



Notes on watching and photographing wild mammals in Switzerland

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With thanks to Valentin Moser for additional information

An untapped potential

When I moved to Switzerland, I thought that there were no interesting wild mammals, what little exists is impossible to see, and people are uninterested in wildlife. It turned out not to be true. Ungulates like ibex and deer locally occur in surprisingly large herds. In some places, wild mammals became habituated to people. These places are not well known outside the immediate neighborhood and don't advertise themselves.

I feel Switzerland has the opportunity to develop mammal watching. Millions of Swiss residents enjoy outdoor activities like hiking. These millions seek contact with nature which can be done in half a day to a few days. People are usually interested in wildlife as a side attraction. This applies to diverse age and social groups: young people interested in iconic wildlife like wolves, families with children, and pensioners looking for activities to fill time. The country also receives many business and holiday guests. So, mammals in Switzerland can potentially attract more private and organized visitors than mammals in more biodiverse tropical countries.

There is definitely potential to make more individual people interested in mammal watching and photography. There is probably also potential for small businesses focusing on wildlife watching and wildlife photography, especially as a side attraction besides other outdoor tours.

How to watch and photograph mammals in Switzerland

Surprisingly, urban areas and outskirts of towns have much viewable wildlife. Another place is the outskirts of mountain sport areas, where wildlife is used to people. Then there are nature reserves, especially the Swiss National Park.



Chamois and Lynx - mobile photos

Time-wise, long mid-summer days in Switzerland allow watching nocturnal mammals in good light. Forest mammals in Switzerland often appear accustomed to people moving on forest roads, and wait quietly expecting not to be noticed. In winter in mountains mammal watching is much restricted, because of snowfall blocking access. Respect also *Wildruhezonen* - no-entry areas designated as retreat of wildlife from winter sports.

Species:

Alpine Ibex

Found in many places in the Alps. Often not shy. In places with many tourists, ibex tend to hide under rocky cliffs, invisible for tourists walking along the top.

Pontresina - this ski resort has habituated Ibex often coming out of the area of the cable car, near the paved paths (approx. 46.49105, 9.90874, parking in the village but is awkward).

<https://www.myswitzerland.com/en-ch/experiences/ibex-in-pontresina/>

Beatenberg - often seen along a straightforward hiking trail. Note: on weekends and holidays, an early morning visit is best. Many hikers easily push ibex away (parking at 46.68563, 7.74719, cable car Niederhornbahn to 46.71053, 7.77525, walk along the grassy mountain ridge to ca. 46.7321, 7.80722). Chamois are often visible, too, and Alpine Marmots are when going back lower down, e.g. near Gemmenalp Oberberg (46.72754, 7.80976).

Brienzer Rothorn. Ibex are often very fearless. Walk along the ridge any side from 46.787881, 8.04919. Notes as before, chamois and marmots are also present. Again, wildlife can be scared during the main tourist season and weekends. Best access is probably cable car Sörenberg - Brienzer Rothorn (46.80799, 8.05933) and hike down.

Swiss National Park - easy to see at Val Truphuhn trail, Trail 12 Grimmels, trail 17 Margunet and other places. A quiet side valley to the north had some, too, and looked good for wildlife in general. Drive to S'Charl (46.715746, 10.33109), hike to Val Sesverna (46.72262, 10.39269 and beyond).

See: <https://www.nationalpark.ch/de/besuchen/wandern/wanderrouten/>

Alpine Marmot

Widespread in the Alps, can be seen or at least heard in many places. Note that they hibernate from about the end September to late April. The alarm call is a short, strong whistle not easily confusable with other wildlife.

Generally, a single whistle announces close danger, while several whistles in quick succession mean danger farther away. To a naturalist, the marmot call often announces a predator e.g. Golden Eagle or Bearded Vulture. However, the call type actually depends on the excitement of the marmot not the objective danger, so is not fully reliable.

I know of at least two places where marmots are habituated to people and can be photographed very closely. Saas Fee - a tourist resort, has a marmot trail (46.10436, 7.9238 and onwards) where people are even encouraged to try feeding marmots with carrots. More info: <https://www.touringswitzerland.com/saas-fee-murmeli-trail-feeding-marmots-in-spielboden>

Swiss National Park. Colonies of marmots are right at tourist resting places along the trail 1 Val Trupchun at Alp Trupchun (46.59573, 10.0771, parking at 46.61805, 10.01043 and hike) and Trail 12 Grimmels (park 46.67970, 10.16691 and hike to Alp Grimmels 46.66538, 10.205793). They choose this apparently for safety from their main predator, the Golden Eagle.

Near Zermatt, area around Riffelsee (very approx. 45.98275, 7.76133) sometimes allows photographers' dream - marmots frolicking with the iconic triangle of Matterhorn in the background. Take the mountain railway Zermatt - Gornergrat, get out at Rotenboden and ca 15 min hiking.

Chamois

Widespread. Occurs in Alps and Jura. Often seen when scanning open mountain slopes with binoculars. However, lives also on smaller hills and forests if they have some rocky outcrops or boulder slopes. Hunted, diurnal, generally afraid of man and movable, so not easily predictable.

Habituated Chamois come in the evening to the restaurant Gletschergrotte near Saas Fee (46.09775, 7.91051, access like marmot trails).

Outskirts of Mürren in Lauterbrunnen have Chamois feeding near houses at dawn.

Swiss National park - track Val Trupchun has good density of Chamois, here at least distant views can be almost certain.

Red Deer

Widespread but hunted, so usually shy and not reliable.

Swiss National Park: track at Val Truphuhn, Trail 12 Grimmels - I seen several deer at both. Val Truphuhn is said to be a popular place for red deer rut watching.

Hotel Parc Nazional Il Fuorn (46.66439, 10.21034) - I saw red deer feeding in the evening at the meadow facing the hotel windows. It might be a good if pricey place to stay in the national park.

Justistal:

From Beatenberg in September an extremely intense red deer rut could be heard, with calls of stags merging into a continuous roar. This valley is locally known for the red deer rut, however, there are few photos which suggest that the deer are distantly visible. Park (46.71275, 7.76058) and walk on the dirt road northeast along the valley ottom to the mountain bar (46.73495, 7.79416) or beyond. Note - it is not possible to walk down off-track from Beatenberg, there are dangerous undercut cliffs.

Beaver

Surprisingly widespread along waterways. The presence of beavers is easily noticed by cut trees and branches. Beavers can be rather often seen by walking quietly in such places at dusk and dawn. They are swimming or sitting on the riverbank. Often, waves on water are more easily seen than beavers themselves, which can be surprisingly inconspicuous and fearless, hidden between shore vegetation.

Places: I have seen beavers around Klingnauer Stausee (AR): north of the bridge on the Aare in Kliendottingen on the western side, north for about 1 km, along a small side channel (47.5729, 8.25116 to 47.57604, 8.24172, parking 47.5763, 8.23994). The second place is on the west shore, about 2 km south from the dam, on the small canal along the reservoir (47.59168, 8.22304).

Fanel (VD) channel at Chablais de Curdefin on the south bank had habituated beavers (46.9798, 7.037598, parking 46.9758, 7.05663).

Flachsee - west bank of the river Reuss, about 5 km north of the bridge at Leuggern (parking 47.3193, 8.37254, walk approximately to 47.32925, 8.36286).

Bern city. A walk along the river Aare late evening or at night usually leads to some sightings, especially in the area between Münsingen and Bern (info WM).



Hiking encounters

Zürich city. Urban beavers occur along waters in the city centre, and for example also along the Glatt in Dübendorf. Territories move, so it's best check for trees and sticks freshly gnawed by beavers (info WM).

Coypu

Introduced. They are habituated in Basel, in Park im Grünen (47.5306, 7.61795).

Petite Camargue Alsacienne (France), 5 km across the border from Basel, has many of these animals. They are particularly visible during winter frost, when they spend the daytime feeding. In the reserve, on diverse ponds and canals, and along the canal S of the bridge (parking 47.61987, 7.54557). Note - beavers and muskrat also occur there, but scarcer.

Lynx

I don't know how to dependably see a lynx, although I seen 2 in Switzerland, 1 in Germany and 2 in Poland, and many people asked me how. Most sightings were in midsummer evenings, when it was light past 19.00. Lynx were seen from dirt roads at the edge of the forest and meadow. Two times they were given away by the alarm of Roe Deer: deep, short barks, unusually low and often repeated compared with the usual alarm of the Roe Deer buck. Lynx were NOT escaping from man at a very long distance. However they hid in dense undergrowth. I made a point of passing them pretending not to notice, and standing 100 m further, and after some time they walked out in the open again. After retreating into bushes, noteworthy, lynx stopped few meters into the bushes and crouched there. Their eyes could be seen shining, but DON'T WALK OFF THE ROAD - when you rustle leaves, they know they have been spotted and run away. The lynx seemed to be accustomed to many people moving on forest roads without paying attention.

Here are short mobile films (you probably noticed I prefer not to carry a heavy camera). On the last, the lynx is stalking a roe deer near me - you see how habituated are mammals locally.

<https://vimeo.com/420457219>

<https://vimeo.com/420457397>

<https://vimeo.com/589937652>

<https://vimeo.com/589938391>

To a prospective lynx watcher, I recommend choosing a route along forest tracks going on level ground, long, easy to cover long distances, passing along forest-meadow edges, and walking or cycling there quietly in long summer evenings or early mornings. Look at the forest edge for a brown cat and listen for roe deer alarm calls.

My sightings were near Nenzlingen (47.46060, 7.55500) and near MuttENZ (47.52643, 7.62691), but I only saw the Lynx once in many times walking there. This is to be expected from known lynx behaviour - they have huge territories, several hundred km², move every few days, and leave once the Roe Deer become wary. So there is no such thing as a lynx repeatedly visiting any one place when a human could see it.

Carnivore society in Switzerland, kora.ch shows a map that the lynx territories cover most of Jura and the northern Alps, but in this huge area, there are only about 250 lynx: <https://www.kora.ch/de/arten/luchs/verbreitung>

Eurasian Wildcat

I seen it once near Nenzlingen (47.45716, 7.56679), while trying to relocate the lynx.

I seen this species many times in Germany before. Wildcats are generally located by spotlighting after dark. Walk on tracks in the forest or forest edge. Wildcats spend much time in patches of dense undergrowth or sitting on tree stumps or logs. They avoid open meadows without cover and barren forest floor. The wildcat usually is immobile or moves slowly, unlike foxes and martens which are restless. Stay on the path, be quiet, move patiently forward and back on the path, and lean and stretch to see the diagnostic tail pattern. Miraculously, it is possible to see the tail of a wildcat in thick undergrowth. Normally, a wildcat tolerates a quiet man but spooks once you walk off the road or rustle leaves. Like lynxes, they seem to be accustomed to humans walking on forest roads and wait patiently for a human to pass them without noticing.

Kora.ch has info that they are widespread all along Jura from Basel to Geneva, and also in the lowlands south of Yverdon and Cudrefin, which can be an easier place to look: <https://www.kora.ch/de/arten/wildkatze/verbreitung>

The common problem with the Wildcat is confusion with domestic cats. In the Wildcat, notice the thick tail with a few but very broad black bars, which are not connected with each other or the back by a line at the top. Wildcats in Switzerland have neat fluffy hair, no ear tufts, a dull brown body with subtle marble-like darker pattern on the sides, a black central back line and clear black neck stripes. Felines with tail bands connected to each other, rusty color, strong black tiger stripes on the sides, flowing hair or ear tufts are domestic cats. See especially the domestic breed called the Russian forest cat.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272505524_Achtung_Wildkatze_-_nicht_schiessen

Alpine Mouse *Apodemus alpicola*

Said to be numerous in the Alps in mountain forests, often the most common rodent. Strictly nocturnal as a rule. I saw it with a thermal scope in a forest around Gurnigel. Likely to be everywhere in mountain conifer forests.

Snow Vole *Chionomys nivalis*

Said to be widespread in mountain meadows above the tree line. Occasionally reported living under tourist mountain huts. However, very few actual observations come to ornitho.ch. I never seen this species. One place where I saw trails and possibly the rodent itself was Muottas Muragl, going short distance up from the upper station of the cable car (46.52309, 9.90492, parking at 46.50877, 9.88309) but Field Vole *Microtus agrestis* can also occur there.

Other mammals (many thanks to VM):

Widespread in the Alps, but nocturnal is the **Mountain Hare *Lepus timidus***. I seen its tracks many times but never visually.

Among common bats, the most numerous, found in almost every city and village outside high mountains is the **Common Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*** (call frequency maximum often near 45/46). Often seen casually, hunting at dusk near houses or in the lights of street lamps. In the cities near watercourses, **Soprano Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*** (call frequency maximum often near 52-56) can also be quite common, as well as **Kuhl's Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus kuhlii***, which white edge of the wing can sometimes be well visible in pictures. In the fall, migrating **Noctule *Nyctalus noctula*** can often be observed already flying in the late evening. A visually characteristic bat, large, long-winged, flying high at or above tree crown level, and often well before darkness. **Daubenton's Bat *Myotis daubentonii*** is common over most bigger water courses and has a characteristic hunting style: always low over the water.

Red Squirrel is common in forests and parks, especially around stands of hazel bushes. **Stone Marten** is widespread in farmland, villages, and also city centres, where seen at night alongside domestic cats. **Pine Marten** is widespread but difficult to see. **West European Hedgehog** is widespread, including urban residential areas and parks. Seen at dusk and night, also heard shuffling. Very common **Roe Deer**, and less common **Badger** and **Wild Boar** are widespread in forests, including suburbs, and often seen at dusk on meadows or fields at forest edge or

forest tracks.

Bank Vole *Myodes glareolus* is widespread and common in lowland forests. Its abundance changes every year. It is diurnal and is default small mouse-like rodent seen in forests, where often revealed by rustling leaves. **Yellow-necked Mouse *Apodemus flavicollis*** and **Wood Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*** are common in lowland forests. They are nocturnal and generally seen only with thermal camera, when they can turn to be very common.

There is a small, introduced in the 1970s, but persisting population of **Siberian Chipmunks *Tamias sibiricus*** in urban parks of Geneva, around Parc Mon Repos, Perle du Lac, Parc Barton and Jardin Botanique lakeside (approx. between 46.21907, 6.15068 and 46.22742, 6.148898).

I have never seen a **Wolf** in Switzerland, and have never heard of any certain or moderately sure spots. Local people, especially in the town of Chur, are convinced there is excess of dangerous wolves around, but I never met somebody who actually seen one. All I can relay is online information at: <https://www.kora.ch> .

Note

No responsibility will be assumed for anybody who follows this information. All sites in this article require some fitness and elementary outdoor skills. Accidents are always possible in the mountains. When going into the mountains, take appropriate footwear and warm, waterproof clothing. Before going, check the distance, altitude (e.g. outdooractive.com, alltrails.com), weather, snow situation (high trails are often blocked from November to the end of May) and eventual cable car times. The places described here are generally very popular and well described online, and easy to moderate in hiking scale. They can be also reached by public transport of post buses.

Information sources

One problem in Switzerland is that online and public information is less developed than in other countries. You need to learn things by word of mouth.

<https://www.kora.ch> - The society for protection of carnivores in Switzerland has detailed information.

<https://lepus.infofauna.ch/carto/> - has distribution maps of mammals in Switzerland

<https://fledermausschutz.ch/arten> - bats in Switzerland.

<https://www.ornitho.ch> - allows searching recent mammal records. It needs registration and submitting some observations first. Unfortunately, bats are missing and many species are restricted to search, including huntable mammals and big carnivores.

Switzerland is blessed with an excess of sites about outdoor activities. I use outdooractive.com and detailed maps on swisstopo.ch. I check weather by searching for nearby webcams. In the mountains, it is common that lower slopes are sunny but mountaintops are cloudy, rainy or snow-blocked. Otherwise, a good weather site is meteoblue.ch. All these sites are also available as apps. Every region normally has its own tourist website, too.

Books:

- Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Wildtierbiologie (SGW) (Hrsg.) - Atlas der Säugetiere – Schweiz und Liechtenstein, 2 Auflage, 2023 - a huge and expensive compendium of Swiss mammals.
- Lorenz Heer - Wanderungen zu Murmeltier, Steinbock & Co. Haupt Verlag 2015 - a photo-album-like book with ca. 30 mountain hiking routes where big mammals can be seen. Moderately helpful, focused on hikers.
- Manuel Schweizer, Paul Walser Schwyzer, Mathias Ritschard, Marco Sacchi - Vögel beobachten in der Schweiz, Ott Verlag, 2020 - Bird watching places, mostly lowland waters and marshes. Only a few mentions of mammals.
- Heinz Staffelbach - Wildtier-Wanderungen in der Schweiz. Biodiversität erleben – die 34 lohnendsten Touren zu Laubfrosch, Hirsch und Adler. AT Verlag, 2021 - 34 nature hiking trails. I did not read this book yet.

I seriously hope further competent Swiss naturalists step up and fill the gaps!

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