



Foothills

Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

Mammals of the Foothills

Because of their nocturnal and secretive habits, mammals – furred, warmblooded animals which suckle their young – are seldom seen in the wilds. Yet they are quite common, and no less than 23 species reside within our foothills preserves. The casual hiker will occasionally glimpse a deer or squirrel, but usually passes unaware of dozens of other mammals, hidden and secluded in unseen burrows, dens, forms, and nests. At dusk these shy creatures emerge to hunt and feed, guided by senses keener than humans’.

One way to observe mammals is to locate an area where they have been previously observed or where their tracks, scat, or trails have been found. Select a concealed spot at dusk, and wait – patiently. Deer make conspicuous trails which intersect hiking trails. It is not uncommon to see deer crossing hiking trails as they come out in the evening to browse. It is far more difficult to locate and identify the regular routes of the Coyote, Gray Fox, Raccoon, or Bobcat.

Most conspicuous of preserve mammals is the Black-tailed Deer, which feeds evenings and mornings, taking shelter during the day in woodlands and thickets. When there are large numbers of visitors to the preserves, though, the deer scurry for cover, so you are much less likely to see them on weekends.

In the California Bay trees, look for Gray Squirrels. In the late fall these large squirrels are quite vociferous as they are busily engaged in gathering bay nuts for the winter. The Fox Squirrel, an introduced Eastern species, is similar to the Gray Squirrel but may be distinguished by the rusty color on its sides.

Other members of the squirrel family are the Merriam Chipmunk, seen at the edge of chaparral areas, and the California Ground Squirrel. They are generally seen in open, grassy areas. Unlike the tree squirrels, these burrowing or ground-dwelling species possess fur-lined cheek pouches which they stuff with seeds for transport back to the nest. The Merriam Chipmunk has white and black stripes over its body and face, while the California Ground Squirrel is grayish.

Coyotes and Bobcats are seen as their hunting routes take them across the grasslands. Their sun-grayed scat composed of undigested hair and bone fragments attest to their presence and their frequent use of man-made trails. Look for Raccoon tracks along the mud banks of the lakes, made during the nightly food-seeking activities. Look beneath grasses and sedges for the maze of runways of the California Meadow Mouse which is active in daylight hours and zips along memorized pathways like some miniature mechanical toy.

The large, somewhat conical shaped piles of sticks and twigs along woodland trails, or within the crotches of Live Oaks, betray the presence of the Dusky-footed Woodrat. At night it ventures forth to gather acorns, berries, seeds and nuts. Black-tailed jackrabbits are seen in the grassland and open areas. Early in the morning you may find them feeding upon grasses and herbs. Roundish pellets, 3/8” to 1/2” in diameter, in those areas indicate jackrabbit activity. The smaller and more timid Brush Rabbit is seen along the edges of brushy areas. In early mornings and evenings they do not stray more than a few feet from the protective cover of snowberry and poison oak thickets to feed upon grasses and plants.

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Descriptive Checklist of Mammals of the Foothills

INSECTIVORES	
Broad-footed Mole (<i>Scapanus latimanus</i>)	About 6 inches long with black, velvety fur. Front feet very stout – broader than long. Digs tunnels causing raised molehills. Eats worms, insects and plants.
Shrew Mole (<i>Neurotrichus gibbsi</i>)	A very small mole, about 3 1/2” long. Unlike true shrews, its tail is thick and furred. Usually found above ground in moist areas of litter and vegetation hunting worms, insects, etc.
Shrew (<i>Sorex sp.</i>)	Tiniest of mammals, 2-3” long. Black with pointed snout and tiny eyes. A voracious eater of insects and worms. Often found in moist areas. In Park, probably 5. omatus or trowbridgei
BATS	
Myotis Bat (<i>Myotis sp.</i>)	Several of these Myotis species of small flying mammals may frequent the park.. They are all nocturnal and catch insects on the wing. During the day they hide in caves and tree crevices.
Mexican Free-tailed Bat (<i>Tadarida mexicana</i>)	A small, dark bat, but larger than Myotis, with a tail extending well beyond their tail membrane. They feed on insects, chiefly moths. Seasonal, migrating south for the winter.
CARNIVORES	
Raccoon (<i>Procyon lotor</i>)	Frequents the lake shore at night, leaving tracks in the mud. Nests in hollow trees or togs. Eats fish, frogs, insects, fruits, small mammals, and reptiles. Curious and alert.
Striped Skunk (<i>Mephitis mephitis</i>)	Often smelled but seldom seen, it has two wide stripes atop its back. It dens in brush, burrows, and under buildings. Its food includes plants, berries, birds, eggs, and insects.
Western Spotted Skunk (<i>Spilogale putorius</i>)	Smaller than a Striped Skunk, with broken white stripes down its back. Habits are the same as above. It does a “hand-stand” preparatory to spraying a pursuer.
Long Tailed Weasel (<i>Mustela frenata</i>)	Has an elongated 8-10” body, a long tail with a black tip, and moves in an undulating lope. It is a predator of small mammals, birds, and reptiles, hunting by day as well as night.
Badger (<i>Taxidea taxus</i>)	Low and squat, and 1-1/2 to 2 feet long. It has powerful forearms used to dig out rodents. A badger’s presence is indicated by many large excavations in areas with a heavy concentration of gophers.
Gray Fox (<i>Urocyon cinereoargenteus</i>)	Grayish with rusty sides and a black stripe down its back and tail. Chaparral resident. Omnivorous, eating animals, berries, acorns, and fruit. Often uses distinct travel routes.
Coyote (<i>Canis latrans</i>)	Twice the size of the Gray Fox. Grayish, thin, and sharp featured, it carries its tail low. Omnivorous, eating rodents and plant material. Often deposits fur-containing scat along hiking trails.
Bobcat (<i>Lynx rufus</i>)	Significantly larger than a house cat, with longer legs and a short or bobbed tail. It hunts small mammals and birds. Dens in thickets and brushy areas.
RODENTS	
California Ground Squirrel (<i>Citellus beecheyi</i>)	Grayish, grizzled shoulders, with somewhat of a rat-like shape. Prefers open grassy areas, burrowing in the ground. Eats seeds, fruit, carrion, and plants.
Merriam Chipmunk (<i>Eutamias merriami</i>)	Only squirrel-like animal in the Park with stripes on its face and back. Its body is reddish brown. Chirps like a bird. Likes chaparral areas. Eats seeds, nuts, and fruit. Uncommon.
Western Gray Squirrel (<i>Sciurus griseus</i>)	A large gray squirrel with a bushy, plume-like tail. Spends most of its time in trees. Eats acorns, nuts, and fruit. Often noisy, with a loud, hoarse bird-like chirp or bark.
Fox Squirrel (<i>Sciurus niger</i>)	Similar to a Gray Squirrel, but with rust colored fur on its sides. Habits are similar. It was introduced to California from the eastern U.S. Like the Gray Squirrel, it makes large twig nests.
Pocket Gopher (<i>Thomomys bottae</i>)	Stocky rodent with very large incisors and fur lined cheek pouches. Eats roots, bulbs, and plants. Presence indicated by fresh mounds of earth in grassy areas.
White-footed Mouse (<i>Peromyscus sp.</i>)	Amongst the most widely distributed mammals in the Park, this mouse has jet-black eyes, large ears, and whitish feet. Common in the preserves, where it is usually either <i>P. maniculatus</i> or <i>P. californicus</i> .
Dusky-footed Woodrat (<i>Neotoma fuscipes</i>)	Somewhat rat-like, but with a furred tail and better habits. Its nests of large conical piles of twigs are common in woodland areas. Nocturnal, feeding on acorns, nuis, fruit, and seeds.
RABBITS AND HARES	
Black-tailed Jackrabbit (<i>Lepus californicus</i>)	Large, with very long ears and legs. Prefers grasslands or open brushy areas. Feeds on grasses and other plants, often in the early morning. Its presence is indicated by rounded 3/8” pellets.
Brush Rabbit (<i>Sylvilagus bachmani</i>)	Half the size of a Jackrabbit, with shorter ears and legs. Seldom seen more than a few feet from the safety of dense brush. Eats grasses and plant material. Often “freezes” when alarmed.
HOOFED MAMMALS	
Black-tailed Deer (<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>)	Most conspicuous preserve mammal. Bucks have antlers from late spring through late fall. Browses on the leaves of many plants.