

# Spain and France Mammal Report: 13 to 26 September 2014

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Brown Long-eared Bat (*Plecotus auritus*)

## Introduction

Spain is one of the top countries in Europe for mammal watching and in the past I have enjoyed several successful trips pursuing Cuvier's Beaked Whale, Iberian Lynx and Grey Wolf. With a number of species still left to see we decided to spend a week in the Cambrian Mountains primarily targeting the Cambrian Brown Bear but also hoping for European Wildcat, Broom Hare and the local subspecies of Pyrenean Chamois.

Perhaps less well known for its wildlife, France still has a lot to offer the mammal enthusiast. Although the second part of our trip was mainly for relaxation purposes, we managed to spend a reasonable amount of time chasing bats and other small mammals with varying amounts of success.

## Travel details

We used our own 4X4 vehicle giving us plenty of room for spotlights, field guides, mammal traps, etc. Our initial plan was to use a ferry to get from Portsmouth to Santander, offering a leisurely start to the trip and a day of cetacean watching as we crossed the Bay of Biscay. Unfortunately (and rather embarrassingly!) we managed to miss the ferry departure time by an hour, mostly due to a series of horrendous traffic jams caused by roadworks and car accidents. To their credit Brittany Ferries offered to transfer our booking to another route, the most practical being the boat

to St-Malo departing later the same evening. As a result we missed out on the whales and had an eleven hour drive across France to northern Spain. A severe traffic jam through Nantes increased the journey time to thirteen hours and it's fair to say our trip didn't get off to the best of starts!

Our accommodation needs were met by some pretty nice B&B's although cheaper options were available at all locations. In all we covered over 4,000 miles in two weeks, using the Channel Tunnel to return to the UK at the end of our holiday.

### **Soto de Cangas, Asturias, Spain: 13 to 16 September 2014**



Lago Ercina, Covadonga

Located on the northern edge of Picos de Europa National Park, we spent our first three nights in Soto de Cangas where we stayed at the La Ablaneda (highly recommended). This gave us easy access to the Covadonga Lakes, an area where Vladimir Dinets had seen Broom Hare earlier in the year.

We didn't arrive at our hotel until late evening and while driving the last couple of miles we saw a Southern Smooth Snake and two **Badger** cubs; the later kicking the mammal list off nicely.

On our first full day we joined the Sunday tourists and hiked around the lakes seeing plenty of birds, a few reptiles but no mammals. A torrential rainstorm forced us off the mountain but we returned after dinner to seek out some nocturnal wildlife. Although the whole district is very touristy with restaurants and hotels aplenty, the daytime traffic quickly disappeared once darkness fell.

As we made our way up the lower forested section of the Covadonga Lakes access road we startled a **Badger** that was foraging on the shoulder.



Badger (*Meles meles*)

A **Red Fox** quickly followed but mammal sightings dried up once we entered the pastures and moorland where the Broom Hare can be found. The steep, hairpin nature of the road made spotlighting from a moving vehicle difficult so I spent some time looking for eyeshine on foot. Disappointingly in several hours I only found more **Red Foxes** and what I presume to be **Daubenton's Bats** flying over the lower lake. The continuous drizzle had brought out good numbers of amphibians including Palmate Newts and some fantastic Fire Salamanders.



Honorary Mammal (*Salamandra salamandra*)

I set some Sherman traps along the river behind our hotel and the next morning they contained a couple of **Wood Mice**. We then drove south to Fuente De where we planned to take a cable car up the mountain and look for Snow Voles that are reportedly common along the paths around the upper station. Frustratingly the cable car was out of action and no one seemed to know for how long. We wasted several hours waiting with the other tourists for the mechanics to fix the problem, before hiking around some local trails to kill some time. They never got the cable car working.

After a delicious dinner in Cangas de Onis, we embarked on another spotlighting session in search of Broom Hares. Despite spending several hours walking and driving the Covadonga Lakes road we didn't find any lagomorphs. **Red Foxes** proved common in the pastures, while the woodland gave up two more **Badger** sightings and a couple of **Wild Boar**.

Other mammals commonly found in the area include Roe Deer and Pine Marten, while Pyrenean Chamois occur high up above the lakes and are easier to see in winter. Much more difficult to observe in the Picos de Europa are Brown Bear, Grey Wolf and Pyrenean Desman, the later which are said to inhabit the river which runs through Soto de Cangas.

### **Somiedo National Park, Asturias, Spain: 16 to 19 September 2014**



La Peral, Somiedo National Park

Housing Spain's main nuclei of Cambrian Brown Bears, Somiedo National Park has become a popular destination for wildlife tour operators hoping to show their clients a glimpse of this elusive mammal. The bear watching season starts in August and ends mid September and at this time animals can usually be viewed as they leave the forest to gorge on berry-bearing trees and shrubs, particularly Alpine Buckthorn.

Although we were a little late in the season I still hoped we'd be able to spot some bears, making sure we arrived in the park with enough time to find the best bear watching areas. After checking into the Hotel Rural Somiedo (great value and recommended) I popped into the tourist information centre in Pola de Somiedo where I enquired about recent bear sightings. I was relieved when the guide didn't just give the usual 'oh, no one sees the bears' spiel and instead informed me that some bears had recently been seen above the hamlet of Gua. Knowing that La Peral is the usual watch point I asked if any animals were showing there. The lady seemed to know her stuff and told me none had been seen for at least a week.



Somiedo is quite compact and it didn't take long to reach the tiny settlement of Gua. It was too early for the dusk bear activity so I continued south as far as La Peral, mainly to familiarise myself with the area. At this point low cloud had moved in and it started to rain, greatly reducing visibility at a time when it was most crucial.

Back in Gua we parked next to the small cemetery before noticing several other bear watchers eagerly scanning the surrounding mountain slopes. One guy pointed out a **Red Deer** stag high up on a ridge but no one had seen a bear over the last couple of days. As the rain worsened most people headed off to sit in their cars, some drove off. Moments later Sarah spotted a huge male **Brown Bear** walking through an orchard on the other side of the main road. The view was fantastic as it stood on its hind legs to reach an apple from a particularly high tree. Unfortunately Sarah's camera was in the car keeping dry and we missed part of the spectacle trying to attract the attention of other bear watchers. The bear disappeared back into the forest never to be seen again despite several more people appearing to join in the search.

Heavy rain persuaded us to have an early night but we awoke at dawn to explore the park. I was particularly interested in looking for Broom Hare habitat and soon found a suitable area along the road south of El Puerto (southern border of the park).

Back at La Peral we bumped into John Hallowell from Wild Wolf Experience who was good enough to share some local knowledge. He confirmed that the El Principe mirador at La Peral had not produced a bear all week, most likely because the buckthorn crop across from the watch point had been completely depleted by hungry animals. Moreover the rain and strong wind had made it difficult to use the viewpoint so I guess any bears that were still about may not have been recorded.

On the plus side a European Wildcat had been showing quite well in the irrigated hay meadows below the village. In fact one of John's clients had seen it hunting for voles several minutes before we had turned up.

After a fantastic late lunch at the restaurant in Caunedo the rain had eased enough for a wildcat stakeout back at La Peral. Carefully parking next to the Km 47 marker gave us a good view over one of the meadows where the cat had been seen. After about half an hour a female **European Wildcat** appeared showing the full suite of pelage markings suggesting that Somiedo wildcats are pure and that inbreeding with the local domestic cats is limited.

We watched the cat as it patiently patrolled the field in search of voles. Unfortunately we didn't see it catch anything and before long it disappeared over a ridge and out of view.



European Wildcat (*Felis silvestris*)

By now it was time to return to Gua for the late afternoon bear watch where a couple of **Pyrenean Chamois** (Cantabrian subspecies) were spotted high up on the mountain slopes that surround the settlement. However, despite the fact we were joined by good numbers of dedicated bear watchers, including a team from France and a couple of small tour groups, it wasn't until dusk when a **Brown Bear** was spotted. This time it was a juvenile feeding along the forest edge at top of the scree slope west of the village. Although the light had almost gone it still gave reasonable telescope views until it was too dark to see anymore.

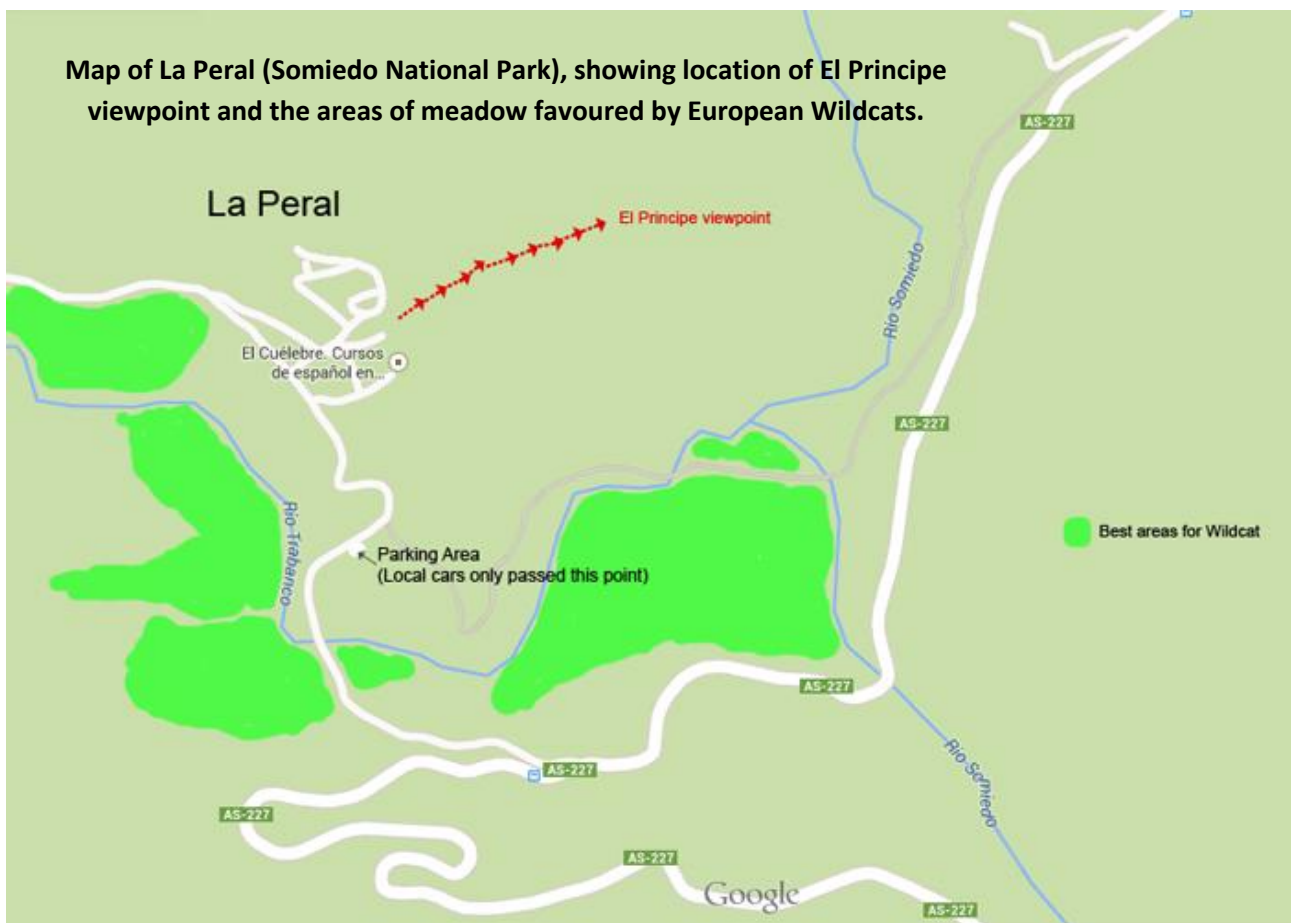
After dinner Sarah and I embarked on a very long night drive, mostly concentrating on the road south from El Puerto, including the area just outside the park boundary. I was mainly targeting Broom Hare although with strong winds I was not optimistic. After countless **Red Foxes** and **Wood Mice** I picked up some interesting eyeshine south of El Puerto and just over the boundary. Once I realised it was a kitten I almost told Sarah to carrying driving until I noticed a thick, striped club tail, dorsal stripe and the other features indicating it was a **European Wildcat**. Extremely curious, the kitten gave fantastic views although typically the camera was out of reach.

Changing my tactics I tried spotlighting on foot although the only paths through the moor were those made by cattle. With no luck I decided to investigate a brick shelter used to house a waste bin and found two Iberian **Brown Long-eared Bats** roosting inside. The shelter is just south of El Puerto and is located next to a riverside picnic area.

On our last day in Somiedo we decided to investigate the El Principe mirador at La Peral in the hope of seeing more impressive numbers of chamois and perhaps a bear. Unfortunately the wind and rain was relentless once we had made the ten minute hike from the car park, forcing us to retreat back to the car for some shelter. Despite the horizontal hail we were able to appreciate the vast area covered from the watch point and in clear conditions it must be possible to see for miles.

A vehicle track (foot access only) goes west from La Peral and passes several of the local thatched roofed shepherd huts so popular with photographers. From this road we saw another female **European Wildcat** hunting in the adjacent meadow. Possibly the same animal we saw a day earlier, we were able to watch it distantly for about ten minutes.

As the La Peral area is usually the best watch point for bears, chamois and wildcat I've provided a map showing the main areas below.



I was tempted to spend our last evening bear watch at La Peral but the wet and windy weather made the relative shelter of Gua a more inviting prospect. Again, it wasn't until twilight when a **Brown Bear** was spotted on the slope behind the village and it spent most of its time hidden by trees.

Another long night drive failed to produce any new mammals, although as usual **Red Foxes** and **Wood Mice** were abundant. I guess any Broom Hares will have been hunkered down in the heather keeping out of the wind and heavy rain which lasted throughout the night.

There is no doubt that Somiedo National Park is a fantastic mammal watching location and with time or more favourable weather conditions it should be possible to find Broom Hare. Pine Marten is also relatively common and Grey Wolf is sometimes seen from the watch points.

## Sabo, Languedoc-Roussillon, France: 20 September 2014



Abandoned Chateau

Leaving Spain behind us we drove to Biarritz in France for a mammal-less night on the coast. We then continued west to the hamlet of Sabo, Labastide-Rouairoux, where we stayed at the Fond Dal Mas Hotel (recommended).

We only had one night in Sabo and I was eager to visit the Grotte de Julio near Julio le Haut. Although the tunnel is fenced to prevent access, I hoped to see the Mediterranean Horseshoe Bats as they emerged, along with various other bat species that share the roost. Sadly we didn't arrive on site until well after dusk and never actually found the exact location of the tunnel (or at least couldn't safely park where we suspected the tunnel entrance to be). The sky was full of bats and from my bat detector it was evident that many of them were *Rhinolophus* species including some **Mediterranean Horseshoe Bats**. However, with so many other bats flying about at a given time, I didn't feel I'd seen them well enough to add them to my life list.

The gardens of our accommodation looked like excellent habitat for small mammals and the friendly owners said they often see white-toothed shrews around the place. I set some traps overnight but disappointingly by morning I had only captured a single **Wood Mouse**.

Before we continued on our way to Provence I couldn't resist looking around a huge abandoned Chateau located just outside Sabo. Although the main building was protected by security grilles, many outbuildings and an overgrown garden provided a haven for wildlife and I could easily have spent a full day exploring. With time at a premium I only managed to find a single **Common Pipistrelle** roosting behind a wooden shutter.





Common Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*)

## Vidauban, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, France: 21 to 26 September 2014



Vineyards of Vidauban

The last five nights of our holiday were spent at Chateau Verez (highly recommended) near Vidauban. Surrounded by vineyards our accommodation wasn't selected for its wildlife potential, however I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of biodiversity living around the farm. Mammals were not as obvious as the many bird and herp species, however both **Red Fox** and **Brown Hare** were noted while driving back to our accommodation after dark.

I was given permission to set my Sherman traps where I pleased and the farm manager even gave me an impromptu tour on his quad bike to show me various areas of set-aside with apparently high rodent densities. Unfortunately many of my traps were swarmed by ants, including a particularly aggressive species that gave a nasty bite without much provocation. While limiting my

bait to sunflower husks may have reduced the problem, I chose instead to cut the number of trap nights, setting them at dusk and only when I was certain I could check them immediately after sunrise.

Over two more nights I captured a fantastic **Lesser White-toothed Shrew** and, somewhat less thrilling, a **House Mouse**. I was hoping for an Algerian Mouse but with hindsight I may have been better setting my traps in damp, deciduous woodland rather than a dry, highly disturbed agricultural environment.



Lesser White-toothed Shrew (*Crocidura suaveolens*)

Our days were spent relaxing and doing regular tourist activities, although we also visited several sites around the region in search of mammals.

#### Grotto de La Truèbis, Solliès-Toucas

Located 15 km east from Toulon, this cave is a known **Lesser Mouse-eared Bat** roost. The colony is found quite deep within the cave (about 15 metres from the entrance) but once I reached the correct area I easily found a single animal hanging from the wall.

#### Vallon Sourn, Chateaufort

Following the Argens River, the cliffs of Vallon Sourn are popular with rock climbers. European Free-tailed Bats can often be found roosting in the cracks of the cliff face and I spent several hours searching for them without success. The majority of potential roosting sites are way out of reach without abseiling equipment so I returned to the site at dusk in the hope of seeing the bats leave the roost. The plan worked to an extent and I saw several large bats flying directly away from the cliffs. With a powerful and fast flight action it is likely they were **European Free-tailed Bats** although it was dark at this point, and the bats were too high up to be sure.

### Gorge du Verdon , Quinson

The abandoned tunnels of the Canal du Verdon hold good numbers of Long-fingered Bats and I arrived shortly before dusk to explore the area. Although I managed to find my way into the first couple of tunnels that run adjacent to a public footpath, the bats had already started to emerge. I quickly returned back to the lake (just south of Quinson) and watched many **Long-fingered Bats** hunting low over the water. Apparently the main bat roosts are protected by a security gate.

### Haut-Thorenc, Andon

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the trip, the meadow streams opposite the zoological park are allegedly a good place to see Southern Water Vole. Having missed this species a couple of times before in Spain, I visited the site mid afternoon and waited until after dark without sight or sound of a vole. Frustratingly there were tunnels and fresh diggings everywhere so I decided to make another visit despite it nearly being a four hour round trip from our chateau.

On my second attempt I arrived at dawn in temperatures just above freezing and patiently waited along a particularly promising section of the stream for a couple of hours. The voles were nowhere to be seen, neither were the Miller's Water Shrews which also live in the area. With other things to do I cut my losses, vowing to return for a longer vigil when I'm next in France.

Although I barely explored the Andon area it seemed a pretty good place for wildlife. On our first visit we saw an impressive **Red Deer** stag crossing the road and moments later we came across a very fresh road-killed Badger. More details of the area (including the vole site) can be found on mammalwatching.com.

### Jardin botanique de la Villa Thuret, Antibes

As we were in the area anyway, we called in on this park to look for the introduced Pallas's Squirrels. Several circuits of the gardens failed to produce any rodents although we did come across several containers which looked suspiciously like arboreal versions of the rat catchers used by Rentokil. Our fears were confirmed when we came across an information board hidden behind a building as it turns out a programme to eradicate the squirrels has been in place since 2010! Although the squirrels can still be found in other parts of the Cap d' Antibes, we couldn't find the time nor the enthusiasm to search for them.

### **Species seen**

1.	<b>Lesser White-toothed Shrew</b> <i>Crocidura suaveolens</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>An animal trapped along vineyard drainage ditch near Vidauban, France (25 Sept) showed external characteristics and measurements consistent with this species.</li></ul>
-	<b>European Mole</b> <i>Talpa europaea</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A very fresh corpse found on the road in Somiedo NP, Spain (16 Sept) was most likely this species. Clearly not a road kill, it is likely the animal was killed by a dog or other predator.</li></ul>

2.	<b>Horseshoe Bat sp.</b> <i>Rhinolophus sp.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several <i>Rhinolophus</i> picked up on bat detector near Grotte de Julio, Languedoc-Roussillon, France (20 Sept). The frequency suggested Mediterranean Horseshoe which are common in the tunnel, however two other <i>Rhinolophus</i> species (Lesser and Greater Horseshoe) share the roost site and could not be completely ruled out. It is possible all three species were present.</li> </ul>
3.	<b>European Free-tailed Bat</b> <i>Tadarida teniotis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some large, fast flying bats seen high over Vallon Sourn, France (25 Sept) were probably this species. The bats appeared to be leaving the cliff face which is a known free-tail roost.</li> </ul>
4.	<b>Iberian Brown Long-eared Bat</b> <i>Plecotus auritus begognae</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two animals found late evening (17 Sept) roosting in brick shelter just south of El Puerto, Somiedo NP, Spain. Larger and genetically different from the nominate form, this subspecies probably deserves full species status.</li> </ul>
5.	<b>Common Pipistrelle</b> <i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A single animal found roosting behind window shutter of abandoned building near Sabo, France (21 Sept).</li> </ul>
6.	<b>Lesser Mouse-eared Bat</b> <i>Myotis blythii</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A single bat found roosting deep in a cave near Toucas, France (23 Sept).</li> </ul>
7.	<b>Long-fingered Bat</b> <i>Myotis capaccinii</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many bats observed leaving known roost and hunting low over lake south of Quinson, France early evening (22 Sept).</li> </ul>
8.	<b>Daubenton's Bat</b> <i>Myotis daubentonii</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The <i>Myotis</i> hunting low over the lower Covadonga Lake, Spain (14 and 15 Sept) were presumably this species.</li> </ul>
9.	<b>Red Fox</b> <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Common and seen almost daily throughout trip.</li> <li>Especially numerous on night drives.</li> </ul>
10.	<b>Cantabrian Brown Bear</b> <i>Ursus actos</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large male observed south east of Gua, Somiedo NP, Spain (16 Sept) at approx. 1830hrs. The bear stood on rear legs to reach an apple before disappearing back into the forest.</li> <li>Young individual seen feeding along forest edge at dusk (17 Sept) on top of scree slope west of Gua.</li> <li>Poor views of bear at dusk on scree slope north of Gua (18 Sept).</li> </ul>
11.	<b>Eurasian Badger</b> <i>Meles meles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Five sightings, including same animal seen twice, around Soto de Cangas, Spain (between 13-15 Sept)</li> </ul>



12.	<b>European Wildcat</b> <i>Felis silvestris</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female watched hunting voles in meadow below La Peral, Somiedo NP, late afternoon (17 Sept).</li> <li>• Very young individual seen late evening from main road just south of Somiedo NP park boundary (17 Sept).</li> <li>• Female hunting voles in meadow north east of La Peral, early afternoon (18 Sept).</li> </ul>
13.	<b>Wild Boar</b> <i>Sus scrofa</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two animals seen on forested section of Covadonga Lake road, Spain, late evening (15 Sept).</li> </ul>
14.	<b>Red Deer</b> <i>Cervus elaphus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stag seen high on mountain ridge east of Gua, Somiedo NP, Spain (16 Sept).</li> <li>• Hind and calf observed in meadow between La Peral and Caunedo, Somiedo NP (18 Sept).</li> <li>• Stag crossed road south of Thorenc, France, early evening (23 Sept).</li> </ul>
15.	<b>European Roe Deer</b> <i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Several seen in roadside fields at dusk while driving through central France (26 Sept).</li> </ul>
16.	<b>Pyrenean Chamois</b> <i>Rupicapra pyrenaica parva</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two of the Cantabrian subspecies observed from Gua , Somiedo NP (17 Sept).</li> <li>• Good numbers can apparently be seen from El Principe viewpoint, La Peral.</li> </ul>
17.	<b>European Hare</b> <i>Lepus europaeus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One seen late evening while driving through vineyards near Vidauban, France (21 Sept).</li> </ul>
18.	<b>European Rabbit</b> <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good numbers seen after dark while driving through northern France (26 Sept).</li> </ul>
19.	<b>Wood Mouse</b> <i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two trapped in Soto de Cangas, Spain (14 Sept).</li> <li>• Numerous after dark in Somiedo NP, Spain.</li> <li>• One trapped in Sabo, France (20 Sept).</li> </ul>
20.	<b>House Mouse</b> <i>Mus musculus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One trapped in woodland bordering vineyards, Vidauban, France (25 Sept).</li> <li>• A <i>Mus</i> that crossed road near Vidauban, France (24 Sept) was most likely this species.</li> </ul>

## **Conclusion**

Considering the early logistical mishaps it was a pretty successful trip. Yet again Spain provided some fantastic mammal watching opportunities including my target Cambrian Brown Bear and European Wildcat. Seeing a Broom Hare was never going to be easy, although with more time and better weather conditions it is certainly possible. Snow Vole and Pyrenean Desman provide additional incentives for a return visit to Picos de Europa, as does the potential cetacean watching from the Portsmouth to Santander ferry.

Our time in France was also very enjoyable and we managed to cram a fair amount of mammal watching around more regular tourist activities. Our success with the bats was down to some fantastic help and advice from Jean-Michel Bompar and for this we are very grateful. No doubt I'll be trying again for Southern Water Vole before too long and I'll hopefully spend some more time tracking down the many French bats and rodents that I have yet to see.