

Pyrenean Desman Hunt, 31st July-3rd August (plus three nights at the end doing cultural stuff)

All our trips these days rely heavily on the information provided through mammalwatching.com and the related Facebook groups, but for this trip a particular shout-out is needed. A post from Fabien Pekus was the first I knew of a reliable site for Pyrenean Desman, which was then confirmed by checking the website for Ben Schweinhart's excellent report. For the second time in six months it was Ben's report of an excellent site which set us off on another aquatic mammal stake-out.

The plan. We decided to go by train to save on carbon, and so took the Eurostar from London to Paris, and then a TGV from Paris to Bordeaux. Both booked through the Eurostar website, and in total £250pp return (expensive in part as we booked late). We spent the night in Bordeaux and then picked up a car (with Enterprise, through rentalcars.com) the next morning (again price-y owing to late booking). The train and car both worked well, though I'd recommend leaving yourself more than an hour to get between the Gare Du Nord and Gare Montparnasse unless you want a slightly stressful metro trip and run. From Bordeaux, it is a ~3h20m drive to Lac de Bioux Artigues where there is a very large car park in which you can leave the car. Because we arrived on a Saturday during the French summer holidays we had to park the car in the lower of the two car parks. It just added a ~20min, 100m ascent, to the walk.

From the upper parking next to the lake itself, it's a 6km (600m climb) up to the Refuge D'Ayous. The desman site is then a further 1.2km (~100m ascent) from the refuge. The refuge itself is in a lovely location (when you can see the backdrop!) and the staff extremely friendly and welcoming. There are no showers, but there is a clear lake just below where you can go swimming. Owing to our late booking (3 weeks before the trip) and the summer holidays, there was no space in the refuge itself, so instead we camped for free just below it. We decided to get dinner from the Refuge (18€pp), which just had to be booked by 5pm each day. We decided against getting all our food from them, and walking up the mountain very much regretted this. The walk is not overly strenuous, but with food and two tents made for car-based camping trips on my back, the pack was over 25kg and the walk not pleasant. If you can, I'd recommend booking early to get a spot in the refuge (this way keeping you warm as well as sparing you weight) and getting all your food from the refuge – it's 39€pp for half board, 50€ for full board, and I think the lunch would be packed for you to take away too.

The path from the refuge to the desman site is easy enough to follow. You walk past the refuge on your right, and then descend about 10m to a little stream crossing. From there, you follow the path to the right, and five minutes later begin the only ascent on this stretch – a few switchbacks up about 75m. At the top, you cross and then follow another stream for a further 5mins before the path goes off uphill to the left. At this point, it's easiest if you leave the path behind and follow the livestock tracks by the water edge to the desman pond, which is perhaps another 3 minutes further on. We knew we were in the right spot as despite having no signal our phones could still provide GPS info. Fabien had also suggested we downloaded a couple of pics from his [site](#) of what the area looked like, and this acted as a nice check that we were indeed in exactly the right spot.

The site itself is beautiful, with high mountains, scree slopes and cliffs towering above you. However, despite climbing up in full sun, on arrival at the desman spot, the fog set in, and we could barely see 30m. It would remain foggy for the rest of the evening, night and the entirety of the next day. Despite putting in quite a few hours (1730-1830; 2030-2230; 0545-1300; 1600-1800; 2030-2300) we saw very little. Dad had the most fleeting of sightings of what we would later know to be a Desman, but beyond the Pyrenean Brook Salamanders, the fog meant there was very little to keep us entertained on the cold and wet mountain. Our attempts included spotlighting with a red filter – the

night scope was unable to look below the surface of the water – for an hour and a half or so each night, but again there was nothing to report, bar a probable Daubenton's bat on the second night. On our second evening, we also got the rather disappointing news that the weather forecast for the next day was more of the same.

When we woke up on our second morning at the refuge, the weather looked like going either way. We could see to the far side of the lake, but we could also see the clouds rolling in! We climbed to the desman site, arriving a bit before 0600, and hoped for the best. The day proved to be warm and sunny, with clouds few and far between, with only occasional and short-lived plunges into fog. By 8am, when it was properly light, we saw the beautiful scenery properly for the first time. What's more, we had a large herd of Chamois above us, and soon after a pair of marmot running around on the scree slope. From then on the morning was a little slower, but we were happy enough to be in the dry and thawing from the overnight cold. That said, we did enjoy watching ~70 black kites hop from thermal to thermal.

By 1100 we were actively warm. Fifteen minutes later, in the splendid sunshine just as we were beginning to wonder if dad's brief sighting was all we would get, I spotted a sudden plume of silt rise to the surface. This was unlike the gas bubbles which regularly came out to cause exciting ripples at the surface; those causing no such plume of silt. I called mum and dad over and within 30 seconds we were watching a desman dart from under the overhang to the foraging spot, back and forth. The creature then continued to put on quite the show for a full 50 minutes! Moving below the overhang the animal was often invisible to us, before popping up a couple of metres away to forage on the pool bed. The animal was absolutely stunning, the edges of the fur shimmering in the sunlight and the fur reflecting the green of the algae carpet. Very much well worth the wait.

As with Dad's brief sighting at 0745 the day before – when the sun was teasing us that it might make an appearance – the desman appeared during a relatively sunny spell. As it would appear that it had in Fabien's photo. Looking back, I'd recommend a plan of getting there for sunrise and leaving at dusk – there seems little point in being there when it is dark. Likewise, if it's grey and miserable, it may be worth preserving your patience for later when it is sunny. Ben and Fabien's location details are excellent – we saw our desman within 2 metres of their GPS points (see pictures of the site and associated text for further details). Perhaps the most useful addition here is to suggest "tactics" for the stake-out. The Desman was totally blasé about our presence and so don't worry about getting too close to the water's edge. We were quiet, although not silent, throughout and so I can't say much on the Desman's tolerance of noise. Second, probably better to not move around all that much. The total pool area is quite large, but the area where the Desman has been seen seems to be far smaller, with most of it well-viewed from a large rock to the south-west (see the diagram, photos and accompanying text for details including GPS points). Third, look for movement and silt rising to the surface: the animal moves extremely quickly and only ever appears briefly but the rising silt plumes are pretty obvious and last long enough to be easily spotted. The Desman tended to dart back and forth to one point and then move a couple of metres under the overhang at the edge of the pool, then pop-out again to forage in another spot, dart back and forth a few times and then move a little distance away.

Finally, if you're Europe based, go! It's easily the best mammal I have seen in mainland Europe, and the only other European mammals I have seen with a hope of getting into my top 20 are all odd cetaceans in the Azores. Plus, when visibility permits, the other wildlife is great, and the scenery stunning. We had dipper, alpine accentor, alpine chough and Pyrenean brook salamander throughout our time at the pool, plus a lammergeyer on the final morning walking down to the refuge, an Egyptian vulture from the refuge itself, and crested tit just after entering the pine forest

on the way down. The area of France is also ace – pretty villages, nice food and landscapes, and fascinating cultural sites in Bordeaux (a city which had plenty to offer in the one full day we spent there)... and we even got a stop off in Lourdes which was amusing – and added a common pipistrelle to our list. Reserve Ornithologique du Teich (~50km SW of Bordeaux) had good birds too, and a young red deer for mammal purists.



The location of dad's original sighting, at: 42.842389, -0.494278

This rock, seen from the south western edge where I'd suggest you wait, is really recognisable – see photo 4

This is a really good rock to view from, sat upon it you get the view as in photo 2. You can see the rock I mean in photo 3.

The desman spent ~50 minutes visible, following this rough line around the edge of the pool, stretching from 42.842184, -0.4946550 on the eastern side, to 42.842298, -0.494625 on the west. It really liked a point in the south-west, at 42.842221, -0.494779

Photo 1 – a desman backside and tail as it kicks up a plume of silt



Photo 2 – the view from the rock in the south west corner, looking north east and down onto the pond below.



Photo 3 – the view seen looking at the rock we sat on to watch the desman. The red dot marks where we sat.



Photo 4 – this rock, looking back from where we sat, is really recognisable to see that you are in exactly the right place.

