Identifying Similar Looking Animals on Wildlife Cameras

Sky Island Alliance
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Table of Contents

1. General Advice
2. Jackrabbits
3. Deer
4. Canines
5. Felines
6. The 4 skunk species
7. Squirrels
8. Procyonids
9. Opossum
10. Turkey vs Turkey Vulture
General Advice

• Use surrounding landscape for scale
  • Compare animal’s size to near by trees and rocks

• Get familiar with local wildlife
  • Some species might not even be in your area. Look at:
    • Range maps
    • Elevation
    • Vegetation type

• Go with your best educated guess if you don’t know!
  • This is a skill that takes practice
Jackrabbits

Antelope jackrabbit
• White rimmed ears
• White/silver sides
• Short tail

Black-tailed jackrabbit
• Black tipped ears
• Brownish colored overall
• Longer tail

Meagan’s opinion: Antelope jackrabbits have a blockier body and head shape than black-tails
Best ID feature: Ears
Antelope jackrabbit (*Lepus alleni*)

- White rimmed ears
- Silver sides
- Short tail
Black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*)

- Long tail
- Black tipped ears
- Sides are brown

Camera can wash out color and look white. Use other ID clues to help.
Comparison

Antelope jackrabbit

- White sides
- White rimmed ears

Black-tailed jackrabbit

- Long black tail, brown sides
- Black tipped ears
Deer

Mule deer
- Usually at lower elevations
- Black tipped tail
- Larger ears
- Dark forehead/eyebrows
- Long metatarsal gland
- Male antler’s points fork like a tree

White-tailed deer aka Coues Deer
- Usually at higher elevations
- Fluffy white underside of tail
- White band on nose
- Male antler’s points come from a single main beam
- Short metatarsal gland

Meagan’s opinion: Don’t rely on ear size alone! Both have large looking ears to help regulate heat.
Best ID feature: Tail
Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

- Black tipped tail “rope-like”
- White rump
- Antlers fork as they grow
- Tan/orange legs
- Large ears
- Long metatarsal gland
- Dark eyebrows

Jim Rorabaugh

CR Schulz
White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

- White band on nose
- Fluffy white underside of tail
- Short metatarsal gland
- Antler tines come off main beam
Where the heck is the metatarsal gland?

A scent gland on the outside of the hind legs.

Mule deer: longer, higher up

White-tailed deer: Small, lower on leg

The legs are not always clear or in the shot, use other clues first like the tail.
Comparison: Bucks

Mule deer

White-tailed deer
Comparison: Does Mule deer White-tailed deer
Comparison: Mug shots

Mule deer

White-tailed deer
Canines

Coyote
• Large body
• Long legs
• Body high off ground
• Large ears

Foxes
• Small
• Short legs
• Body lower to ground
• Very long tail
• Cat like
Coyote (*Canis latrans*)

- Long legs
- Tail doesn’t reach the ground
- Big ears
- Long legs
- Big ears
Gray fox (*Urocyon cinereorargenteus*)

- **Gray and orange coat**
- **Small delicate head**
- **Body low to ground**
- **Orange and white sides**
- **Black tail stripe**
Foxes

**Gray fox**
- More common
- Greater territorial range
- Larger
- Gray, white, and orange colored
- Black tipped tail WITH black stripe along top

**Kit fox**
- Less common
- Found in deserts
- Smaller
- Sandy gray and orange colored
- Black tipped tail

Meagan’s opinion: In the Sky Island region, gray foxes are much more common, but always check for a tail stripe!
Best ID feature: Tail
Common felines

**Mountain lion**
- Very large
- Long tail
- Solid tan/orange with white undersides
- Round ears
- Longer back legs than front gives them distinctive silhouette

**Bobcat**
- Smaller
- Short tail
- Brownish gray, may have spots
- Dark stripes on inside of legs
- Large pointed ears

Meagan’s opinion: Mountain lions have small heads compared to their bodies
Mountain lion (*Puma concolor*)

- Long tail
- Round ears
- Solid tan and white color
- Small head compared to body
- Long distinctive body shape,
Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*)

- Pointed ears
- Dark forearm bars
- Short tail
- No long tail visible
- Cheek fur
- Long legs

*Sky Island Fotofauna*
4 skunk species

• Hooded skunk
• Striped skunk
• Hog-nosed skunk
• Spotted skunk
• 3 look similar
  • Hooded, striped, and hog-nosed
• 2 look very different once you know what to look for
  • Spotted and hog-nosed
• 2 require practice and experience
  • Striped and hooded
Mephitis genus

Hooded skunk
- White face stripe
- Tail much longer than body
- Longer shaggier fur
- Coat patterns highly variable
- May appear like the striped but the white doesn’t meet at the top of the back but continues along side

Striped skunk
- White face stripe
- Tail shorter than body
  - ~2/3 of body
    - Fur makes it look about body length
- Body looks larger because of shorter tail
- Some variations in coat patterns
- Always have a black stripe at the base of the back and tail bisecting the white
  - White looks like a Y
- The white stripes always meet above the neck/shoulders

Meagan’s opinion: Use tail length and LOOK FOR THAT BLACK STRIPE ON THE BACK!
Striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*)

- **Black stripe on back**: Can be very faint.
- **White stripe on face**: White always meets above shoulders forming a ‘Y’ or ‘V’.
- **Tail roughly body length**
Hooded skunk (*Mephitis macroura*)

- Long tail
- White face stripe
- Fur patterns can vary greatly
- White on neck and head extends past ears, like a hood!
- Can have black back and tail, but the white does not meet above the shoulders. No ‘Y’

Hooded skunk, not a caterpillar

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Comparison: Mephitis

Striped skunk

- Black back stripe

Hooded skunk

- Very long tail!

- White meets above shoulders

- White continues along the sides
Spotted and Hog-nosed

**Western spotted skunk**
- Much smaller than other skunks
- Often a blur on camera
- Distinctive marbled coat
- Large white spot between the eyes
- Shorter tail, fan-like instead of a bottlebrush

**Hog-nosed skunk**
- Large bare nose like a pig
- Stocky body and legs
- Powerful digging claws
- Shorter, all white tail
- Entire back and top of head between the ears is white
  - The white on the head looks like a cap or hat
Western spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*)

- Distinctive marbled coat
- Spot on face instead of stripe
- Short, fan-like tail
- Often appears as bounding blurs!
- Much smaller than the other three skunk species

Jim Rorabaugh
Hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus leuconotus*)

- White on neck and head extends stays between the ears, like a cap
- Large bare nose
- Tail shorter than body
- Stockier body shape
- Shorter body fur makes the line between white and black cleaner
Mephitis vs Conepatus

Striped skunk and Hooded skunk- white backed variation
- White face stripe
- Leaner body and thinner legs
- Longer tails with black mixed in
- Longer fur on body
- Hooded skunks: White extends past ears like a hood

Hog-nosed skunk
- NO face stripe!
- Large bare nose like a pig
- Large stocky body and legs
- Tail short and all white
- Shorter fur on body, clean line between white and black
- White stays between ears like a cap

Meagan’s opinion: Use body shape, hog-noses look like mini honey badgers
Comparison

Mephitis skunks

Hog-nosed skunk

Black tail of a striped skunk

All white tail

Tail longer than body of hooded skunk

Tail shorter than body
Squirrels – Tree squirrels

Abert’s Squirrel
• Found in pine forests and higher elevations
• Slate gray color
• Rust red fur on back
• Silver lined tail
• Almost always have distinctive tufted ears

Arizona gray squirrel
• Found in oak woodlands and riparian areas
• Grayish brown
• Underside of tail looks reddish orange
• Ears lack ear tufts
• Neck fur may be orange behind ears
Comparison

Abert’s squirrel

- Tufted ears
- Silver tail
- Rust colored only on back

Arizona gray squirrel

- No tufts
- Brownish gray body
- Tail has more color in it
Common camera squirrels

**Arizona gray squirrel**
• Gray-brown overall,
  • May have orange patches
• Coat pattern not as complicated as a rock squirrel’s
• White undersides
• Tail long and fluffy with silver and brown fur
• It’s a tree squirrel, it looks like it’s made to jump through trees
  • Long legs and tail
  • Agile, active posture
• They forage on the ground but live-in trees.
• Found mainly in oak and sycamore canyons
  • Mostly in the mountains

**Rock squirrel**
• Salt and pepper coat, multicolored hair makes coat looked flecked
• Back half often an orange brown color
• Tail often held lower to ground
• It’s a ground dwelling squirrel and its behavior often shows this
  • Staying close to ground
  • Perching on rocks
• Adaptable and found in a lot of environments
  • Deserts, canyons, rocky pine forests, urban landscapes

Meagan’s opinion: First consider the environment, gray squirrels are far more limited. Then look for the salt and pepper coloration, and orange rump of the rock squirrels.
Rock squirrel (*Otospermophilus varigatus*)

Much more common is a variety of vegetation types (deserts to pine trees)

Back half often a brown-orange

Body and tail often held low to ground

Salt and pepper coat and tail

Bushy tail has flecked black and white pattern too

Likes to perch on rocks, aptly named
Arizona gray squirrel (*Sciurus arizonensis*)

- **Coat gray overall**
- **Fluffy, silver and brown tail**
- **Tail often held high**
- **Long legs for jumping**
- **Found mostly in the oak woodlands and riparian canyons**
- **White undersides**
Ground squirrels

Round-tailed ground squirrel
- Simple tan and white fur
- Long skinny black tipped tail
- Social and live-in colonies in a large burrow
- Not a prairie dog!
  - But they do look like mini versions of them

Harris’s antelope squirrel
- Striped body
  - Brown, orange, and white
  - One white stripe along sides
- Tail fluffy and held above body
  - The tail acts as an umbrella from the sun!
- More solitary
- Not a chipmunk!
  - Chipmunks are found at higher elevations and have more stripes

Meagan’s opinion: Both are similar size and are active at the hottest part of the day, but have very different appearances and behaviors.
Round tailed ground squirrel (*Xerospermophilus tereticaudus*)

- Sandy tan colored
- Long skinny tail
- White undersides

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Harris's antelope squirrel (*Ammospermophilus harrisii*)

- **White eye ring**
- **Orange brown and white**
- **Fluffy tail held high**
- **White line along body**
Striped squirrels

**Harris’s antelope squirrel**
- Found in deserts
  - Below 4,500 ft
- Ears small and round
- Face not striped
  - White eye ring only
- Body has a single bold white stripe on each side
- Tail almost always held above body

**Cliff Chipmunk**
- Higher in elevation
  - 5,000-12,000 ft
- Ears tall and pointed
- Face boldly striped
  - Orange and white stripes on eyes and cheeks
- Back has multiple black and faint white stripes
- Tail held behind body
The Procyonids

**Ringtail** (*Bassariscus astutus*)
- Small tan body, long black and white tail

**Raccoon** (*Procyon lotor*)
- Black mask, tail shorter than body

**White-nosed coati** (*Nasua narica*)
- Long nose and tail

Both ringtails and raccoons are primarily nocturnal while coatis are diurnal.

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Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana californica*)

- Much larger than packrats
- Pointed face
- Dark stripes across eyes and forehead
- Long skinny tail
- Tail bicolored, dark base with lighter tip
- Much larger than packrats
- Dark stripes across eyes and forehead
Turkey birds

Gould’s turkey
- Colorful head
- Waddles
- White tipped feathers
- Iridescent feathers

Turkey vulture
- Pink head
- Shorter legs
- Solid dark brown color

Long legs
Thank you to all FotoFauna Partners and Collaborators!