



# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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## MEXICO

Date - March 2023

Duration - 25 Days

### Destinations

Mexico City - San Jose del Cabo - Cabo San Lucas - Loreto - San Javier - San Carlos - Magdalena Bay - El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve - San Ignacio - San Ignacio Lagoon - Guerrero Negro - Bahía Tortugas - Punta Eugenia - Islas de Cedros - Islas San Benito - Villa Alberto Andrés - Sierra San Francisco - Santa Rosalía - Mulegé - La Paz - Sierra de la Laguna - Isla Espíritu Santo - Isla Partida - Chihuahua - Sierra Madre Occidental - Tutuaca Flora and Fauna Protection Area - Ciudad Madera - Janos - Janos Biosphere Reserve - Campo Verde Flora and Fauna Protection Area

## Trip Overview

As those who have read my previous Mexico trip report will know, I had originally intended to visit three destinations in August 2022, the Yucatán Peninsula, including a number of wildlife sites on the drive down from Mexico City, Baja California Sur and the Chihuahuan Desert, which borders the United States to the north of the country. However, a tour of this kind would have taken at least seven weeks and I therefore decided to split the trip in two and delay the last two destinations until I could do them justice the following year. I would visit Baja California Sur first, as this is one of the best marine wildlife destinations on the planet, but March is already fairly late in terms of both the whale watching season and for any visitors intending to snorkel with whale sharks, including myself on this occasion. Chihuahua, on the other hand, is far better for wildlife sightings in late spring, as the desert heats up and several species in the surrounding mountains emerge from hibernation.



Again as I detailed in my August report, Mexico is one of the most biodiverse countries on the planet and is home to over 3,000 mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, a large percentage of which are endemic, including around 30% of the 533 or so mammals. Whilst I was unlikely to see as many of these species on this second visit, as neither Baja California Sur or Chihuahua are anywhere near as diverse as the fertile rainforest of the Yucatán Peninsula, the vast majority would be different than those encountered previously, which of course is the real beauty of an extraordinary country blessed with a huge variety of contrasting landscapes and habitat. Having hitherto searched for rabbits perched on verdant volcanoes and jaguars sheltering in deep dark jungle, I would now be hoping to catch a glimpse of the largest mammal to ever live in the astoundingly abundant waters of the Sea of Cortez and hopefully avoid stepping on a spectacular western diamond-backed rattlesnake in the scorched extremes of the greatest desert in North America, at least in terms of size. From black bears in the spectacular Sierra Madre mountains to howler monkeys in the largely undisturbed rainforest of Calakmul and manatees in the tropical paradise of Sian Ka'an, Mexico is home to an astounding array of wildlife and when you consider that these tours were originally conceived as a single epic expedition, the combined results were as impressive and memorable as you would expect in such a significant ecological region. There were disappointments of course, particularly in Chihuahua, where the organisation was somewhat lacking at times and access at certain destinations was far from ideal, but in a land of such incredible biodiversity, you will always miss a few species that you were expecting to see and in general both tours were as exciting and productive as I had hoped. That is not to say that either were easy, as the spotlighting in particular was as tough as I have ever known and in many cases we had to work incredibly hard for our sightings. As previously, I was joined by the Mexican biologist and conservationist Juan Cruzado Cortés, and whilst it is fair to say that he was not as familiar with the destinations at Baja California Sur, having only visited the area once previously, it was still good to have him along, especially in terms of the long drives and his ability to translate for me, not to mention his excellent company. Whilst his daily rate is extremely reasonable, travelling with Juan as

a guide is not a particularly inexpensive option, as you also have to cover his daily expense, which includes all travel, accommodation and food. In almost every case I paid for private rooms for us both, principally to enable me to continue to work where necessary, as well as all of his activities, although this was not part of our agreement and was my own choice. In all I paid for six marine excursions on his behalf, as well as overnight stays on two islands, partly because I did not think that it was fair to just leave my travelling companion behind each morning and partly for him to personally experience activities that he may accompany my future guests on. All of the whale species encountered were new to him for example and it is obviously important that he understands how each tour works and what is likely to be observed in each area. This was particularly the case regarding the two island expeditions, which I had to arrange with private operators, including the boat charter, as neither can be routinely visited, at least not in terms of how I needed to explore them. Our time in Chihuahua was slightly different, as Juan has spent far more time in this region, but not so much in recent years. He was therefore relying largely on his local contacts and whilst most of these were extremely helpful, in reality our time here more resembled a preliminary scouting mission than a fully evolved wildlife trip. There was no doubt that I learnt a great deal, which is of course the primary objective of these research tours, but it is equally likely that we would have enjoyed considerably more success with slightly better planning and more recent information, especially regarding road conditions and access to a number of sites, which were more or less impossible to explore in a vehicle. On several occasions, namely in the mountains, we had to purely concentrate on getting the car to the accommodation in one piece, as opposed to actually looking for animals, and on others the roads were so bad, they more resembled a collection of rocks balanced precariously upon one another. There was no question of us being able to spotlight successfully along the worst of these trails and ultimately a great deal of time was lost as a result of conditions that neither of us were aware of. Needless to say, Chihuahua was the least productive of the three main regions visited across both tours, but we still experienced some outstanding encounters and I am now far better prepared in terms of planning future trips, which again is why I visit every destination before I even consider sending guests. The experience is always invaluable and despite the various setbacks and often interminable spotlighting sessions, I would not hesitate to recommend Mexico as a wildlife destination or Juan as a guide.



## Baja California Sur

For those who are not aware, Baja California Sur or South Lower California, is, as the name suggests, the southern half of the Baja California Peninsula, which separates the Pacific Ocean from the Gulf of California or the Sea of Cortez, as it is more widely known. The entire peninsula, stretching from Mexicali in the north to Cabo San Lucas in the south, is almost 1,250 kilometres long with around 3,000 kilometres of largely magnificent coastline. Christened *'the world's aquarium'* by the famous oceanographer and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau, the nutrient rich waters of the Sea of Cortez are among the most fertile on the planet and although they have been seriously depleted by overfishing, the region remains one of the premier marine wildlife destinations. In addition to the 30 or so whale and dolphin species that can be found here, around 900 islands provide nesting grounds for a vast number of seabirds and below the surface the surviving coral reefs support a huge variety of fish and other marine life, much of which exists only here.



Whereas I had originally imagined that I would need to organise a number of boat trips to search for any of the major whale species, I was somewhat surprised to learn that there are specific destinations for each, so Cabo San Lucas for humpback whale and San Ignacio Lagoon for grey whale for example. Although this would in some cases make life a great deal easier, it did also mean that a few of the tours were almost entirely focused on a single animal and more or less everything else was ignored, which is far from uncommon. As such, and after months of detailed research and countless conversations with locals, our stay at Baja California Sur would involve six major set pieces, five to search for individual marine species and one to visit an island for an isolated population of jackrabbit. In-between, we would explore various sites on the peninsula itself and I was hoping to encounter additional species on both the prearranged excursions and beyond. All of my plans were weather dependent, as the area is known for its high winds, particularly at this time of year, and none of the operators will sail in rough seas. Our overnight island tours were particularly susceptible, as you obviously require a longer period of calm weather and the authorities simply close the ports if the weather is bad, just to ensure that no one attempts a dangerous passage. Having spent months finalising every last detail, our programme was therefore constantly changing as we awaited a safe window for our main island foray, but everyone understands the situation and attempts to be flexible and in all we only missed one whale tour as a result of the weather, which was fairly miraculous given how severe the winds were at times. Our single advantage was that I was able to switch between destinations and even entire coasts, as I had arranged activities at practically all four major compass points and when the weather was disrupting one area, we had the luxury of moving to another. It could have still all gone horribly wrong of course, but we were the recipients of some incredible good fortune and here then are the six marine tours that I planned the first section of the trip around and that somehow survived the elements:

## Loreto - Blue Whale

Rough seas were not the issue at Loreto, but rather a pod of 40 equally deadly killer whales and before I had even travelled to Mexico, I was informed that at least one young calf had been killed by these supreme predators and that the remaining blue whales had quickly moved on. My sympathy for the young whale aside, this was obviously a major disappointment, as blue whale sightings have been extremely consistent at Loreto over the years and although I was visiting towards the end of the season for these majestic cetaceans, if



I am totally honest, I had still expected to see one. We still took the tour, which was a full day affair with the possibility of encountering a variety of whales, but with the regular blue whales now absent, there was not a great deal of emphasis on searching for other species and our guide more or less gave up after the first three hours. Although this initial period did produce a pod of common bottlenose dolphins porpoising around the boat, when your guide decides to stop at an island for two hours just to have 'lunch', you know they are not expecting to find a great deal more. I therefore had to suffer the almost unbearable privation of swimming in crystal clear waters for a couple of hours beneath the bluest of blue skies and whilst I would have much rather been scanning the ocean for whales, I suppose there are worse ways to spend an afternoon. It was still disappointing to miss such an iconic species of course, but ultimately a blue whale was the only major marine target that would elude us and as I had attempted to convey to our guide, I would have been just as thrilled to find the formidable orcas as their vulnerable prey.



## San Ignacio Lagoon and Magdalena Bay - Grey Whale

Our grey whale excursion at Magdalena Bay was the sole marine tour lost to the weather, but by the stage the cancellation had been confirmed, we had already experienced an unforgettable encounter with the same species at San Ignacio Lagoon, probably the most famous grey whale destination on earth. For decades grey whales have been visiting San Ignacio to breed, before returning to calve the following year, and at the height of the season in early February, by which time most females have given birth, 300 whales have been counted in these waters in a single day. As part of the El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve, the lagoon is completely protected and no fishing at all is allowed while the whales remain, which may in part explain the extraordinary behaviour that was first observed here back in 1972 and that I had only read about previously. Basically, the grey whales of San Ignacio Lagoon are known as the 'friendly whales' due to their habit of approaching boats and allowing people to stroke and even kiss them, including their newly born young. If



this sounds unlikely and just another case of humans attempting to profit from the close proximity of an exotic wild animal, then I have to admit that I was initially sceptical as well. However, over a number of years I have spoken to several people who have experienced this astonishing interaction on a first hand basis, including several biologists and conservationists whom I trust, and they all assured me that this was in fact a magical and entirely natural event. For a start, no boats are allowed to approach a whale, no people are allowed to enter the water and a large area of the lagoon is not accessible to boats at all. Whilst this allows the whales to give birth in a completely safe environment and to remain undisturbed if they prefer, the vast majority do not choose to and for more than fifty years mothers and their newborn calves have been intentionally interacting with people. In fact, and as I personally observed on my visit, females actively encourage their young to approach, initially by leading the way and then gently nudging them towards the boats. The whales will often lie on their sides and allow themselves to be stroked and whilst this in itself is extraordinary, the fact that they usually approach and surface to make eye contact before any interaction is for me the truly astounding aspect of the occurrence, as even to the untrained eye, this behaviour is unambiguously intentional. To describe the experience as breathtaking, would not even begin to do it justice and during our 90-minute window, the maximum time permitted per vessel, we encountered several of these benign and obviously intelligent mammals, including a number of calves breaching joyfully all around us. As much as I generally try to avoid direct contact with wild creatures, purely to prevent any form of habituation with a species that most animals should be terrified of, I have to admit that I stroked both adults and young on this occasion, which was as memorable as it sounds. The fact that there are less whales at this time of year was also more than compensated for by the reduced number of boats, as there were only two other groups during our visit, one of which departed within a few minutes of our arrival. We were therefore able to enjoy undisturbed and extremely intimate encounters with a dozen or so whales, but even if there had been a few more boats, the whales themselves choose who they interact with and you are not allowed to approach a vessel that already has whales with it, just as a further precaution. For all my initial doubts and cynicism regarding this type of tourist activity and our perpetual exploitation of the natural world, the grey whale encounter at San Ignacio Lagoon is as life enhancing as it is authentic and I can only express that I experienced the same sense of privilege and wonder with these gentle giants, as I do whenever I am sitting among a family of gorillas, which says it all really.



## Cabo San Lucas - Humpback Whale

Although the humpback whale sightings at Cabo San Lucas are far more conventional, they are not a great deal less thrilling, as this is one of the best places on earth to watch humpbacks and encounters are almost guaranteed during the whale watching season from mid December to mid April. As such, it is not uncommon to observe multiple whales on each sailing, which in turn increases the chances of witnessing the spectacular breaches that everyone hopes to see and that humpbacks are especially prone to. Tours generally last two and a half hours and I booked three in all, partly because the excursions are relatively short and we were consequently able to include three during a one-night stay, and also because this most southerly extreme of the peninsular is known as a productive area for a variety of marine wildlife. Thankfully, my optimism was not misplaced and although our first tour was the most memorable, with several adults and calves treating us to a succession of exhilarating leaps and crashing descents, a couple of which were right next to our boat, all three produced exceptional moments, including a huge manta ray breaching and an almost equally sizeable marlin flying through the air like a silver bullet. Numerous humpbacks were encountered on each excursion, as well as green and hawksbill turtles and the California sea lions that we would become so familiar with during our stay, several of which were routinely sprawled around the harbour we departed from. Whilst the humpback whale viewing at Cabo San Lucas lacks the unique intimacy of the grey whale encounters at San Ignacio, the sheer number of whales and breathtaking natural behaviour on display here ensure that it is an almost equally memorable spectacle. Certainly if you had never seen one of these magnificent leviathans before, you would surely leave this bustling resort as satisfied as I did on this occasion and I have had the immense pleasure of watching thousands of whales over the years.





## La Paz - Whale Shark

I am always extremely cautious in terms of arranging to swim with animals, as I am acutely aware that for every ethical and carefully judged encounter, there are far more instances of often vulnerable species being exploited and harmed. This is particularly the case with whale sharks, which are known to be incredibly docile despite their vast size and are consequently susceptible to unscrupulous operators with either no understanding or, in far more cases sadly, regard to any harm being done to the creatures involved. Some diving and snorkelling outfits even encourage guests to hold on to the sharks for a free ride and it is therefore essential that you choose your operator carefully. This includes speaking to them before you arrange the activity, to check exactly what guidelines are in place to protect the animals involved, as opposed to simply believing everything you read on a website. Where you can, it also makes sense to check with other tourists to have taken the same trip, or to at least read some of the reviews posted regarding the overall experience, and obviously recommendations from people you trust are generally the safest option. I try to complete all of these checks before I proceed and was only happy to book when one of the company guides confirmed that no physical contact or swimming towards the whale sharks was allowed. Instead, it would be a question of swimming alongside or above these colossal creatures, which are actually the largest living species of fish and can reach a staggering eighteen metres long or approximately 60 feet. As it was, anything else may well have been too difficult in any case, as the sea was fairly rough before we set out and I was initially concerned that the tour might be cancelled. Whether it should have been is debateable, as snorkelling in a choppy ocean is never easy and the situation becomes even more demanding when the only whale shark you encounter is a young male actively feeding, as whale sharks are filter feeders in much the same way as baleen whales, which basically involves swimming in a single direction and hoovering up as much plankton as possible. Our ravenous shark was therefore not hanging around to be photographed in some tropical paradise as per the luxury holiday brochures and it was more a matter of throwing yourself off the boat and trying to keep up with it for as long as possible. In my case this was no more than a few minutes, but no matter, as it is always an unforgettable privilege to spend time in the water with these serene behemoths and this occasion was no exception, despite the tougher than usual conditions. Thankfully, given that my only thoughts were on the shark itself, one of the other guests swimming behind me was able to take the picture below, which I instantly recognised as me, as I rarely use the snorkel itself and never the flippers.



Having only just dragged myself back in the boat, our guide spotted the spout of a humpback whale in the distance and we now had the rather unenviable task of either choosing to search for more whale sharks or abandoning the snorkelling altogether to hopefully get a closer view of the whale. Given that it was towards the end of the season and we had only encountered a single shark in around four hours, a few of our small group indicated that they would prefer to try for the whale, particularly given the demanding snorkelling conditions. This did clearly make sense, and although I was equally happy to try for more sharks, in reality the decision was made for us, as the seas were worsening and even if we had been able to find another shark, there would have been no real opportunity to swim with it, at least not for any reasonable period of time or in good visibility. As it was, and regardless of our say in it, our choice was an inspired one, as we quickly realised we were sailing straight into a feeding frenzy, with three adult humpback whales and dozens of bottlenose dolphins porpoising and breaching from every angle. The sea was frothing with activity and for more than an hour we were treated to an astounding and unforgettable aquatic ballet, with whales and dolphins soaring and twisting through the air, often within the same epic view. On more than one occasion, the animated exclamations of my fellow passengers alerted me to yet another humpback crashing back beneath the waves and one of these turned out to be a calf, which then went on to perform its own dazzling sequence of visibly exultant jumps and spins. As you can no doubt imagine, that final hour or so seemingly disappeared in a matter of seconds and as we turned and headed back to La Paz, in the distance our whales were still dancing their own inimitable dance.

## Islas San Benito - Guadalupe Fur Seal and Northern Elephant Seal

Whilst I have intentionally not described these six major highlights in any specific order, the humpbacks at Cabo San Lucas were viewed first for example, our San Benito expedition was the starting point for my visit to Baja California Sur and was the experience that I built this entire section of the tour around. It was also the most susceptible to the weather, as it involved two boat journeys and an overnight stay on Islas de Cedros, which in turn would require low winds and calm seas for at least two mornings in a row. Everything else would consequently have to work around this one precarious event and when it became clear that our original plans were not going to be possible, we made a fairly late decision to delay until day six, which was beginning to look more feasible in terms of a two-day window. When you understand that we had just eleven nights on the peninsula in all, this was probably going to be our only realistic opportunity and the relief was almost tangible when we arrived at Punta Eugenia to find smooth seas and a clear view across to Islas de Cedros. In addition to being where we would sleep, this first island was just the starting point to our adventure, as we had to change boats as soon as we landed in order to take advantage of the good weather to reach Islas San Benito, or the San



Benito Islands, which are much further out to sea and are home to the colonies of Guadalupe fur seals and northern elephant seals that we were making so much effort to reach. Fortunately, from the moment we boarded the first boat, everything went as smoothly as we could have conceivably hoped and within a few hours of our early morning departure, we had encountered all four of the pinnipeds that occur in the region, including both target species, harbour seals and the ubiquitous California sea lions. Indeed, our crossing even featured the completely unexpected and rather wonderful bonus of a fin whale surfacing practically next to the boat, as well as a small pod of common dolphins, both of which were observed on the second leg of our voyage as we approached the three predominantly uninhabited islands that form San Benito. The larger of the triumvirate includes a few ramshackle buildings, as well as two partially maintained trails that lead to northern elephant seal colonies, both of which wind their way through a labyrinth of burrows belonging to various ground-nesting storm petrels and the black-vented shearwater. Given how difficult they are to observe elsewhere and our complete dependence on the weather, we decided that it made sense to visit the Guadalupe fur seals first, which are scattered around various points of the three islands and can only be observed by boat. As the name suggests, these remote fur seals hail from Guadalupe, a reasonably significant island in the Pacific, approximately 240 kilometres west of the Baja California Peninsula. However, they were once far more widespread and were considered to be the most abundant pinniped species in the region until they were hunted to the point of extinction by the mid 19th century. In fact, at one stage they were believed to be extinct, until less than twenty were discovered on Guadalupe Island in the 1950s. Now they also occur on a few scattered islands along the Pacific coast and as far north as San Miguel Island, just south of Santa Barbara in the United States. There is no particularly easy way to access any of the isolated areas in which they occur and even if my journey here sounds simple enough, it involved flights to Mexico City and San Jose del Cabo, a 1,100 kilometre drive to Punta Eugenia and two boat rides, one to Cedros and then the final leg to San Benito. So the Guadalupe fur seal is clearly not an easy or inexpensive animal to observe, not if you live in Europe at least, but it is always especially satisfying to finally gaze upon an animal that has taken so much effort to either find or, in this case, simply reach. This occasion was no different and we spent around an hour watching and photographing two main groups of fur seals before we had to break off to visit the elephant seals, simply to stay ahead of the weather and ensure that we were able to make it back to Cedros. Despite the fact that I have seen them many times before, we eventually spent longer with the elephant seals than their more elusive cousins, as we ended up



walking to two of their colonies on opposite sides of the larger of the three San Benito islands, principally to try to photograph bulls, which spend most of their life at sea and are generally less routinely observed. They are also more impressive than the females in terms of their vast size and are certainly more distinctive, given the rather prominent proboscis after which they are named, which is said to resemble an elephant's trunk. In all we were able to locate three males, an absolute beast of a bull throwing his weight around and generally lording it over his harem in the shallows of the first beach that we arrived at and two juveniles sparring on the second. Whilst I would have preferred to stay longer and wait for closer shots of the first colossal bull, our skipper was becoming increasingly



anxious regarding the sea conditions and we had to practically run to the second colony before boarding for the return voyage to Cedros. He was probably worrying a little unnecessarily, as the sea remained reassuringly calm and we made it back to our overnight base in both good weather and good time. That said, we did now have time to search for one of the rarest deer on the planet, the Cedros Island mule deer subspecies *Odocoileus hemionus cerrosensis*, which, as the name clearly suggests, only occurs on this one island. According to our guides, there are currently around one hundred deer on the island and although we were not able to find one during a hike of around two hours, we were grateful for the opportunity to try towards the end of an already very long day. That said, I would have expected nothing less, as our two female guides, one of whom had arranged the entire trip for me, had been superb throughout the day and literally could not have done more for us or made us feel more welcome. The entire expedition, including our accommodation on the mainland and boat charters, had all been organised superbly and we left Cedros having made two good friends that I am looking forward to visiting again in the future. Thanks in no small part to their amazing endeavours on our behalf, this was actually my favourite day of the entire tour, partly because of the six captivating marine species we had been able to observe, but perhaps even more as a result of the considerable effort it had taken to finally realise an ambition that I had been considering for more than a decade and actively planning for almost a year.





## Isla Partida and Isla Espíritu Santo - Black Jackrabbit

This island trip was our last activity at Baja California Sur and our final night was spent sleeping rough on a boat huddled against the cold and praying for the first rays of the morning sun. If that sounds like a fairly miserable way to finish such a wonderful adventure, the opposite was the case and this was a really satisfying and productive end. It may have lacked the intensity and spectacular action of our previous activities, but to me searching for an animal that only exists in one tiny corner of the globe is equally rewarding and I was as keen to see a black jackrabbit as I had been to snorkel with a whale shark. If that sounds somewhat unusual, it is intriguing to me that a reasonably large species of mammal can occur on two relatively small adjoining islands, Partida and Espíritu Santo in this case, and nowhere else. That said, island endemism itself is not uncommon and there are actually two mammals that occur only here, although the other, the Espíritu Santo antelope squirrel, has now been reassessed as a subspecies of the white-tailed antelope squirrel,



which is prevalent throughout the peninsula and across a large area of the United States. Nevertheless, this subspecies can still only be observed on these two islands and I was consequently hoping to find both rarities on this visit, as well as a ringtail. This would mean spending a night on Espíritu Santo, as these cute little carnivores are nocturnal and although they were apparently easy enough to find, you cannot return to the mainland after dark. The islands themselves are situated around six kilometres from the mainland near La Paz and I was informed that at certain times it is possible to wade across the narrow channel between the two. I did not put that theory to the test and had chartered a boat for around 24 hours, as we were due to fly to Chihuahua via Mexico City the next afternoon. The charter included the captain of the boat and the female guide who I had arranged the tour with and who turned out to be as friendly and enthusiastic as I had grown accustomed to in this part of the world. We began on Espíritu Santo and although it did not take long to find both species, photographs of the jackrabbit proved to be difficult during the hottest part of the day, as you would expect when they are mainly sheltering. We therefore decided to move on to Partida and to sit and wait at what we thought would be a likely spot after an initial hike across the island. Having found a reasonably open area littered with jackrabbit droppings, we climbed up into the hills and sat down between some rocks to wait for the sun to slip away and the jackrabbits to emerge. That they would was never really in doubt given the vast number of droppings and when they did duly appear, it was now just a case of approaching slowly and carefully in order to take the photo that you see here. Easier said than done of course, but I was able to get within maybe five metres of this stunningly elegant creature and we were able to watch several until we began to lose the light and had to return to Espíritu Santo, where we would now begin the search for a ringtail. When I first became aware that these charmingly distinctive members of the raccoon family could be found here, I began making enquiries in terms of how easily or otherwise they could be found. Almost unanimously, I was informed to just wait at one of the campsites on the island, as apparently they like to visit each evening in the hope of a free meal. Never one to go against local knowledge, I duly heeded the advice and we were able to watch four ringtails climbing around the rocks behind the main camp at Playa Candelero, before my guide suggested that we visit another location that she knew well, where we might be able to get even closer. Again I was more than happy to acquiesce and we were soon sitting within a few metres of a gorgeous and thoroughly relaxed little ringtail, which we would ultimately spend almost an hour with. I have to admit, the few hours that followed on the boat were not pleasant, but we had found and photographed all three of the species I had hoped to see on this final adventure and any one of these magical creatures would have been well worth an uncomfortable night.





### Baja California Peninsula

Although our visit had been designed principally around these six major marine episodes, they were certainly not the only highlights of our time on the Baja California Peninsula and when we were not otherwise engaged aquatically, we would explore terrestrially for a variety of wildlife. As I have already touched upon, the spotlighting was as unproductive as I have experienced and apart from the brief appearance of a northern raccoon near La Paz and a handful of black-tailed jackrabbits over several nights, any success, if you can even call it that, was limited to a few rodents and a hugely impressive great horned owl. We did also clearly smell a western spotted skunk on one of our night drives, but strangely these were the animals that we would enjoy the least success with across both trips, with just a Yucatan spotted skunk to show for our marathon efforts back in August and only a hooded skunk this time. I say strangely, largely because eight different species of skunk have been recorded in Mexico and we could have encountered four on this tour alone, including a striped skunk, which are usually routinely observed within the habitat we would spend so many hours searching in Chihuahua. Thankfully, our days were more productive and I was particularly delighted to spot a pronghorn mother and fawn at the El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve, having spent several hours scanning specifically for this species over two days. Eventually we were able to follow the two for much of the afternoon, but at distance, as the mother was clearly nervous and if we approached to within a certain distance, she would immediately turn and head her young off in another direction. We intentionally never caused her to run and in trying not to disturb the vulnerable pair, I had to sacrifice the opportunity for a decent photograph and accept a collection of obscure reference shots, blurred as they were in the shimmering afternoon heat. I had also hoped to photograph a herd of bighorn sheep, but by the time we realised we were unlikely to see them in the region I had planned, it was too late to travel further north to Bahía de los Angeles in Baja California, where they are easily encountered. I should really have included this site on my original itinerary, but time was limited and I had genuinely expected to find these imposing wild sheep without having to venture that far north. Isla Carmen near Loreto would have been an even more straightforward option, given that we had two nights at Loreto and would have been searching for basically a captive population, albeit within a fairly substantial area. However, the sheep there were introduced for hunting purposes and although they have since thrived and are living a natural life in an ideal mountain environment, that only remains the case until a stupid Mexican or American with more money than sense intervenes with a crossbow bolt. As much as I wanted to see a species that has always been a favourite of mine, I was not prepared to legitimise this type of unethical operation with my presence or to spend time with the same guides who usually take their guests to kill animals rather than photograph them. Instead, I look forward to seeing bighorn sheep again in authentically wild conditions, where they at least have a chance of a full and natural lifespan. The pronghorn and bighorn sheep aside, I did not really have any terrestrial targets on the peninsula and it was often more a case of being surprised by something other than actively searching for it. Having more or less given up on seeing a mule deer after the first nine days for example, one ran across our path at Sierra de la Laguna and the story was similar with our only coyotes on this section of the tour, as we had not seen any at all until the early morning drive back from Punta Eugenia to Bahía Tortugas, when we came across three on a 27 kilometre stretch of road. We would not encounter these resourceful but dreadfully persecuted canids again until Chihuahua and the same short road provided our only view of a brush rabbit, which Juan





spotted at the side of the road whilst I was taking a turn to drive. Having already observed several black-tailed jackrabbits, this was our second lagomorph of the trip and we would eventually go on to encounter all six of the bunnies that occur in the regions we were exploring, having also seen all five possible species on my previous visit. Whilst not exactly a target, I was hoping to find a California chipmunk during our travels, as a small population is known to exist in a tiny area of the El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve, at least 400 kilometres south of the next nearest population in Baja California. Personally I believe that there are probably other colonies in between and that chipmunks are being mistaken in some cases for white-tailed antelope squirrels, which are abundant on the peninsular and more than superficially similar. Whether or not this is correct, I was sufficiently intrigued to want to compare the two for myself and we spent several hours in the remote area where they are known to occur, with Juan eventually spotting one on some rocks on his side of the road. He called 'chipmunk' instantly and although I had not seen it at this stage, as he pulled over it broke cover and I could clearly see its thick bushy tail, whereas antelope squirrels have smaller smooth tails. The shape of their bodies are different as well and we decided to stake out the site in the hope of securing at least a reference shot of this apparently isolated species. Unfortunately, and despite returning the next day, we would not see it again, but we did speak to a local guide who confirmed that both species occur where we had been searching and that chipmunks are increasing in number and being encountered far more regularly. I was fortunate with another member of the squirrel family as well, as I delayed us on the road to the old Jesuit mission at San Javier in order to search for bighorn sheep, without realising that Juan was taking us there for the California ground squirrels that



live in the stone walls around the grounds. Although we fared slightly better on this tour, our communication was not always in perfect harmony and by the time we arrived at what was an arresting and atmospheric 17th century mission, the light was disappearing and with it our chances of finding a ground squirrel. We consequently split up to hopefully increase our chances, but in reality that was a mistake, as Juan saw a squirrel without me and by the time we got back together, it had basically gone to bed. I was not that concerned at the time, as I thought that these ground squirrels were far more abundant than is actually the case and that it was only a question of time before we chanced upon another. The opposite is in fact true, at least this far south where their range is decidedly patchy and there was a very real possibility that we would not have another opportunity with this species. As it was, I was fortunate and we spotted one from the car near San Ignacio, which tarried just long enough at the side of the road for me to photograph. Such is the capricious nature of wildlife watching, when hours or even days of intense effort can count for nothing, but a change of mind or a simple mistake can salvage an entire tour. That was not quite the case on this trip, but when I did detour to Magdalena Bay on what was the wrong day, my blunder was rewarded with a pair of handsome barn owls perched under a flyover and more ospreys than I have ever seen at a single location. Of course this first section of the tour would probably have been even better had I been able to travel earlier in the year when whale numbers are higher, but I still encountered all of the species I was hoping to, with the exception of a blue whale, which was at least missed due to an entirely natural occurrence. Given the fact that around 30 different whales and dolphins inhabit these profuse waters at various times of the year, clearly I had hoped that we might discover at least one or two rarities, but this is where some of the standard excursions are not quite as strong, as they largely target one animal, more or less to the exclusion of everything else. Despite these minor issues, and as I hope I have adequately conveyed, our time at Baja California Sur had been exceptional, particularly in terms of some truly remarkable marine experiences. However, next time I would like to explore the entire peninsula by boat, perhaps even following the route taken by John Steinbeck on his voyage in 1940 and recounted in his book *'The Log from the Sea of Cortez'*. On a journey lasting around six weeks, Steinbeck and the marine biologist Ed Ricketts, on whom the character 'Doc' from the novels *'Cannery Row'* and *'Sweet Thursday'* is roughly based, sailed along the Pacific Coast from Monterey Bay to San Diego and then down the entire length of the Baja California Peninsula. From Cabo San Lucas they cruised north into the Sea of Cortez, formally the Gulf of California, and up along the eastern coast of the peninsula as far north as Guardian Angel Island, which they sailed round to begin the journey home, initially down the opposite coast and then back along the original route. Six weeks would be too long on board, at least for me, and instead San Diego would be the ideal starting point for an expedition lasting around three weeks, with stops at several major destinations, including possibly Guadalupe Island, which only takes around 24 hours to reach from Ensenada and includes the opportunity to observe great white sharks, although cage diving there is currently prohibited.



## Chihuahua

As I have already alluded to, this section of the tour did not go as well as I had hoped, certainly not in comparison with our superb experience on the Baja California Peninsula, and whilst it was not exactly a case of from the sublime to the ridiculous, it did begin to resemble that at times. I was not involved in any of the planning for this stage of the tour, which Juan took care of with the help of friends and colleagues in each area, most of whom were as helpful as I have come to expect. The original plan was to spend a first night in Chihuahua city and to split our remaining twelve nights evenly between Janos, Campo Verde and Tutuaca, in that specific order. However, and despite the fact that my travel dates had been confirmed for around seven months, when we arrived in Chihuahua I was informed that everything had changed as a result of the Easter religious festival, which presumably has been known about for even longer. We would now only have two nights at Campo Verde, three at both Janos and Tutuaca and three at Madera, a new site that I had not previously been made aware of. This in itself was fine, as I am used to these situations and always try to remain as flexible as possible whenever they occur. The real problem, although I was not aware of it at the time, was that Juan had not visited most of these destinations for a number of years and was relying on information provided by his contacts, which may have been fine in terms of their daily lives, but was not going to work as well for a wildlife tour, where access to the best areas is basically a minimum requirement. We did not know, for example, that most of the mountain roads were completely inaccessible in a standard vehicle, as Juan had not been informed of these latest conditions and had consequently advised that I could hire a compact vehicle at the airport. As it was, all of the standard cars were already taken and I was forced to hire a Nissan X Trail, which actually salvaged the trip to some degree, as there was no way that we would have reached several destinations without the high clearance of this type of SUV. It still took hours of careful manoeuvring to avoid totally wrecking the car and, as I mentioned in my introduction, at times we just had to concentrate on traversing the next section of rubble, rather than even thinking about looking for wildlife. We did usually have the use of a four-wheel drive vehicle at each final destination, generally amazing old tanks that had been negotiating these treacherous mountain roads for decades and could handle anything, but even in these, progress is incredibly slow over exposed boulders, not to mention horrendously noisy. These access issues led to even more changes, usually instigated by me to be fair, when we arrived at a destination and it was obvious it was just not going to work, at least not in terms of locating anything much rarer than a squirrel. These continual changes and our inability to explore the most productive areas efficiently, so covering reasonable distances, relatively quietly, undoubtedly cost us a number of sightings and at least the opportunity to observe additional species, including probably white-nosed coati, black bear and possibly even some of the rare cats that have been recorded in these mountain regions. That said, on other occasions and despite considerable effort on our part, we were just downright unlucky, as I have detailed within the following destination guides, which have been completed in chronological order:



### Tutuaca Flora and Fauna Protection Area (Sierra Madre Occidental)

At roughly the size of Spain, Chihuahua is the largest of 32 states in Mexico and much of it is covered by the Sierra Madre Occidental, a major mountain range that borders the Mexican Plateau, which the Chihuahuan Desert in turn forms part of. As such, our time here would be split between both mountain and desert environments and we would consequently be searching for an exciting combination of high altitude and arid specialists. Following an overnight stay in Chihuahua itself, our first two nights would be spent at different locations within the Tutuaca Flora and Fauna Protection Area, as the journey up to our final destination took around ten



hours and had to be completed over two days. The first section of the road in was not too bad, but by the time we reached the summit on the second morning, we realised that a vehicle would be of no real use and that we would only be able to explore on foot, including at night with spotlights. Given our previous lack of success at night and how little ground we could cover without a car, this was subsequently the first destination that we were forced to abandon as unsuitable, although, somewhat ironically, if we had known just how bad conditions were going to be elsewhere, we might have tarried for one more day. Part of the issue may have been how unproductive the initial journey in had been, as this was the first day across both trips, excluding travel days, where we failed to see a



single mammal, which also rather wrecked our spectacular record of having encountered at least one new mammal species every day in Mexico. This rather remarkable achievement had included all 23 days of my previous visit in August, as well as the first eleven days of this one, all of which were spent at Baja California Sur. Whilst certainly unusual, the record itself was little more than a matter of fun between us and we used to joke about the possibility of trying to extend it to include both trips. However, coincidence or not, it was a shame that it happened to fall on our first full day in Chihuahua, as this rather set the tone for the rest of our stay, despite some exceptional sightings. We obviously tried to keep it going on that first evening, but the area we had to overnight at was seriously disturbed in terms of sprawling human settlements and domestic animals and we had little real chance despite a fairly long spotlighting walk. As we repeatedly implored at the time, we only needed a new mouse or bat and although it was not to be, as we climbed above the majority of human activity the next morning, we did begin to enjoy some success, initially in the form of a very cute pygmy owl in superb light. Abert's squirrels and cliff chipmunks quickly followed and we then spotted what turned out to be a Sierra Madre ground squirrel, which Juan was particularly excited about, as this species has a very limited range and this was the only area that we could observe it in. Unlike the chipmunk on the Baja peninsula, this time we were able to take a series of probably slightly better than reference shots, although actually on the way back down the next morning and not following this initial brief encounter. Our accommodation on the second night was in a far more pleasant and natural setting and in normal circumstances I would have been delighted to while away at least a couple of pleasant evenings here and possibly more depending on how productive the site proved to be. As it was, the accessible driving trails were severely limited and, having already spent most of the afternoon searching on foot, we were ultimately relieved when our abbreviated night drive produced a new bunny species, namely a robust cottontail. This relatively large rabbit, if not exactly robust, was formerly considered a subspecies of the widespread eastern cottontail *sylvilagus floridanus*, but has now been classified as a full species and would make an appearance at each of our three mountain locations. We would spot the same rabbit again the next morning on the drive out, which took a full ten hours on the same challenging road and would actually include all of the mammals observed the previous day, as well as a pair of rock squirrels, running across the top of a stone wall in typical fashion. It was certainly not the worst start I ever experienced in a new region, but the mountain roads were evidently a major concern even at this stage and when we moved on to Madera, the situation would deteriorate further.

### Madera (Sierra Madre Occidental)

As at Tutuaca, we would eventually spend two nights at Madera, one at the town of Ciudad Madera, from where we would spotlight towards the foothills of the Sierra Madre and a second higher up in the mountains. As is so often the case, the more urban site proved to be the most productive and in addition to several robust cottontails and black-tailed jackrabbits, we encountered our only skunk of the entire trip, a hooded skunk that we followed on foot for a few partially obscured photographs. Having searched so long for any of four possible skunk species, we were understandably thrilled to have made what we hoped would be a significant breakthrough and set off for the mountains the next morning in extremely high spirits. The breathtaking views only added to the general sense of



optimism and on the way up our local guide, an old friend of Juan's, pointed out a deep cave that produced a fair amount of crawling about and two new bats. Having arrived at our base, we were discussing the possibility of spending two or even three nights in such a lovely spot, and when we set off for an afternoon hike, the general consensus was at least two. Sadly, that positivity lasted no longer than the road transfer up to the trailhead, if indeed you can even call the scattered assortment of jagged rocks and displaced boulders a road, as there was no way that it would be possible to go any higher at night, the road was just too dangerous to attempt in the dark, even if we had been prepared to take an hour to cover less than a kilometre. After an entirely blank hike, where we observed more evidence of cattle than wild animal tracks or scat, our only remaining opportunity would be to spotlight the trail back down, which

was in reasonable condition and passed through some promising habitat. Unfortunately, several hours passed without a single eyeshine and we consequently had to make the terribly difficult decision to again cut our losses and leave the next morning for the Janos Biosphere Reserve, which we would at least have unrestricted access to. It is very rare for me to abandon a destination after a single night and to do so on consecutive occasions is more or less unheard of. However, and as I have stated previously, being able to actively search for wildlife is absolutely a minimum requirement and finding these elusive species is difficult enough without attempting to spotlight on steep mountain trails at night and on foot. It was not great for Juan either of course, as his friends had all made a great deal of effort to assist us, but it was the only sensible option and going forward we either need to forget this region entirely in terms of a mammal destination or to find an area that we can reach and search efficiently in a vehicle. In stark contrast to our arrival, the mood was fairly sombre on the return journey the next morning and although I startled a white-tailed deer while the rest of our team were investigating a deserted building for bats, it was running by the time that I lifted my camera and I could only watch it disappear into the treeline.



## Janos Biosphere Reserve (Chihuahuan Desert)

Covering a land mass of over 500,000 km<sup>2</sup>, which is more than twice the size of the United Kingdom, the Chihuahuan Desert is the largest in North America and comprises areas of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas in the United States, as well as five states in Mexico, including much of Chihuahua and Coahuila. It forms part of the even larger Central Mexican Plateau, a vast arid plateau that stretches from the American border in the north to the volcanic belt around Guadalajara and Mexico City in the south and is in turn bordered by the mountain ranges of the Sierra Madre Occidental to the west and the Sierra Madre Oriental to the east. It is a desert that I know well from previous tours in the United States, but I have never encountered the plateau previously and in visiting the Janos Biosphere Reserve, we would be exploring the north western extreme of this immense geographical feature. Although deserts are probably my favourite environment in which to search for wildlife, the six nights we spent at Janos were at least two too many, certainly in terms of how productive the area was and how much time was ultimately wasted. Unfortunately, hindsight is, as they say, a wonderful thing and this can happen sometimes when you are desperately searching for perhaps a handful of species that you know



you should have seen and cannot understand why you have not. In financial terms it is known as 'throwing good money after bad', so basically spending more in an attempt to improve an initially unfavourable position or outcome. This is basically what happened to us, as we poured more and more hours into, if not exactly a lost cause, than at least a progressively thankless one. Consequently, we ended up with just one night at Campo Verde, which was clearly insufficient, although we could have still managed two if we had visited the last two destinations in reverse order. That is another matter though and at Janos it really was just a question of some ill fortune and ultimately a little poor judgement on my part, as I kept trying different areas and different strategies in the hope of finding some of the species I had expected to encounter within the first couple of days. On this occasion we could have no complaints regarding our access, as we were the solitary guests on a large reserve within the Janos Biosphere and could come and go entirely as we pleased, which was probably why I caused us to outstay our welcome, metaphorically speaking at least, as I suddenly had the freedom to explore untethered, which is really all I ever ask. Part of the issue was that neither Juan or I had any recent knowledge of the region and subsequently had no real idea where to search for specific targets. Whereas in other parts of Mexico Juan knows reliable sites for dozens of species, and will probably improve your chances of finding certain animals by up to about 95%, that only works when he is able to visit a region regularly and that has not been the case in Chihuahua in recent years. We were therefore desperately lacking the type of indispensable local expertise that can be the difference between a successful tour or otherwise and in some cases we were even relying on sightings on the iNaturalist community website, some of which were several years old. All of this



said, I have to stress that we were still incredibly unlucky, certainly when you consider the absurd number of hours we devoted to the task and how close we came to certain creatures, including skunks, which we smelt but never saw, and bobcats, which suddenly turned into ghosts of the desert. I still have absolutely no idea how we failed to see a bobcat, as we found the body of an unfortunate young one at Baja California Sur and just kept missing them from that point. Their tracks were all over the reserve that we stayed on at Janos and on one occasion we were following a trail that could not have been more than fifteen minutes old, as we had only just driven down it and their paw prints were on top of our tyre tracks. They led exactly back to where we knew one lived, but we visited this site probably a dozen times without a single glimpse. We would constantly find fresh scat in the middle of the road and on one particularly infuriating occasion, while we were getting a puncture fixed in town, workmen on the reserve were taking photographs of a bobcat in a tree with their mobile phones. It was just the type of insane situation that you dread and I am not sure we would have seen a bobcat if we had stayed another month, although of course, we could have seen one with an extra twenty minutes, such is the nature of the beast. Ultimately, of the mammals I had expected to see in Chihuahua, we would somehow miss bobcat, American black bear, American badger, striped skunk, western spotted skunk, hog-nosed skunk and white-nosed coati, not all at Janos admittedly, as some of these species are more likely to be observed at higher elevations. It was not all gloom though and our hard work and determination did produce a number of memorable encounters, including herds of American bison, that were never in doubt in terms of possibly being missed, but were still an inspirational spectacle. There are few better sights on earth than a herd of stampeding bison and whilst there are not the numbers at Janos to conjure that kind of raw emotion, I still spent several hours with these majestic kings of the prairie. Peccaries are a favourite animal as well and having missed both varieties on my last visit, I was delighted to get to within a few metres of a herd of five, with views of another larger herd at distance. The peccaries were spotted within a short walk of the largest prairie dog colony in Mexico, where we would spend much of our time and where we had both hoped and expected to find an American badger. Whilst this did not prove to be the case, it was still productive in terms of dozens of Arizona black-tailed prairie dogs and spotted ground squirrels, as well as three kit foxes when we returned at night, including a fabulous view of one fairly close to the car. Back at our own reserve Juan spotted a North American porcupine in a tree, that quickly clambered to the top and enabled us to take a few photographs at our leisure, and my spotlighting produced several coyotes and a brief glimpse of a grey fox, which Juan missed whilst driving. Fortunately, we would have a far better and prolonged view of this animal when we moved on to Campo Verde. Having already encountered four species of rabbit, three at Baja California Sur and one at Tutuaca, we quickly added desert cottontail at Janos and three days later a solitary white-sided jackrabbit, the last of the six bunny species it was possible to find at the sites visited. Whilst we were not searching for mammals, we were trying to save them, well one at least, as the cattle grids around the reserve were death-traps to a number of small species, principally because the essential escape ladders had not been maintained. Once something had fallen in, it was impossible to escape and we found dozens of bodies of creatures, mainly kangaroo rats and a few frogs and toads, that had slowly starved to death. We reported the issue immediately and were assured that all of the ladders would be repaired, but meanwhile we had found a live merriam's kangaroo rat trapped, which we fed in the hope of keeping it alive long enough to rescue. Having discussed a number of options, we attempted an improvised repair of one of the wire ladders and were relieved to discover that it had actually worked and the kangaroo rat had escaped. Beyond the mammals, trapped or otherwise, the undoubted highlights for me at Janos were our rattlesnake encounters, as I have a real affinity for snakes and rattlesnakes are a particular favourite. We were able to approach several during our stay, mainly western diamond-backed rattlesnakes, but also a prairie rattlesnake, which is far rarer in Chihuahua, but no less stunning. I was actually lucky with a few of my favourite animals, as I also adore owls and we saw five in all across the trip, including two more at Janos, namely, lesser horned owls, which were observed in typical fashion hunting at night, and burrowing owls, which were also encountered in characteristic fashion, but during the day,





perched incongruously on the edge of their burrows or a nearby cactus. Given the huge number of prey species, most notably a significant variety of rodents and lizards, raptors in general were prevalent and our first morning drive at the prairie dog colony produced a glorious view of a massive golden eagle, with an obvious eye on something slightly more substantial than a lizard. So although it would be difficult to make a convincing case to visit the Chihuahuan Desert on the Mexican side of the border, given how easy the same species are to find at so many sites in the United States, our time here was certainly not wasted and I feel that with a little more local assistance, we could probably do better next time or perhaps slightly less badly would be a better way of phrasing it.





## Campo Verde Flora and Fauna Protection Area (Sierra Madre Occidental)

Our return to the Sierra Madre would again include two different sites, but from the four nights that we were originally supposed to spend in this extensive protected area, we were now reduced to two and we would barely get the opportunity to explore the second at all, which remains a regret. Our first stay was with a local studying neotropical otters, which he regularly observes on camera traps and sometimes in person along one main stretch of the Río Negro. Whilst we would have very little hope of encountering an otter on such a brief visit, he showed us the main site, as well as some of the film taken there. This is where these research trips really work, as I had now found an area within the Sierra Madre that I would very much like to return to, particularly as it produced our best mountain spotlighting session of the tour. The road was still not ideal, but it was considerably better in places and we were able to cover a reasonable amount of ground. We eventually returned at around 2am and it was certainly no coincidence that the only night drive of any length, was also the most productive, with clear views of a second grey fox and a second white-tailed deer, both of which



Juan had missed previously. Three robust rabbits followed, including a tiny baby, as well as a northern raccoon foraging at the edge of the river and a mystery animal that only I saw and that disappeared across the trail in front of us. At the time I thought that it might be a cat of some description, as it moved like one and puma, bobcat, jaguar and ocelot all occur in the region. In the morning the same local took us to search for black bears and, more realistically in the short time available, Mexican fox squirrels, one of only two tree squirrels on the trip and the only squirrel species missed to date. We found a few in the end, but they have the rather endearing habit of lying entirely flat along a branch whenever they sense danger, which makes them incredibly difficult to photograph well. After such an enjoyable time, the second site was a bit of a disaster, as instead of visiting the more distant destination first, we found ourselves driving several hours further away from Chihuahua the day before we had to return to the city to fly home, which never makes sense. The drive in eventually took so long on yet another poor road, that I calculated we would basically have to leave at 4am the next morning to have any chance of making the flight and that would only work if we had no car issues. Given that we had already suffered three punctures and that the first couple of hours would have been in complete darkness on the very worst section of road, I reluctantly suggested to Juan that we abandon our final night and at least begin the drive back towards Chihuahua. I cannot adequately convey just how disappointing it was to miss the last spotlighting session of the tour, particularly given how many species we were still desperately hoping to find, but I could not see any real alternative, as we had not seen a single animal on the five-hour drive in and had no idea whether the spotlighting would have even been productive on yet another terrible road. As it was, we saw nothing on the drive out either and as distraught as I was at the time to have to make that type of decision, it was the right one. The only alternative would have been to extend the tour and spend a couple of nights at that second destination, which I did consider and would have preferred. However, I was already aware that Juan had work commitments within a few hours of our return and that this would not be possible. It was a horrible way to end of course and I hope that I get the opportunity to return to Campo Verde and to what appeared to be a beautiful region, although next time I will certainly check the road conditions before committing. It goes without saying that our time in Chihuahua did not entirely live up to my expectations, but it has to be remembered that both tours were originally planned as one long expedition and, as such, they were undoubtedly an unqualified success. In addition to around 120 distinct mammal species, many of which were endemic and consequently entirely new to me, we encountered a wealth of other wildlife, again, some of which I had never seen before. In so doing, I had been able to discover the heartbeat of another new country, at least in wildlife terms, and to research multiple fascinating destinations, which is what these tours are primarily designed to achieve. The experience gained is always priceless in terms of planning future trips with guests and despite the intense schedule and a few obviously disappointing setbacks, I was entirely satisfied with the results over seven challenging but ultimately rewarding weeks. So my great thanks to Juan for his considerable efforts on my behalf and I very much look forward to exploring more captivating destinations in Mexico with him.



No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>	Three individuals on the road to Bahía Tortugas, seven at Janos and one at Campo Verde.
2	Grey Fox	<i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>	Individuals at Janos and Campo Verde.
3	Kit Fox	<i>Vulpes macrotis</i>	Three at the prairie dog colony at Janos.
4	Hooded Skunk	<i>Mephitis macroura</i>	An individual at Madera.
5	Northern Raccoon	<i>Procyon lotor</i>	One briefly at La Paz and a second longer sighting at Campo Verde.
6	Ringtail	<i>Bassariscus astutus</i>	Five across two different sites on Isla Espíritu Santo.
7	Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>	One running across the trail at Sierra de la Laguna.
8	White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	One at Madera and one at night at Campo Verde.
9	Pronghorn	<i>Antilocapra americana</i>	A mother and young at the El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve.
10	American Bison	<i>Bison bison</i>	Several small herds at a reserve at Janos.
11	Collared Peccary	<i>Pecari tajacu</i>	Two small herds near the prairie dog colony at Janos.
12	Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>	Commonly observed at both Baja California Sur and Chihuahua.
13	White-sided Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus callotis</i>	A single animal at night at Janos.
14	Black Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus insularis</i>	Low numbers on Isla Espíritu Santo and Isla Partida.
15	Desert Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus audubonii</i>	Routinely observed at Janos.
16	Brush Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus bachmani</i>	One at the side of the road between Punta Eugenia and Bahía Tortugas.
17	Robust Cottontail <sup>1</sup>	<i>Sylvilagus holzneri</i>	Observed at all three destinations within the Sierra Madre.
18	North American Porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>	An individual in a tree at Janos.
19	Arizona Black-tailed Prairie Dog	<i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>	Observed at two sites at Janos.
20	Cliff Chipmunk	<i>Neotamias dorsalis</i>	Low numbers at Tutuaca and Madera.
21	California Chipmunk	<i>Neotamias obscurus</i>	One near San Ignacio at Baja California Sur.

22	White-tailed Antelope Squirrel	<i>Ammospermophilus leucurus</i>	Abundant at Baja California Sur.
23	Espíritu Santo Antelope Squirrel <sup>2</sup>	<i>Ammospermophilus leucurus insularis</i> ssp	Low numbers on Isla Espíritu Santo and Isla Partida.
24	Sierra Madre Ground Squirrel	<i>Callospermophilus madrensis</i>	An individual and a pair at different locations at Tutuaca.
25	California Ground Squirrel	<i>Otospermophilus beecheyi</i>	One at San Javier and one near San Ignacio.
26	Rock Squirrel	<i>Otospermophilus variegatus</i>	A pair at Tutuaca, one at Janos and individuals at two different sites at Campo Verde.
27	Spotted Ground Squirrel	<i>Xerospermophilus spilosoma</i>	Commonly observed at Janos.
28	Abert's Squirrel	<i>Sciurus aberti</i>	Low numbers at Tutuaca, Madera and Campo Verde.
29	Mexican Fox Squirrel	<i>Sciurus nayaritensis</i>	Several at a single destination at Campo Verde.
30	Merriam's Kangaroo Rat <sup>3</sup>	<i>Dipodomys merriami</i>	A single sighting at Loreto and widespread at Janos.
31	Banner-tailed Kangaroo Rat	<i>Dipodomys spectabilis</i>	Abundant at Janos.
32	White-throated Woodrat*	<i>Neotoma albigula</i>	One on foot and one from the vehicle at Janos.
33	Bryant's Woodrat*	<i>Neotoma bryanti</i>	One on the road at night driving to Mulegé.
34	Tawny-bellied Cotton Rat*	<i>Sigmodon fulviventor</i>	At least three individuals at Janos.
35	Little Desert Pocket Mouse*	<i>Chaetodipus arenarius</i>	One on the road to San Javier.
36	Chihuahuan Desert Pocket Mouse*	<i>Chaetodipus eremicus</i>	At least two confirmed individuals at Janos.
37	San Diego Pocket Mouse* <sup>4</sup>	<i>Chaetodipus fallax</i>	One killed by a cat at Loreto.
38	Baja Pocket Mouse*	<i>Chaetodipus rudinoris</i>	A small colony whilst spotlighting near Mulegé.
39	Gambel's Deer Mouse*	<i>Peromyscus gambelii</i>	Several at the same location near Mulegé.
40	Western Deer Mouse*	<i>Peromyscus sonoriensis</i>	Several at Janos, but only one individual seen clearly by me.
41	Silky Pocket Mouse*	<i>Perognathus flavus</i>	Two at Janos, one of which Juan caught to record.
42	Mexican Big-eared Bat*	<i>Corynorhinus mexicanus</i>	Several in a cave system at Madera.
43	Cave Myotis*	<i>Myotis velifer</i>	Several in a cave system at Madera.
44	Fish-eating Bat*	<i>Myotis vivesi</i>	One flying at dusk at Isla Partida.
45	Guadalupe Fur Seal	<i>Arctocephalus townsendi</i>	Observed in small groups at San Benito.
46	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>	By boat and on foot at San Benito.
47	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>	Observed on most marine tours and in large numbers at San Benito.
48	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Several sightings at San Benito.
49	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	A small group around the boat on the voyage to San Benito.
50	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Encountered on tours at Loreto, San Ignacio Lagoon and La Paz.
51	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	A single animal on the voyage to San Benito.
52	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Several out of Cabo San Lucas and La Paz.
53	Grey Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>	Around twelve at San Ignacio Lagoon.

\* All of these species were identified by the biologist Juan Cruzado Cortés, often by sight and in some cases with the assistance of photographs.

Every species was eventually observed by us both, but only I saw the white-tailed deer at Madera and the grey fox at Janos. Similarly, Juan encountered a California ground squirrel that I missed at the San Javier mission.

<sup>1</sup> Formerly considered a subspecies of eastern cottontail, *Sylvilagus floridanus*, but now reassessed to full species level.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly considered a full species, but now reassessed as a subspecies of *Ammospermophilus leucurus*.

<sup>3</sup> Other than the banner-tailed kangaroo rat, which is large and easily identified by its distinctive tail, two small kangaroo rat species occur at Janos, merriam's and ord's. From previous mammal surveys, it is known that the vast majority of these are merriam's, but given the considerable number observed during our stay, we almost certainly encountered the ord's variety as well.

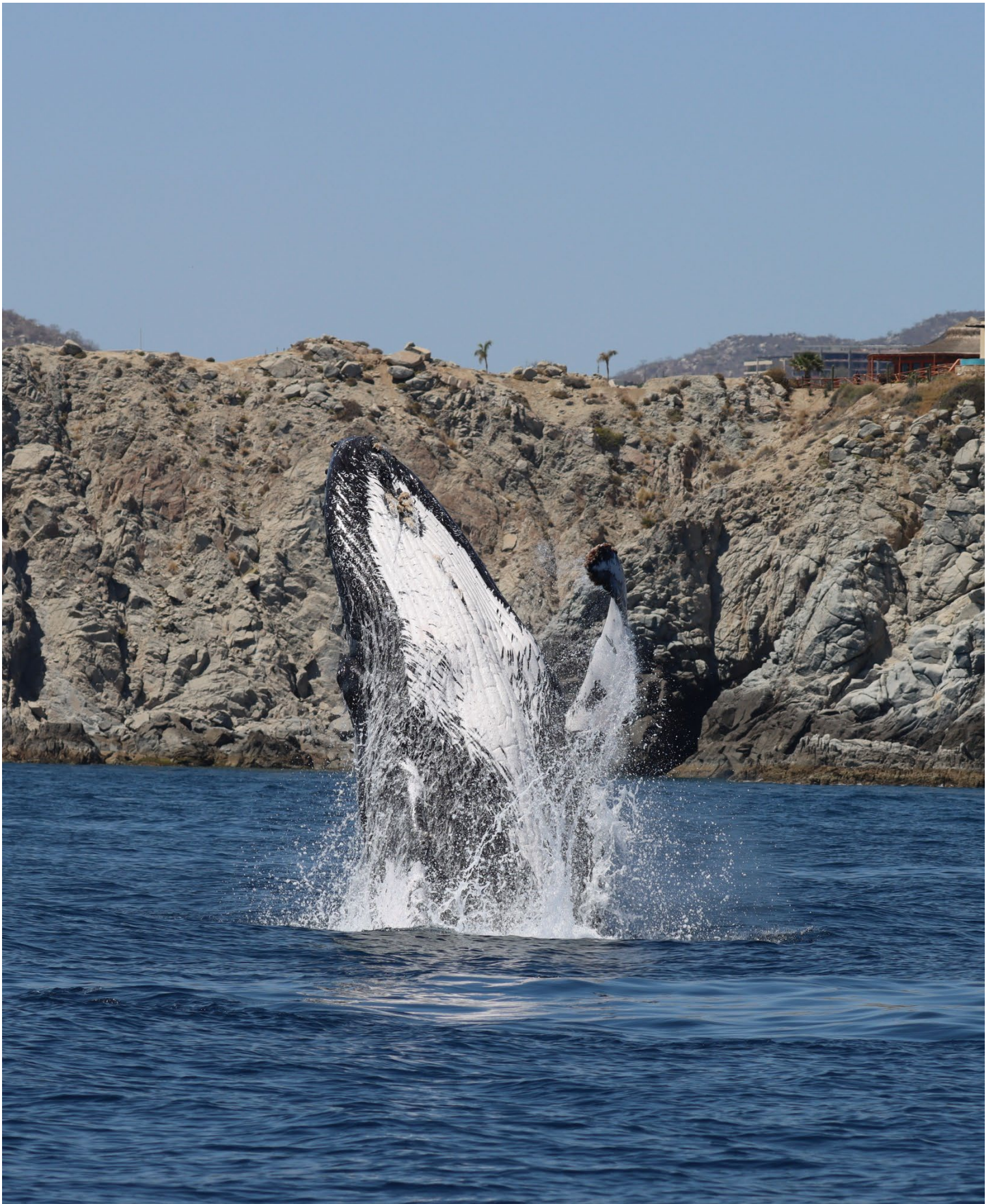
<sup>4</sup> This mouse was killed by a cat in front of us, but as the cat pounced before we caught sight of the ill-fated mouse, it is impossible to know for certain whether we actually saw it alive.











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