

RODENTIA

(Rodents)

Beavers



Packrats



Gophers



Kangaroo Rats



Rats, Mice



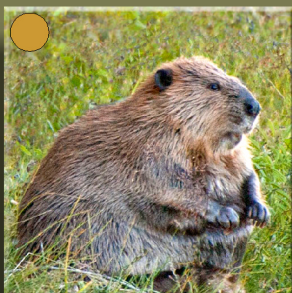
Squirrels



(33 Families Worldwide)

Family CASTORIDAE (Beavers)

American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*)



Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 40" Tail: 16" Weight: 52 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large, bulky size; dark brown fur; rounded head and small ears; black, **paddle-shaped tail**; short legs with webbed feet



Notes:

common locally; found in wetland habitats (ponds, rivers and streams, etc.) throughout most of NA; diet consists of bark and twigs of broadleaf trees; famous for building dome-like lodges made from felled trees, forming dams and marshes that benefit its environment by promoting tree growth and habitat for other wildlife; NA's largest rodent

Mojave presence: native; rare

Comments

Sometime in the mid 1990s I went on a rafting trip with two friends down the Green River in Utah (between the communities of Green River and Moab). On the last day I saw my first wild beaver, paddling close to the raft and occasionally displaying his annoyance with our presence by flapping his tail on the surface of the water. Of course, I was impressed. This was long before I became interested in wildlife photography, so it didn't occur to



me to get a picture! As it turned out, more than twenty years would pass before I encountered another beaver (pictured here), this time at the **Clark County Wetlands Park** in Las Vegas, NV, in June of 2020. This time, however, I had a camera at the ready! One doesn't usually associate beavers with the Mojave Desert, but obviously there's a small population in and around this habitat near Lake Mead (**Lake Mead National Recreation Area**).

Family **CRICETIDAE** (Packrats)

Desert Woodrat (*Neotoma lepida*)



Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 12" Tail: 5" Weight: 4.5 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

small size; light gray to almost black; large rounded ears and big black eyes; very long whiskers; **feet always white**

Notes:

common, but nocturnal, thus seldom encountered; found in desert and pinyon-juniper habitats from se OR-sw ID south through NV, parts of UT, nw AZ, s Calif., to northern Baja; herbivorous diet includes a variety of plants (e.g. cacti, yucca), nuts, seeds, berries

Mojave presence: native



Lake Overlook; Lake Mead NRA

Comments:

No matter how common woodrats may be in their range, they are seldom seen, because they are so secretive and mostly nocturnal. However, as a geologist, I have often seen them scurrying about in abandoned mines (always dark, which suits their nocturnal nature). The fellow below, in the [Clark County Wetlands Park](#) at the break of dawn, was the only one I've ever seen outside of a mine. Because of their secretive nature, they usually stay hidden in shrubbery when they are out and about (bottom right), but this inquisitive "woody" couldn't resist checking me out, thus affording me a rare photo op! Note the characteristic white feet.



Family **GEOMYIDAE** (Gophers)

Botta's Pocket Gopher (*Thomomys bottae*)



Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 9" Tail: 3" Weight: 5.5 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

medium size; buffy brown coat, though often variable from gray to black; two **orange**, chisel-like upper and lower incisors that lack grooves; cheek pouches; short, naked, rat-like tail



Notes:

common, but rarely seen; solitary; mainly nocturnal; found in desert, mountain, and prairie habitats throughout sw US from e Tx west to CA, and n CA to s CO south to northern Mexico; strictly herbivorous, mainly roots, tubers, grasses, etc.; males larger

Mojave presence: year-round



Comments:

Like woodrats, these gophers are quite common, but mostly nocturnal, thus seldom seen. Plus, they spend about 90% of their lives underground in their burrows! Conversely, indication of their presence is quite conspicuous, as mounds of dirt from their diggings litter most any meadowy site attractive to these subterranean inhabitants, such as the **Floyd Lamb State Park** in Las Vegas, NV.

The excavator above was so busy with his evening work in the spring of 2021 that he hardly noticed my presence, thus affording me my first sighting of a wild pocket gopher. When he was done, he plugged the entrance and retired for the night.

Family **MURIDAE** (Rats, Mice...)

Brown Rat (*Rattus norvegicus*)

Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 15" Tail: 7" Weight: 12 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

medium to large size; **brownish coat**, grayish undersides; long tail, scaly and naked; small dark eyes

Notes:

common in urban settings, farms, fields, unusual elsewhere; omnivorous, eating meat, insects, seeds, grain, etc.; Old World rat probably native to Central Asia, started spreading about the 16th century, arrived in NA about 1776, and now cosmopolitan aside from polar regions; also known as the "Sewer Rat" and the misnomer "Norway Rat"; major carrier of many disease organisms

Mojave presence: invasive; naturalized

Comments:

Though common, loathed, and feared in urban areas around the world, seeing this rat in the wilderness is actually a rare sight. The individual shown above at Red Spring in the [Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area](#) in the spring of 2017 is the only one I've seen and photographed in the Mojave Desert--not exactly a favored environment for the species. Red Spring is a popular picnic area, so it's reasonable to assume it was drawn to the trash bins, but how it got there from the city is a bit of a mystery. Either it went for a stroll--a hike of some twenty miles--or more likely hitched a ride somehow.



Red Spring; RRCNCA; LV, NV



Family **MURIDAE** (Rats, Mice...)

Western Deer Mouse (*Peromyscus sonoriensis*)

Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 6-7" Tail: 4" Weight: .5-1.2 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

small size; brownish to **gray coat**, pale undersides; **pale feet**; long, slightly furry, **two-toned** tail (dark above, pale below); large dark eyes; large ears

Notes:

common, but seldom seen outdoors due to their secretive nature; native to NA west of the Mississippi River in grasslands, desert scrub, woodlands, etc.; **polygamous**; omnivorous, eating meat, insects, seeds, grain, etc.; prey to snakes, raptors, cats, foxes, coyotes, etc.; 3-4 months life expectancy; carrier of hantavirus

Mojave presence: common

Comments:

While I'm not fond of mice as roommates, by default I am reluctant to inflict harm on any animal (aside from cockroaches and flies; we all have our limits!). Therefore, eviction takes the form of capture-and-release--unless my cats get to them first (which is their nature and the likely outcome of any intrusion, but do they have to make such a big production of it?). To avoid the inevitable outcome of cat-mouse interactions, I proceeded to obtain non-lethal traps from Amazon to accomplish the feat (below left) and 5-gallon buckets partly filled with kitty litter to provide temporary housing for any potential prisoners, as I was not enthusiastic about getting up in the middle of the night to get dressed and go outside to release captives; plus, I needed to get decent mugshots first! I'd say, "mission accomplished!"



big ears, eyes

Dolan Springs, AZ



gray coat

Dolan Springs, AZ



pale feet

Dolan Springs, AZ



2-tone tail

Dolan Springs, AZ



temporary detainees...



...and they're off!

Family **SCIURIDAE** (Squirrels)

Rock Squirrel (*Spermophilus variegatus*)

Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 20" Tail: 8" Weight: 1.5 lbs

Distinguishing field characteristics:

large and stocky; **mottled** gray to brown fur, darker rump, buffy below; **white eyering**; pointed ears; long, bushy, grayish tail edged with white

Notes:

common; found in mountainous, rocky habitats throughout mid-southwestern NA from s NV east to w TX, and UT-CO south just into parts of n Mexico; omnivorous, mainly plant material, seeds and nuts, fruits and berries, etc., plus invertebrates (beetles, grasshoppers, worms), but will also accept (or steal) just about any offerings from tourists; one of the largest ground squirrels in the family Sciuridae

Mojave presence: uncommon



South Rim; Grand Cyn NP; AZ



Red Rock Cyn NCA; NV



South Rim; Grand Cyn NP; AZ



Dolan Springs; AZ



Comments

While common at the South Rim of **Grand Canyon National Park** (above), these squirrels are much more scarce in the Mojave Desert region. I have only seen a few specimens in Southern Nevada near Las Vegas in the higher elevations of **Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area**, such as Willow Springs (adjacent photos), and the one out-of-place individual depicted above right scrounging for food in Dolan Springs, AZ.



Family SCIURIDAE (Ground Squirrels)

White-Tailed Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus leucurus*)



Valley of Fire SP; Clark Co.; NV



Valley of Fire SP; Clark Co.; NV

Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 9" Tail: 2.75" Weight: 4 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

small size; coat buffy brown in summer, gray in winter, underparts whitish; **single white stripe** on each side; tail dark gray above, **white below**; small ears, dark eyes

Notes:

common; ranges from se OR south to Baja, and eastern CA west through most of NV, UT, AZ north of the Grand Canyon, into nw NM; mostly diurnal; active year round, but hibernates in winter in northern parts of range; omnivorous, eating various green vegetation, seeds, insects, carrion, and begs--successfully--for almost any food offered by tourists; particularly fond of potato chips and bread!); close relative of **Harris's Antelope Squirrel**

Mojave presence: year-round; west of Colorado River



Valley of Fire SP; Clark Co.; NV



Valley of Fire SP; Clark Co.; NV

Comments

These adorable little rodents abound at the **Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area** near Las Vegas, NV. The white fur under the tail is always conspicuous; the squirrels use their tails to shade themselves, and the white helps to reflect heat from the hot desert sun. Another technique employed to cool their bodies (called heat dumping) is to sprawl out in a depression in the ground, as demonstrated by the fellow at the bottom left. The one in the top right photo seems to be planting a flag to declare its territory atop a barrel cactus growing behind a creosote bush; these ground squirrels are so nimble they are able to somehow avoid being jabbed by the sharp needles!



Family SCIURIDAE (Ground Squirrels)

Harris's Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus harisii*)

Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 9" Tail: 3.5" Weight: 4.5 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

small size; pinkish-buff coat in summer, gray in winter, white underparts; **single white stripe** on each side; tail dark gray above, mixed black and white below (appearing **lighter gray**); small ears, dark eyes

Notes:

common; found throughout AZ south of the Grand Canyon and southward across the border into Mexico; mostly diurnal; active year round; omnivorous, subsisting on cactus and yucca seeds and fruit, insects; close relative of the **White-Tailed Antelope Squirrel**

Mojave presence: restricted to Mohave Co., AZ

Comments:

This cute little bugger in Dolan Springs, Arizona, in February of 2023 stopped by to collect some scraps I left out for the local quail. In return for the free lunch, he posed for some great shots.

The **Harris's Ground Squirrel** and **White-Tailed Antelope Ground Squirrel** are nearly identical, save for the coloration of their undertails (gray and white, respectively), which may not be apparent for specimens viewed momentarily or from a distance. In such cases, location is the best identifier.

The two squirrels are separated by the lower Colorado River from the Grand Canyon southward, thus their habitats do not overlap. Though still uncertain, it is likely the canyon and river system isolated different populations of the same species, leading to eventual unique speciation.



Joshua Forest; Mohave Co., AZ



Hualupai Plateau; AZ



Harris's range



Joshua Forest; Mohave Co., AZ



Hualupai Plateau; AZ



White-tailed range

Family SCIURIDAE (Chipmunks)

Palmer's Chipmunk (*Tamias palmeri*)

Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 9" Tail: 3.5" Weight: 4.5 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

small size; **reddish-brown flanks** with gray shoulders; four grayish white and three brown stripes on back

Notes:

uncommon; unique to the high elevations (Yellow Pine, Pine-Fir, and Bristlecone Pine Forest life zones) of the Spring Mountains in southern NV; diurnal; mostly inactive in winter; diet consists of seeds, fruit, nuts, fungi, etc., and occasionally insects; closely related to Uinta Chipmunk

Mojave presence: rare; endemic

Comments

Distinguishing this "chippy" from others like it is easy...it's just a matter of knowing where you are. While the Palmer's is endemic to Mt. Charleston in the Spring Mountains west of Las Vegas, NV, there is another that can be found in this range.

The **Panamint Chipmunk** also lives in these mountains, but in a different environment. While the Palmer's lives strictly in the higher elevations (see **Notes** above), the Panamint is only found in the lower-elevation pinyon-juniper life zone.

Another close relative is the **Uinta Chipmunk**, but it occurs in southern NV only in the Sheep Mountains across the valley to the north in the **Desert National Wildlife Refuge**.

Thus, knowing your location is the best way of identifying these cute squirrels.



Lee Canyon; Spring Mtns; NV



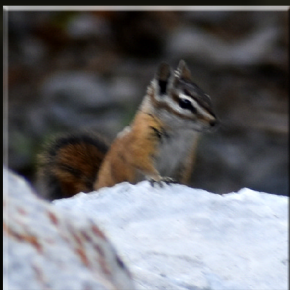
Lee Canyon; Spring Mtns; NV



Lee Canyon; Spring Mtns; NV



Lee Canyon; Spring Mtns; NV



Family **SCIURIDAE** (Chipmunks)

Cliff Chipmunk (*Tamias dorsalis*)

Measurements:

Ave. Overall Length: 9" Tail: 3.5" Weight: 2.5 oz

Distinguishing field characteristics:

small size; gray coat with **indistinct stripes**, brown underside and flanks; bushy grayish tail, rusty below; boldly striped face (characteristic of all chipmunks)

Notes:

common; diurnal and social; hibernates in winter; occupies rocky areas and cliffs in forested habitats from central NV and UT diagonally southeastward to w NM; subsists on nuts, seeds, berries, fruit, etc.

Mojave presence: rare

Comments:

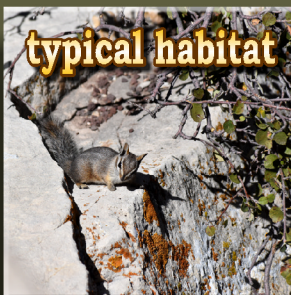
While the individuals shown here were photographed at the Bright Angel Lodge on the South Rim of **Grand Canyon National Park**, the species **does** occur in the Mojave, though much more rare. Their range in the region is limited to the higher elevations of southern Nevada, southwestern Utah, and northwestern Arizona.



South Rim; GCNP; AZ



South Rim; GCNP; AZ



South Rim; GCNP; AZ



South Rim; GCNP; AZ