

Mammal watching in Southern Italy

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Southern Italy is probably the poorest part of Western Europe. Prior to 1860 it was a modern, prosperous country. During that time of rapid industrial development there was a lot of deforestation; most large mammals and even some small ones (i. e. moles on Sicily) went extinct. The so-called Unification, achieved with much fanfare in 1860, was immediately used by Northern Italy to plunder the South's finances and meticulously destroy its industries. Much of the population had no choice but to emigrate. The region has never fully recovered; its major cities look very Third World (actually, some Third World cities look better than Naples or Palermo nowadays), and the interior is somewhat depopulated. As a result, there is now plenty of good habitat and a lot of interesting mammals (almost all ungulate populations result from reintroductions). The extensive network of national, regional and provincial parks is fairly unregulated, although some trails are officially closed at night and a few require reservations in high season. Many caves have been developed for tourism (see showcaves.com for more info), but I haven't visited any of those, and don't know if they still have any bats. There are no whalewatching tours in Southern Italy, but numerous ferry crossings provide access to the high seas.

People are very friendly except when they are driving, and some even speak a little English. Food is outstanding: even local tomatoes are much sweeter and tastier than any fruit available in North America. Credit cards are not universally accepted and are processed a bit slowly; money exchange is difficult to find. Bring cash to avoid paying ATM fees. Avoid high season (late June-late September), and spend weekends in remotest locations.

Freeways are very good and often almost empty; some of them are amazing feats of engineering, running almost entirely through tunnels and bridges. Other roads are usually slow, but the countryside is very beautiful, so long drives tend to be a bonus rather than a chore. Night drives on rural roads can be very productive, but it is important to pick roads with zero nighttime traffic, because more often than not there is no place to safely pull over if you see something interesting. The main difficulty is navigation. Road signs are sparse, streets are seldom labeled, and GPS maps are said to be inaccurate to the point of being seriously dangerous. I've never bothered with using GPS in Italy (coordinates provided below were obtained from GoogleEarth after the trip). In a few cases when I tried to use Google for directions, those were totally inaccurate, too. The printed map we had, Michelin's *Southern Italy*, proved reasonably good for rural roads, but inexplicably omitted western Sicily. Of course, you'll need separate maps for major cities.

There are about 70 species of land mammals in Southern Italy. Some local subspecies are very distinctive, for example, the large local race of **Eurasian red squirrel**, which closely resembles Abert's squirrel of North America; I am not aware of any studies on its molecular phylogeny. A few endemic forms have recently been proposed to be full species (**Sicilian shrew**, **Sardinian long-eared bat**, **Calabrian** and **Sicilian voles**); others are shared only with Northern Italy (**Savii's pine vole**, **Appenine shrew**, **Roman mole**, non-introduced **Corsican hare**). A few more widespread species, such as **Etruscan shrew**, **blind mole**, **Pyrenean chamois**, **wildcat**, **pine marten**, and **European snow vole**, are apparently easier to see in Southern Italy than anywhere else. Except at higher elevations, all land mammals are nocturnal and/or crepuscular. Marine mammals (12 species) are generally sparse and difficult to see; the least rare of them are **short-beaked common** and **striped dolphins**.

The information below is mostly based on a visit on June 7-23, 2013. I saw ~44 species during that time with relatively little effort. If you think it's a surprisingly high number, so do I. I've also been in Southern Italy in February 1993, but that was a hitchhiking trip on almost-zero budget, so I was mostly limited to more populated areas and saw only 7 species in ten days. I think it should be possible to see all or almost all land mammals on a more dedicated, month-long trip.

Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise, commonly known simply as Abruzzo National Park, is a beautiful area with the best collection of montane species in the region. Almost all land mammals of the region have been recorded in the park. In early June it was delightfully empty of tourists, and the weather was perfect for hiking. While driving into the park we saw a gorgeous black **Eurasian red squirrel** near Paso di Diablo (41.93N 13.709E), a huge **Eurasian boar** in a meadow N of Valle Chiara (41.86N 13.77E), and two **red deer** stags on a slope near Opi (N E). Other people have seen **brown bears** along this road, particularly from the viewpoint at Gioia Veccio church

(41.9N 17.733E). We stayed at the very nice Albergo Antico Borgo La Torre (41.765N 13.941E) in Civitella Alfedena (1100 m), which is one of the cheapest options in the park, and the most conveniently located. About 50 m up the street from the hotel is a trail signposted as Area Natural di Lince. It is only about 200 m long, and always had **red deer** does with fawns at the time of our stay. Along the trail there is a small walk-in cave (41.766N 13.941E) which had 1-2 **lesser horseshoe-nosed bats** during the day and one (much less friendly) **Western barbastelle** at night. There are electric lights at the trailhead; at night there were two bat species flying around these lights. The smaller ones were almost certainly the **lesser horseshoe bats** from the cave, while the larger ones looked like **common noctules**, although this is obviously far from certain. There are also lynx enclosures below the trail, but the lynx are seldom visible. There is contradictory info on whether any non-captive **Eurasian lynx** still live in the park.

Abruzzo has the largest population of **Pyrenean chamois** in Italy. Park staff insists that the easiest place to see them is at the upper end of Val di Rose, the trail to which starts from below the hotel (41.764N 13.941E). I started the climb at first light, and saw a huge, very long-haired, incredibly cool-looking **brown hare** in the pastures above the village. The trail climbs through dark beech forest with lots of **red deer**, **boar** and **badger** tracks, and with insanely high density of rodent burrows, falling into two size classes (~2.5 cm and ~3.5 cm). Almost every rock I flipped had rodent tunnels underneath. After a few dozen rocks I finally managed to see a **yellow-necked mouse**. I still don't know who made the smaller burrows; my guess is bank voles. Just before the trail reached alpine meadows (at ~1400 m) I heard **roe deer** alarm calls. There is usually no coniferous belt in the Apennines; beech forests either border the alpine meadows, or are separated from them by a narrow line of dwarf alder. In the meadows (41.75N 13.921E) there was a small herd of **red deer** does with fawns, grazing on abundant alpine flowers. Getting to the timberline took about two hours.

The trail reached the upper end of the valley and started climbing to Cavuto Pass (1962 m) leading into the next valley to the left. I decided to first climb a low saddle leading into the next valley to the right. On the ridge (41.749N 13.917E) I found five reasonably friendly **Pyrenean chamois**; one had two yearling calves (that was interesting because twins are extremely rare in chamois). The other valley had small groves of black pine (41.748N 13.916E) where I caught a glimpse of what I think was a **bank vole**. Then I returned to Valle di Rose and followed the trail over the pass (41.746N 13.916E) into the next valley to the left, called Valle Lananghera. I decided to follow it back to the village, but soon found that this trail hadn't been cleared since the previous year. There was also a lot more snow in this valley. The descent took about six hours. On the way down I saw a few more **chamois**. Small mammals living along the edges of rapidly melting snowfields were busy replacing their under-snow tunnels with underground ones. There were some fresh-looking molehills, and after waiting for half an hour I briefly saw the snout of a small mole (only **blind mole** occurs in these meadows). While waiting, I also saw a **European snow vole**. At the timberline (41.74N 13.92E), dark-colored voles were scurrying in the alder thickets partially flooded by snowmelt. Recently there's been a relatively well-substantiated proposal to split Savii's pine vole into two or three species; the small, short-tailed form living at high elevations is **Calabrian vole** (*Microtus brachycercus*).

Valle Lananghera has better forest than Val di Rose, with very old beeches and nice natural clearings. It should have lots of dormice and martens. I saw old **wolf** tracks 100-200 m below the timberline (41.739N 13.923E). The last mammal of the day was a **Eurasian water shrew**, briefly seen in a small stream along the trail, about 300 m below the place where the water first emerges (41.746N 13.953E).

The next valley to the south, called Valle dell'Inferno, has a large alpine lake called Lago Vivo (41.727N 13.952E). Its shores are said to be a good place to look for **brown bears** in the morning.

Parco Nazionale del Circeo south of Rome, where I've never been, is said to have **Eurasian otter**, **wildcat**, **boar**, **roe** and **fallow deer**, and introduced **European mouflon**. Another coastal park, on the other side of the peninsula, is Parco Nazionale del Gargano, the only place in Southern Italy with non-reintroduced **roe deer**.

Parco Nazionale del Vesuvio near Naples is a good place to combine with Abruzzo because of complimentary elevation range: Abruzzo lies mostly at 1000-2000 m, while on Vesuvius natural vegetation is at 500-1000 m. As an extra bonus, many mammals in the area have unusually dark coloration as an adaptation to life on black volcanic rocks and soil. The road from Ercolano to the crater has nice side trails and almost zero traffic from one hour after

midnight to two hours after sunrise (avoid it during the rest of the day). I did two nighttime drives up and down, and saw at least two **wildcats** (probably more, but I counted only certain ones), four **red foxes** (three dirty-grey and one black) and one **Savi's pine vole** (*sensu stricto*). **Beech marten**, **European polecat** and **roe deer** are also said to occur there. As you drive up from Ercolano, stop at the park office to photograph the trails map (you can do this through the fence if the gate is closed). Most trails are gated and closed outside the park office hours, so the only ways to see any mammals there are to climb over the fence, get a special permit, or walk in during the day and stay all night.

After you leave the continuously developed area, watch for the first side road to the right, signposted "Osservatorio Vesuviano". This short road is worth walking at night. The abandoned restaurant building at the junction (40.829N 14.395E) might have bats. Less than a hundred meters down the side road you pass under a bridge (40.828N 14.395E) which is popular among bats as a night roost. I walked underneath a few times during the night and saw two **brown long-eared bats**, one **Mediterranean horseshoe-nosed bat** and one **Savi's pipistrelle**. Then there is a junction. The road to the left soon ends at the observatory gate, but before that it passes by the old, abandoned observatory building (40.828N 14.396E) which has a bat colony. The colony is in the attic and requires some unpleasant acrobatics to access, but at night the bats can be found in the more accessible rooms on the ground floor, where they feed on millions of tiny flies. The ones I managed to identify were **common pipistrelle**, **serotine bat** and **greater myotis**; there was also another mid-size species which I never managed to see well. The road to the right continues for a few more hundred meters and is excellent for dormice since you get nice canopy views. I saw a **garden dormouse**, but other species might also be present. **West European hedgehog** is also common there. A narrow but easy trail branches off at the first hairpin turn (40.8275N 14.399E) and leads into the forest interior, with pine, oak-chestnut and Mediterranean-type forests. I saw a **roof rat** there, and some **badger** tracks. The road ends at a large abandoned building (40.828N 14.398E) which is, unfortunately, locked up, but I found a **lesser white-toothed shrew** nearby under a pile of old rags.

The main road towards the summit then goes parallel to 1944 lava flow (accessible by a short trail from the Observatory junction or directly from the road) where I briefly saw a **least weasel** in 1993. The ungated trail from just below the Observatory junction to the flow passes through some good deciduous forest where I found some **polecat** tracks and scat (40.83N 14.394E). Continuing up the main road, you soon reach another junction (40.828N 14.415E). The road to the right, signposted "Panoramico", goes through some of the best pine forest in the park. It passes through two large parking lots and ends at yet another abandoned hotel building (40.8175N 14.415E), where I saw a **hazel dormouse** at the overgrown terrace.

Further up the main road a few more trails branch off, and there are some small lava caves visible from the road that are worth checking for bats at night (although I didn't see any). One long trail (gated) goes around Mt. Somma, an old caldera rim surrounding Mt. Vesuvius proper on three sides (because of the gap on one side it failed to protect coastal Roman cities from pyroclastic flows). It has more humid deciduous forest where **edible dormouse** and **pine marten** are said to be common, but the only mammal I saw there was a black **wood mouse**. There were also **crested porcupine** tracks on the trail (40.84N 14.419E).

The main road ends at a gated trailhead for the crater. The gate (40.828N 14.4256E) is only open from 9 am to 4 pm, but locals don't mind climbing over it to watch the sunset. If you go up the trail (800 m long, a steady climb) before sunrise, watch for **roe deer** grazing at the forest edge far below, and for **house mice** around trailside buildings.

Archeological sites around Vesuvius have some nice bats, and large numbers emerge from the ruins at dusk. Contacting the administration in advance might get you access to the main colonies. Pompeii was a good place to look for bats in 1993 (I found **Natterer's bats** and what could be either **common** or **soprano pipistrelles**), but in 2013 almost all buildings were fenced off or gated, and I couldn't find a single bat. Much smaller Herculaneum has more roofed buildings (in Pompeii most roofs collapsed after heavy ashfall, while Herculaneum was hit only by pyroclastic flows). I found single **Kuhl's pipistrelles** there in both 1993 and 2013; look in narrow spaces formed where ceiling beams are very close to walls. A small marsh (40.8053N 14.3463E) near the exit (just before the tunnel) had **Northern water voles** in 1993, but in 2013 there was much less grass and it was too hot for them to be outside during the opening hours, although I saw one possible runway near the edge of the marsh. Oplornis, which I visited only in 2013, had **soprano pipistrelles** in the tunnel descending from the main atrium (40.757N 14.4524E).

Parco Provinciale Monti Lattari on Amalfi-Sorrento Peninsula is one of the most scenic places in Europe. It has some excellent Mediterranean habitat; there are also deciduous forests at higher elevations and in shady ravines, and lots of small limestone caves and grottoes which I didn't have time to explore properly. It is probably better to visit the park in winter or early spring to avoid traffic jams. Don't drive the Ravello-Amalfi road if you've just rented a car, for this road is very narrow and requires a good feel for your car's dimensions. **Ravello-Cobarrera Road** (SP1) is good for late night drives; I saw a **Eurasian badger** and a "caravan" of **bicolored white-toothed shrews**. If you drive this road from Ravello, look for a tiny roadside altar on the left, just after you begin descending from the first summit (40.69N 14.616E). It is located at the entrance of a tiny cave which had a whiskered-type myotis. Unfortunately the bat took off before I could photograph it. As far as I know, whiskered myotis bats of peninsular Italy are suspected to be **steppe myotis** (*M. aurascens*), but nobody knows for sure, so it would be nice to obtain more data on them. There were lots of bats flying above **Ravello**, including some **European freetails**, but I couldn't find any roosts.

Parco Nazionale Cliento e Vallo di Diano, the second largest in Italy, is similar to Monti Lattari; it also has plenty of forests, rocky habitats and caves. It is said to be inhabited by a large population of **Corsican hare**, a few **wolves**, **wildcat** and **fallow deer**. We drove through the park during daytime, so the only mammals we saw were a roadkill **red fox** and a **house mouse** in a road culvert a few km from the nearest village. There were old **Eurasian otter** tracks on sandy shallows of **Mingardo River** (40.05N 15.395E) above Palinuro-Cassolino road bridge (look also for rare Audouin's gulls bathing in the river at this location). We visited one of **Maratea Grottoes** (39.9525N 15.7355E) south of the park, and found one **long-fingered myotis** there; another one of those sea caves is said to have lots of bats, but is accessible only by boat. The ruins of **Paestum** north of the park had lots of molehills; I guess they were made by **Roman mole** since it is much more common along the coast and the tunnels were fairly wide. The adjacent **Parco Nazionale dell'Appennino Lucano Val d'Agri – Lagonegrese** reportedly has similar fauna.

Matera is a city famous for its ancient houses (*sassi*) built partially or completely in artificial caves. These houses cover an entire canyon slope, and the whole place looks a bit reminiscent of Bryce Canyon in the US. Many caves are no longer in use, but those tend to be fenced off or locked up. Still, there are dozens that you can explore, and a huge population of bats lives in them. The problem is that the bats are widely scattered; in a few hours of search I found only a couple **soprano pipistrelles** in town and what I think was a **Geoffroy's myotis** in more natural-looking caves across the canyon (40.664N 16.6155E). The sassi area also houses the world's largest colony of lesser kestrels, and the canyon is good for snakes, red kites and steppe birds such as little bustards. Judging by the number of roadkills, **red fox** is common around the town.

Parco Nazionale del Pollino has a lot of interesting species, including **Apennine shrew**, **Daubenton's myotis**, **greater noctule**, **grey wolf**, **river otter**, **wildcat**, **Calabrian vole**, **crested porcupine** and all four West European **dormice**. A good road for night drives, called **Strada Colle San Martino-Piano Ruggio**, branches off Rotonda-Campo Tenese Rd. and climbs to high elevations at Colle di Dragone and Colle di Impiso. It is completely traffic-free at night. The beginning of the road (39.8945N 16.049E) is marked by a large sign with a map, a chapel which had some bat droppings on the floor and so is probably used for night roost sometimes, and a ruined castle. Points of interest are marked along the road. I didn't see any mammals except one **red fox** on the road, probably because of full moon, but short walks through surrounding oldgrowth beech forest proved very successful. At the area signposted "Area di Sosta Bocca del Forna" (39.894N 16.088E) I found the rarest mammal of the trip, a **forest dormouse** of the Calabrian subspecies. It was digging through the leaf litter at the base of a large pine tree. Next morning there was a **red squirrel** digging around in the same area; I wonder who was robbing whose caches. I also walked to the slope (39.9N 16.116E) where rare Pollino pines (*Pinus heldreichii* var. *leucodermis*) grow (the slope visible from the pullout signposted "Pine overlook"), and saw a **beech marten** along the way. It was carrying a dead *Apodemys* mouse, probably to a den. Watch also for eagle owls there. The road ends at a T-junction (39.91N 16.121E). If you park your car and walk to the right, you immediately enter an area of lush subalpine meadows with lots of molehills (probably made by **blind mole**) and beech groves hiding countless small sinkholes. I saw a

brown hare, a few **fallow deer** and a **Eurasian boar** in the meadows at dawn. My understanding is that the fallow deer in the park represent one of a handful of unfenced populations within the species' native range. I also found a dead **bicolored white-toothed shrew** and some marten tracks (not good enough to tell the species) in the forest. Driving past the meadows, you get to the foot of Mt. Pollino (2248 m); I didn't hike to the alpine meadows at the summit, but they look like right habitat for **European snow vole**.

There are two more national parks further south, with similar fauna; I've never been there. The only wild mammal I ever saw elsewhere in Calabria was a **Roman mole** caught in a fresh roadside landslide near Villa in 1993.

Sicily has much fewer species than the mainland (just 12-14 native non-volant land mammals), but some of these are apparently easier to see here than elsewhere, and one or two are endemic. Probably due to limited competition, some forest animals such as pine marten, wildcat and wood mouse have colonized more open habitats in Sicily.

Parco Regionale dell'Etna has the highest mountain in Southern Italy (unfortunately, I've never caught it erupting), as well as plenty of excellent trails and great roads for night drives. One such road, Strada Milià on the southern slope, branches off the road from Refugio Sapienza to Nicolosi just a few switchbacks below the Refugio (ask for directions to Giardino Alpino or Osservatorio Astrophysica). It soon passes by an area of nice alpine meadows (37.693N 14.98E) where the Sicilian race of Savii's pine vole, claimed to be a separate species **Sicilian vole** (*Microtus nebrodiensis*), is common at dusk. Then the road descends through pine forests (37.693N 14.954E) where I saw a **European polecat** at night (prior to that I had only seen it once in more than 20 years of living within its range), and through pastures/gardens where **Etruscan shrews** live in stone fences. I almost caught one while walking one of many side roads (37.6915N 14.938E). There was also a couple of **West European hedgehogs**. The best side trails are marked "proprietà privata"; I don't speak Italian and so have no idea what it means. Look for **red foxes** near roadside garbage piles; most of them are dark-grey, but I also saw a light-orange individual. The road eventually joins the highway around Etna in Adrano (37.6745N 14.84E).

Another great road is Strada in Basolato Lavado, which goes up from Bronte (37.78N 14.8395E) on the western slope (ask for directions to Piano del Grilli, Casa Forestale or Grotta della Neve). I counted two **red foxes** and about ten **European rabbits** there in one night drive. The road ends at a trailhead (37.7455N 14.871E) from which a network of easy trails radiates. The trail to the right leads to a forested volcanic cone called Monte Peloso (37.738N 14.87E), where I saw two **pine martens** in less than four hours, again doubling my lifetime total (and my previous two sightings required many days and nights of hardcore snow tracking). I also heard some **edible dormice** there, but caught only a glimpse of one moving in the canopy. The trail going straight climbs through East African-looking landscape of grass-covered lava flows and scattered trees. I saw countless **rabbits** there, and one **Corsican hare** (37.7645N 14.927E). I also found an old **badger** den. During the day you can drive on some of these trails, but there is no point since there are no mammals and birding/herping is better on foot (look for beautiful little meadow vipers).

There are a few caves (lava tubes) on Etna, and some of them are said to have colonies of **greater myotis** and possibly other bats in winter. I visited two caves in June. One, called Grotta Cassone (37.6988N 15.0496E), contained just one **greater myotis**, which was hiding in a horizontal pocket in the ceiling; I would never have found it if it didn't squeak just as I was passing by. The cave is on the side of the road from Zafferana to Refugio Sapienza, 10.8 km from Zafferana. To find it, park at the large wooden sign saying something about "property of the archdiocese" near a bunch of abandoned buildings, and walk up the road looking for a large hole almost on the shoulder. Sometimes there are vehicles parked near the cave. The cave is about 250 m long, and easy to walk through. The other cave, Grotta della Neve (37.747N 14.8645E), is accessed by a short trail signposted off the road described in the preceding paragraph. It is actually a collapsed lava bubble with remains of an old stone roof above and a patch of stinging nettle on the bottom. I didn't see any bats there at night or in the morning, but found a very tame **wood mouse** in the grasslands along the access trail at night, and one **Sicilian shrew** on the bottom of the cave at dawn (near the seep behind the low stone fence). Rock partridges of the distinctive and difficult-to-see Sicilian subspecies roost at the edge of the cave together with dozens of pigeons (don't get a heart attack).

The park also has **wildcat** and **crested porcupine**, but I never saw a single quill or track anywhere.

Monti Nebrodi is a mountain range parallel to the northern coast of Sicily. It is not volcanic, so the vegetation at higher elevations is a bit lusher than on porous Mt. Etna. The [road from Francavilla di Sicilia to Novara di Sicilia](#) passes through pine and deciduous forests (37.983N 15.114E) and should be good for night drives. It has some nice culverts (although the couple I checked didn't have any bats) and passes by a few abandoned buildings (of the three I checked, one had a single **Blyth's myotis**). Two other roads might be even better as they cross [Parco Naturale dei Nebrodi: Cesare-San Fratello](#) and [Caprizzi-Marina di Caronia](#). Even without trying these roads, we saw yet another **pine marten** in broad daylight on a rural road (38.012N 14.339E) on the outskirts of [San Stefano di Camastra](#) near the northern coast.

Grutas di Addaura are a chain of caves (38.1869N 13.3515E) at the base of a huge rock face just northwest of Palermo. They are mostly famous for Neolithic rock art, but they also shelter some locally uncommon bat species. To get to the caves, go to Mondello and follow signs to Addaura. Once there, find Addaura Hotel. Its stuff used to run cave tours, but in 2001 a major earthquake caused a small rockfall in one of the caves, all caves were permanently shut down and gated "for safety reasons" (in one case with a non-bat-friendly gate), and never officially re-opened again. Locals have since cut holes in all gates except one, and in absence of protection there's been a lot of vandalism and disturbance, so the numbers of bats are much lower than one would expect in such an extensive cave system. Drive east past the hotel for a few hundred meters until you see a large paved lot with a bus stop on the right (38.1885N 13.351E). Park on the dirt track just above the bus stop and climb towards the cliffs (at one point you'll have to find the large hole in a metal fence). Most caves are easy to find by following trails. The largest one is an extensive labyrinth, with many low, narrow passages. The bats are in ceiling crevasses high overhead and far from entrances, so plan on at least half a day of serious caving; bring binoculars, a hard hat and at least three flashlights, and wear clothes you don't mind throwing away afterwards. The species I managed to identify were **greater** and **Mehelyi's horseshoe-nosed bats**, **Natterer's myotis**, **Nathusius'** and **Kuhl's pipistrelles**. There was also a *Plecotus* bat hanging too high to be identified; the only species known from Sicily is **grey long-eared bat**, but I really wish I could have a better look at it. All species were scarce, and I saw less than 15 bats total. There were **pine marten** tracks on the trail between the caves.

Sardinia has the recently described endemic **Sardinian long-eared bat** (although it can be expected to occur on Corsica as well), and distinctive races of **red deer**, **Eurasian boar** and **garden dormouse**. Other interesting mammals include **mouflon** and North **African white-tailed shrew**. I haven't been there, but hope to get there someday.

Tyrrhenian Sea is a deepwater basin where at least ten species of cetaceans are known to occur. It is crossed by many ferries, but the long-distance ones usually go overnight, and many short-distance hydrofoils have no open decks.

Strait of Messina is a migration route for some marine mammals and seabirds. The best area is the patch of strong tidal currents and whirlpools at the northern entrance to the strait, described very poetically in *The Odyssey*. It's been popular among 19th century naturalists as a place where rare deepwater creatures could be often found at shallow depths or even washed ashore. You can get a distant view from [Scilla](#) or [Canitello](#) on the mainland, from [Torre Faro](#) on the Sicilian side, or from [Villa-Messina ferries](#). In winter of 1993 I saw some **short-beaked common dolphins** off Scilla, and in June 2013, during one of two ferry crossings I made, I was totally surprised to see a small group of **Cuvier's beaked whales** amidst heavy ship & boat traffic. A ferry crewman I talked with said that dolphins are visible from ferries at least a few times per week; he also described having seen what I think were **long-finned pilot whales**. He had never seen beaked whales before, although he admitted he might have taken them for large dolphins.

Ferries to and between **Aeolian Islands** provide a nice whalewatching option, particularly the ones to **Stromboli** and **Alicudi**. In February 1993 I didn't see any mammals from Stromboli ferries, but got stuck on the island for a few days due to a storm, and saw a mixed herd of **short-nosed common** and **striped dolphins** just offshore, as well as some whale spouts on the horizon that looked like either **fin** or **sei whale**. In June 2013 the sea was generally devoid of mammals and pelagic seabirds, but we saw a single **striped dolphin** (and a leaping swordfish nearby) while on a scuba diving trip just off **Lipari** (38.45N 14.968E). The islands have very few land mammals. Lipari has a large, distinctive endemic subspecies of **garden dormouse**, but it hasn't been seen since 1992. I didn't find it in a few hours of spotlighting in one of the last remaining tree groves, and the remaining habitat is marginal at best. Introduced species include **house mouse** (believed to be a very ancient introduction, and common in natural habitats – look for it while climbing **Stromboli Volcano** at night), a small population of **edible dormouse** (also believed to be an ancient introduction, and limited to chestnut forests on the summit of **Salina Island**), **roof rat**, **European rabbit**, **West European hedgehog** (very recently introduced to Alicudi), and **Etruscan shrew** (first found on Lipari just a few years ago). There are surprisingly few bats on the islands; although seven species have been recorded, only three are believed to live there permanently. **Kuhl's pipistrelles** can be seen flying around the castle (38.467N 14.957E) on Lipari and near Giardino Secreto hotel (38.802N 15.234E) on Stromboli. Colonies of **European freetail** are said to exist in remote sea caves on Lipari, Volcano and Salina. **Greater horseshoe-nosed bat** is also present but rare; I saw only one, over the hill separating the towns of Lipari and Canetto (38.483N 14.97E). The islands also have rare Eleonora's falcons that nest in the fall on tall cliffs.

Ferries from Sicily also go to **Uscia Island** north of Palermo, where the only native land mammal is a black subspecies of **Sicilian shrew**, and to remote **Pantelleria**, **Lampedusa** and **Linosa Islands** southwest of Sicily. There are endemic subspecies of **North African white-toothed shrew** and **wood mouse** on Pantelleria; **Mediterranean monk seal** has been recently observed there. **Sperm whales** migrate through Lampedusa waters in March, while **bottle-nosed**, **striped** and **short-beaked common dolphins** are reportedly common there year-round. Other mammals present in the waters around Southern Italy include **rough-toothed** and **Risso's dolphins**, **killer** and **pygmy killer whales** and **Blainville's beaked whale**. Ferries from Sicily or Naples to Tunisia and Malta are also worth considering.