents at Carrizo Plain, but the 'drought' that is having such a damaging effect in California and many other western states has ravaged their populations and it is now believed that 95% of these animals have been wiped out in less than five years. Depressingly, it does not look as if the situation is likely to improve, as this is not a drought in any normal sense of the word, but further evidence of the man-made climate change that continues to wreak havoc across the globe and will ultimately prove to be the most significant factor in humankind's continued survival or otherwise. While governments, corporations and a multitude of pressure groups and lobbyists continue to deny the reality of climate change purely to protect their own short-term interests, so, thousands of precious and unique species will be lost and eventually entire regions will be rendered uninhabitable. In California and many other areas across the planet, semi-arid grasslands are basically becoming deserts and countless animals are starving to death as a result. This is the case with the giant kangaroo rat and whilst it would be a tragedy in itself to lose such an endearing creature, the situation is far worse when you consider that this rodent is a keystone species and that a large variety of other animals rely on it as a food source. Coyotes, kit foxes, weasels, badgers, various raptors and even rattlesnakes all feed on this one species and its demise would have a profound effect on an already harsh and fragile ecosystem. For now this special animal somehow endures, however, based on my own experience and having discussed the situation with several locals, Carrizo Plain is clearly suffering and the number of large mammals in the area has certainly declined. Pronghorns were very scarce, we saw a few individuals and one small herd of seven, and the only other notable sighting, excluding one area with high concentrations of desert cottontails, California ground squirrels and San Joaquin antelope squirrels, was a timid coyote at distance. The proliferation of rattlesnakes, we encountered seven in less than two full days, did at least suggest that some rodent species were still thriving and at night the two smaller kangaroo rat species that occur here were reasonably common. Kit foxes, however, were not and it looked as if we might struggle to find our main target at Carrizo Plain until I discovered some tracks and made the slightly ludicrous decision to begin following them. I must admit that I did not have a great deal of confidence in being able to track a fox in such an open area, as these somewhat unpredictable animals can cover a large range fairly



quickly and there were so many prints crisscrossing each other that it was difficult to follow one clear path. We spent more than three hours trying and just as we were about to give up, the trail led to what appeared to be an active den. Partly because we had been traipsing about in the area for a long time and also partly because it was still a hot afternoon, we decided to leave the den immediately and to return just before dusk, when the inhabitants were more likely to be active. This almost worked perfectly, but unfortunately we disturbed a fox just before we reached the actual den and although it did not appear to be that nervous, it departed more or less instantly and we had to make do with a quick glimpse of it looking back at us from just beyond a wire fence. We saw another fox later that evening whilst spotlighting and the next morning we rectified our mistake and returned rather more circumspectly to the den area, where we were quickly rewarded with superb views of two adult foxes, there were no obvious young, relaxing around the entrance to their home and under some old farm machinery. As per the photograph at the very top of this report, both foxes were clearly aware of our presence, but they did not appear to be at all concerned and we enjoyed a wonderfully relaxed hour in their company. The rest of the day was not quite as sedate, as I had to drive to Ventura in order to take a boat to Santa Cruz Island the next morning and decided that we would explore a little more of Los Padres National Forest on the way. We had several hours to spare and the rather loose initial plan was to drive up to the higher elevations of coniferous forest and to take a suitable hiking trail among the pines, as Los Padres includes over 1,200 miles of well maintained trails. With so much choice, you would have thought that it was a fairly simple task for us to pick one path, but the opposite was actually the case and we eventually found ourselves at the summit of that particular section with no obvious walking trails in sight. At this point the plan was revised, but instead of making the only sensible decision and driving back the way we had come, I decided to take our vehicle down the other side of the mountain on what appeared to be a four-wheel drive track. The terrain was incredibly steep and as we tottered downhill over rocks and fallen trees at a highly irregular angle, I remarked to James that the trail 'had better be accessible all the way to the bottom, as there is no way we will ever get back up'. We both laughed of course, but we stopped laughing a few minutes later when we saw an old fallen sign stating that the mountain track that I had so intelligently chosen to descend upon, was in fact only suitable for trail bikes. No matter, there was no way that we could possibly get back up, so we would go on and hope that our rather inadequate dirt track would suddenly converge with something far more appropriate. As is so often the case, it was a forlorn hope and almost immediately we found our narrow passage completely blocked by a much larger fallen tree. There was no room to turn on either side of the path and I had to reverse more than a hundred metres uphill just to find sufficient space in order to turn around without sliding off the edge of the mountain. In a normal safari jeep I would have been confident of making the summit again, but, even given that we were now at least facing the right direction, I did not think that a hire jeep would make it, as they are not generally the most robust of 4x4 vehicles. As it was, I told James to hold on tight and that we were going to try and make it in one go without stopping, which we almost achieved until we reached one extremely steep section and I had to change direction slightly and slowly grind our way up. I still have absolutely no idea how we made it in one piece, but James was grinning from ear to ear as we finally pulled over the last slope and at least we knew exactly what our car was capable of for the rest of the trip, although I can certainly think of less stressful ways of finding out. Thankfully, the rest of the day was far less eventful and when we did finally manage to take a hike at Los Padres, we encountered our only western grey squirrel of the trip, which was at least something to show for our not inconsiderable efforts. Although I generally look forward to every single moment of these tours, I was particularly excited when we reached Ventura that evening and not only because it did not look as if either of us was going to make it earlier in the day. The real reason was because I knew that the next morning I would have the opportunity to search for an animal that I had never seen before, which is a comparatively rare privilege for me these days. That the animal was an island fox, one of the few canid species that has eluded me to date, just further increased the anticipation, as I love dogs and have always relished the prospect of attempting to find all 35 species across the globe. Eluded me is actually the wrong phrase in many ways, as the only reason that I have not seen this animal previously, is almost entirely due to the fact that I have spent very little time on the eight California Channel Islands, five of which form the Channel Islands National Park. The diminutive fox, and it really is very small, can only be found on six of these eight islands and although I did visit one of them, Santa Catalina, several years ago, I was really only assessing the activities and accommodation available there and did not get a great deal further than the famous harbour city of Avalon. I did make a point of

photographing the introduced bison population, as I have long been interested in this animal and in any attempts to reintroduce it across much of its former range. As I maintain is also the case with wolves, I believe that free and sustainable bison populations are inextricably linked to the environmental health of the entire continent and that the ecosystems of North America will remain unbalanced and incomplete until the seemingly endless Great Plains are once again adorned by huge herds of these majestic and ecologically significant animals. It is almost certainly a futile dream of course, but I had ensured that bison would feature later on in the trip and for now it was time to take the short voyage to Santa Cruz Island, which is the most visited island of the five within the national park and consequently the easiest on which to see the fox. The cruise itself had the potential to be a productive marine safari in its own right, as several whale and dolphin species, including humpback whales and blue whales, are seen in these waters and I was slightly disappointed to only encounter a small pod of California sea lions. Any dissatisfaction quickly evaporated however, when we came face to face with our first island fox, which was completely unconcerned by our presence, as it foraged for scraps at one of the island's camp sites. We spent around an hour following this individual and over the course of the day we savoured extended periods with a further five foxes, three within close proximity of the two main campgrounds and two more on trails, one of which ran down to the beach. It is interesting to note, albeit rather obvious when you stop to consider their geographical isolation, that a different subspecies occurs on each of the six islands and that the foxes of Santa Cruz Island are the smallest of all six. According to the park literature, they are approximately a third smaller than the grey fox, their nearest mainland relative, and are therefore about the same size as a domestic cat. That said, they are almost certainly less aggressive than your average pussy cat and, having watched them hoovering up crumbs and rummaging for tiny insects, it is difficult to believe that they are even classified as carnivores, let alone predators. The fact that they were almost exterminated by golden eagles probably tells us all that we need to know in terms of their survival capabilities, as they were never exposed to predators until the indiscriminate spraying of the DDT insecticide wiped out all of the bald eagles living on the Channel Islands and the golden eagles were able to occupy their territory. Whereas bald eagles eat fish and sea

birds and were able to stop other eagles nesting on the islands, golden eagles had no such sensibilities and were quickly eating the defenceless foxes into extinction. It was only the removal of many of the golden eagles and the reintroduction of bald eagles, in combination with captive breeding programmes and extensive vaccinations against canine distemper and rabies, that ultimately saved the day and from a low of around 200 foxes in 2000, there are now well over 6,000 adults. This is a success story of sorts for sure, but, as I will touch upon later in this report, it is a tragedy that we once again disturbed the natural harmony of an entire ecosystem to such a disastrous extent and the absolute catastrophe is that we never appear to learn from the calamitous mistakes of our past. While one federal department dictates that a tiny little fox will be spared, another government agency announces that they will allow drilling to recommence in the Arctic and thus we stumble on as a species from one unmitigated disaster to another. If anyone is unsure of how much damage we can cause simply as a result of unadulterated ignorance and gross stupidity, I would urge them to watch the documentary Dust Bowl, which was directed by the great American filmmaker Ken Burns. Ken Burns has made several riveting documentaries that I will later recommend and this one highlights the appalling and uncontrolled farming practices that turned one of the most fertile areas of the United States into a barren wasteland and consequently created 'The Largest Manmade Ecological Disaster In History'. Given that Ken Burns is not known for his hyperbole, that tagline may well belong to a marketing executive, especially taking into account the strong competition in terms of purely manufactured environmental disasters, of which there have been too many to elucidate over the centuries. It must be said that the Chinese strategy to eliminate the four pests, the mosquito, the fly, the rat and the sparrow, during the Great Leap Forward was particularly inspired and there can be no doubt that it was certainly effective, although perhaps not entirely in the way that the Communist Party had hoped when Chairman Mao first instigated the policy in 1958. The theory was that as sparrows eat seeds, the people would have more food if there were no sparrows, which of course makes total sense until you suddenly remember that sparrows eat other things as well, like insects. By the time the great and the good realised this, millions of sparrows were already dead and locust populations were out of control, destroying vast areas of crops and exacerbating the problems that the terrible farming practices of the Great Leap Forward had already caused. The net result was the Great Chinese Famine, during which between 20 and 40 million people starved to death in less than four years. As a perfect accompaniment to the Ken Burns piece, I would also suggest the John Steinbeck novel The Grapes of Wrath, which brilliantly conveys the conditions and mood of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression period. I would spend some of the next three weeks driving



across part of the Great Plains, but I would be reversing the journey made by so many migrants of the Depression era, as their ultimate goal was California and I was now travelling in the opposite direction towards Arizona. Our last destination in California was the simply stunning Joshua Tree National Park, which I have visited many times previously and wanted to show James. After driving from Ventura the preceding evening, we only had a few hours to explore the park and therefore made a point of entering before first light. After driving some of the more scenic roads, I decided to take a less traversed 4x4 trail, but we did not have sufficient time to do the park justice and the main highlight, apart from the exquisite joshua trees themselves and the spellbinding Mojave Desert, was a couple of white-tailed antelope squirrels. Our next stop would be Cibola National Wildlife Refuge, which I had been reliably informed was a good spot for a variety of animals, including bobcats. As it was, the refuge was clearly undergoing a fairly major development and whilst there was no actual construction work during our brief visit, there had obviously been a great deal of recent disturbance and the visitor centre and trails were not in good condition. Not surprisingly, we did not enjoy a great deal of success and our daylight drive of around five hours produced just one female mule deer and a few black-tailed jackrabbits. The night did not begin that promisingly either, as some fishermen, the reserve sits directly on the Colorado River, lit a fire on one of the main spotlighting paths and it would be fair to suggest that, by this stage, James and I both felt that we were probably wasting our time. We avoided the fishermen for several hours, but, having exhausted all of our other options, I eventually decided to try the road they were fishing

along, undoubtedly more in hope than expectation. I had only driven maybe 200 metres past them, when I saw what appeared to be a cat on the left hand side of the road and immediately called out ‘bobcat’, principally because that was the cat I had expected to encounter at this reserve. This bobcat, however, had a very long tail and we both quickly realised that we were watching a puma. I had no easy way of taking a photograph as I was driving, but I pulled over while James tracked the magnificent animal with our spotlight and we both watched in admiration as it calmly crossed the road maybe fifteen metres ahead of us. Having retrieved my camera, I desperately hoped that it would stop to enable me to exit and to at least take a quick reference shot, but it continued on its way and all too soon disappeared into the darkness. We were both left breathless, as it is always a fantastic honour to spend time with these incredible creatures, but to see one in America is even more thrilling, as they are far easier to observe in South America and indeed I have lost count of how many pumas I have encountered across several southern hemisphere countries. We searched for it again of course, but our special moment had passed and we would have to be satisfied with the unforgettable memory of an exceptional experience. By way of compensation, not that we really needed any, we did see our only desert kangaroo rat of the trip, as well as two coyotes, which broke cover just as the first rays of sunlight appeared. They trotted down the road side by side in the glorious early morning light with a dainty infectious bounce that somehow mirrored our own high spirits, as we prepared to head north into Arizona

for the next stage of our adventure. Sadly, but almost inevitably on a tour incorporating so many specific and generally elusive objectives, we were due a failure, which accordingly arrived at the small town of Seligman on the famous Route 66, which at one time was probably the most famous road in America, but no longer actually exists. Replaced by a number of Interstate Highways in 1985, the original Route 66 stretched almost 2,500 miles from Chicago to Santa Monica and was, coincidentally, the road that millions of itinerant workers used to reach the Promised Land of California during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The famous ‘Get Your Kicks on Route 66’ song aside, all that remains is a modern marketing campaign encouraging prospective travellers to visit ‘Historic Route 66’, plus the usual collection of anonymous motels and cheap tourist attractions, which possess at best, a highly tenuous connection to the historic road. Seligman itself offers a few of these featureless motels, but ours was perfectly comfortable and, in any case, we would be spending the majority of our time to the west in Aubrey Valley. Although there is a great deal of wildlife in that area, our absolute priority was to find and hopefully photograph a black-footed ferret, a creature that was declared extinct in 1979, following the systematic eradication of the prairie dog over almost 100% of its range. Prairie dogs are the main food source of the ferret, and the two species coexisted harmoniously on the Great Plains for millennia until the cattlemen arrived and began exterminating basically everything that was not a cow. Initially they killed all the predators, which of course had controlled the prairie dog numbers, and then they killed all the bison and most of the pronghorn, which were also thought to keep prairie dog populations in check, as they competed for the same land. Ultimately, only prairie dogs remained and the ‘towns’ in which they live grew unimpeded, often extending for miles and containing literally millions of these social burrowing rodents. Then of course it was their turn and an incalculable number of prairie dogs were slaughtered, many by indiscriminate poisoning. These and a succession of other equally hapless and repugnant federal wildlife management policies have cost the citizens of both the United States and Canada billions of

dollars over the years and yet we have still not learned that it is necessary to live in harmony with the natural world and that wild animals are, by their very design, the most important guardians of any wilderness area. Fortunately for the ferrets, two years after they were proclaimed extinct, a tiny population was discovered on a farm in Wyoming and eventually a captive breeding programme was started with the last eighteen surviving animals. This has been largely successful and although there are obviously no absolutely wild populations remaining, the ferrets that have been reintroduced at several key sites are breeding successfully and it is thought that there are now over 1,000 surviving in the wild. So the ferrets are 'good' again and will thankfully be saved, but the prairie dogs sadly are still 'bad' and are classified as pests, which means that it is acceptable for brave men, women and children, with telescopic scopes, high powered rifles and even machine guns, to shoot them for fun. These myriad contradictions from area to area and species to species are illogical and often more than a little disturbing. The Arizona Game and Fish Department, for example, have played a vital role in saving the black-footed ferret from extinction. As commendable as this initiative undoubtedly is, on their website they have a multitude of pages devoted entirely to hunting and are happy to promote the hunting and trapping of almost 50 different species, including puma, bobcat and black bear. The ferrets that they have helped save are of course mustelids, but so are the long-tailed weasels, American badgers and North American river otters that they are selling hunting licences for and are actively encouraging people to kill. Free licences are available for those hunters who 'introduce a friend, neighbour, relative or co-worker to the traditions and importance of hunting' and 'a person under 10 may hunt wildlife other than big game without a licence when accompanied by a properly licensed person 18 years or older'. So, in Arizona at least, you do not need to have a licence or to have even reached the age of ten in order to begin killing animals, just as long as you are chaperoned by a pathological friend or relative who already relishes the prospect of shooting defenceless creatures. I actually thought that I must have read that last regulation incorrectly, until I saw the next one regarding the reduced fee Honorary Scout hunting licence for 'Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts who have reached the highest level of their organization'. Talk about indoctrinating the next generation as early as possible, as telling children that if they excel at something they can kill a helpless animal for $5 instead of $37 as a reward, is almost as reprehensible as closing schools on the first day of the hunting season, a practice that has occurred in many parts of North America for decades. As I have written before, whilst poaching and crimes against nature occur all over the world, in both the United States and Canada these crimes are not only sanctioned by federal governments, they are exploited by them for either financial or political profit. The system is as corrupt in North America as it is in so many African countries that Americans shake their heads at in exasperation, but it is just more skilfully concealed. Although these and similar concerns dominate a lot of my time in the UK, and certain sections of most of my tours are devoted to a particular conservation project or initiative that I want to support, in general I rarely let these issues trouble me when I am in the field, as I prefer

to concentrate my thoughts and efforts on the unforgettable and uplifting moments that I am so privileged to experience. These trip reports and other aspects of my life provide me with an opportunity to reflect and to highlight issues and injustices that I believe are important to us as a society, but I do not begin writing them or even preparing them while I am on tour, as my time away is far too precious and I instead choose to immerse myself in the natural wonders that greet me whenever my mind is open enough to appreciate them. Our stay at Aubrey Valley was a wonderful example of this, as we never did see a ferret, which could have easily ruined our visit, but the area was clearly a superb one for wildlife and our patience was amply rewarded with some marvellous encounters. Gunnison's prairie dogs, the black-footed ferrets meal of choice, were the most visible mammals and we spent several extended periods enjoying their amusing and highly social behaviour. Occasionally we would have to look twice at a burrow, as you expect to see a prairie dog staring back at you, only to notice that it is actually a burrowing owl, which have a rather unique demeanour and are also extremely comical in their own way. Black-tailed jackrabbits were fairly common, particularly in one meadow where they were decidedly cooperative in terms of posing for photographs, and we were also rather fortunate with a magnificent greater roadrunner, which tarried long enough to display its effervescent tail feathers, shimmering resplendently as they caught the sun at just the right

angle. We managed to get closer to some pronghorns than had previously been the case, although the best sightings of these ancient plains animals would come later in the trip, and at night two coyotes and a handful of ord's kangaroo rats were almost all that we had to show for around twenty hours spotlighting. I say almost, because our efforts at Aubrey Valley again perfectly demonstrate the rather random nature of what we do and how the mood of an evening or even an entire trip, can change in just a few seconds. In truth, the nights here were extremely testing, as not only were we not successful in terms of finding the ferret, we were seeing almost nothing for hours at a time. Things appeared to get even worse on our last night, when we finally spotted a badger and our initial delight turned to horror as it took one look at us and instantly fled. It now seemed almost inconceivable that anything could be salvaged from such an unproductive and basically miserable session until James miraculously illuminated a different badger and this one allowed us to approach quietly and slowly until we were standing within about five metres of it. It was as good a badger encounter as you could hope to experience, certainly in terms of a nocturnal sighting, and although it was not the target species that we had originally hoped to see, it was still an amazingly intimate view of an exceptionally beautiful animal. In any case, when we return we will stay longer to ensure that we are not disappointed again, as this was always planned as a fairly intensive research trip and I could not therefore spend as long as I would generally prefer at each destination. We were also slightly unfortunate in that I had arranged to spend an evening searching with one of the Arizona Game and Fish Department employees, who has worked on the ferret recovery project for a number of years and has an excellent record of showing visitors this rare animal. Sadly, she was called away at the last minute and the loss of her expertise was probably the determining factor in our lack of success, as you simply cannot replace that level of local knowledge. I hope to catch up with her next time and meanwhile we moved on to the next leg of our journey in Southern Arizona and a brief stop at Sweetwater Wetlands Park, a water treatment facility and urban wildlife reserve in Tucson. We arrived late in the afternoon after a long drive, but within about ten minutes of our arrival, we were watching a remarkably calm bobcat stalking rabbits and all of the frustration of the previous two days was instantly forgotten. This was one of my great bobcat sightings, as the animal was extraordinarily relaxed and allowed us to basically shadow it at a distance of often no more than five metres for well over an hour. At one stage it sat down within about two metres of us and we instantly sat down as well, in order not to

disturb it, if that was even possible given its incredible temperament. As agonising as the decision was, we eventually decided to actively stop following it, as it was a young cat and was obviously attempting to hunt. We reasoned that whilst we were not distressing it at all, we were almost certainly disturbing the rabbits it was trying to stalk and that it would have more success without our presence. Having made such a tough call, we went on to explore the rest of the reserve only to walk straight into it again half an hour later, when we turned a corner and found it sitting in the middle of the trail. Once again we left it to hunt undisturbed, as it had already been an outstanding experience and we were more than satisfied with one of the most memorable sightings of this or any other trip. It was getting dark as we eventually left the reserve and although we arrived at our comfortable accommodation in Madera Canyon fairly late, we grabbed our spotlights and went out exploring. Our enthusiasm was more or less instantly rewarded with our first white-tailed deer and antelope jackrabbit encounters of the tour, as well as good views of both merriam's and banner-tailed kangaroo rats. The next morning Arizona grey squirrels and rock squirrels were raiding the many bird feeders directly outside our room and on our early morning hike we had excellent views of more white-tailed deer, they were very common in this area, as well as a close look at what I think was an eastern patch-nosed snake. We visited another lodge with even more bird feeders further down the valley and were treated to an impressive display of hummingbirds, woodpeckers, flickers, jays and even a few wild turkeys. Rock squirrels were again present and as I was photographing one, I noticed a couple of yellow-nosed cotton rats foraging under the feeders. The two rodents ate in close proximity for some time, apparently oblivious to each other, when suddenly the rock squirrel launched itself at one of the cotton rats and killed it with a powerful bite to the back of the neck and two or three violent shakes. Although I was aware that rock squirrels were opportunistic feeders, and would accordingly scavenge birds eggs and carrion when available, I had no idea that they would actively hunt in this manner and was fairly shocked to see the very sweet little rat killed directly in front of us. I certainly did not view rock squirrels in quite the same way for the rest of the trip, but, despite my sympathy for the rat, it was fascinating to witness this type of natural event and I was ultimately left wondering whether this was normal behaviour or whether we had experienced some kind of aberration. At our next lodge, which was around 150km further east, we watched the same two species feeding side by side for extended periods without any indication of this type of predator/prey relationship and the availability of food could not have been the main determining factor, as both properties had a large number of bird feeders and there was clearly a surfeit of food at each. Possibly

protein was harder to come by at the first lodge or perhaps this behaviour is far more common than I was aware. Either way, the entire event was absorbing and was probably the highlight, in a rather macabre way, of what was a fairly disappointing short stay at Madera Canyon, certainly in terms of what we saw in comparison to the animals that are routinely encountered here. Several skunk species, white-nosed coati, collared peccary, ringtail and black bear were all real possibilities in the areas that we searched, indeed all of them have been viewed within the grounds of our lodge, but we did not encounter any and had only a brief view of two harris's antelope squirrels to show for several hours exploring Box Canyon. Excluding the multitude of relatively tame white-tailed deer, the adjacent Coronado National Forest was similarly tough and puma tracks, they are considerably larger than bobcat prints and were the wrong shape to be a jaguar, were the best that we could do in almost another full day. Our run here was so bad that the owner of our lodge, who was extremely helpful and had a more than decent knowledge of the local wildlife, suggested that we visit his friend in Green Valley on the day that we were due to leave, as collared peccaries, or javelinas as they are known locally, are frequent visitors to his garden and can often be found sheltering under his trees in the heat of the afternoon. We of course jumped at the opportunity, but our luck was just out here and the peccaries did not turn up. No matter, our host was extremely generous with his time and took us on a jeep safari around his local area, where he often sees deer, coyote, jackrabbit and once, amazingly, a jaguarundi. The afternoon was a lot of fun, and we had a great shake at a local diner, but we were visiting during the hottest part of the day and consequently did not observe any of the animals that he was so used to seeing. As I have stated on more occasions than I can remember, you get runs like this and the only real answer is to move on and try your luck elsewhere, which is exactly what we did, with immediate and gratifying results.

Our next destination was Cave Creek Canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains and within twenty minutes of our arrival we were watching two striped skunks, having already passed a large number of white-tailed deer, which were even more tame here and would walk around the guests during the day. We observed four or five different striped skunks on that first evening, as well as a hooded skunk and I was fairly hopeful that we may also encounter a western spotted skunk or an American hog-nosed skunk, as all four species can be found in this area and even on this one property. In a way, we actually did see the western spotted skunk the following

night, but certainly not as we had hoped, as I spotted a decapitated head at the side of the road whilst we were spotlighting between our lodge and the tiny town of Portal and on closer inspection identified it as the head of the distinctive western spotted skunk. There was no sign of the guilty predator, but there was quite a lot of blood around and the head had clearly been ripped off, so I was fairly certain that this was the work of another animal and that the skunk had not been hit by a vehicle, although it is of course possible that it was killed by a car and then eaten. That rather gory discovery aside, this was one of my favourite destinations of the trip and I would have liked to have spent much longer at what felt like a little slice of paradise absolutely brimming with wildlife. We were visiting in early June and both jaguarundi and puma had been spotted on the premises during the previous two weeks and I was informed by the exceedingly helpful and enthusiastic owner, that black bears were also relatively common, although less so since the

bird feeders were taken down at night to avoid the hungry bears trashing them. The lodge itself sits on several acres of productive land and whilst we spent a great deal of time exploring the surrounding area, including the Chiricahua National Monument, within another section of the sprawling Coronado National Forest, most of our sightings occurred in or around the grounds of our accommodation. That said, we did not have any luck with three probable species, white-nosed coati, ringtail or black bear and although I was not that concerned about the ringtail or black bear, as I knew that we had better chances of seeing these animals elsewhere, I was sorry to miss out on the coati, as these are a particular favourite of ours and we were not to see them on this trip. We did encounter both species of skunk again the next evening, as well as our only grey fox of the tour, which was spotted just beyond the entrance to the property on the road to Portal. We were actually slightly unfortunate with this animal, as it crossed the road and disappeared into the vegetation without lingering, while other guests saw it walking casually past them within a few metres of their rooms. Ironically, we observed five different foxes during our three-week trip and this relatively common species was the only one that I did not get some sort of photograph of. It probably goes without saying that we would have almost certainly enjoyed more success if we had stayed longer, but the additional skunk and fox species had already made the visit worthwhile and during the day we had superb views of cliff chipmunk, Mexican fox squirrel and once again rock squirrels and yellow-nosed cotton rats dining side by side, as opposed to on each other. We also finally caught up with the collared peccaries, as a herd ran through Portal just as we were arriving to eat early one evening and we were able to catch a quick but reasonable glimpse of the last four or five crossing. Throughout the trip we observed several bat species flying, but I cannot identify the majority of them on the wing and the only one that we got really close to was a western pipistrelle, now known as a canyon bat I believe, that I found on the floor at this lodge. It was obviously ill, but it was able to roost when I placed it in a tree for safety and when I checked it later that evening it had departed, hopefully under its own volition and not inside something else. Given that we missed the black-footed ferret, which was really one of our principal targets, the Arizona section of the tour could not be classified as entirely successful. However, any visit that includes puma and bobcat sightings, cannot be described as a failure either and from a research perspective, this leg of the trip had been extremely constructive. We now

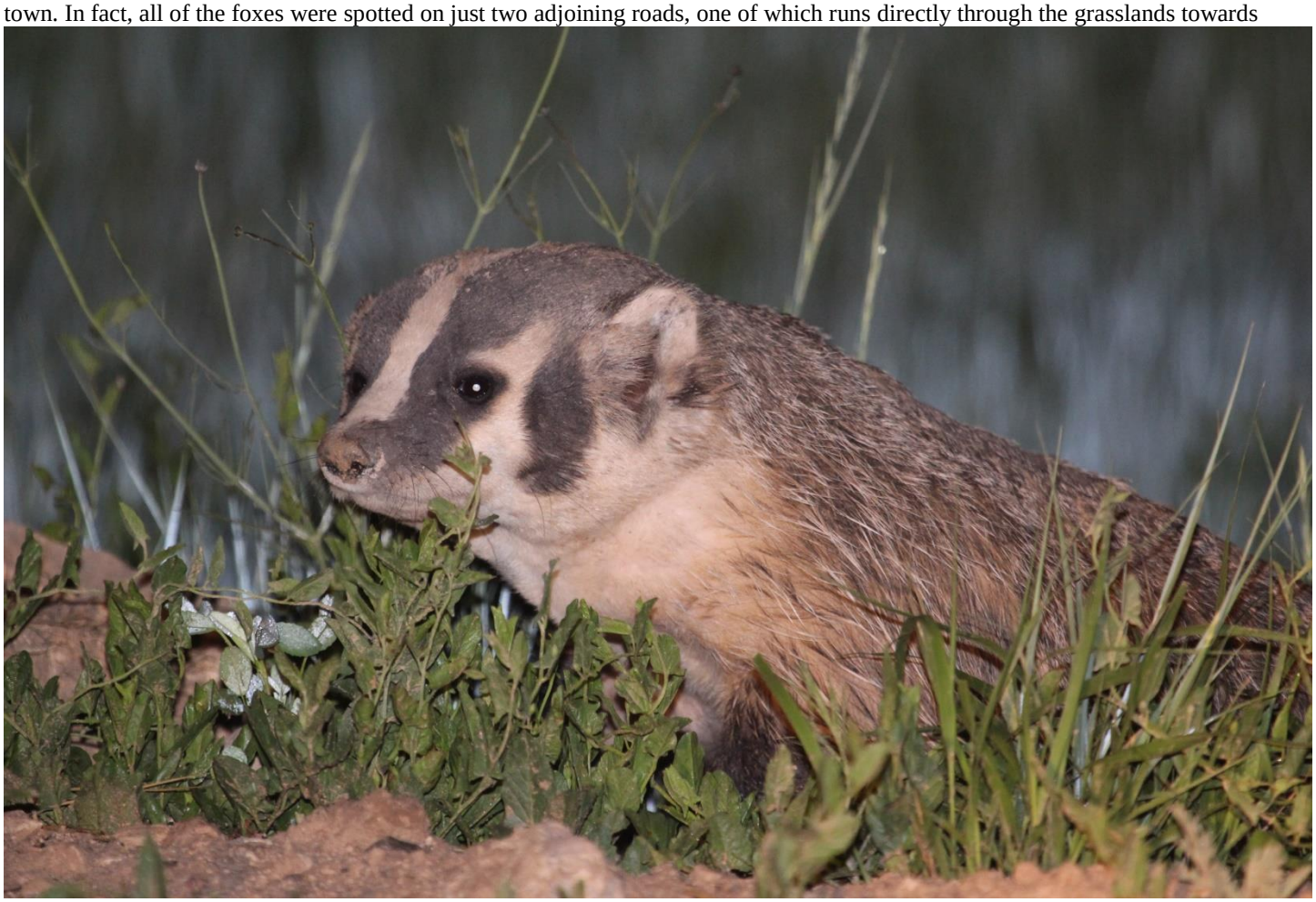
had to move on for a short section in New Mexico with two specific targets, ringtail at Carlsbad Caverns National Park and swift fox at the Kiowa National Grasslands near Springer. The drive to Carlsbad was a long one and involved a detour into Texas and a sixty-mile stretch without any services, which I was not aware of until I had run out of gas about ten miles from the end of it. Fortunately, I had just been pulled over for speeding, I was desperately trying to make it to the next town more or less on fumes, and instead of giving me a ticket, the two officers very kindly gave us a lift to pick up some fuel. Set in the Chihuahuan Desert, which extends over three states, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, as well as much further south into Mexico, Carlsbad Caverns, as the name suggests, is largely famous for the vast labyrinth of caves and passages that stretch an astounding 120 miles and to a depth of almost 500 metres. Over 100 distinct caves have been discovered to date and three of these are accessible for the public to explore, which does mean that

the two self-guided subterranean trails can become rather busy. The large crowds would not trouble us a great deal, as our initial plan was to explore the road into the park and the 9.5 mile Walnut Canyon Desert Drive loop road, in order to search for barbary sheep, which were introduced in the 1940s for hunting purposes after the native bighorn sheep had been wiped out by, as you can no doubt guess, overhunting. The barbary sheep were not a huge priority for us, but it would have been really nice to see them, particularly as the geniuses at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, who have probably been responsible for more wildlife atrocities over the years than any organisation other than the British government, are talking about exterminating them in order to reintroduce the bighorn sheep that they oversaw the annihilation of decades ago. Sadly, we did not get a great opportunity to look for the sheep, as the Walnut Canyon road was closed for some unknown reason and we would only get time for a long hike if we failed to see the ringtails instantly and had to spend more than one night in the area, which I was not expecting to be the case. Ringtails are of course nocturnal and while we waited for it to get dark, we joined the bat programme led by a member of the national park staff, which consisted of a reasonably interesting lecture, followed by the staggering sight of tens of thousands of Brazilian free-tailed bats exiting the caves. It was quite a spectacle and the only downside was the number of people who attended, as hundreds of cars would now be leaving the park on the very road that we wanted to look for the ringtail on. We therefore decided to

take the short drive to Rattlesnake Springs, which is on another site, but is actually part of the same national park, in order to allow everyone to leave and for the area to quieten down. This worked perfectly, as we saw the first two raccoons of the trip at Rattlesnake Springs and when we returned, the entrance road leading to the public caves was completely deserted. With our black-footed ferret debacle still fresh in my mind, I joked to James that this new species was unlikely to be as easy as the island fox and that we were going to need some good fortune. Whether we got any or not I remain unsure, as I had been informed that ringtails are routinely observed here and within an hour we had encountered five, including two together that I was able to photograph. The fact that the pictures were not great was of no consequence, as we were both just thrilled to have seen such a delightful new animal. None of the five were what you would call curious, not in the way that some small carnivores are when approached by people, but they were not nervous either and we were able to get within a few metres of one on foot without alarming it. After the initial hour we decided to leave, at least temporarily, as I had spotted a raccoon at the entrance to the park and we thought that it made sense to give the ringtails a break while we searched for another of our favourite animals. As it was, we barely had to search, as there was a restaurant just beyond the park and we found three raccoons happily tucking into the former contents of the rubbish bins. They were more skittish than the ringtails, but it was interesting to note that we found both animals living in such close proximity, as they belong to the same procyonidae family of small carnivores, which also includes coatis, olingos and kinkajous. This was the only occasion that we would

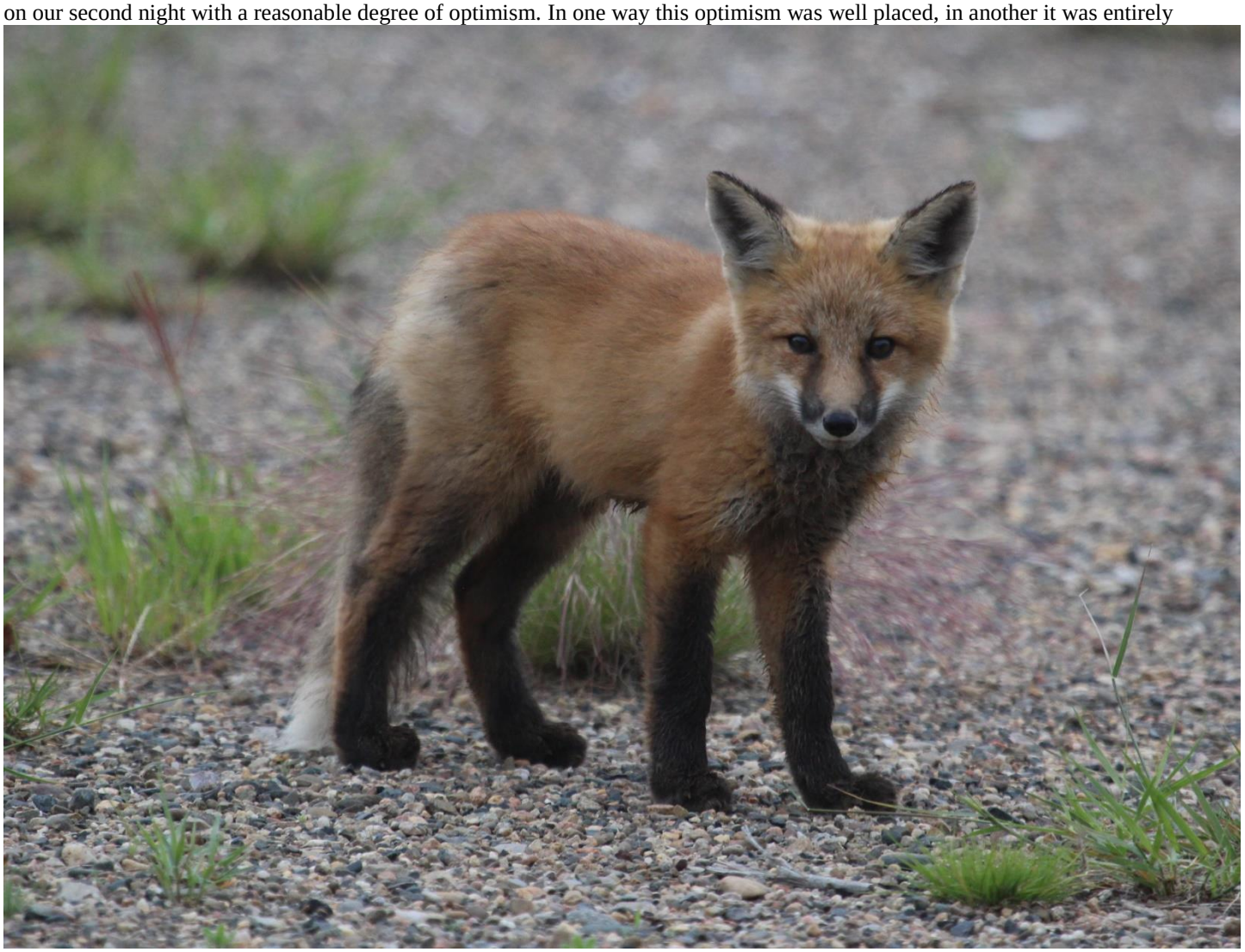
see either animal on the trip and before we moved on, we returned to the park for hopefully one last look at a ringtail. As this was going to be our final chance, we had a lengthy conversation regarding how exactly we were going to proceed, which James calmly interrupted to inform me that there was a ringtail watching us from a tree more or less next to the car and that perhaps we should concentrate on that one. It is not that often that the wildlife finds you, as opposed to you finding the wildlife, but it is a lovely bonus and indeed the ringtail appeared to have climbed the tree specifically to see what we were up to. So much for them not being overly curious, as it barely moved for the utterly enthralling twenty minutes that we spent fixated on it and only climbed down as we returned to the vehicle to leave. Having been successful relatively early, it was just past midnight when we arrived at our hotel in Carlsbad, we had the rare luxury of a decent night's sleep before the long transfer north across almost the entire state to Springer, an unexceptional town, but the gateway to the Kiowa National Grasslands and a healthy population of swift foxes. Several of the drives on this trip could only be described as spectacular, but this one was more memorable than most, as we passed through more than 300 miles of largely outstanding scenery and were constantly pulling over to photograph either the gorgeous landscapes or the many pronghorn that adorned them. At one stage, after some rain in the distance and a storm approaching, a double rainbow appeared and we again stopped to admire what was becoming an increasingly dramatic scene with dark storm clouds gathering all around us. Initially we were discussing attempting to reach Springer before the storm hit, but when it did, it was so violent and so compelling, that we deliberately drove straight through town, deeper into the heart of the tempest. By this stage forked lighting was flashing all around us and whilst I have witnessed a lot of ferocious weather over the years, and have always smiled at the 'storm chasers' who basically live to reach the very centre of the worst possible storms, on this occasion I could appreciate their obsession. The atmosphere was electrifying and the rain was so torrential that my visibility had been reduced to zero and the dirt road that I had taken in order to travel in the same direction as the storm, was rapidly flooding. It was no longer safe to drive and I therefore parked up on some slightly higher ground and we watched the rest of the action pass overhead, mindful that it is

of course a myth that rubber tyres protect you from lighting strikes. It is actually the metal cage of the car that conducts the lighting away from the passengers and into the ground and it therefore makes a lot of sense not to be holding metal objects, mobile phones and cameras immediately come to mind, whilst watching a storm from a vehicle. Once we had stopped driving, this one rolled over in just a few minutes and although lighting continued to illuminate the horizon for several hours, the ground had been so dry that the surface water had practically disappeared within about half an hour. In that time we had already observed the first of seventeen swift foxes encountered over two nights around Springer and the Kiowa National Grasslands, which were located less than twenty miles east of town. In fact, all of the foxes were spotted on just two adjoining roads, one of which runs directly through the grasslands towards



Mills Canyon, another excellent wildlife area. In addition to a large number of cottontails, jackrabbits and kangaroo rats, as well as a few elk and a single coyote, the canyon and approach road provided us with another two major highlights, the first of which was a second extended American badger sighting and a third in all. The badger was not appreciably nervous, but it was definitely aware of our presence and whenever we moved a little too quickly or shone the light slightly too close, it would freeze as only mammals can and hope that would work as a defence mechanism. This charade played out on several occasions, with the badger coming to a complete stop for maybe two minutes at a time, before totally forgetting about us and shuffling on as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. As is always the case with these beguiling creatures, it was another wonderful encounter and as we watched it trundle off into the night, I noticed a small reptile moving slowly through the grass. At first I thought that it might be a young gila monster, probably because I had been hoping to see this extraordinary reptile since we arrived, but as it emerged from the vegetation, I could clearly see that it was actually a tiger salamander, another extremely elusive reptile that had been right at the top of my wish list for

the trip. Largely because they live in deep burrows, and also because they are strictly nocturnal, tiger salamanders are notoriously difficult to observe in the wild and we had probably only seen this one as a result of the earlier storm, as they generally await heavy rains before migrating to a pool where they will breed. Ironically, given the number observed and the success that I was having photographing other rare species, I was not able to take a decent photograph of a swift fox. I did get some reasonable reference pictures, but nothing that I was happy with or could use in this report. The main issue was that I was driving and that we never benefited from that one easy, or at least achievable, opportunity that you rely on when spotlighting in a vehicle. We really needed to find an animal on foot, as we were mainly spotting foxes at distance and the close ones would generally run as soon as I pulled over. The ideal scenario, as per the kit fox at Carrizo Plain, would be to find a den and I thought that we had when some locals suggested an area of derelict land back in town. Apparently foxes were seen on the property fairly frequently and we therefore staked the area out on our second night with a reasonable degree of optimism. In one way this optimism was well placed, in another it was entirely



inappropriate, as there were undoubtedly foxes present, a beautiful vixen and three adorably cute cubs, but they just happened to be entirely the wrong species and we were actually watching red foxes instead of swift foxes. We absolutely did not care of course, as red foxes have a special place in our hearts and we often watch them playing in our back garden, sometimes with a squeaky toy that our dopey dog has left out. Tragically, and despite the hunting with dogs ban, which the so called cream of our society are currently attempting to overturn, foxes have always been persecuted in the UK and it speaks volumes for the mentality of a succession of ineffectual British governments, that our largest surviving predator is officially classified as a pest. Having already eliminated our apex predators, wolf, bear and lynx all roamed these isles at one stage, the classification obviously suits farmers and wealthy landowners, as they can continue to slaughter these animals with impunity, largely to protect the invasive bird species that are introduced to this country simply to be shot for profit. However, if foxes are such serious pests, why were they imported from the continent in significant numbers during the late 19th century when overhunting and an acute outbreak of mange had severely depleted fox populations within the UK? The answer, of course, is that the aristocracy had nothing to hunt on horseback, as all of the other ‘chaseable’ animals were already extinct by that stage and in those enlightened times, they could no longer get away with running down serfs purely for recreational purposes. So, despite the fact that each fox will save an arable farmer around £900 in its lifetime, purely by controlling rabbit numbers, they are still treated as vermin and are killed indiscriminately, in much the same way that badgers now are, the only other relatively large carnivore remaining in this animal-loving country. We spend time watching both creatures back at home in England and we were so thrilled to see this beautiful family, that we returned the next morning to photograph them in the daylight. Fortunately they were visible again and I was able to take some decent shots of what was our fifth fox species of the trip and our sixth canid in all. I had managed to photograph four of the five foxes, but I still did not have a swift fox picture that I was happy with and I now had the dilemma of either spending another day and night around Springer, where I had already seen so many swift foxes, or moving on to visit what appeared to be an important conservation project that I had been hoping to fit into the schedule. The Southern Plains Land Trust was created in 1998 in order to purchase and conserve areas of shortgrass prairie in the vicinity of the Comanche National Grassland in southeast Colorado. They currently manage 8,000 acres and are hoping to increase the area protected to 10,000 acres by the end of this year. In normal circumstances, I would have automatically arranged to research such a significant and worthwhile initiative as part of the main tour programme, but on this occasion, despite an initial

correspondence with one of the trust directors, I had not been able to narrow down an exact date to visit. I was therefore aware that in reality, I would be making a 200-mile detour, more to research the area that the trust operates in, than to actually spend time learning about the project in detail and exploring one or more of their preserves. I still felt that this was probably worthwhile, as I have always been interested in the Great Plains, the vast sea of grass that runs 2,000 miles through the heart of the continent from southern Texas to the south west of Canada, particularly in terms of the Native American cultures and the huge herds of bison that once roamed these mighty plains. Indeed, I had an appointment to visit a bison reserve in the San Luis Valley area of south Colorado the next day and therefore had just a single day and night available to reach and explore the Comanche Grassland, which was obviously not sufficient and we ended up spending most of our time at the unrelated Queens State Wildlife Area just north of Lamar. Hopefully, I will be able to arrange a more appropriate stay in that region when I next visit, as I would very much like to finally meet a member of the Southern Plains Land Trust and to learn more about their highly encouraging work and long-term objectives. Swift fox and North American porcupine are just two of the many species protected on their reserves, but we did not see either at Queens State and had to be content with black-tailed prairie dogs and burrowing owls during the day and a large number of kangaroo rats at night. On the long drive the next morning towards the bison project that I wanted to assess, James and I had what turned out to be a thought-provoking discussion about that iconic animal and its role within the volatile history of the United States, particularly regarding its relationship with the

indigenous people and the newly created ‘Americans’, who forged a nation almost by their sheer will and in doing so, wiped out 1,000 diverse cultures and 50 million bison. The epic story of the ‘West’ has captivated me since I was a young child and I grew up gripped by the exhilarating and evocative tales of desperate outlaws, tough lawmen, bloody gunfights and the eternal battle between good and evil, which was always played out between the brave decent cowboys and the murderous heathen Indians. By the age of seven, I had Jesse James, Billy the Kid and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid replica wanted posters on my bedroom wall and I devoured every possible book and film on the subject. In addition to his many classic westerns, John Ford made a superb movie

version of John Steinbeck's seminal novel The Grapes of Wrath and my other favourites included Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen attempting to outshine each other in The Magnificent Seven, Sam Peckinpah's ambitious and wistful The Wild Bunch, the rising tension and climactic fury of both High Noon and Gunfight at the O.K. Corral and of course the wonderfully sanitised, but equally infectious, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, which featured Paul Newman and Robert Redford in a collaboration of such charisma, they later reprised it for the same director, George Roy Hill, in the similarly memorable The Sting. Although several Clint Eastwood westerns also featured among my favourites as a child, including The Beguiled, High Plains Drifter, The Outlaw Josey Wales and Unforgiven, none could match the passion that I had for the magical spaghetti western trilogy directed by the Italian

filmmaker Sergio Leone, who would also go on to direct Once Upon a Time in the West and his masterpiece, Once Upon a Time in America. As most readers of a certain age will instantly know, the three films in question were A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More and the operatic and immense, The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, all of which were made before I was born and featured magnificent and haunting scores by the great composer Ennio Morricone. James and I hummed out the theme tune from The Good, the Bad and the Ugly on several occasions during this trip and more than once, when my concentration has wandered and I have missed a relatively easy photograph, I have muttered Eli Wallach's, or actually Tuco's, immortal line, 'When you have to shoot, shoot, don't talk'. The Big Country, with an even bigger score by composer Jerome Moross and starring the masterful Gregory Peck, also had a major influence on me, as I often find myself whistling the incomparable soundtrack when driving through similar expansive landscapes and the grandiose panning shots of infinite sprawling wilderness simply staggered me, as I spent my entire childhood in London and could not believe that amount of space existed anywhere on earth. However, for all of these illustrious American movies, it actually took a British film, one of the greatest ever made in my opinion, to educate me that all might not be as it

first appears in terms of the way history is recorded and how indigenous people are depicted within that history. I was about ten when I saw Zulu for the first time and although the majority of the film obviously concentrates on the heroic last stand by a handful of British troops against an overwhelming force of Zulu warriors at Rorke's Drift, I remember being surprised, and not a little delighted, that the Zulus were portrayed as proud and civilised people and not as backward savages. As I discovered more over time, it did not take me long to realise that indeed, 'history is written by the victors' and that the assimilation of the Native Americans, for assimilation read subjugation and cultural extermination, was one of the darkest and most ignoble episodes in the history of the United States. Massacres of defenceless women and children at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee are just two infamous examples of the widespread and systematic persecution of an entire people and although the debate still continues regarding the exact terminology of the outrage, the comparatively modern terms ethnic cleansing and genocide have both been applied retrospectively by various sources, there can be no doubt that, at the time, Native Americans were considered to be an inferior race. No two sources appear to agree on how many were killed or exactly how, as the native people had no immunity against European disease and it has been estimated that between 75% and 90% of all Indian deaths were caused by smallpox, influenza, measles and other diseases transmitted by the early pioneers. What is not in doubt, is that by the year 1900 only 250,000 Native Americans remained alive of an original population of perhaps as many as twelve million. Whilst a

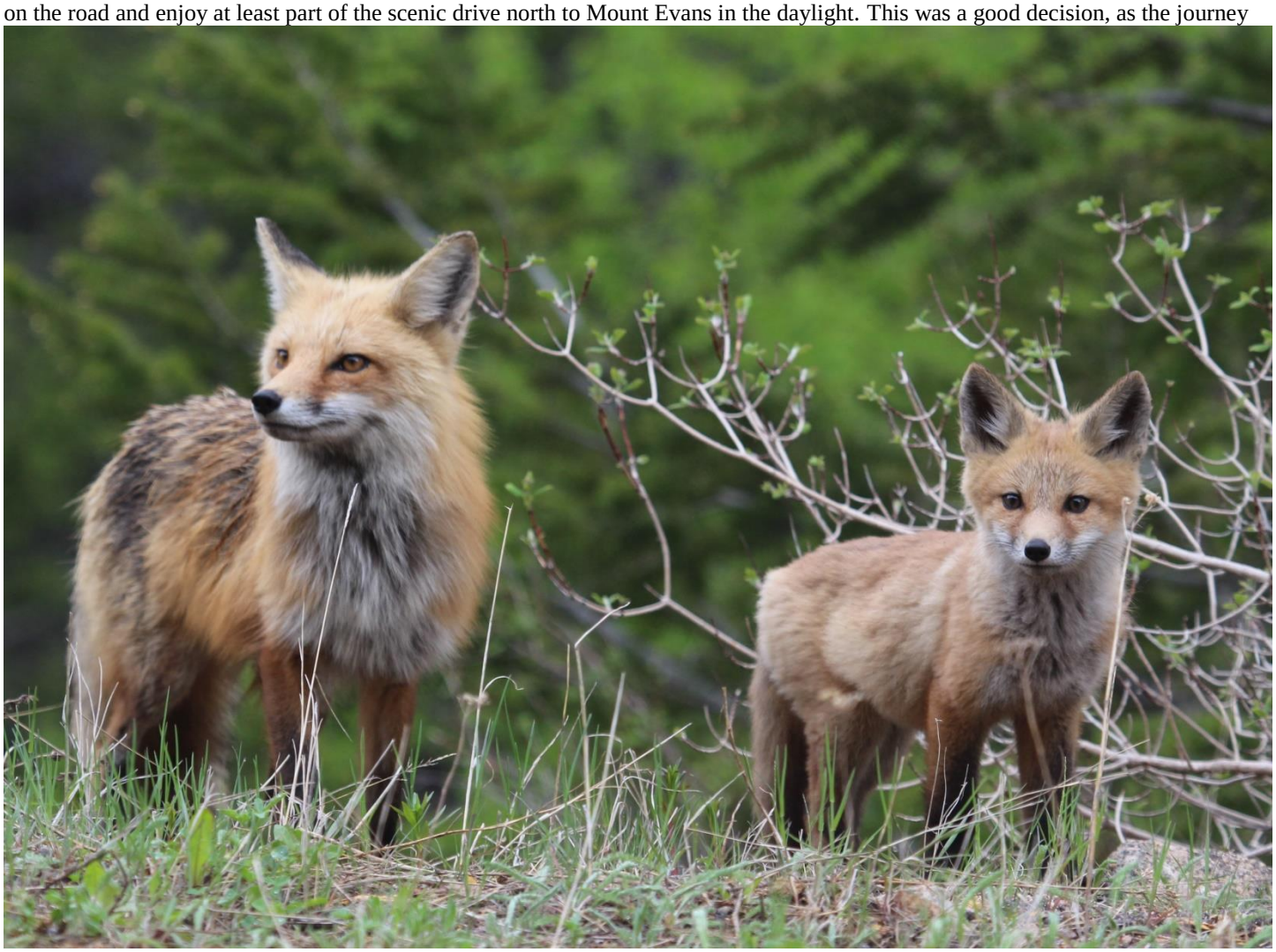
growing number of revisionist academics prefer a more sanitised version of the history of their country and have attempted to either suppress or to at least understate the crimes committed against the indigenous communities, it was documented that blankets infected with smallpox were intentionally given to Indian populations and it is unlikely, given the other atrocities committed against the same people, that this was an isolated incident, particularly when you consider that ultimately bison were not being killed for food or for their hides, but purely to deprive the native people of their very existence. It is slightly churlish of those more sensitive scholars to argue against the probable use of this early form of biological warfare, when there is so much documented evidence that the United States government had implemented a policy intended to starve the people from their land. In the early 1870s, considerably more than a million bison, or buffalo as they were then known, were being slaughtered every year and the government was even providing free ammunition in order to kill bison on the reserves that had been allocated to the Indians by federal treaty. It is perhaps difficult to reconcile these and other atrocities with the indomitable pioneering spirit that settled an entire continent, until you remember that the United States is a nation birthed in bloody conflict and over a million soldiers and civilians were killed in the name of liberty during the American Civil War. For those who would like to learn more about a period in American history that was as ignominious as it was inspiring, I would recommend The West and The Civil War, both of which are exceptional documentaries. The first was directed by Stephen Ives and produced by acclaimed filmmaker Ken Burns, whilst the second was the sole creation of Burns. Neither make for entirely comfortable viewing, but they are two of the best and most important historical documentaries that I have watched and are of the same calibre as the landmark British television series The World at War, upon which all such works should be judged. Given my

passion for wildlife, my main interest in recent years has been whether the North American prairie will again reverberate to the thunder of thousands of bison, as I believe that these beautiful natural cultivators were here in such huge numbers for a specific reason and that they play an integral role in the management and regeneration of the diverse grasslands and ecosystems that make up the Great Plains. Individual herds at one stage were so vast that wagon trains would have to wait for hours as thousands of bison ten-miles deep passed by and it has even been suggested that bison may have been the most plentiful large mammal on earth. They were certainly slaughtered as if that was the case and the killing was often so intense that buffalo hunters would have to pour water on their rifles to stop them overheating. When the water ran out, they simply urinated on the barrels and carried on blasting. Bison were killed by a variety of people for a variety of reasons. By cattlemen to clear huge swaths of territory for their livestock, by the railroad to feed their workmen and to keep herds off the tracks, by the U.S. Army in order to starve and demoralise the Indian populations, by professional hunters for profit, by wealthy tourists purely for sport and by the Native Americans themselves, as a few tribes, including the Comanche, massively intensified their hunting for commercial purposes and at one stage were killing more than a quarter of a million bison each year. By 1902 there were more or less none left, just a few hundred in captive herds and 23 that had somehow been missed in Pelican Valley in Yellowstone National Park, which consequently remains the only location in the United States where bison are not ecologically extinct as a truly wild species. Although they have been reintroduced to various areas over the years and the North American population now totals around half a million, the vast majority have been raised as commercial livestock and have been crossbred with cattle. There are consequently very few genetically pure animals remaining and only eight viable bison

populations in all of Canada and the United States. Despite a so-called recovery, privately owned animals, branded, fenced and bred in captivity on ranches for meat, hardly qualify as wild and it has been estimated that there are probably fewer than 12,000 genuinely wild mature bison remaining. Shockingly, certainly given the almost unsustainable remaining populations of pure bison, hundreds of these genetically healthy animals are killed every year when they migrate to their traditional winter range beyond the contrived boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. They are butchered, with the full knowledge and assistance of the national park, in the name of 'disease risk management', as a disease called brucellosis was transmitted to both elk and bison by introduced exotic cattle almost a century ago and cattle grazing within the bison's range are apparently considered to be at risk of catching this disease, although there has never been a single case involving this animal. So, the oldest national park in America, is responsible for the

slaughter of hundreds of the most genetically pure bisons on earth, simply because a disease that was originally passed by an invasive species to the endemic bison, may, just possibly, be spread by the bison, but never actually has been in almost a hundred years. It is difficult to either accept or forgive such a pathetically inept concept, or indeed the disingenuous reasoning behind it, particularly when you consider the scarcity of the animal involved and that almost 5,000 of them have been killed in the last decade alone, by the very people who should be protecting them. If, in actuality, park officials are concerned regarding Yellowstone's carrying capacity, instead of taking the easy option and shooting any surplus, they should be using these precious unadulterated populations to stock other national parks and to ultimately conserve and regenerate large areas of prairie. That is principally the goal of the project that I visited in the San Luis Valley, a 103,000 acre ranch purchased by The Nature Conservancy, a major charity that operates in 35 countries and all over the United States. The bison are classified as a 'conservation herd', which means that they are not fed, branded or weaned and lead a natural life on a home range of just under 50,000 acres of pasture, which is shared with a great deal of other wildlife. In addition to conserving a natural bison population, and demonstrating that a successful ranch can exist within a healthy and intact ecosystem, part of the ambitious project is aimed at regenerating the grasslands for a variety of species and of course for subsequent generations. The bison also play a key role in this initiative, as they are utilised as part of a prescriptive grazing programme, which is basically the practice of grazing animals to control the vegetation, as opposed to exploiting the vegetation simply to feed the grazing animals. This holistic approach is impressive and the overall intentions are unquestionably admirable, but whilst the bison can roam a substantial preserve, they are still not entirely free and once a year a percentage of the herd is sold to help finance the operation, which means that their fate is still ultimately dependent on people and that only some of them will live a full and natural life. In many ways, this commercial model represents the future of conservation, but only on a finite scale, as the national parks in America are too small, certainly in the 48 contiguous states, and bison need more space to roam if we are ever going to witness herds of even 20,000 or 30,000 again. Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada is 44,807km², which is a substantial area, but is still smaller than both the Selous and Central Kalahari game reserves in Tanzania and Botswana respectively, two tiny countries in comparison to the United States. Whilst Wood Buffalo currently conserves approximately 10,000 wood bison, the largest herd of wild

bison in the world, Yellowstone has a bison population of around 4,000, but is approximately a fifth of the size at just 8,983km² and even Death Valley National Park, the largest protected terrestrial area in America beyond Alaska, is relatively small at only 13,630km². There are several reserves within the United States section of the Great Plains that receive at least some level of federal protection, but, given the epic scale of the plains themselves and the vast area of land required to sustain a massive free ranging bison population, even added together, they would be insufficient. There now needs to be a different approach, as the vast majority of grassland ecosystems have either been entirely lost or severely degraded and an organisation, or possibly a combination of the government, charitable foundations and private investors, considering the magnitude and cost of this type of project, needs to purchase massive tracts of former farmland that can be regenerated to create a reserve capable of supporting an animal that to me represents not only the enthralling majesty of the 'West', but also how close we came to losing that majesty. Whether this will ever occur or not, small preserves and privately protected areas will remain an essential part of a bigger, coordinated conservation policy and there can be no doubt that The Nature Conservancy are playing a major role at the very forefront of conservation across the globe. As per my previous visits to a few of their other reserves, we greatly enjoyed our time here and it was a tremendous pleasure to photograph a large herd of bison again. In addition to a porcupine burrow, that I would have certainly staked out if we had more time, we also came across a few mule deer and a population of gunnison's prairie dogs, fascinating creatures that are believed to have the most complex vocal language of any animal. Apparently their language is so advanced, that not only do their warning calls differentiate between predator types, they can construct sentences describing those predators and even relatively minor variations between them. So a coyote warning, for example, could be 'that regular dog type is coming', but the warning for one that was injured could be 'that regular dog type is coming, but slowly'. For a human it might be 'that large person wearing red with no hair is coming', but for his young daughter it could be 'that little person, wearing yellow with long hair is coming'. These are of course fairly crass examples that I have created, as they would obviously have no idea of our words like dog or person, but apparently their 'speech' is so sophisticated, they can instantly create new vocalisations for sizes, shapes and colours that they have never previously seen, which is fairly incredible. As we were so close, we decided to visit Great Sand Dunes National Park, which is a tiny reserve, about 2% of the size of Yellowstone, and was formed in 2004 to protect the tallest sand dunes in North America. The dunes and surrounding mountains were certainly arresting and I would very much like to return to explore further, but we were not able to do the park full justice on this occasion, as the heavens opened within a few minutes of our arrival and we ultimately decided that it made sense to get on the road and enjoy at least part of the scenic drive north to Mount Evans in the daylight. This was a good decision, as the journey

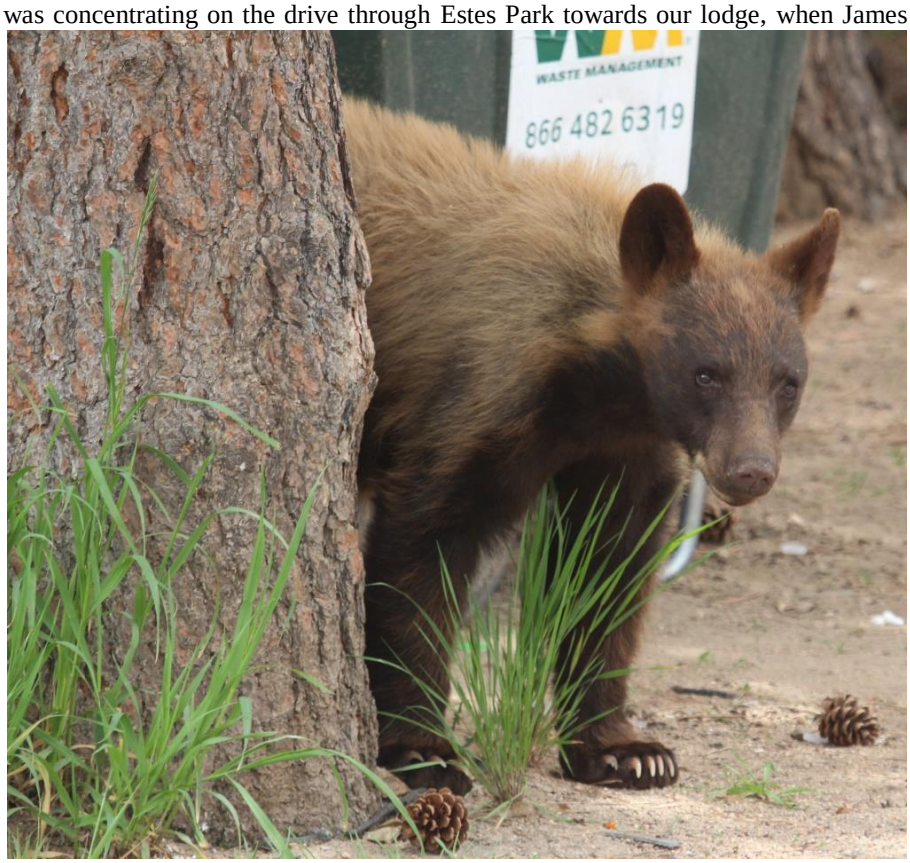


into the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains is breathtaking and we stopped to admire so many amazing views, that we all too quickly ran out of light in any case. We set out the next morning in exceptional spirits, as Mount Evans is probably the easiest place in North America to photograph mountain goats and we knew that we were likely to have great views of one of the continent's most striking mammals. Golden mantled ground squirrels, yellow-bellied marmots, American pika, elk and bighorn sheep were all likely as well, so it really did have the potential to be a superb day, among the type of remarkable landscapes that you can only dream about until you have visited the Rockies. The day certainly started encouragingly enough, as we encountered three male elk on the initial drive up, quickly followed by a sublime adult red fox and two gorgeous cubs. One of the cubs was acutely curious and we stayed with it for as long as we could, considering that I was parked on a bend on the side of a mountain. Regrettably, that was as good as our time at Mount Evans would get, as we discovered that the final section of the summit road was closed for repair and we were not allowed

to continue, despite the fact that one of the workmen informed me that a single lane was still open and that it remained possible to reach the very top. This was incredibly frustrating and infuriating in equal measure, particularly as some of the workers blatantly lied and said that the road was closed due to heavy snow and would be open again in a couple of days, which of course initially led us to believe that we would have the opportunity to return before we travelled home. This was sadly not the case and although I kept checking the latest situation, the road did not reopen for almost two months. We did consider hiking to the top, as the distance of just under fifteen miles was not impractical, until you consider that the round trip was 30 miles and that the first half was of course entirely uphill, eventually at an altitude of around 4,350 metres. This would have been difficult, but certainly not impossible, as we have both walked further than that in a single day previously, although admittedly, not at that elevation. However, our real problem

was that, even when we reached the top, we would have to search for the mountain goats on foot, which in turn meant that we were palpably less likely to find them. Whilst they are usually relatively easy to observe, they are not sitting waiting in one place that you can just automatically drive to and occasionally they are not visible at all. There was also the issue that, as they are so used to vehicles, we might not get very close on foot and ultimately I decided, despite the fact that James was as willing to proceed as always, that our time would be better spent within the wildlife rich environs of Rocky Mountain National Park. Ironically, a few weeks before we travelled, I had commissioned the maps for this trip report and had asked the illustrator Duncan Butchart to include a black-footed ferret and a mountain goat on the Arizona and Colorado map. These were the only two target species that we failed to see during the entire trip and in future, I will return to the system of asking for my maps to be produced retrospectively. We made another significant decision that day, as we had four nights remaining in all and had originally been planning to visit both the Rockies and the Pawnee National Grassland in northeast Colorado. Situated on the border of both Wyoming and Nebraska, the Pawnee National Grassland is another area of shortgrass prairie and could have presented us with a final opportunity to photograph a

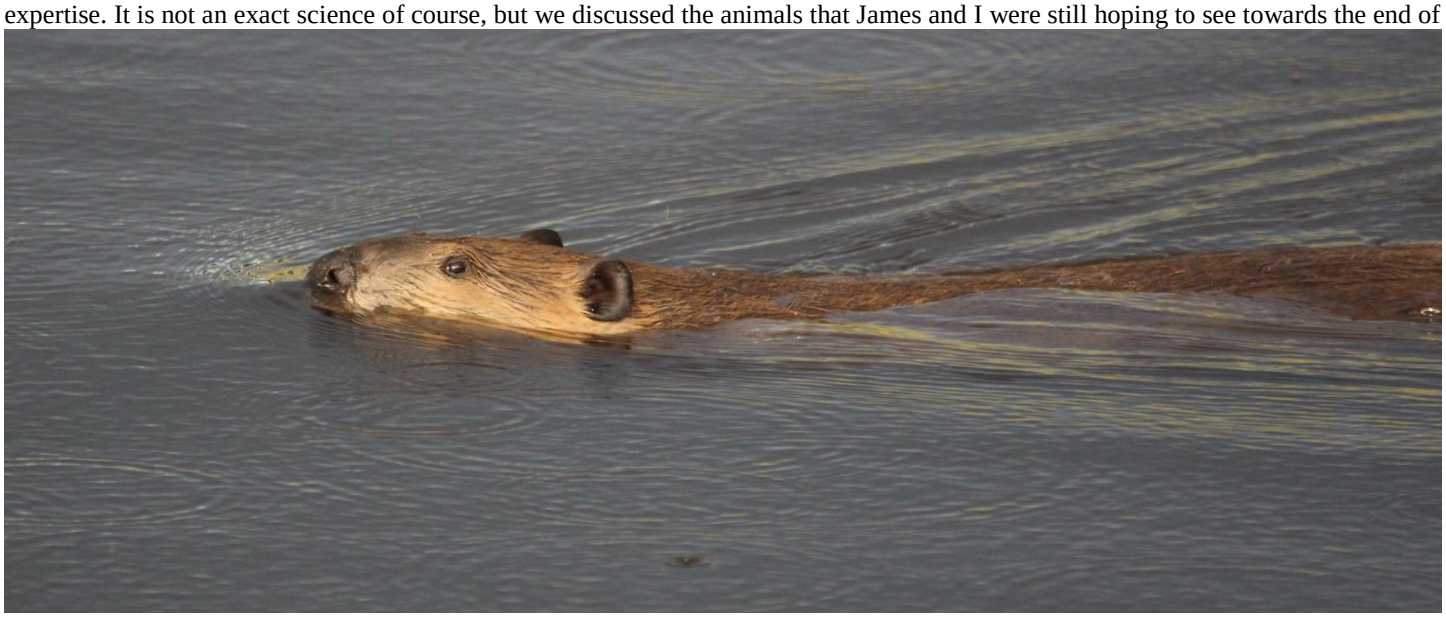
swift fox. However, the pace of the tour to that stage had been almost absurdly hectic and we decided that instead of rushing the two remaining destinations, we would spend our last few days thoroughly exploring Rocky Mountain National Park. It was probably the best decision of the trip, as the park and surrounding areas are teaming with an overwhelming array of glorious wildlife and we basically spent four idyllic days moving from one magnificent sighting to another, all against a backdrop of some of the most staggering panoramas imaginable. You actually have a feeling that your stay is going to be special, when one of the main animals that you are hoping to see, surrenders itself before you have reached either the park entrance gate or your accommodation. That is exactly what happened to us on our first afternoon, as I was concentrating on the drive through Estes Park towards our lodge, when James casually mentioned that there was a black bear walking across a nearby front yard. It has to be said, that my breaking and turning manoeuvre was less casual and at first I thought that I might have missed it, but it was partially obscured behind a tree and popped its head back out as soon as I pulled over. Two things were instantly apparent, it was a juvenile bear and had probably only recently separated from its mother and it was extremely interested in the contents of the rubbish bin in the yard, which had obviously, to us and to the hungry bear I would imagine, not been sealed correctly with the bear proof rope. Black bears rarely require a second invitation to dine and within less than a minute the bin was on its side and the bear was merrily foraging through its contents. It appeared to be largely interested in dairy based products, as, much like my dog back home, it eschewed anything organic and instead headed straight for the calories. Whilst ideally the setting and the food source would have been more sympathetic, the view at less than four metres, could not have been any better and for over half an hour we were privileged to savour the delightfully guileless behaviour of one of nature's most charismatic creatures. It is impossible not to enjoy the antics of boisterous young bears and when this one was not disappearing into the empty bin in case it had missed anything, it was individually examining every item of rubbish and promptly discarding anything that it could not eat. Just as we were considering the best way to clear up the mess, a storm broke and the startled bear scampered up a tree in order to shelter from the ensuing heavy rain and hailstones. As we would discover over the remaining days, the weather was unsettled each afternoon, but



the inevitable storms did not last long and we spent our evenings bathed in sunshine and a sumptuous natural light. That was the case on our first afternoon and with the rain easing almost as quickly as it appeared, we seized our chance to clear the rubbish while the unruly juvenile looked on from its tree. Having secured the lid and taken a few pictures, by this stage the bear did not appear to be at all nervous and was peering at me curiously, we reluctantly departed to allow it to climb down and hopefully disappear towards the national park. That was where we wanted to disappear to as well, but it was easier said than done given the resplendent elk that we kept encountering on the way and the superb location of our lodge, which backed on to the national park and was teaming with wildlife as a result. Within less than ten minutes of dropping our bags, I had photographed golden mantled and Wyoming ground squirrels, as well as a Colorado chipmunk and several elk. Although we did not catch a glimpse of her until later in our stay, a female yellow-bellied marmot has made her home on the hill behind our charming wooden cabin and bighorn sheep can often be seen wandering along higher points of the same hill. Mule deer are also regular visitors and black bear, red fox, coyote and puma have all been photographed on the property. Our cabin door was, at the outside, a one-minute drive from the Fall River entrance to the national park and when we eventually arrived, our increasingly successful day, the Mount Evans disappointment was already long forgotten thanks to the unexpected bear sighting, just kept getting better. The fairly relaxed plan was simply to ascend to the higher elevations of the Front Range in order to search for American pika and yellow-bellied marmot and, at the same time, familiarise ourselves with Trail Ridge Road, which winds its way to the highest traversable point of the park and is the only road that runs directly through it, crossing the Continental Divide and connecting the sections to the east and west. We did eventually achieve these objectives, but our progress was delightfully slow, thanks in part to the astonishing landscapes that we kept stopping for and the similarly striking critters that appeared to keep stopping for us. Elk, mule deer, chipmunks and ground squirrels all meandered obligingly into view and when I saw several cars rapidly pulling over on the same side of the road, I mentioned to James that they had either seen a bear or a moose, as they were not quite frantic enough for it to have been a puma, but they had more intent than would probably have been the case for an elk. After our earlier experience my money was on a bear, but I can honestly say that I was not at all disappointed when I saw a young male moose walking through a shallow creek in the last glowing rays of a ravishing evening. I never tire of watching these intriguing creatures and although I am completely aware that I state that regarding more or less every species that I am fortunate enough to spend time with, it is particularly the case with moose. I think that part of my affection probably relates to their generally bemused

expressions, as one moment they look incredibly wise and the next they look totally perplexed and just a little gormless. It is as if they are ruminating on the mysteries of life and the universe, when suddenly they just get hopelessly side tracked and begin thinking to themselves, 'plants, plants, look at all those lovely tasty plants'. We were to see a lot of moose during our stay at Rocky Mountain, including fourteen on a memorable early morning drive, but this was the only one that we were to encounter on the eastern side of the park. Having observed Eurasian moose in Estonia in April, it was nice to complete the set within a couple of months and we ended the day with another fitting double, excellent close views of both American pika and yellow-bellied marmot, another two new mammals for the trip and two of the animals that we should have seen on Mount Evans. Given the calamitous start and accepting the obvious

disappointment of not being able to either find or photograph a mountain goat in such frustrating circumstances, the day had developed into a remarkable one, with seven entirely new species and almost definitive shots of red fox, elk, moose, yellow-bellied marmot and, if I use the term definitive in its loosest possible sense, black bear. Although it was evidently impossible to sustain that number of new animals each day, the quality of our sightings did not decline in any way and we did still manage to find a further eight new mammals. Several of these were with a local guide, who we spent part of each of the next two days with. It is very unusual for me to use a guide in America, principally because the majority are either hopeless or enjoy killing animals for fun when they are not guiding wildlife lovers for money, which is deplorable as far as I am concerned. However, I had been really impressed by everything I had read about this guide and was pleased to discover that all of the positive reviews were entirely justified, as he was as helpful as he was professional and he also had an outstanding knowledge of both the national park and the wildlife that it protects. Given that we were searching for specific animals, we only completed a few short hikes in precise areas, but he offers a number of longer scenic day hikes, as well as photographic tours, tuition and workshops. Partly due to cost and partly because he does not operate in that way, he is not the type of guide that I could hire for an entire trip of several weeks, but he is ideal for a few days in or around the national park and I would certainly use his services again to explore further. One of his main strengths is that he spends so long in the field and has been able to observe the behaviour and habits of various animals from season to season over many years. Consequently, he knows the most reliable areas to look for each species at any given time and several of our sightings were as a result of this invaluable local expertise. It is not an exact science of course, but we discussed the animals that James and I were still hoping to see towards the end of



a long tour and within a couple of hours we were watching one of them, bighorn sheep. This was one of the best sightings of not only another productive day, but of the trip in many ways, as bighorn sheep are enormously imposing animals, particularly the rams with their remarkable curved horns, and we had been fortunate enough to find a small bachelor herd relaxing at one of the highest accessible points of the park. As enjoyable as later views of this animal would be, this was the classical bighorn encounter, with a herd of strong rams basically perched on the edge of a mountain overlooking a breathtaking alpine landscape. In this way, Trail Ridge Road is actually one of the unique features of Rocky Mountain National Park, as it is the highest road in any U.S. national park and allows visitors to experience the evocative and largely hidden world of the alpine tundra, as well as the distinct flora and fauna that such a specialist ecosystem supports. Whilst there are higher areas in the park, the summit of Longs Peak sits at 4,346 metres for example, they can only be reached by serious climbs or strenuous hikes and the road therefore allows many people to experience a world that they would not generally have the opportunity to access, at least not easily. Indeed, to be able to photograph these iconic creatures in such a superb natural setting and at such close quarters, was a real treat for me and it was only later that I realised that many of the visitors who photographed those same animals, would not normally have been able to do so, certainly not in that environment or at that altitude. Pikas and marmots are also common at these elevations, but as you begin to descend, they are replaced by chipmunks and ground squirrels, both of which were routinely encountered in and around the park. Three chipmunk species occur in the area and I would have undoubtedly struggled to identify the three without my guide's expert assistance, as they can be devilishly tricky to tell apart when their ranges overlap in this way. Our time with our guide each day was divided into two early morning and late afternoon sessions, principally to maximise his knowledge at the best mammal viewing times. On our first afternoon he took us to Lily Lake, as we had mentioned wanting to prioritise searching for a beaver and were ecstatic when he informed us that he knew of an active lodge. This more or less guaranteed that, with some patience and just a little good fortune, we would see a beaver, as finding the inhabited lodge is usually the difficult part and when you have, it is then just a question of hoping that the beavers emerge whilst there is sufficient light to take a decent picture. Although Lily Lake does form part of the national park, you have to drive out of the main section of the park in order to access it and, perhaps as a result, it does not appear to get as many visitors. There were several couples and groups enjoying a late evening stroll around the lake during our vigil, a few of whom joined us, but it was never overly busy and we did not have to wait long in any case, as the beavers were obligingly active that evening and both the male and female, I would later learn that they did not have a litter this year, appeared within about forty minutes of our arrival. We did not mind waiting in any case, as the lake is in a sublime setting and we were kept royally entertained by a large population of muskrats, many of which were climbing up on the bank to feed and collect vegetation. At one stage we watched a family of eight, the adults and six young, emerge from the actual beaver lodge, which the two species were evidently sharing. This cooperative behaviour was first witnessed, or at least first reported, in the 2002 BBC wildlife documentary The Life of Mammals, which, as per the entire 'Life' series, was narrated by the inimitable David Attenborough. It was clear that the muskrats were very used to people and were easy to photograph if you just stayed reasonably still, however, I was surprised to see how calm the beavers also were, as their lodge was actually built onto the side of the path and you had to walk round part of it to continue along the trail.

Whilst I have no idea whether living in close proximity to people has affected their breeding cycle, certainly they are less likely to breed if they are regularly disturbed or feel pressurised, that did not appear to be the case, as they both swam close to the bank on several occasions and one even climbed out in still reasonable light, before crossing the path and disappearing into the adjoining creek. At that time of day, with the last flickers of sunlight sparkling on the water and illuminating the beavers swimming gracefully across the surface, the lake was an absolute picture and we were so entranced, we decided to return two days later and spend our final night of the trip here. It was yet another good choice, for although we were initially greeted by a brief shower, in the greater scheme of things the rain proved to be a necessary evil, for as the sun returned, a resplendent rainbow emerged over the lake, as if to somehow

signify that our marvellous journey had come to a fitting end. On both occasions, more notably on the second visit when the beavers were slightly less active, we had a few brief glimpses of what I think was a meadow vole. It was clearly a vole of some description and it certainly looked like the meadow variety, but I have not included it on the mammal list, as I was not able to get a photograph and cannot therefore be 100% certain. We also saw a pair of wilson's snipe during our second visit and these distinctive wading birds with the long needle-like bills, reminded me of the infamous 'snipe hunt', which is basically an elaborate practical joke played on someone with no knowledge or experience regarding the subject matter. Traditionally it involves sending someone out into the woods to look for an animal that does not exist, but the easiest example that I know appears in A Game of Thrones by George R.R.Martin, when Robert Baratheon sends his new squire to fetch a 'breastplate stretcher'. I never really knew the expression or how popular it was in U.S. culture, until I told an American years ago about a rare mammal that I was searching for in Africa and he replied 'never heard of it son, sounds like a snipe hunt to me'. I never really forgot that, as that one straightforward statement probably sums up the last twenty years of my life and every trip that I take, as they are all basically snipe hunts in one way or another and the only thing that keeps me going is being the first person to find that bloody snipe. More seriously, it is fascinating how animals can mean different things to different cultures, as to me a snipe is the unfortunate bird that aspiring marksmen would use as target practice in India during the days of British rule. Apparently this particular bird is fiendishly difficult to shoot in flight and anyone skilled enough to manage to shoot one on the wing would attain the moniker 'sniper', which is where the modern word originates. Having been so successful to date and missed very few major mammals, we spent our remaining days either enjoying relaxed sightings of animals that we had already encountered or searching for the last four species, two squirrels and two rabbits, that our guide was reasonably confident we could see. We were obviously still hoping to come across something unexpected, porcupine, American marten and American mink were all outside possibilities, but I know more suitable areas for each of those animals and it was now more a question of seeing what appeared. Of the possible squirrel species, the red squirrel, or pine squirrel as it is known locally, was fairly easy, as our guide knew a likely spot in a lovely patch of ponderosa pine forest and the noisy inhabitant, they are very territorial and chatter aggressively at any interlopers, did not disappoint. We saw a few more red squirrels, including one during our second visit to Lily Lake, but were not as lucky with the abert squirrel, which everyone recognises as the squirrel with the large pointed ear tufts. We tried the most likely area on four separate occasions, with and without our guide, but, excluding the mountain goat, which was beyond our control, this was the only mammal we actively searched for in Colorado and failed to find. Of the rabbits, the mountain cottontail was as effortless as the red squirrel thanks to our guide's local knowledge and whilst we missed the snowshoe hare on one really enjoyable evening hike with him, we would have more success with that animal on our final full day. A guide of course does not generally help with those 'lightning strike' sightings that arrive out of the blue and just hours after ours had mentioned that he encounters maybe five black bears a year, we bumped into our second in three days without him. This was a much larger adult bear and we were very lucky not only to see it, but to have spotted it unobserved from above, as that section of road overlooked a valley that the bear was walking through. In many ways this was a much nicer encounter than the one with the juvenile, for although we were not as close this time, the setting was natural and our height advantage allowed us to follow the bear on foot without disturbing it. Eventually, as other tourists spotted what we were doing and a noisy crowd began to gather, it did become aware of our presence, however, it was still extremely relaxed and spent time feeding and grooming before ambling calmly into the woods. At this point, with cars being abandoned in the middle of the road and agitated drivers blasting their horns, James and I left the increasingly raucous horde at the roadside and followed the bear into the forest. We were only able to stay with it for another fifteen minutes or so, but it was mercifully peaceful among the trees and the welcome serenity extended to the affable bear, which was

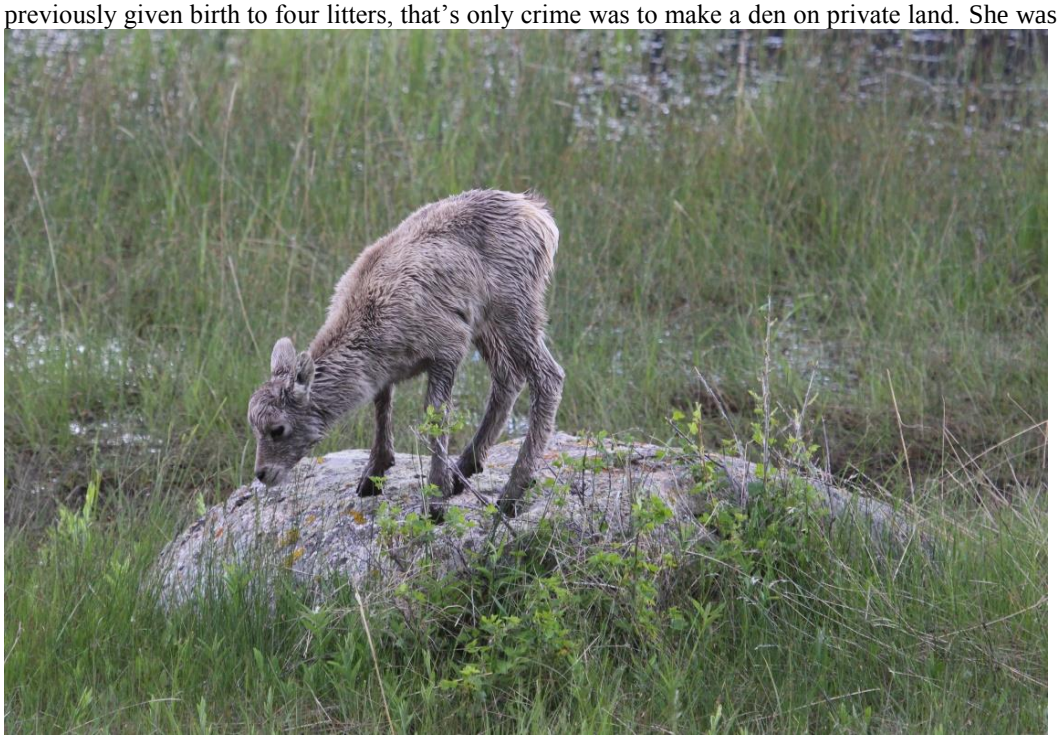
clearly unconcerned by us. The only break to the reverie, the bears and ours, was when we disturbed a great horned owl and had to duck as it swooped low over our heads. The entire enchanting episode lasted about forty minutes and in many ways would have been an exceedingly appropriate way to finish, but we still had one full day remaining and decided to spend the first part of it on the western side of the park looking for moose. We left in darkness in order to arrive at first light and on the way we stopped to photograph two snowshoe hares, which would prove to be the last new animals of the trip. In just under three weeks we had encountered 61 different species, which was fairly exceptional when you consider that I do not use traps, rodent and bat trapping is becoming increasingly popular among mammal enthusiasts, and that we also saw several unidentified species, including at least six flying bats, probably another two kangaroo rats and the vole at Lily Lake. I would imagine that we observed around 70 mammals in all, but, as I hope some of the photographs included here illustrate, the number is not as important as the quality of the encounters and this report should give readers at least an idea of how well such magnificent and diverse wildlife can be viewed. Our final day was an excellent example of this, as we did not see any new species after the snowshoe hares, or any massive apex predators, and yet we savoured one of the most enjoyable and rewarding days that I could recall. The moose activity in the early morning undoubtedly justified the 4am start, as we spotted fourteen in all, including one feeding directly at the side of the road, which we sat watching undisturbed for an extended period, and three females with typically distinctive red calves. Given that their diet includes a lot of aquatic plants, you often find moose in lush picturesque settings around pretty creeks and streams and that was certainly the

case on the western side of the park that morning. Despite the fact that the youngsters were not always easy to photograph because of the long grass, several of the sightings were against a characteristically spectacular Rocky Mountain landscape of verdant green meadows, enticing blue pools and towering snow-capped peaks. It was a very special scene and we were also exceedingly lucky to spot a coyote hunting rodents, largely because it was so engrossed in catching its breakfast and we were consequently able to sneak to within about twenty-five metres for an outstanding view of it pouncing gracefully through the air in typical coyote fashion. I love watching how they jump almost directly up in the air whenever they perceive something moving and a lot of canids actually hunt in this manner, including several foxes and the maned wolf. This one caught four in our presence before moving further away to sit in the sun, probably to dry off, as its fur was soaking from the morning dew covering the meadow. Much of the rest of the day was spent photographing animals for a final time and of the eighteen species that we encountered during our stay at Rocky Mountain, I believe we saw sixteen on that final day, including our last significant views of mule deer, pikas, marmots and a host of squirrels, ground squirrels and chipmunks. The elk also had young at that time of year and there were a few specific shots that I was hoping to take of a large nursery in an exceptionally attractive valley full of beautiful wild flowers. The one problem was that hinds are naturally protective of their fawns and keep them much further away from the road, which had been making it difficult to get decent shots. I could have gone on foot of course, but a significant part of what I do is understanding what can be achieved reasonably and what is simply unacceptable. To go barging towards a nursery herd and risk scattering young fawns and distraught females would have very much fallen into the latter category and I therefore made do with stealing a few metres towards the edge of the meadow and then leaving the herd in peace. The consolation came as we were heading back to the visitor centre to grab a quick late lunch and were greeted by another brilliant surprise in the form of a family of about forty bighorn sheep that had dropped down from the mountains and were feeding in the flooded pasture just by the entrance to the park. The herd largely consisted of ewes and their newborn lambs and it was enormously satisfying to be able to watch these mothers and their dependent young so late in the trip. We spent well over an hour with them before the entire herd crossed the road and disappeared into the hills, at which point we were finally able to get something to eat. It had already been a great day and an even better trip and, although we did not know it at the time, both were going to end well at Lily Lake, where we said farewell to the beavers and the muskrats and an unforgettable rainbow said farewell to us. We did actually return to the park the next morning for a few hours, as we had an evening flight home, and we also dropped by at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, one of the largest urban wildlife reserves in the country which, conveniently for us, is located just a few miles from the international airport at Denver. We encountered the family of bighorn sheep again in the national park and mule deer, eastern cottontail and hundreds of Arizona black-tailed prairie dogs at the refuge, as well as two members of the small bison herd that they maintain there. If I am honest, seeing the fenced bison was a rather sad way to end, but perhaps that was just part of the pervading mood, as it is always a little difficult to bring any tour to a close, but particularly one that had been as memorable as this. North America cannot even begin to approach the diversity of other areas across the globe, but it remains a truly special wildlife destination for a variety of unique reasons and whilst it was Africa that captivated me as a young adult, growing up it had always been America. In addition to the thrilling western tales of dangerous outlaws and the glamorous gangsters of

the Roaring Twenties and prohibition era, I remember thinking that even the Loony Tunes cartoons were incredibly exotic, with clever rabbits outwitting dim hunters and loveable coyotes chasing pesky roadrunners. I was clearly always going to be interested in mammals, as even then I was rooting for the calamitous coyote and not the unflustered, immortal bird…'Beep, Beep'. What I was not aware of at such a young age, was why a hunter would appear in a children's cartoon in the first place, as I had no idea that hunting was such an integral part of the American psyche and that a deep-rooted and in many cases fanatical hunting mentality pervades much of North America. Ultimately I learned about the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution, and the importance that so many Americans place on the second amendment and the 'right to keep and bear arms'. It took me a number of years to realise just how jealously that particular amendment is guarded by a fundamentally small but remorseless minority and even longer to come to terms with the fact that there is no political will to even protect the children of the nation, let alone the wildlife. Given the extent to which the immensely powerful National Rifle Association dictate federal policy, their influence extends well beyond their membership and into the very heart of government, even limited gun control is almost impossible in a country where millions of people maintain that they have a god given right to bear arms and to kill anything that cannot defend itself. Even themselves and each other of course, as more than one and a half million people have died in the United States in gun related incidents, so basically murders, suicides and accidents, since 1968, which is considerably more than the number of Americans killed in every war throughout history. As shocking and as shameful as that statistic undoubtedly is, the number pales into insignificance when compared to the millions of animals indiscriminately killed in the same country each year and I recently discovered some research that I believe I have probably always known in some way, or at least suspected, but have never been able to prove or

adequately articulate. In an article published by two American scientists in Animal Conservation, the journal of the Zoological Society of London, it was established that humankind is responsible for more than half of all mammal deaths across the continent. As immoral as that statement initially sounds, its widespread implications are even more significant, as it confirms what many of us already knew, that entire species are living in highly pressurised and increasingly unnatural environments and that this will inevitably influence their behaviour and ultimately how they evolve. That may sound implausible, but by killing animals in such unsustainable numbers and thereby artificially controlling supposedly wild populations, we are actually undermining the very concept of natural selection, the basis on which life evolves. As the dominant species on the planet, we are choosing, or at least North Americans are choosing on our behalf, to kill more animals than old age, disease and predation combined, which of course also means that they are killing more animals than even other animals do. The research, which was conducted over 69 populations of medium and large North American mammals across 27 species, found that approximately 35% of mammals were killed by hunters, 30% legally and 5% illegally, with vehicle collisions accounting for a further 9% of all deaths and other human causes contributing 7%. Several apex predators, those animals supremely adapted to maintain the genetic health of an area and the wildlife populations within it, are absent across much of their former range and 'survival of the fittest', the cornerstone of natural selection in terms of the 'fittest' creature being the one that breeds most successfully, is being replaced by the whims of hunters with large guns and even larger appetites for destruction. The natural balance of entire ecosystems is being lost, as the vast majority of hunters no longer need to kill for food and have no real empathy with the land or the animals that they so ruthlessly exploit, principally for pleasure. Modern so called hunters, sitting at tables and blasting away at prairie dogs with automatic weapons or shooting cornered animals at point blank range on canned hunting ranches, bear no resemblance to the subsistence hunters that the second amendment was no doubt partly designed to protect and far too many of them have forgotten how to live in harmony with nature, as custodians of the land for future generations. The right to bear arms is one thing, but the right to wipe a species of the face of the earth is another and that is exactly what happened to the red wolf, which was hunted to extinction in

the wild in 1980 and is again being persecuted, but this time by the very people charged to protect it. In many ways, the systematic mistreatment of the red wolf is one of the most shocking and inexcusable atrocities perpetrated against a single animal. Not so much because the species was allowed to become extinct in the first place, but because an actual state agency is seeking to remove the remaining wolves from the wild in order to declare the species extinct for a second time and The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to whom the survival of this animal has been entrusted, are basically letting them. The red wolf was reintroduced to North Carolina in 1987 from captive breeding programmes and, as I write this, there are believed to be between 50 to 70 animals surviving in the wild, making the red wolf, which is a distinct species to the grey wolf, one of the most critically endangered animals on the planet. The state agency in question is the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, which has adopted an official resolution requesting that the U.S. government end its red wolf reintroduction project, ostensibly on the grounds that wolves have encroached onto private land. Given the vociferous support from hunters in the state, who argue that a few wolves are devastating the wildlife populations that thousands of hunters would prefer to personally devastate, other factors are believed to be driving this initiative and we now really have reached the stage in our civilisation, whereby human beings, indeed appointed wildlife officials, are actively campaigning for extinction. The wolves are of course fully protected by the Endangered Species Act and their continued survival has been intrusted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the custodians of wildlife in the United States. Lamentably, the FWS is not fit for purpose in that role and has overseen and actively contributed to a serious decline in wolf numbers. Of the 59 recorded red wolf deaths in the last three and a half years, between 36 and 45 were killed by hunters or trappers and another nine by vehicles. When you take into account the 'Management related actions' within these figures, which is basically the FWS killing wolves, as few as five of the 59 deaths are likely to have occurred naturally. This is not protecting a species, at best it is letting one slip away and at worst it is intentionally pushing it towards extinction. The latter certainly appears to be the case, as the FWS recently authorised the extermination of a breeding female, she had previously given birth to four litters, that's only crime was to make a den on private land. She was one of only ten remaining breeding females in existence and she almost certainly had young at the time that she was shot, which, just as certainly, would not survive without her. When the FWS are allowing a private landowner to eliminate 10% of the breeding population of one of the rarest animals on earth, you know that they are working to their own agenda and not in the best interests of the species concerned. Fortunately, that much is also apparent to a number of conservation organisations, who are in the process of taking legal action against the FWS for both failing 'to protect the world's only wild population of red wolves' and the 'illegal action in authorizing the killing of a breeding female red wolf', as, according to the Endangered Species Act, the ill-fated female should have been moved and not shot. This is obviously not how I would prefer to finish a trip report, but this issue is simply too serious to ignore, as the federal authorised extinction of a species should be a step too far for any right-minded person and I would urge individuals and organisations to support the commendable efforts being made by the following conservation groups: the Red Wolf Coalition (www.redwolves.com), the Animal Welfare Institute (www.awionline.org), Defenders of Wildlife (www.defenders.org) and the Southern Environmental Law Center (www.SouthernEnvironment.org). In addition to sharing this issue with friends and family, or indeed anyone who you feel may be able to help, you can assist by making vital



donations or volunteering your time and the Defenders of Wildlife website includes online letters that you can submit to Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, the FWS falls within her jurisdiction, and Daniel Ashe, Director of the FWS, both of which urge the belated protection of an animal that has been persecuted for far too long. It is essential that rational people add their voices to these debates, as the pro hunting lobby are highly organised and extremely vocal regarding their rights. I watched one hunter, without the slightest trace of irony whilst addressing a commission on the subject, stating that the red wolves had every possible advantage and would 'run rampant' if their numbers were not kept in check by hunting. This is the type of mentality that you are dealing with and where the hunter's arguments flounder regarding the supposed link between hunting and conservation, as we are talking about a wolf population of 50 to 70 in a state containing ten million people, thousands of whom are hunters utilising automatic weapons, telescopic sights, all-terrain vehicles, lethal traps, dogs, night vision and just about every other advantage possible, including our intelligence, our relentless will and our complete immorality. Whilst the red wolf situation is particularly abhorrent, these outrages are happening all over North America and since 2011 hunters, trappers and government officials have led a sustained and ruthless campaign to dramatically reduce grey wolf populations in Idaho, which has resulted in over a thousand wolves being killed. To be fair, these atrocities are not confined to America, as this intense hunting mentality is just as ingrained further north and every year the Canadian government actively supports and encourages the largest mass slaughter of marine mammals on the planet. In 2015 alone they authorised the massacre of 468,000 harp seals, grey seals and hooded seals, which are clubbed to death in the most horrific manner. As adults seals are significantly more difficult to kill, they usually have to be shot in the water, around 97% of the seals killed are pups aged between three weeks and three months and most have never left the ice or even learned to swim before they die. They can barely move as the hunters approach on foot and simply have to wait for death, as others around them are bludgeoned about the head with heavy clubs, principally to avoid causing damage to the pelt. The Humane Society of the United States has produced evidence that around 40% of the dead seals examined had injuries to the skull which were not sufficient to have caused death, which basically means that these poor creatures were skinned alive. The annual seal hunt is not even economically significant, as there is little demand for their fur and even less for their meat and barely 6,000 Canadians derive any financial gain from the entire disgusting affair. Even in Newfoundland, the home of most of the fishermen involved in this barbaric trade, income from the annual hunt accounts for less than 1% of the province's economy. In 2009 the European Union banned the sale of seal products, including furs, and even the U.S. Senate, hardly known for its liberal tolerance towards wildlife, unanimously passed a resolution calling for an end to the slaughter. These are just three cases of the extreme cruelty and sickening profligacy of actual policies generated not by a corrupt third world government, but by elected officials of two of the purportedly most civilised nations on earth. Although I have been asked why I occasionally feature such 'depressing' accounts in these reports, I could have actually included hundreds of similarly outrageous examples of the obscenities committed against nature by a selfish minority determined to disregard future generations and I therefore make no apology for highlighting these few issues. It goes without saying that I would prefer to concentrate on the largely positive

aspects of every trip, but that is not the reality of the world that I inhabit and by continually ignoring the unsavoury, you eventually fail to even recognise it. I have to ignore a great deal of course, or I would not be able to function in some of the regions that I visit, but I also attempt to keep these important issues alive and to ensure that conservation of some kind plays an integral part of every trip that I either participate in or arrange. As it is, and despite the serious problems that so many areas face across the world, North America remains one of the great wildlife destinations and I will return in the summer of 2016 for my longest ever tour of Alaska and an exceptional opportunity to immerse myself in some of the finest wildlife habitats on the continent. I hope to have James by my side for that one as well and of course we also need to return to Arizona together, as we have an overdue appointment with a sweet, but tenacious little ferret that somehow managed to cling on to the very edge of existence. Damn it son, sounds like a snipe hunt to me.

For the purposes of this report, I have only included the first destination that some of the rodent species were encountered at.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Puma	Puma concolor	One briefly walking at night at the Cibola National Wildlife Refuge.
2	Bobcat	Lynx rufus	Prolonged encounter with a young animal hunting at Sweetwater Wetlands Park.
3	Coyote	Canis latrans	Brief sightings at almost every destination, but only one extended encounter.
4	Grey Fox	Urocyon cinereoargenteus	One crossing the road between our accommodation in Cave Creek Canyon and the small town of Portal.
5	Island Fox	Urocyon littoralis	Six different animals on Santa Cruz Island in the Channel Islands National Park.
6	Kit Fox	Vulpes macrotis	A pair at a den and one spotlighting at Carrizo Plain.
7	Swift Fox	Vulpes velox	Seventeen animals over two nights around Springer and the Kiowa National Grasslands.
8	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	A vixen and at least three cubs at Springer and a vixen and two cubs on Mount Evans.
9	Black Bear	Ursus americanus	A juvenile scavenging at a bin in Estes Park and a large adult within Rocky Mountain National Park.
10	American Badger	Taxidea taxus	Two in Aubrey Valley and one near the Mills Canyon area of the Kiowa National Grasslands.
11	Hooded Skunk	Mephitis macroura	One on successive evenings at our accommodation in Cave Creek Canyon.
12	Striped Skunk	Mephitis mephitis	Four or five each evening within the grounds of our accommodation in Cave Creek Canyon.
13	Ringtail	Bassariscus astutus	Six at Carlsbad Caverns National Park.
14	Northern Raccoon	Procyon lotor	Two at Rattlesnake Springs and three or four just outside Carlsbad Caverns National Park.
15	Red Deer	Cervus elaphus	Viewed at several locations, but in large densities within Rocky Mountain National Park.
16	Mule Deer	Odocoileus hemionus	Low numbers at Cibola National Wildlife Refuge and larger herds at Rocky Mountain National Park.

17	White-tailed Deer	Odocoileus virginianus	Healthy numbers at Madera Canyon and Cave Creek Canyon.
18	Moose	Alces americanus	One on the eastern side of Rocky Mountain National Park and more than twenty on the western side.
19	Pronghorn	Antilocapra americana	Common in small numbers at several locations.
20	Bison	Bison bison	Large partially managed herd within the San Luis Valley.
21	Bighorn Sheep	Ovis Canadensis	Several healthy herds at Rocky Mountain National Park.
22	Collared Peccary	Pecari tajacu	The last few of a small herd moving through the tiny town of Portal, Arizona.
23	Black-tailed Jackrabbit	Lepus californicus	Commonly observed in several areas.
24	Antelope Jackrabbit	Lepus alleni	Around six sightings in southern Arizona between Madera Canyon and Cave Creek Canyon.
25	Snowshoe Hare	Lepus americanus	Two animals in the early morning at Rocky Mountain National Park.
26	Desert Cottontail	Sylvilagus audubonii	First observed at Carrizo Plain and at several subsequent destinations.
27	Eastern Cottontail	Sylvilagus floridanus	Common at several locations.
28	Mountain Cottontail	Sylvilagus nuttallii	Two individuals around Estes Park and several more at the lower elevations of Rocky Mountain National Park.
29	American Pika	Ochotona princeps	Several at the higher elevations of Rocky Mountain National Park.
30	American Beaver	Castor canadensis	A pair at one dam within Rocky Mountain National Park.
31	Yellow-bellied Marmot	Marmota flaviventris	Common at the higher elevations of Rocky Mountain National Park.
32	Gunnison's Prairie Dog	Cynomys gunnisoni	Large numbers in and around Aubrey Valley and several large towns near Great Sand Dunes National Park.
33	Arizona Black-tailed Prairie Dog	Cynomys ludovicianus	Populations at the Kiowa and Comanche National Grasslands and at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.
34	Arizona Grey Squirrel	Sciurus arizonensis	First observed at our accommodation near Madera Canyon.
35	Western Grey Squirrel	Sciurus griseus	One at a picnic site in Los Padres National Forest.
36	Mexican Fox Squirrel	Sciurus nayaritensis	A pair each morning within the grounds of our accommodation in Cave Creek Canyon.
37	Red Squirrel	Tamiasciurus hudsonicus	Three or four at Rocky Mountain National Park.
38	Cliff Chipmunk	Tamias dorsalis	Low numbers, but easily observed within the grounds of our accommodation in Cave Creek Canyon.
39	Least Chipmunk	Tamias minimus	Common at Rocky Mountain National Park.
40	Colorado Chipmunk	Tamias quadrivittatus	Probably the most regularly observed chipmunk at Rocky Mountain National Park.
41	Uinta Chipmunk	Tamias umbrinus	At least two sightings, but probably more at Rocky Mountain National Park.
42	California Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus beecheyi	First encountered and common at Carrizo Plain.
43	Wyoming Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus elegans	Common at our lodge and at one main area of the Rocky Mountain National Park.
44	Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus lateralis	Viewed at our lodge and at Rocky Mountain National Park.
45	Round-tailed Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus tereticaudus	First viewed at Sweetwater Wetlands Park.
46	Rock Squirrel	Spermophilus variegatus	Common around Madera Canyon and Cave Creek Canyon.
47	Harris's Antelope Squirrel	Ammospermophilus harrisii	Two on the side of the road in Box Canyon.
48	White-tailed Antelope Squirrel	Ammospermophilus leucurus	Two at Joshua Tree National Park.
49	San Joaquin Antelope Squirrel	Ammospermophilus nelsoni	First observed at Carrizo Plain.
50	Muskrat	Ondatra zibethicus	Several in the same Rocky Mountain National Park lake as the beavers.
51	Yellow-nosed Cotton Rat	Sigmodon ochrognathus	Common at Madera Canyon and within the grounds of our accommodation in Cave Creek Canyon.

52	Desert Kangaroo Rat	Dipodomys deserti	Just one confirmed sighting at Cibola National Wildlife Refuge.
53	Heermann's Kangaroo Rat	Dipodomys heermanni	Commonly encountered at Carrizo Plain.
54	Giant Kangaroo Rat	Dipodomys ingens	Three, in and around Carrizo Plain.
55	Merriam's Kangaroo Rat	Dipodomys merriami	First viewed at Madera Canyon.
56	San Joaquin Kangaroo Rat	Dipodomys nitratoides	Several sightings at Carrizo Plain.
57	Ord's Kangaroo Rat	Dipodomys ordii	First observed at Aubrey Valley near Seligman and common in several areas.
58	Banner-tailed Kangaroo Rat	Dipodomys spectabilis	Only two confirmed sightings, both at Madera Canyon.
59	Western Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus hesperus	An obviously unwell bat found on the floor within the grounds of our accommodation in Cave Creek Canyon.
60	Brazilian Free-tailed Bat	Tadarida brasiliensis	Tens of thousands leaving Carlsbad Caverns at dusk.
61	California Sea Lion	Zalophus californianus	Around twenty on the voyage to Santa Cruz Island.


Oregon
Idaho
Black Rock Desert
Redwood
Lassen Volcano
Nevada
Reno
Lake Tahoe
Carson City
Utah
Humboldt-Toiyabe
Point Reyes
Sierra Nevada
Sacramento
San Francisco
Yosemite
Kings Canyon
Death Valley
Monterey
Sequoia
Red Rock Canyon
Las Vegas
Lake Mead
Carrizo Plain
California
Arizona
Mojave
Los Padres
Colorado
Channel Islands
Los Angeles
Joshua Tree
Palm Springs
San Diego
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