

COMMON MAMMALS OF LAGUNA SAN IGNACIO

In addition to gray whales, Laguna San Ignacio is home to a variety of marine and terrestrial mammals that are permanent residents or reside seasonally in the lagoon watershed or the lagoon itself.

Next to the gray whale, groups of Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) roam the lagoon interior during the winter months. This species is cosmopolitan around the world and populations reside in and around the coastal lagoons of Baja California. The local fishermen tell us that Bottlenose dolphin may be



encountered during all months of the year, and they frequently will race to intercept moving boats to briefly “bow ride” on the pressure wake of the boats. Groups of Bottlenose dolphin follow schools of fish that move with the falling tides that spill across the sand and mud-



flats. It is not unusual to see one or more Bottlenose dolphin tossing a larger fish around at the surface of the water, or playfully leaping out of the water, but just why they do this is not clear. Over the winters we’ve opportunistically photographed many individual Bottlenose dolphin in Laguna San Ignacio and learned to recognize several individuals by the white scars on their flanks and cuts and nicks in their dorsal fins.

California sealions (*Zalophus californicanus*) haul-out on the outer beaches of the barrier islands that protect the lagoon interior from surf and storms. In winter groups of 50 or more animals will haul up onto the beach above the high tide line



to bask in the sun. Local naturalist and fisherman Ranulfo



Mayoral noticed that during the summer months groups of male and a few female California sealions will gather and haul-out on the southern end of Isla Pelicanos within the lagoon during the summer months. During October and November Ranulfo

observes upwards of 150 California sealions, mostly bachelor males and a few females. He has not seen any evidence of pups being born in these groups.



The desert around the lagoon and its shores are routinely patrolled by coyotes (*Canis latrans*) looking for carrion and to ambush marine birds along the shorelines. Some individuals have learned to dig for clams and hatchet scallops that are visible on the sandflats when exposed at low tides. In recent years coyotes have made their way onto virtually every sand and barrier island in the lagoon basin, and this has had a devastating

impact on many of the ground nesting birds, like the Osprey, pelicans, cormorants, and egrets. As more and more humans visit the lagoon, the coyotes are becoming bolder and are frequently seen prowling through the eco-tour camps during the days. At night, groups of coyotes in different locations will exchange “choruses” of their distinctive howls throughout the night.

A common desert mammal, especially around human habitation, is the Deer mouse (*Peromyscus maniculatus*) and its cousin the Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys sp.*). These small rodents forage during the nighttime hours for seeds, small insects, plants, and if they can find it, bits of food left over from humans that reside at the lagoon. The distinctive long tail of the K rat sets it apart from the smaller Deer mouse. Deer mice are known to carry the infectious “Hantavirus” which is contagious to humans if they come into contact with the animal’s droppings, urine or saliva.



The largest desert mammal to frequent the shores of Laguna San Ignacio is seldom seen, but leaves its footprints in the sandflats and salt marshes around the lagoon. The native, but endangered Pronghorned antelope, or Berrendo (*Antilocapra americana peninsularis*), is a subspecies of the North American antelope endemic to Baja California. For many decades these animals were found only in the desert south of Laguna Ojo de Liebre and in the Santa Clara mountains. Conservation efforts to protect the small herds from poachers, and a captive breeding program have encouraged the recovery of the species in Baja California. We find fresh foot-prints of these antelope in the salt flats and tidal areas along the northern shores of the Laguna San Ignacio, but we have yet to see an individual. Apparently as this elusive species’ numbers are increasing, they are beginning to re-occupy their former range throughout the Vizcaíno desert of Baja California and within the Biosphere Reserve.



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The desert surrounding Laguna San Ignacio is the home of the Black Tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus Californicus*). This small brown rabbit rarely uses burrows, but prefers to find cover in thick brush and vegetation to avoid predators. It is rarely seen during the day unless surprised and flushed from its hiding places. Evidence of their presence is usually groups of small round, pellet-like droppings left behind on their trails. They are most often seen at dusk and in the early morning when they forage on plant leaves and other vegetation. Brush rabbits are important food for coyotes.



Donkeys (*Equus africanus asinus*), a domesticated member of the Equidae or horse family were introduced to Baja California during colonial times to serve as work animals, as were mules which are hybrid equids resulting from the cross breeding of a female horse and a male donkey. These animals are known for their ability to transport people and goods over rugged terrain. As one would expect, some of these animals escaped from captivity and have roamed the deserts of Baja California, and occasionally they are seen along the roads or where water is reliably found.

