

Spain, Andorra and the French Pyrenees, June-July 2014

In 2014 my wife happened to have a math conference in Bilbao, and we decided to use the opportunity to drive around Spain and the French Pyrenees for a month, starting on July 18. We drove from Madrid to Toledo, then north via Segovia and Burgos, and explored parts of Asturias, Cantabria, Basque Country and Navarra. Then I left my wife in Bilbao for 5 days of the conference and did a quick dash to Andalusia via Madrid and back via Extremadura. After that we drove east through the French Pyrenees (with a short foray into Andorra), south along the Mediterranean Coast almost to Valencia, and back to Madrid via Cuenca.

Spain is a compact, very civilized country with excellent, mostly traffic-free roads (you can easily cross the whole Iberian Peninsula in one day), sparsely populated countryside and plenty of wildlife. Driving is a safe and relaxed experience (compared, for example, to Italy); roads are very well signposted, and speed enforcement rudimentary. There's plenty of paved backcountry roads perfect for night drives (except on weekends, when lots of people drive to and from remote restaurants until 1 am). Most locals know at least 10-20 words of English, although not everyone would admit to it. I expected local languages and dialects to make communication difficult, but my basic Latin American Spanish proved totally sufficient. Food is fantastic, but the best stuff can be tricky to find. The society is remarkably egalitarian: even the best food can be really cheap, and even the cheapest hotels can be really good. (However, almost all hotels we stayed in had some technical issues with Wi-Fi.) As usual in recent years, Rough Guide's *Spain* guidebook is much better than the Lonely Planet's version. Michelin's 2014 *Spain and Portugal* road atlas proved very accurate, except in river deltas (don't know why).

France is a wild, poorly organized, brutally overpriced country with worse roads, fewer road signs, and stupidly reckless drivers; at least this is the impression you get if you enter its southwestern corner from Spain. Services are lethargic even when open, and people are not always friendly (starting absolutely all conversations with "bonjour" helps a bit). If the only Frenchmen you've known before were scientists, you'll be a bit disappointed with the rest of the population, because the difference is more striking than in any other developed country. The only consolation is the impressive selection of food in local supermarkets: cheese and yogurt aisles go on forever.

I had two small Sherman traps with me, and caught 7 rodents of 4 species in 8 nights that I set them, using a mix of oats and dry cat food as bait. All were common species; I wish I had brought more traps and better bait mix, but I didn't expect such a high success rate. I put some effort into looking for bats, but finding them proved difficult. I guess the habitat is so saturated with potential roosting sites (caves, old/abandoned buildings, bridges, culverts, roof tiles) that the chances of stumbling into a colony are low. My camera had issues with both in-built and exterior flashes, and both broke down eventually, so I couldn't get photos of some bats and voles and their identifications might be incorrect.

The weather was unusually cold and (in the north and the west) rainy during most of the trip; I don't think it interfered much with mammal and bird watching (except on the few days when it got really bad), but herping was pretty much ruined and invertebrates were sparse. On the other hand, I found some nice flowers (including a few orchids) that can normally be seen only in spring. The total number of mammal species seen on the trip was 65 (assuming even the most tentative IDs were correct). I also got almost 200 bird species, 24 reptiles and 12 amphibians on that trip.

Toledo. Across Rio Tajo from the old city, on its southern side, there is a chain of popular viewpoints, the best of them at Eremo del Valle (a tiny monastery). If you climb the rocky outcrop above the Eremo, you can find a few **Kuhl's pipistrelles** in deep cracks in the rocks. Higher up the same slope, but accessible via a different road (that one signposted) is an expensive hotel called Parador Turistico, where hundreds of **soprano pipistrelles** live under roof tiles (I know the species because I found a dead one underneath). **European rabbits** are common on that hill; it's nice to watch them in their native range after having seen them as introduced pests elsewhere.

Segovia. There is a **polecats** den under the city wall above Paseo Domingo de Guzman, about 500 m from that street's lower end, before the first roundabout. I found it when we were about to leave town and didn't have time for a stakeout, but it looked and smelled like it was active. Our hotel room balcony was overlooking a vacant lot where I watched a female **European rabbit** suckle her young (unfortunately, too far to photograph).

Burgos. Behind Hotel Rio Cobia (17 km W of town towards Valladolid) there is a huge fallow field, where I caught two **house mice**. I've heard that house mice are very common in Spain, and expected to see more later, but didn't.

Suances. This small, very touristy, and generally boring village in Cantabria is located on a lush foggy coast reminiscent of coastal California. If you follow signs to the lighthouse (Faro de Suances), you'll get to the base of a small, heather- and shrubs-covered limestone peninsula with scenic cliffs where shags and spotless starlings nest and a few small rocky coves with great snorkeling. Interestingly, there are no rabbits on the peninsula, despite the habitat looking perfect for them. An offshore islet is called Canejero, so there might be some rabbits there. The tip of the peninsula is a good vantage point for seawatching; I didn't see anything interesting, but locals say you can sometimes spot dolphins from there. Just as many similar headlands in California, it is riddled with vole burrows, but local voles are more fossorial than Californian ones and don't run around in broad daylight. I set traps at various locations near the lighthouse for three nights. On the first night there was a thunderstorm and I didn't catch or see anything. On the second night I spent six hours spotlighting and didn't see or catch anything either. On the third night I spent four hours watching a vole runway across a trail and finally saw a cute tiny **Lusitanian vole**, almost black. I also trapped a **wood mouse** that night.

Santillana del Mar, a pretty but touristy village nearby, has some nice deciduous forest around the famous Altamira Cave. We briefly saw a *Crocidura* shrew crossing a trail there. I've read somewhere that in Spain the **lesser white-toothed shrew** is usually dark-grey and the greater white-toothed is brown; this one was dark-grey.

Parque Nacional Picos de Europa. This chain of ragged limestone peaks is said to be the most scenic part of Spain. The northern slopes are covered with lush deciduous forests; the alpine meadows above are severely overgrazed but still have a few interesting species. Probably because there are so many caves, even the best rock niches, abandoned buildings and road tunnels that I checked didn't contain any bats.

I saw just one shrew there, a mid-size *Sorex* that I flushed from a tiny cave (rather a niche) about 100 m down the trail that crosses the pre-Roman bridge signposted "Puente del Vidrio" on AS-114 between Trescares and Arenas de Cabrales. It was too large for Eurasian least shrew. The status of larger *Sorex* in the park is unclear: they might be crowned (*S. coronatus*), Iberian (*S. granarius*), or both. I vote for **Iberian shrew** because it didn't seem to have whitish underparts.

We hiked about two miles up Rio Cares Canyon from Poncebos and briefly saw a **least weasel** moving between rocks on the other side. The canyon is a good place to see the endemic lizards of Cordillera Cantabrica, as well as Eurasian griffons. We also saw a huge boulder fall on the trail about 10 m from us and 5 m from another couple of hikers; be alert if there are goats grazing upslope.

The best road on the northern side of the park is the one that climbs to a couple of alpine lakes above Covadonga. It has virtually no nighttime traffic and crosses subalpine meadows where the endemic **broom hare** can be seen at night. It's an interesting species really worth looking for; you have to walk a bit off the road, so it's better to see the area in daylight first. I saw only one hare in about two hours of spotlighting on shrubby slopes 2-4 km down the road from the lower lake. The forested part of the road has more mammals: I saw a small brown **boar**, a very fat **badger**, a family of **red foxes** (a female with 3 almost grown-up cubs), a **European hedgehog** (very dark-haired with ochraceous spines), and a **wood mouse** during just one nighttime pass. In late afternoon I saw a **pine marten** above Covadonga. The forest along the lower stretch of the road had a lot of dry leaves and was teeming with noisy **wood mice** at night; one of the many I saw while walking around was clearly more rusty-colored than others and was likely a **yellow-necked mouse**. I also heard an **edible dormouse** there. The lakes at the end of the road are surrounded by what could be beautiful alpine meadows, but are instead badly overgrazed pastures. Around the upper lake there are a few colonies of moles (species unknown) and voles. I watched one such colony at dusk and saw a **false water vole** (*Arvicola scherman*); some burrows seemed too small for it and were probably made by another species, most likely **Pyrenean pine vole**. In winter you can see the Cantabrian subspecies of **Pyrenean chamois** near the upper lake, but in summer you have to hike for four hours (return) for a binocular view (ask at the visitor center for

current locations). I didn't see any other wild mammals during the entire hike, but briefly saw a Seoanei's viper on a talus slope about 2 km from the upper lake.

I set my traps in a tallgrass meadow near our hotel in Soto de Cangas and caught only one **field vole**, although there was an old **harvest mouse** nest in the grass there. The river in Soto de Cangas is said to have **otters** and **desmans**, but I saw neither in about an hour of walking along the shore at night.

The more arid southern side of the park has one road that reaches summer **chamois** habitat, and two small populations of **Spanish ibex**, but we didn't have time to explore it. There are also a few **brown bears** and some **wolves** in the park.

Ribadesela. We stopped in this coastal town in Asturias to visit Cueva de Tito Bustillo, another cave with famous paintings (the worst-organized cave tour I've ever been on, and I've been on many poorly-organized cave tours). You wait for your tour in a hall with large windows overlooking a grassy patch and a shady forested slope; as we were waiting, I saw a **yellow-necked mouse** running back and forth between two burrows on the slope. In some parts of Europe it can be difficult to tell from the wood mouse, but in Spain they seem to be clearly distinguished by color and tail length (unless, of course, I misidentified some). A marshy meadow across the road from the cave museum had some vole burrows, but I never saw the owners.

Castro Urdiales. A picturesque port city in Calabria where I found a large bat roosting in the main Gothic church (the one on the western side of the harbor, near the castle). The bat was tucked in the gap between the metal gate of which the entrance door is a part and the masonry arch above it. It was very difficult to see well, but eventually I saw enough of it to ID it as a **serotine bat**. About 20 km W, near **Laredo**, A-8 crosses the large tidewater estuary of Rio Ason that is said to have been recently colonized by **European mink**.

Olite. Another beautiful small town, this one in Navarra. The castle looks like it's been built for bats, with numerous towers, slits between ceiling blocks, and wall niches, but I found only one bat there, a **Geoffroy's myotis** roosting in the chimney in Great Tower.

Parque Natural de Despeñaperros. This small park created around a rocky canyon is conveniently located along A-4 on the southern side of La Mancha/Andalucía border, and makes a nice break in the long drive from Madrid to the southern mountains. I drove the park road that more or less parallels the freeway and saw two huge **red deer** herds with some impressive stags. An abandoned building near that road was used for a night roost by a small, dark, very shy bat that I think was a **whiskered myotis**. The park has nice forest habitat that I didn't have time to explore.

Parque Natural Sierra de Andujar. This large park, a bit scruffy-looking but one of the best in Europe for wildlife viewing, is already described in many reports on *mammalwatching.com*, so I'll not describe it in detail. Most people visit it in spring; I visited in summer and still found everything I was looking for, except for some amphibians. I also enjoyed the sights of a magpie pair feeding its own fledglings plus a great spotted cuckoo, of three species of owls with their fledglings, and of two Spanish imperial eagles fighting a golden eagle high above the canyon.

I spent 24 hours there, starting at midnight, with an afternoon break for a quick trip to Cordoba. It was a weekend, so on paved roads the wildlife mostly showed up after 2 am. In half a night I saw a **badger**, three rather tame **red foxes**, three large **boars**, two gorgeous **fallow deer** stags with fully grown antlers still in velvet, at least 50 **red deer** (including some very small fawns), a female **Spanish ibex** with a kid (they were on the wall of the upper dam at night, but moved off the wall by morning), a few **European rabbits**, at least a dozen **wood mice**, and a shrew that crossed the road too fast to be IDed well. It was too small for a *Crocidura* or a *Neomys*, but too plump for a *Suncus*. There are no *Sorex* known from Andalucía, so either there is an unknown population of Iberian shrew in Sierra de Andujar, or it was a juvenile **greater white-toothed shrew**.

I drove both "lynx" roads a bit farther than most people do. The road to the Sanctuary (the source of horrible light pollution) didn't have anything new; the road to the farthest viewpoint ran through more open habitat where I flushed a small herd of very skittish **European mouflon**.

I found that there are actually four, not one, tunnels at the upper dam. The one at the far end of the dam contained about a dozen **common bentwings**, a similar number of **Daubenton's myotis**, and a few **greater myotis**. There is a larger tunnel running underneath that one; you can access it by walking beyond the first tunnel and then taking the path down and backwards. This tunnel had a lot more bentwings, a few Daubenton's myotis and one **Blyth's myotis**. I found a tiny, naked baby myotis on the tunnel floor and almost broke my neck trying to get it back on the ceiling. There are also two short tunnels accessible from one of the switchbacks of the trail descending to the river just below the dam; each had a couple dozen **greater horseshoe bats** and a few **Mehely's horseshoe bats**.

I checked a few abandoned stone buildings and hollow walls at La Lancha and found two small bats. One left immediately and I didn't ID it even to genus; the other was a small myotis that I decided was a Natterer's. Later I found that Natterer's myotis of Spain have been split into two new cryptic species, differing in habitat, and the one living in caves is called **Escalera's myotis** (*M. escalerae*). The hollow wall sure looked more like a cave than a hollow tree, but *M. escalerae* is also said to occur in large colonies rather than small groups. If you visit Sierra de Andujar, please check out those bats and try to get more data on them!

I saw one Iberian lynx at night while walking along the shore of the lower reservoir beyond the end of the "birding trail", but it was so far that I wasn't even sure it was a cat rather than a fox. Then in the evening I was sitting on a rock near the far end of the small bridge below the lower dam, and another **Iberian lynx** walked right up to me. She sat down within three feet from me, and we watched the sunset together for about ten minutes. After the sun set, she got up and went hunting, but allowed me to quietly follow. Her method of hunting was to listen for rustling noises in the grass/fallen leaves, quickly approach the place and then wait for the animal to reveal itself. She almost immediately caught a large *Psammodromus* lizard, then a **Mediterranean pine vole** (after ten minutes of waiting), and finally a **wood mouse**. Then she walked into dense shrubs; I couldn't follow her quietly anymore, and had to leave. I've had plenty of highly entertaining wild cat encounters in my lifetime, but this was the most enjoyable one.

Parque Nacional Sierra Nevada above Granada is an easy place to see the southern subspecies of **Spanish ibex**. In late June they were within an hour's uphill walk from the end of the highest paved road open to the public. I drove the access road at night and in late morning, and saw only one other mammal, almost certainly a **snow vole**. There were a few burrows in the alpine meadows on rocky ravine slopes, probably belonging to snow voles, but I didn't see the owners, probably because I only waited for about twenty minutes.

Granada. Just a day after the trip's best mammalwatching experience, I had the worst one. I was in Alhambra in Granada (totally overrated, terribly organized and absolutely not recommended to anyone who has been or hopes to someday be in India, Uzbekistan or the Middle East). The palace gardens are said to be the best place to look for European worm lizards. So I looked under a few heavy rock slabs in a remote corner of the gardens, and found a mole under one of them. The only species in southern Spain is **Iberian mole**; to my knowledge, it has never been photographed alive, so I really wanted to see it up close and run a little photo session. The problem was, I couldn't let go of the rock. It was too heavy to lift completely off the ground, another slab on top of it wouldn't allow me to flip it, and I couldn't drop it because it had already shifted and could squash the mole. So I watched helplessly as the animal disappeared into its tunnel. After that I looked under at least forty other rock slabs (all of them pretty heavy), but found no vertebrates at all.

Cuevas de San Marcos near Lucena have Europe's largest bat colony in winter. The main species are said to be **common bentwing**, **greater myotis**, and **greater** and **southern horseshoe bats**. In summer the numbers are much smaller. The main cave was closed when I visited, but I found a few smaller caves that contained small numbers of all four of these species as well as one **Geoffroy's myotis** and (in a smaller cave a few hundred meters W) a colony of **Escalera's myotis** (certain this time). Farther NE, near Baena, is another cave with similar species, called **Cueva de Murcielagos**, which I didn't have time to check out.

Parque Natural de Los Alcornocales. A huge park just inland from the S tip of Spain, it protects forests of corkbark oak, and is said to have the highest density of **common genet** in Europe. I spent a night spotlighting by car and on foot, mostly along the road to Castellar de la Frontera (a beautiful hilltop castle), and saw mostly

feral cats, **wood mice**, and rather shy **red deer**. I also found a not-so-fresh roadkill **badger** on the road; half an hour later I walked back along the same road and saw a smallish **boar** that was slowly walking towards the badger, obviously following the scent trail. I set traps in the forest, and, surprisingly, caught one **roof rat** (I expected wood mice, since the forest was crawling with them, but caught none).

Gibraltar. I had to drive in there instead of walking because I only had one spare hour before a whalewatching trip from Tarifa. Don't do that! The place is a driver's nightmare. I never found a way to the forested slopes above the city, and had to be content with binocular views of two **Barbary macaques** on the fort wall high above (and a lone Barbary partridge near the botanical garden).

Tarifa. Whalewatching trips from this southernmost town in mainland Spain regularly get pilot whales. The trip I was on got a small pod of **killer whales** hunting for tuna amidst a flotilla of Spanish and Moroccan fishing boats, 3 **sperm whales**, and distant views of **striped dolphins** on the way back, as well as a few spp. of shearwaters. The tour takes you all around the Strait of Gibraltar, and close to the African coast; the views are great.

Vejer de la Frontera. This picturesque hilltop town is famous for the recently established colony of reintroduced (and still extremely rare) Northern bald ibis; the nests can be viewed from 5 m away. Pine forests on the slopes around the town were totally dug up by **Mediterranean pine voles**; it took me just 5 min to catch a glimpse of one. Normally this species (and related ones) is largely fossorial and takes a lot longer to see above ground.

Parque Nacional de Doñana. This huge area is very popular among birders, but mammal watchers tend to skip it. I spent a night and a morning there and didn't regret it.

The interior of the huge delta used to be accessible only by organized bus tours, but now there is a new visitor center called Jose Antonio Valverde located in the remote central part of it, near a huge egret colony. The new visitor center and the adjacent area had lots of **Iberian hares** at dusk and at night. Surprisingly, nobody ever does night drives in the park. I did a bit of driving around that visitor center, and saw lots of rodents, but most of them were sitting at the edge of the roadside vegetation and were pretty much invisible until they turned around and disappeared in the grass. The only ones I could ID were an **Algerian mouse** (its white feet easily visible in the headlights) and a few **Southern water voles**. I also saw a **European hedgehog**, much lighter colored than the one I saw in Cantabria, and a **boar**. Boars of S Spain are a different ssp. from those up N, and I got an impression that the border between the smaller, lighter southern form and the larger, darker northern form lies S of Sierra de Andujar, which is a bit unexpected. Just before sunset I saw a small herd of very skittish **fallow deer**. Generally, ungulates in Doñana are much shyer than in Sierra de Andujar. Poaching is still a problem; when driving at night, watch for rangers on anti-poaching patrols driving around with their headlights off.

There are three more visitor centers on the western side of the park. They are open 7 am – 10 pm, which means you can't do any spotlighting in summer, but you can in other times of the year. One of many blinds at El Acebuche visitor center is called "Mammiferos" and is said to be good for **foxes**, **badgers**, and **polecats**, but the only mammals I saw there were **European rabbits** and **red deer** (even smaller than those elsewhere in Spain). An **Egyptian mongoose** crossed the road between the other two visitor centers (El Rocina and El Acebron); the latter has bottomland forest that should be great for spotlighting; parts of it were completely dug up by **boars**. The park also has the largest population of **Iberian lynxes**, but these are difficult to see.

Quatro Lugares is a protected area NE of Caceres in Andalucía, centered on Talavan Reservoir. It is mostly known for bustards and other steppe birds. Unfortunately, Spain doesn't have any steppe-associated mammals, but the parking lot is a known stakeout site for **Cabrera's vole** that can be seen along the edges at dusk. The reservoir has **Eurasian otters** that are relatively easy to see when active because the reservoir is small and most of it can be watched at the same time. A few miles SE of the reservoir I saw a roadkill **beech marten** in a completely wrong habitat, flat open grassland with scattered olive trees.

Parque Nacional de Montfragüe is a very scenic place, famous for huge colonies of griffon vultures plus other raptors nesting in cliffs. If you walk from the summit parking lot to the castle, watch for a small cave near the junction with Sendero Rojo (Red Trail). It had a single **lesser horseshoe-nosed bat** suckling its young. **Red deer** can often be seen from viewpoints. At night I saw two **wood mice** and some **beech marten** scat in the summit area. The park also has a few **Iberian lynxes**.

Sierra de Candelario is a part of Sierra de Gredos conveniently located near A-66 between Cáceres and Salamanca. Road DSA-191 from Bejar (freeway exit 414) quickly brings you to a high-elevation viewpoint where you can see the “central” subspecies of **Spanish ibex** grazing on the slopes high above. Rocky roadcuts before the viewpoint had some vole burrows. One vole crossed the road at night; I didn’t see it well, but it seemed too light-colored and long-tailed to be anything but a **snow vole**.

Palencia. A huge area of grasslands and pastures centered on this city is known for spectacular “plagues” of **common vole**. The worst one so far was in 2007. What is amazing is that until the late 1990-s this vole was a rare high-elevation species in Spain. I knew nothing of these “plagues”, and was surprised to see hundreds of voles running across the freeway as I was driving at night from Salamanca to Cantabria. There was still plenty of traffic, so I had to risk an accident trying to see the voles up close to ID. They occurred along a ~100-km stretch on both sides of Palencia.

Parque Natural Saja-Besaya in Cordillera Cantábrica west of A-67 has lots of lush broadleaf forest, most of it old-growth. It is crossed by two roads. CA-280 is higher in elevation; I did some spotlighting there but saw only some **red deer**, a few **foxes** and countless **wood mice**. A large hollow tree about 1 km up the trail that starts near the interpretive center had a mixed colony of *Myotis* bats; some were the unnamed “tree hollow” split of **Natterer’s myotis**, while others looked like **Bechstein’s myotis**. The lower road, CA-804, signposted “Ucieda” off CA-180 south of Cabezon de la Sal, is much more interesting. Once it enters the park, there is a nice area of clearings, picnic tables, and numerous foot bridges across a small river. If there’s been no rain or snowmelt for a few days, this area is a perfect place to look for **Pyrenean desman** from the bridges. It was recommended to me by a park ranger, and I got a reasonably good sighting on the first night after just 4 hours. You have to be very quiet and use red light; if the water level is too low, you might have to move up- or downstream. At dusk watch for **roe deer** and (reportedly) **European polecat** in the clearings.

Spanish Basque Country has a bunch of nature reserves with broadleaf and pine forests. The fauna is supposed to be mostly northern, but with the **common genet** very common. I did a few short walks there, but never saw any mammals. At that point I had seen all voles of Spain except two, and decided to go after the remaining ones, but didn’t even find any burrows.

Ainhoa is a tiny, very pretty village in French Basque Country. A path leads from the tourist information center to a viewpoint on a nearby hilltop. We didn’t walk all the way up because of poor weather, but saw a **red squirrel** at the beginning of the trail. This was the only squirrel seen on the entire trip. Red squirrel is not supposed to be rare in upland forests of the region, so I guess it was a bad year for squirrels, just as it was a good one for voles and wood mice. Nearby are showcaves called **Grottes de Sare** where you can see **common bentwing** and **greater** and **southern horseshoe bats** in winter during a tour. In summer there are said to be no bats inside. We didn’t take a tour, but found one **long-fingered myotis** night-roosting near the entrance.

Orx Marshes (Réserve Naturelle Nationale Marais d’Orx) about 12 km N of Bayonne are said to be the best place in Europe to look for **European mink**, and a good one for other small carnivores. We didn’t go there because there was some heavy rain that day, and serious flooding with houses being destroyed and people being airlifted from tree tops. It was tempting to look for animals escaping the flood in the marshes, but we didn’t want to get stuck in the area, and left while the freeway was still open.

Parc Nacional des Pyrénées is a great place to look for voles (there are five species) and other mammals, although larger ones are said to be more common on the Spanish side of the mountains.

As you drive south from Argelès-Gazost, look for an abandoned road tunnel on your left: I didn't find any bats there day or night, but there were some bat droppings on the floor, so it's worth checking out (**mountain big-eared bat** is an interesting possibility). At night, **red foxes** are very common along that road; we also saw a **common vole** just above Argelès-Gazost, a **roe deer** above Gédre, a **false water vole** on the southern outskirts of Gavarnie, and a **beech marten** halfway between the latter two villages.

A trail said to be the most scenic in France leads from Gavarnie to a large glacial cirque (Cirque de Gavarnie) about 5 km to the south. It passes through gorgeous subalpine meadows with lots of orchids and **false water vole** burrows; look also for **roe deer** at dusk and for **Pyrenean chamois** on grassy ridgelines high above the valley.

A side road that branches off to the left just above Gédre provides car access to a larger, also very scenic cirque (Cirque de Troumouse). By early July it already had grazing cattle and sheep, but the alpine meadows were still lush and full of flowers. The easiest way to get to a good selection of habitats is to walk straight up the steep slope above the parking lot at the end of the road. At dusk, look for **snow voles** on drier slopes at the base of talus slopes and on steeper slopes with rhododendron and juniper shrubs (this species is not particularly common here, so searching for its burrows might take a while). **Field voles** inhabit moister habitats, mostly along the periphery of marshy patches at the bottom of small side cirques. **False water voles** are common along the lower part of the access road and are more easily seen at night by slowly driving up and down. As the sun comes up, **Alpine marmots** emerge on the slopes and along the upper part of the access road. Much of the habitat looks perfect for **chamois**, but I didn't see a single one in that cirque. You can reportedly see them up close by driving a side road from Gavarnie to a pass called Port du Boucharo on the Spanish border.

Aire du Pic du Midi is a rest area on A-64, located between Torbes and St-Gaudens. Lawns around the restaurant were covered with molehills and vole burrows. We saw one **field vole** through the glass wall while eating there; with more patience, **European mole** would also be possible.

Port d'Aula Pass above Conflence in Central Pyrenees is said to have a **European freetail** colony in a rock face above the road. Two other places in the French Pyrénées reportedly good for mammal watching are **Pourtalet Pass** in Vallee d'Ossan above Pau and **Reserve Naturelle de Neouvielle** – both have **chamois** and **marmots**, and the latter also has **desmans**.

Foix is a city in Ariège surrounded on all sides by limestone hills with countless caves, many of them easily accessible. About a dozen are open to organized tours (some of those have Neolithic paintings; the best ones are in Grotte de Niaux). In winter it's probably possible to see all bat species of southwestern France there. I checked a few caves and found bats only in one, a large cave easily visible from the access road to Grotte de Niaux. It was difficult to ID these bats because the ceiling was very high and the bats were small, but I think they were **whiskered myotis** and **Nathusius's pipistrelles**. **European freetails** roost in small holes high above the entrance to Niaux Cave. Another cave, Labouiche, had only marbled and warty newts in its underground river, but the mossy slope along the access trail had some **bank vole** burrows. In winter that cave is said to have **Leisler's noctule** and other bats despite very high level of human disturbance. Yet another cave, La Grotte de Mas D'Azil, which we didn't visit, is said to contain lots of bats even in summer. Gorges de la Frau east of the city are said to have a good **desman** population.

Andorra is a high-elevation country mostly known for shopping malls and skiing. I entered it from the E end and hiked from a highway pass called Port d'Envalira (2400 m) to the summit of nearby Pic Blanc (~2700 m). The alpine meadows there, despite being disfigured by countless ski lifts, looked like prime chamois, marmot and vole habitat, but I didn't see either, not even a single vole burrow, and there was only one possible **marmot** burrow far downslope. As I drove back to France after nightfall through dense fog, I saw a **red fox** and a shrew that I watched for a while and almost caught; I'm pretty sure it was a **common shrew**.

Reserve Nacional Faunistique d'Orlu near Aux-les-Thermes is said to be the best place in French Pyrenees to see montane wildlife. It is a lush, pristine valley with impressive old-growth forests and meadows ungrazed by sheep and cattle, surrounded by steep peaks. The place is so gorgeous that it reminded me of the mountains of

Sichuan. Walking the full length of any of the two trails to alpine lakes takes 5-6 hours return. My plan was to start after midnight, get to the lakes by dawn, and walk back. The access road looks like it should be excellent for night drives, but I saw only a few **red foxes**. The toilet building at the trailhead was used as a night-only roost by a couple dozen **Mehely's horseshoe bats**; they were hanging in lines along the seams between the ceiling boards, looking like a musical score, and slowly spinning. The river looked like it could have **desmans** in its slower sections. In the first half hour of walking I saw a **wildcat** in the forest, a **European hare** and a few **boars** in riverside meadows.

Then a violent thunderstorm began, and it never stopped raining for the rest of the night and the morning. The trail turned into a stream and streams turned into torrents. I found one **Pyrenean pine vole** colony in a semi-flooded meadow, and saw one of those reddish-brown voles peeking from its burrow in dense moss. At dawn, dense fog filled the valley. Every time the fog cleared a bit and a fragment of the beautiful landscape became visible, I could see numerous **Alpine marmot** burrows and miserable-looking **Pyrenean chamois** on the slopes above the tree line. The rain was getting worse, so I turned back. The forest had lots of **bank vole** burrows, but I wasn't in the mood for long stops, and accepted that it will remain the only vole species of the region that I wasn't going to see on that trip. But after I finally made it back to the parking lot and checked the traps I had set under a large boulder in the forest outside the reserve, I found a **wood mouse** and a **bank vole** in them. I really wish I had more time in that reserve, but the weather forecast sounded like Genesis 7:17 and my wife insisted that we spend a few days on a warm-water beach, so we continued moving E.

Carcassone, a city I wish I could play in when I was a kid, has a beautifully restored castle. You can walk on top of part of the city wall and all castle walls; one of the towers of the latter has complex woodwork inside the roof, and if you look through it, you can see a few **soprano pipistrelles** hiding in roof seams.

The Mediterranean coast from Marseilles to Gibraltar is mostly a chain of overdeveloped resort cities; it is very arid and mammals seem to be more difficult to see than elsewhere. I would recommend skipping it altogether if you can. We briefly visited the following locations:

Le Boulou is a small town in France near the Spanish border. Le Tech River just south of it is crossed by three bridges. You can park under the downstream one (Avenida de Espagna bridge, with red railings) and walk the nice trail along the river either upstream or downstream. The bridge has a bat colony located in the narrow gap between side and bottom panels on the upstream side (looking from underneath the bridge, it runs about 5 cm from the edge). The gap has variable width, and the bats are sorted out according to their sizes. The ones I could ID were **common bentwings**, **common pipistrelles** and one **Western barbastelle**. The second bridge had only one bat, a **Geoffroy's myotis**, and the third one was too high to see anything. The trail had **fox**, **badger** and **hedgehog** tracks, but I didn't see any mammals during a two-hour night walk. A local birder told me he'd seen **least weasels** between boulders under the third bridge. Side channels of the river looked like good places for water shrews, and trailside meadows had lots of vole burrows. Nearby village of **Saint-Genis de Fointaines** has an old church with a cloister; the gallery around the cloister had some bat droppings on the floor, probably from pipistrelles hiding in the slits between the wooden ceiling and the stone wall. Someone with more time, enthusiasm and knowledge of French than me might be able to arrange nighttime access and see if the bats are visible at night.

Besalú is a pretty old town NW of Barcelona. I've been told many years ago that **common water shrews** could be seen from the bridge across the moat, but spent an hour around sunset looking for them and didn't see any. The bridge, however, is a great place to watch **Daubenton's myotis** trawling for water bugs.

Parc Natural dels Ports is a rocky mountain ridge above Tortosa, just upstream from Ebro Delta. It has a huge population of **Spanish ibex** of the same subspecies as in the Sierra Nevada but easier to see (try the road to Caro). At night I saw a **common genet** along TV-3541 between Xerta and Pauls.

Ebro Canyons are deep canyons with spectacular cliffs, formed by Ebro and its tributaries between Flix and Faio on the border of Catalonia and Aragon. The best views of the cliffs are from TV-7231 bridge a couple km

S of Faio. The cliffs are inhabited by all kinds of cliff fauna, from **European freetails** to vultures. A trail branches off near the N end of the bridge, and soon reaches a very muddy road tunnel where **Daubenton's myotis** roost. **Red fox** is very common in the area; I saw a few at night and two during the day (both were mobbed by small birds and thus easy to find).

Delta de Ebro is a flat peninsula that used to be excellent marshland, but has mostly been turned into endless ricefields. There are still a few lagoons and reedbeds, mostly along the outer edge of the delta, and lots of birds, but surprisingly few mammals. Canals and lagoons look like prime mink habitat, but instead of minks they are inhabited by **European polecats**; I saw two in four hours of late night driving (one about 2 km N of El Poblenu in the S part and one at Ullals de Baltasar in the far W of the delta). Didn't see any small mammals at all, probably because it was around full moon. Huge swarms of bats emerge from delta towns at dusk, but I couldn't find any roosts in the few abandoned buildings that I checked. According to nature reserve employees, **short-beaked common dolphins** are often seen in winter near Fangar Lighthouse on the N side.

Parc Natural de la Sierra de Irta is a small coastal mountain range between Peñiscola and Alcossebre in Comunidad Valenciana. Like many places on the E coast, it has surprisingly few bats. We didn't see any mammals on night drives through the park, but there was plenty of **genet** scat, and the habitat, with lots of old stone fences, looked perfect for Etruscan shrew.

Parc Natural Desert de les Palmes above Benicassim is another arid mountain range. You can drive from either Castellon or Benicassim to a monastery 2/3 of the way upslope, and then take a narrow side road to the ridgecrest where **Spanish ibex** is said to occur. The Castellon approach passes through some good pine forest. Unfortunately there is a popular restaurant near the monastery, so traffic doesn't end until after midnight. We drove the road back from the monastery before midnight and didn't see any mammals, but spotted two **boars** on a slope below when it was still daylight.

Serrania de Cuenca is a large montane area in La Mancha east of Madrid. It has extensive pine forests, dehesas, arid plains, canyons and areas of limestone outcrops, all reminiscent of western USA. The very scenic city of Cuenca is a good base for exploring the region. If you drive to the northern end of the old city and through the narrow arch in the city wall, you'll see two roads, one going straight (signposted "Camino de St. Jeronimos"), the other going left (signposted "Camino de San Isidro"). The one going straight is apparently good for **beech martens** (I saw one just 500 m past the edge of the city at night). The one to the left also crosses some excellent beech marten habitat. It ends at a T-junction where you can take the road to the right and after about 20 km reach "Ciudad Encantado", a fenced-off area of particularly spectacular limestone rocks. It is closed at night, but you can walk the trail across the road, through tall pine forest where **red deer** and **red fox** are very common, and **Mediterranean pine vole** occurs along forest streams. I drove there and back to Cuenca around midnight and saw one **roe deer**, two **wood mice**, one **Cabrera's vole**, one **Iberian hare** (much woolier, shorter-eared, and generally less European hare-like than the ones in Doñana), and a juvenile **garden dormouse** that I caught by hand in the middle of the road. A bar near the entrance to "Ciudad Encantado" has a small colony of **Kuhls's pipistrelles** under the green roof overhang (where the roof meets the wall), but I think these bats are only visible at night. This road has virtually no traffic after 10 pm on weekdays, but it might be much busier on weekends.