



Riu de la Llosa above Can Jan

How not to see Pyrenean Desman

Jan Ebr, Spain, July 2–6 2022

We (me and Ivana) have spent three nights at the beginning of July 2022 in the Catalan Pyrenees looking for the Pyrenean Desman with no success. The purpose of the report is to show what kind of effort is insufficient, give logistical advice and to follow the ethos set by Manuel Baumgartner in the EU FB group that people should also report fiascos to provide a more balanced perspective.

We searched until 3 am the first two nights and 2 am the last one and we also looked at streams during the daytime, mainly out of desperation. In the night, we used a thermal imager and red light and we combined walking along streams with periods of silent waits at locations with a good view.

To look for a desman, one has to first select some sites. Recently, reports described a site in France, in the high alpine zone, with an easily accessible desman, which is however extremely

surprising, as it completely contradicts all available literature on desman habitat; we have decided to treat the single data point as an outlier and tried to look for habitat according to said literature. Typically, desmans should occur in fast flowing streams (one paper shows that turbulent flow is highly preferred over laminar) with densely vegetated banks (preferably with deciduous forest). Another recent paper studied correlations of desmans with other factors and found that they prefer steep and deep valleys, 2nd-4th step of watercourse from headwater (calculated by adding confluences) and that they tend to co-occur with Dippers and not co-occur with Neomyses. While for the French side of the Pyrenees, papers with specific sites exist, I found no public information south of the border - there is plenty of data in observation.org, but it's all obscured. At least it's clear that they should occur mostly everywhere along the main ridge west of the first major mountain group (roughly north of Ripoll); notably they are absent from the lower ridges to the south, such as Cadí.

Several sources mention a sharp decline of desman numbers in lower parts of watercourses and "a retreat towards headwaters", likely due to human interference (but the details are unclear). We thus looked for streams mostly above any habitation. Although the area even just within Catalonia is huge, there aren't actually that many sites to choose from - a lot of what you see on the maps are tiny streams (which don't seem to be preferred by desmans as there isn't much room to swim), so there is basically one significant watercourse every 10-15 kms of the main ridge.



La Noguera de Vallferea in the lower gorge above La Farga



A stream with an absurdly complicated name above Montgarri

The main question however is access - below the tree level, there often aren't trails along the streams and often the water flows through impenetrable gorges, so detailed research is needed. In fact the best strategy would be to fully scout the sites during the day first - however this has proven difficult to do in July as even at 1500 meters, the afternoon temperatures were well above 30 and hiking up and down did not seem very attractive. Another interesting problem is what to do when the search is over as the area between the villages and the alpine zone (where the refugios are) doesn't offer accommodation. We camped, but it's not always easy to find a spot in the steep terrain and in protected areas it's technically illegal - you actually can legally camp, but only above 2000 meters and between 8 pm and 8 am, neither of which is well tailored to desman-watchers. Also note that if you want to sleep more than a few hours, you desperately need a site with some shade. There is relatively good car access all the way to the mountains, but some places have restrictions and even require advance reservation.

We started in the afternoon at Riu Duran from the free carpark at 42.4523N, 1.7621E (the road is regulated, but only much higher, on the way to the refugio), but after hiking a few kms up, we turned back as there was no real access to the stream and it was quite waterfall-y anyway. On the flip side, this valley had the most butterfly species I have ever seen in one place and it was all in a giant bloom.

Riu de la Llosa looked better - we parked at the small area at the bridge at 42.4198N, 1.7017E and started the search upstream. There is first some deciduous forest with good access - sometimes directly from the road, sometimes walking along the stream. We skipped the part between the waterfall and Can Jan (there is another parking lot there but the road to it is really bad). Above Can Jan, access was worse than we expected as the water is in a gorge - we obtained river views only from time to time, but the sites looked very good. Eventually we camped at a small spot next to the river (the trail is high above the gorge so it's well out of view).

Next up was La Noguera de Vallferea above Areu. This is apparently a famous staging area to climb some high peaks, so the road above Areu has restricted access - on weekends and in peak holiday period you must reserve a parking spot in advance online. We reached the gate above Areu and were told this and there was barely enough mobile coverage to do so on the spot. We were told that we could in principle drive all the way to the parking lot at La Molinassa even with a normal car "if we go very slowly" but the road was bad enough that we stopped at La Farga. As it was already Sunday evening, there was only one other car, but this probably fills up on weekends; parking in Areu is possible instead, it's just a few kilometers. The river between La Farga and La Molinassa has some great stretches and some really inaccessible ones. If you take the trail that crosses the river at La Farga, it soon crosses it back and then a great stretch with a trail close to the river starts. We originally planned to stay at the bridge or around for a few hours before sunset and then continue upwards but there were so many mosquitoes (even for our standards twisted by having lived in Poland) that we gave up and hiked to La Molinassa to do the night search in the other direction; after sunset, the mosquitoes were gone. After a kilometer or so, the trail leaves the valley and there is no practical access; another useful stretch is then below La Molinassa where the "main road" is close to the river, but one has to climb up and down towards the water to get good views. This area was particularly practical to have seen during daylight. Eventually we camped at a small hidden flat in the forest half way through the slope where the trail climbs from the bottom gorge.

From the ski center at Beret, a comfortable dirt road leads to a parking just above the lonely church in Montgarri. We hiked a bit up to the flats around 42.7658N, 0.9720E and focused around the streams there. This is not the perfect habitat (continuous forest is only a little lower along the stream, but with only a short accessible stretch and overwhelmingly coniferous), but the upside is very good visibility of any part of the water. Having not scouted this area in daylight, we struggled a little with finding a way between the wetlands in the valley but it was doable. The most difficult part was finding a campsite that would be flat yet not exposed to morning Sun, eventually we had to accept a shade that only lasted until about 9 am.

Apart from not seeing desmans, we also failed to see much mammals at all - there were occasionally **Red Deer** and **Roe Deer** and unidentified bats (at least some likely **Common Pipistrelle** based on ultrasound); thermal scoping brought a few **Apodemuses** which seemed to really like the stream sides here. Above Montgarri, we got our best views ever of a **Stone Marten** which we interrupted at a streamside at dusk. Later that night our hearts skipped some beats due to a heat signature on stones in the middle of the water which however quickly turned out to be a vole. I first thought it was a Water Vole but why was it so hesitant to even get wet? Eventually we IDed it as a **Bank Vole**, but I have never seen one this big - apparently the

mountain form is bigger? The only other mammal species seen were the many, many Rabbits in the steppes west of Lleida where we went to check on some birds.

Birding was almost surprisingly slow, the most interesting birds were Citril Finches, a lifer for Ivana, which were quite common in the higher areas. Above Areu and above Montgarri, we found Pyrenean Brook Newts, a spectacular mountain amphibian species; above Areu we also encountered a reptilian lifer, Western Green Lizard (which required a detailed look as there are, unusually for Spain, also Sand Lizards in the area). There are some quite exciting Iberolacerta in the alpine zones, but that was too far up for us this time to even try. Pyrenees are great and there is a lot of nature to enjoy, still relatively freely - in particular the lesser known areas can be completely devoid of people. July isn't the best time to visit though, with the unique combination of oppressive heat and frequent thunderstorm risk; next time I'd like to come in a more shoulder season. I wonder what the desmans even do in winter?

We had originally not planned to rent a car, as the offers were expensive, but in the end, we gave in and took one. While the Pyrenees are accessible on public transportation, having a car spared us from hiking up through the hottest altitudes and allowed us to take advantage of the mountain parkings. Also the bad times of the flights would force us to take hotels in Barcelona which are very expensive in July. However I would like to once again warn against Europcar - or, in this case, Goldcar, which is their Spanish offshoot. They have already once scammed me of money in the UK and they tried to do so again in Barcelona: the clerk gives you a payment to authorize, which includes things you actually want to pay - such as a deposit for the gas - but also adds on extra insurance that you never ordered. This time, I was prepared for this shady practice and had the insurance removed - then the clerk starts babbling about how bad it is that now I have to leave a deposit - yes, that's what the conditions I agreed during booking stated and that's why I have an external insurance to cover the deposit! They do this to everyone as evidenced by the constant bad reviews from people who only notice this in their credit card statement - and they absolutely deserve bad press. Sadly, the offer of rental cars, which used to be bountiful in Spain, is now severely diminished and so there isn't much to choose from.



Surely this must be a Bank Vole, right?