



# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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## WALES AND SOUTHERN ENGLAND

**Date - May and June 2021**

**Duration - 38 Days**

**Destinations - Hampshire and Dorset**

New Forest National Park - Bolderwood Deer Sanctuary - RSPB Arne Nature Reserve - Buckland Newton

**Destinations - Gloucestershire and Bristol**

Forest of Dean - Nagshead Nature Reserve - Portbury Wharf Nature Reserve

### **Destinations - Wales**

Tenby - Caldey Island - Stackpole - Bosherton - Haverfordwest - Pembrokeshire Coast National Park - St Davids - Grassholm Island - Strumble Head - Cardigan - Gwbert - Cardigan Bay - Mwnt - Teifi Marshes Nature Reserve - New Quay - Brecon Beacons National Park - Sennybridge - Pont ar Daf - Henrhyd Falls - Margam Country Park - The Begwns - Elan Valley - Aberystwyth - Cors Caron Nature Reserve - Dolydd Hafren Nature Reserve - Snowdonia National Park - Nant Gwynant - Pen-y-Pass - Cwm Idwal - Dinorwic Quarry - Anglesey - Plas Newydd House and Garden - Newborough Nature Reserve - Llyn Parc Mawr - Great Orme - Bodnant Garden - RSPB Newport Wetlands Nature Reserve - Magor Marsh Nature Reserve

### **Destinations - Devon and Cornwall**

Exmoor National Park - Horner Wood - Lynton and Lynmouth - Valley of the Rocks - Lee Abbey - Heddon's Mouth - Ilfracombe - Padstow - Dartmoor National Park - Wistman's Wood - Belstone - Dunsford Nature Reserve - Canonteign Falls - Parke - Yarner Wood - Haytor - Hound Tor - Lady's Wood - Teignmouth - Powderham Castle - Budleigh Salterton - River Otter - Seaton Wetlands - Borrow Pit

### **Destinations - Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk**

RSPB Rainham Marshes Nature Reserve - Weeting Heath Nature Reserve - East Wretham Heath Nature Reserve - Norwich - River Yare - Reepham - Blakeney Nature Reserve - Blakeney Point - Cley Marshes - Salthouse Marshes - The Broads - Barton Broad - Hickling Broad - Horsey Gap - Martham Broad - Ranworth Broad - RSPB Strumpshaw Fen Nature Reserve - RSPB Minsmere Nature Reserve



## Trip Overview

Having been unable to travel for more than seven months due to the continued coronavirus pandemic, which is probably as long as I have ever gone without spending time in the field, in early May 2021, with national lockdown restrictions easing, I took the opportunity to explore several wildlife sites in Wales and southern England that I had not visited for a number of years, as well as a few new ones. I had been considering the trip for some time and had already arranged to visit various sites in Norfolk, when I heard the unlikely news that a walrus, previously spotted off the coast of Ireland, had taken up residence on a lifeboat slipway in the fortified medieval town of Tenby in southwest Wales. This really was too good to miss, as I was aware that these massive Arctic pinnipeds have very occasionally been observed in the Orkney Islands and to the extreme north of Scotland, but even these remote sightings were incredibly rare and I had never heard of a walrus recorded this far south. Unfortunately, Wally, as the young male walrus had been rather unimaginatively christened, slipped away before I was able to juggle my work and dog commitments and it looked as if I may have missed the chance of a lifetime to see a walrus on the United Kingdom mainland. Happily though he returned and most of this trip was arranged following my first visit to the charming harbour town of Tenby for almost two decades. Whilst work demanded that I had to return home briefly at certain points, the tour was planned and could easily be undertaken as one single



adventure and although I would often spend just an hour or two at certain destinations, others were visited on multiple occasions over several days. Given the large number involved, I have not included details of most of the towns or villages that I either stopped or stayed at, unless wildlife was encountered there of course, and similarly I have not attempted to record every walk at each location. In Dartmoor, for example, I hiked an awful lot of trails, but have not listed them all and often did not even make a note of the path that I was traversing. In terms of the wildlife observed, the tour was enormously successful and I was able to experience thrilling encounters with a number of the UK's rarest and most iconic species, as well as the vast majority of the usual suspects that I am always hoping to see whenever I am able to spend time exploring my own kingdom. Excluding bats and marine mammals, but including a few domestic species living wild, of the 39 mammals that occur in the areas visited, I was delighted to be able to observe and identify 32. Of the seven that I missed, three were carnivores, but pine marten are almost impossible south of Scotland, while American mink and least weasel are both always very much a matter of chance. That said, I had encountered three least weasels during the previous year alone, two whilst walking my dog locally and one on the drive back from the same woods, which is more or less as many as I have seen in a lifetime in the UK. This no doubt relates to the severe coronavirus lockdown restrictions, which has limited human activity in many wild or semi wild areas and has certainly resulted in far more wildlife sightings as a direct consequence. Of the remaining four species to elude me, I was disappointed to miss all three native shrews, particularly as I visited a good site for water shrew, and, as I will



describe in more detail later in this report, I was very unfortunate not to encounter a mole, although sadly not as unfortunate as the mole itself. In addition to the 39 species that I spent much of May and June searching for, four terrestrial mammals occur elsewhere, European wild cat, although the exact presence of this species remains uncertain, mountain hare, edible dormouse and the introduced red-necked wallaby, which can be found on Inchconnachan Island in Loch Lomond and in the north of the Isle of Man. There are also many other breeds of domestic horses living wild in the UK, but I only included the Exmoor and Dartmoor varieties on this occasion, largely because they are so well known and people visit both national parks specifically to see them. Whilst mammals are my main interest and generally occupy much of my time in the field, I am fascinated by all wildlife and always try to fully immerse myself in the habitat I am exploring, which usually means that birds, amphibians and reptiles are all well represented on my tours. This trip was no exception and if several stunning owls and a couple of comical stone-curlews were among the avian highlights, an hour or so spent watching grass snakes swimming, a pair of slow worms mating and a majestic adder, were very much the outstanding reptilian encounters. Sadly, and quite abjectly in terms of the conservation efforts of so many other countries, only around 13% of the UK's native woodlands survive to this day and there are almost no entirely intact ecosystems



remaining on these isles, certainly not in pristine condition and wholly unaffected by any human disturbance or presence. As such, it is very difficult to visit one habitat for a full variety of species and it is more a case of choosing a certain location for a specific animal, so the New Forest for wild boar for example or the River Otter in Devon for beaver. To some extent wildlife viewing in the UK has been reduced to almost artificial set pieces and supposedly wild areas and actual protected reserves are now either so fragmented or degraded, or often both, that I had to visit more than 60 sites to produce the sightings that I have detailed in this report. Whilst I accept that it would obviously be possible to identify the same number of species at considerably fewer destinations, it could not be guaranteed and without exception every site that I visited had been impacted by man in some way, almost entirely adversely and often quite disastrously. Some areas are either so heavily farmed or just so completely overused, that it was almost impossible to find an actual wild animal and I think that around 40 hours of driving and hiking in Brecon Beacons National Park produced a single

grey squirrel at Henrhyd Falls. Admittedly the weather did not help, as May was incredibly wet and I spent much of my first three weeks trudging across waterlogged landscapes in torrential rain. Indeed, there was even flooding during my stay in Snowdonia and there is no doubt that my prospects of seeing various animals were severely hampered by the extreme weather conditions. However, it is equally the case that we have failed to protect the vast majority of our wild places, certainly in comparison to many other similar European destinations, and that this lack of authentic wilderness has severely impacted the species that occur on these shores and consequently the way that we are able to observe them. Sightings can range from uncomfortably artificial in fragmented or confined areas, to almost inconceivable for some species, but it does still remain possible to experience wonderful natural encounters in certain parts of the UK, if you are prepared to spend enough time looking. I always am, in fact, I find searching for wildlife almost as



rewarding as actually finding any and I hope that this and my other UK reports will inspire more people to take an interest in British wildlife and the environments that we so urgently need to conserve. Given the number of locations involved, I have only featured a selection of the reserves visited in any depth and have also only described a few of my favourite sightings, as it makes more sense to discuss the best places to observe each species than to actually record every encounter. Despite some impressive competition and any number of memorable moments, the absolute highlight of the tour was undoubtedly seeing a wild walrus on the Welsh coast, which is not a statement I would have ever considered being able to write. Even as I drove to Tenby I was worrying that Wally may have moved on again and when I arrived in the late evening he was indeed nowhere to be seen. Anyone who has visited this picturesque seaside town, will know how difficult it is to park within clear view of the sheltered lifeboat station and I therefore decided to scan from a distance until I was certain that our itinerant walrus had returned home...and by home, I meant his adopted lifeboat slipway and not all the way back to the Arctic. That would have been very difficult to take given that, for me at least, this appeared to be a once in a lifetime opportunity to see a wild walrus in my own homeland, at least a couple of thousand kilometres beyond this animal's normal range. With the continued and no doubt ultimately catastrophic effects of climate change, that situation may well change of course and it is possible, perhaps even likely, that in future many other species will occur in entirely new regions, either in a random search for food or for an environment that will sustain them. However, for now, the appearance of a walrus this far south was an extraordinary wildlife event and I was determined not to miss such an historic occurrence. Just purely from a practical perspective, this was actually a wonderful opportunity for everyone in the UK and even beyond, as these magnificent creatures are difficult and expensive to reach in the wild and the vast majority of people will live and die without ever encountering one. Heart-warmingly, thousands clearly realised this and travelled from all over the country to catch a glimpse of our spectacular and unexpected guest. That I was one of them, will always stay with me, as the next day, when I again pulled up to scan at distance, there was now a large dark blob at the

bottom of the lifeboat ramp. Around 30 minutes later, after a desperate scramble to find a parking space and a fairly long run, I was within less than 50 metres of the first walrus ever recorded in this region. As it transpired, I need not have worried or even rushed, as I was informed by one of the local wildlife volunteers monitoring Wally, that he had been out feeding for the previous couple of days and clearly had no intention of moving for several hours. In fact, his slumber was really only disturbed when the tide encroached and he occasionally had to drag his huge frame a few more metres up the slipway. These occasional bursts of activity presented the best opportunity for photographs, as Wally looked around for a few seconds to see what had disturbed him, before settling back to a peaceful repose. After several hours of taking shots from roughly the same position, looking down at the slumbering walrus from the path directly above the slipway, I decided to try to get a closer eyelevel view, but obviously without disturbing him at all. There had



already been numerous complaints that some boats and paddle boarders were getting too close, although to be honest, Wally appeared to be largely oblivious to any of the usual harbour traffic and barely stirred when the wake of a craft washed gently against him. I quickly noticed that he more or less ignored even relatively large boats passing by and when you consider that at one stage lifeboat staff took more than twenty minutes to rouse him back into the water with the aid of a hosepipe and air horn, I do not believe that he was overly concerned by a great deal of the commotion his unexpected presence had caused. Having said that, it did not feel right to charter my own boat and add to any possible disturbance, however unlikely, and instead I decided to catch the regular tourist boat to Caldey Island, which I had seen went straight past the comatose walrus on its return journey. I had intended to visit Caldey in any case, as red squirrels were introduced there in 2016 after an intensive rat eradication project and I was aware that they had been thriving on the island without any competition from grey squirrels. Hedgehogs have also been introduced and it is hoped that in time it may be possible to re-establish a puffin colony on the island, as these ground-nesting birds cannot survive where rats proliferate. Whilst it is often not the case when working around wildlife, happily on this occasion the plan worked to perfection and my afternoon on Caldey produced a first red squirrel of the tour and a superb view of Wally on the boat ride back. As hard as it was to eventually drag myself away, after years of chasing exotic animals all over the globe, it had been an immense privilege to spend time with such a rare creature so close to my own home and I returned a few days later to enjoy another magical afternoon with this captivating gentle giant. Although I did not know it at the time, this would be the last chance for anyone to see Wally in Tenby, as he left the Welsh coast the very next day and made his way even further south, firstly to Padstow in Cornwall and then on to La Rochelle in France and as far south as Bilbao in Spain. In his wake, he left a trail of sunken boats and partially submerged dinghies, as well as numerous hilarious photographs of a vast walrus snoozing contentedly on a variety of speedboats and pleasure cruisers that he had managed to haul himself onto without actually capsizing. For all the obvious interest and humour involved in his journey, it was difficult to understand why he was continuing south into even warmer waters and I must admit that I was relieved to hear when his trail of destruction eventually turned north once more and he returned to Cornwall by way of the Scilly Isles and then back to the southern coast of Ireland. I was very much hoping that he would journey on to far cooler climes, possibly to look for a mate, as he was estimated to be between four and five years old, which is not far off sexual maturity for a male walrus. Whether that is the case or not, I am delighted to say that as I write this report, Wally was last observed in Iceland, which is a great deal closer to his Arctic home. As

much as I would like to know how his story continues, when you consider that walrus are hunted and killed both legally and illegally in a number of countries, I actually hope never to hear of him again. The fabulous Wally aside, Pembrokeshire is in many ways the ideal place to begin a wildlife tour of Wales, particularly if you are interested in marine species. The high cliffs of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park are perfect for a wide variety of nesting seabirds and from St Davids it is easy to take boat tours to the islands of Skomer, Skokholm, Ramsey and Grassholm. In combination Skomer and Skokholm protect the largest nesting grounds for Manx shearwaters on the planet, with considerably more than 300,000 pairs breeding here from March each year. Both islands also support healthy Atlantic puffin colonies and although I only visited Grassholm on this occasion, which itself is home to almost 40,000 pairs of nesting northern gannets, I was delighted to spot a number of puffins and shearwaters. Whilst they were largely dedicated dolphin and whale watching trips, my two voyages out of St Davids produced fabulous views of a host of seabirds, including European storm



petrels, razorbills, guillemots, fulmars and kittiwakes. Peregrine falcons soared along the towering cliffs, several harbour porpoise were observed characteristically close to shore and at one stage we had a pod of 30 or so common dolphins in view, many breaching and bow riding around the boat. As is always the case with these exuberant creatures, it was simply thrilling to be right in the centre of such a dynamic display and to be able to observe such freedom and apparent joy at such close quarters. In all the two trips produced three common dolphin encounters, the others involved far fewer dolphins and were only slightly more subdued, but none of the distinctive risso's dolphins that I had been hoping to see or any of the whale species that can be observed in these waters. Minke, sei and fin are the most commonly encountered whales in Pembrokeshire, whilst orca and humpback whale are also possible, but it is probably fair to say that none are spotted with anything approaching regularity. That cannot be said of the grey seal, which is the only seal species to occur on the west coast of the UK and can be watched at a number of locations with a minimum of effort, including Tenby, Grassholm Island and Strumble Head, which also boasts an enviable reputation as one of the best places to observe porpoise, whales and dolphins from the mainland. I saw seals at all three and the further north you travel along the coast beyond Pembrokeshire and into Ceredigion, the more likely you are to see common bottlenose dolphins than common dolphins. Cardigan Bay is home to one of only two significant resident populations of bottlenose dolphins in the UK, the other being the Moray Firth in Scotland, and I took boat tours to search for them from both Gwbert and New Quay. The bottlenose dolphin does not have the distinctive yellow or brownish markings on its flanks of the common dolphin and is much larger than its diminutive cousin, indeed, the bottlenose dolphins of Cardigan Bay are the largest bottlenose dolphins in the world and I was able to find good numbers on each tour. I also took the opportunity to visit nearby Mwnt, a beautiful hidden cove and deceptively steep hill overlooking the ocean and another great spot for watching dolphins and porpoises from the coast. I spent a lazy three hours or so either scanning or just enjoying the sumptuous views on a rare sunny afternoon and was rewarded with an entirely different and more distant perspective of a bottlenose dolphin, though no less pleasing. Further inland I went looking for otters at two of the best locations for these beguiling predators in all of Wales, Stackpole, which is owned by the National Trust and features the gorgeous Bosherston Lily Ponds, and Teifi Marshes Nature Reserve, which was always pretty as well, but is now looking tired and overused. Two of the hides have been deliberately burnt down and almost none of the dog walkers that I met were prepared to keep their dogs on a lead, despite the very clear signs indicating that all dogs had to be tethered and under control. Whilst the reserve has always enjoyed a good reputation and I did see a few grey squirrels and a couple of red deer during three visits, as well as the semi-wild water buffalo that have been introduced as part of the reserve management plan, I never had the feeling that an otter was likely. The opposite was the case at Stackpole and although I again had no luck with an otter and actually failed to see a single mammal during the same number of visits, the hikes here were far more tranquil and I was constantly drawn back. The same cannot be said of my stay in the Brecon Beacons, which was as unproductive as I believe



I have ever known, partly due to the abysmal weather, but also because of the way that the national park has been managed, with almost every metre of green space devoted to sheep and other domestic livestock. I consequently widened my search beyond the park boundaries, initially up to the Begwns and then further to the impressive reservoirs, dams and viaducts of Elan Valley, where I again enjoyed some stimulating walks, albeit in the same atrocious conditions. It was here that I was able to identify my only bank voles of the tour and likewise, my one and only Eurasian curlew, which I initially spotted from the car at the beginning of one of the most



memorable UK drives this side of Scotland, the mountain pass between Rhayader and Aberystwyth. Most of Elan Valley is captivating enough, but the scenery on the mountain road to Aberystwyth is breathtaking and I spent as much time stopping to savour the views as I did to scan for wildlife, even in the rain. Much the same would occur amid the wild rugged landscapes of Snowdonia, which was to be my next significant destination, following an all too brief sojourn at Dolydd Hafren Nature Reserve. I would have preferred longer to explore here, but I could not devote the same amount of time to every reserve and had already been in Wales for almost two weeks at this point. It is always difficult to decide exactly where to spend your time on any tour and often it can just be a matter of instinct. At Dolydd Hafren I had to make do with a few evening hours, but they still produced the only European hares



beyond the Norfolk and Suffolk leg of the tour and also the only confirmed yellow-necked field mouse of the campaign, as well as a lone fallow deer from one of the hides. The final major leg of my Welsh expedition would take place in and around Snowdonia National Park, with excursions into Anglesey for red squirrel and to Great Orme for a second feral goat species. The first, I was fairly confident of seeing amid the spectacular mountain scenery of Snowdonia, as domestic goats were introduced here by early Neolithic farmers at least 5,000 years ago and have been roaming wild on these austere mountain slopes since Roman times, which makes them very much a native species in my opinion. Despite this, their numbers are regularly culled, ostensibly to protect the local vegetation, but in reality to stop them competing with sheep for food. There are around ten million sheep in Wales alone and at best a few hundred ancient goats, but almost every conceivable patch of workable land is devoted to agriculture and even the national parks are really just vast open farms, where domestic animals are protected at the expense of a variety of their wild counterparts. However successful you are and however at home they appear within the landscape, it is always challenging to entirely savour watching creatures that you know might be shot and of course this applies to a variety of genuinely native animals across the country and not just a few so called invasive species. As it was, I was able to locate small herds of these iconic mountain specialists on long wet hikes at both Dinorwic Quarry, where I had seen them previously, and Cwm Idwal, a ravishingly beautiful valley, concealing a sparkling glacial lake and surrounded by imposing volcanic crags. There can be few more idyllic locations to watch these ancient feral goats and



although I would have preferred to visit in far more pleasant conditions, the rain was again torrential and at times the gale force winds were blowing it directly into your face as you attempted to take another step forward, Cwm Idwal remains one of my favourite destinations in all of the UK. Fortunately, I was able to photograph the goats in slightly better conditions elsewhere and on the day that I was due to visit Great Orme in search of a second species of wild goat, this time the Kashmir variety, the sun actually made an appearance. For those who are not aware, Great Orme is a towering headland jutting out into the Irish Sea on the north coast of Wales. It overlooks and is accessed via the seaside resort of Llandudno and is home to a population of around 200 Kashmir goats, which are said to be descendants of a single pair given to Queen Victoria by the Shah of Persia in 1837 as a coronation gift. Whilst it is the case that a pair of Kashmir goats was presented to a young Victoria on her succession, a Windsor herd already existed and in the late 1800s a pair were purchased for the Mostyn family estate at Gloddaeth Hall, from where they were released onto Great Orme. They have been literally looking down on Llandudno ever since and during the recent coronavirus pandemic lockdown restrictions, which more or less curtailed the vast majority of human activity across the country, they began wandering into the empty town and helping themselves to the succulent hedges and flowers. Despite this, or perhaps even more so because of it, they remain a popular local attraction and instead of shooting a certain number each year, their population is controlled by sterilisation. Rather interestingly, and to complete the royal connection, in 1884 Queen Victoria presented the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Welsh, an infantry division of the British Army, with a Kashmir goat from the royal herd and to this day the regiment includes a goat by courtesy of the reigning monarch. The goat is not a mascot, but a full serving soldier with the rank of Lance Corporal and the latest incumbent is Lance Corporal Shenkin IV, who was captured on the slopes of Great Orme in June 2018. It was on these same slopes that I managed to find my own regal goats, with several members of the small herd sprawled out after a long day of chomping and no doubt enjoying the late evening sunshine. Thankfully the improved weather held somewhat for my final excursion from Snowdonia, this time to Anglesey to look for red squirrels. Given its geographical location, separated from the UK mainland by the Menai Strait sea channel and only reached by boat or bridge, Anglesey is a stronghold for the native red squirrel and over a period of about twenty years all of the grey squirrels on the island have been eradicated, largely on the basis that they are solely responsible for the catastrophic decrease in red squirrel numbers. In truth, the demise of the red squirrel has far more to do with extensive habitat destruction and human persecution, than it does with grey squirrels and people it seems have very short memories. As I wrote in a previous trip report, it is worth remembering that we have more or less exterminated the red squirrel now on two separate occasions within the last two centuries and that they had to be reintroduced to the Scottish Highlands back in the mid 19th century purely because they were previously viewed as pests in the same way that grey squirrels now are and were automatically killed by gamekeepers. They thrived upon their return and their numbers increased so rapidly that the powers that be thought it would be a good idea to exterminate them once more and squirrel clubs were formed with the sole purpose of killing as many red squirrels as possible. Hundreds of thousands of reds were slaughtered in a 25-year period until the late 1920s and a few years later it was the grey squirrels turn, when the British government decided that

the introduced species was now too widespread and began paying bounties for every grey squirrel killed, resulting in the destruction of several million grey squirrels in just over a decade. After centuries of persecution at the hands of man and the whims of ill-informed governments, red squirrels are once again being viewed as an icon of conservation, but the reality is far more complex and recent research has shown that even now we are getting it very badly wrong. A five-year study in Ireland involving the interaction between pine martens and both squirrel species has indicated that the conifer forests currently being planted all over the UK to combat climate change and encourage biodiversity, will now actually damage the recovery of the red squirrel. The opposite was previously believed to be the case, as red squirrels are far more adept at exploiting the small seeded cones produced by a variety of conifers than grey squirrels, which are more general feeders. However, whilst pine martens predate on grey squirrels and thus help to control their



numbers in native broadleaf woodland, there is not sufficient food to sustain them in the absence of grey squirrels in coniferous forest, which of course means that they are now almost exclusively eating red squirrels in those areas. Once again basically ignorant human intervention is making things worse, not better and I am now just waiting to hear the first irrational calls that pine marten numbers need to be controlled in order to save the red squirrel. I personally adore red squirrels and am more than happy to see them receive additional protection in certain areas, but that equally does not mean that I believe in killing one sentient creature to preserve another, not when you consider our woeful culpability for the entire sorry episode and the immense suffering and cruelty caused to both species over the years. We basically need to learn when to leave nature alone, not just in the UK, but all over the world, as we have no real idea what we are doing and continue to stumble from one ecological calamity to another. In Anglesey I had chosen two sites to hopefully see at least a few of the recovering red squirrel population, Plas Newydd House and Gardens, which is owned by the National Trust, and Llyn Parc Mawr, a small woodland within the much larger Newborough Nature Reserve. Both destinations utilise feeders, principally to ensure that general visitors are able to catch a glimpse of these attractive animals, and although I did observe several in these artificial settings, I spent all day across both protected areas and was also able to find and photograph a succession of squirrels in their natural habitat. As far as pine martens are concerned, they have been reintroduced to several areas in Wales in recent years and their numbers and range are once again increasing, although they remain fiendishly difficult to see anywhere beyond Scotland. Polecats, on the other hand, have been thriving in Wales for a number of years and, Wally apart of course, were my number one target for this first leg of the tour, despite the fact that they are solitary, secretive, nocturnal and consequently also very tricky to find. My main problem though was the weather, as spotlighting was severely disrupted by the incessant rain, some nights it was just not practical to even go out, and the closest I came to a polecat encounter in Wales was finding a dead one on the road, which had very clearly only just been killed. In stark contrast, I was overjoyed to see so many red kites on my return to the region, as these splendid raptors were once common all over the British Isles, Shakespeare even refers to London as a 'city of kites and crows', but were on the verge of extinction when I was a boy. They have recovered partly as a result of several reintroductions from Europe



during the intervening years and partly due to the fact that they are now protected by law and farmers cannot simply shoot them. Despite the obvious disappointment of missing a polecat in certainly the best region to see one, I had encountered eighteen different mammals in approximately the same number of days in Wales and had the opportunity of at least one more before I moved on to the next stage of my tour in England, as I had arranged additional stops at Newport Wetlands and Magor Marsh Nature Reserve, which I knew was home to a healthy population of water voles after more than 200 were released there between 2012 and 2013. Otters were



also a possibility and whilst neither reserve ultimately proved to be productive, I liked Magor Marsh and spent several hours there one evening and then again the next morning at first light. The reserve is quite small, but incorporates an interesting mix of contrasting habitat and I think that I was just unfortunate on this occasion, as I know many visitors have seen water voles here. I was certainly unfortunate with another even more elusive mammal, the European mole, which is widespread across most of the UK, but is inordinately difficult to observe unless you are prepared to trap one, which I am not. I found one dead in the middle of a path with no obvious signs of injury during my final morning walk at Magor Marsh, which in itself is not that unusual. However, I had traversed the same path within the previous 30 minutes and the mole had therefore appeared and been killed in that time. I thought at first that I had probably disturbed a stoat or weasel, or perhaps even a raptor and the mole's neck had been broken, but there were no visible wounds or obvious signs of trauma and it is possible that the poor little creature had simply died of natural causes. Either way, it was an extremely sad and I have to say frustrating way to conclude my time in Wales and from Magor Marsh I drove back into England to



spend a couple of days at the Forest of Dean, where I was very much hoping to encounter the wild boar that roam this surviving patch of ancient woodland. Originally hunted to extinction in medieval times, largely by the British nobility, wild boar have been reintroduced to the UK on a number of occasions over the intervening centuries, but again almost exclusively for hunting purposes and it is only in recent years, through a combination of deliberate releases and escapes from farms, that this native species has been able to once again establish a foothold on these shores, albeit a tenuous one. Despite the fact that they clearly belong here, their presence remains controversial and large numbers are culled every year, including in the Forest of Dean. At one stage wild boar numbers had recovered in the area to around 1,600 but during the winter of 2019 more than a thousand were slaughtered and Forestry England, it has to be said, one of the feeblest organisations in the country in terms of genuine conservation, have announced that they will continue to kill this native animal until its population has been reduced to no more than 400, an entirely contrived figure, based on absolutely no scientific evidence. One of the main issues is how we treat wildlife as a nation, as millions of Britons find it impossible to exist in harmony with what little remains of our indigenous species and a large number of local residents complain bitterly about the presence of wild boar in the Forest of Dean, despite the undoubted fact that these important environmental engineers clearly belong here and elsewhere across the country. Instead of simply enjoying such a charismatic creature so close to home, they whine about wild boar digging up fields, part of the natural rooting behaviour that is actually highly beneficial in most ecosystems, or attacking supposedly well behaved dogs on leads and even regarding the damage to their cars when they are driving too fast at night and hit, what in some cases, can be a fairly large animal. The complaints regarding dog attacks are undoubtedly contrived in order to excuse irresponsible owners, as there is no reason at all for a boar to attack a large predator unprovoked and it would only do so if the owner had allowed their animal to get too close or to chase the boars, particularly if they had young. It goes against all natural



behaviour for an omnivore to choose to hunt down a dangerous carnivore and on this visit I personally experienced the reality of the situation when I visited the Nagshead Nature Reserve, which is situated within the Forest of Dean and allows dogs, but only those on a lead and under strict control. The rules are fully posted at every entry point, but not a single person had their dog on a lead and at one point I watched helplessly as a spaniel darted across a path and killed a fledgling blackbird. The dog was naturally thrilled and happily carried the dead bird back to its owner, who immediately praised it and then tried to convince me that the young bird was



already dead. This is the level of apathy and ignorance that you are dealing with and is by no means an isolated incident, but sadly these people are listened to and animals are killed as a result of their lies. No doubt at least some of the boars that I encountered will be culled this year, Forestry England sell their meat for profit by the way, and it is a great shame that the return of these wonderful native creatures is the cause of such disquiet. For my part, having observed them in so many countries across the globe, particularly in Europe, I was thrilled to finally say that I had been able to gaze upon a wild boar in an ancient English forest. In all, I was able to savour six thrilling sightings, including large family groups with multiple piglets, five on my own and one with a local guide, who I had hired just to ensure that I was successful. In addition to the ubiquitous rabbits and grey squirrels, I also spotted a few fallow deer and a first muntjac, which I had not really expected to observe until I reached Norfolk, where they are very common. Whilst it was always highly unlikely, I also scanned repeatedly for pine marten, as eighteen were released to the area in September 2019 and are said to be doing well and breeding. Additional reintroductions were due to follow in 2020, but they were postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic and I have not been able to ascertain exactly when they will recommence. Hopefully soon and I look forward to the day when I can return and it will be possible to once again observe pine martens and wild boar sharing the same woodland. The



next leg of my expedition would largely take place in Devon and on the way I dropped in at Portbury Wharf Nature Reserve in Bristol, a 150-acre wetland reserve overlooking the Severn Estuary between England and Wales. At one time Portbury was another good site for water vole, but it was in a horrible condition when I visited, with a great deal of building work severely impacting the water vole habitat and a stream of people, cyclists and dog walkers all using it as a busy thoroughfare. I did find two roe deer, but they looked as traumatised as I felt and I was more than happy to move on. Devon was likely to be an altogether calmer affair, as I only had one specific target, beavers on the River Otter, and would spend the rest of my time leisurely exploring what has always been one of my favourite British regions. I would particularly concentrate on the Dartmoor and Exmoor national parks and the roe deer photograph that features here was taken on Dartmoor during one of several long hikes. Most took place in fairly poor weather again and the worst day by far, and what felt like the worst day of my life at the time, was actually experienced in neighbouring Cornwall, when I drove down to Padstow for a two-hour boat tour to search for risso's dolphins. Not only did it rain throughout the entire day, it was so torrential during the boat trip that it was more or less impossible to even look for animals when we were moving and the sleeting rain was being driven directly into your face. I did see a grey seal briefly, but that was it and it must have been the most sombre wildlife tour I have ever been involved in, with a dozen or so bedraggled passengers huddled together against the elements,



basically praying for the tour to end. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this would be my only foray into Cornwall, but the weather was also fairly miserable when I took another marine tour back in Devon, this time from the small harbour town of Ilfracombe on the north coast. It was so cold out to sea that I had to give my waterproof jacket to a freezing little girl, as her father apparently thought that she would be okay wearing a summer dress in the middle of the Bristol Channel. I took pity on her when she started turning blue, but at least on this trip she had the consolation of a fantastic common dolphin encounter, with over 30 of these amazing creatures darting all around the boat. I would take two more dolphin tours in Devon, this time from Teignmouth on the opposite coast in the English Channel, but they only produced a solitary harbour porpoise and I was not destined to see a risso's dolphin on this tour, although I have seen them on many previous occasions. The rest of my time in the county would take place inland, where thankfully the sun did eventually begin to shine again, albeit intermittently. Aside from its red deer, which are abundant and can be seen easily enough with just a little perseverance, Exmoor is of course famous for its ponies, which have endured for centuries on these austere, brooding moors and are believed to be the closest surviving relative of the tarpan, an ancient breed of horse now extinct. The last wild tarpan is said to have been killed on the Russian steppe in the late 1800s and the first written account of an Exmoor pony occurs in the Domesday Book of 1086, where 104 broodmares are recorded. Equine fossil records for the region date back to around 50,000 BC and carvings from Roman times depict ponies with similar characteristics to the Exmoor variety, which is a small sturdy breed, perfectly adapted to the rugged open moorland. I spent quite a lot of time sitting and walking with these striking creatures and it was a real joy to photograph them within such an extraordinary landscape, where they so evidently belong. For once the rain actually helped, partly in terms of the atmosphere of the shots and also in bringing out the deep, vibrant colours of the evocative heaths and mires. I only very occasionally found red deer in these arresting environments and always at distance, but unlike the deer, which are quite rightly wary of people and usually gallop away, the ponies are very relaxed and it is easy enough to approach to within a short distance without disturbing them. The same applies to the ponies on Dartmoor, but here other breeds intermingle with the pure Dartmoor variety, including hill and heritage ponies and a smaller breed crossed with Shetland ponies. Uniform in colour, Dartmoor ponies are relatively easy to tell apart from the other equine species that roam wild here and like their cousins on Exmoor, are robust, compact animals, ideally suited to the harsh conditions and poor vegetation of the moors. I was again able to approach to within just a few metres of one wild herd, but in truth, the majority of the horses on Dartmoor are fairly tame in comparison to those on Exmoor



and can often be watched in and around some of the car parks. Whilst locating the ponies is therefore fairly straightforward at both locations, red deer are only routinely observed at Exmoor and in all I encountered about six herds, including one of around 150 animals, as well as several individuals. None at all were seen on Dartmoor, despite the fact that I probably spent slightly longer exploring there, but roe deer were observed in their customary low numbers on both moors, as well as grey squirrels and rabbits, but in entirely opposite quantities. The Valley of the Rocks region near Lynton on the north Exmoor coast produced some of the most unexpected sightings and consequently some of the most pleasing. In addition to a large common toad swimming in a cattle grid, I



was as delighted as I was relieved to finally spot an owl and my first tawny was quickly followed by a first barn owl, such are the vagaries of wildlife viewing. Not surprisingly, given the presence of the owls, the area proved to be productive in terms of several rodents, although I was only able to positively identify a single long-tailed field mouse. During the day I was lucky enough to chance upon slow worms mating on the cliffs overlooking the sea on the famous south west coast path, a 630-mile walking trail that, as the name suggests, runs along the English coast from Minehead in Somerset all the way to Poole Harbour in Dorset. As with the owls, the fascinating slow worms were another first for the trip, as all six of our native mainland reptile species had eluded me thus far, not unpredictably of course, given the seemingly eternal rain. The soggy conditions would have obviously had considerably less impact on hedgehog activity, but the fact remained that until this point, I had still not seen these cutest of all creatures either, not alive in any case, and I was now well into the fourth week of the tour. Thankfully the Valley of the Rocks had one last secret to reveal in the form of a gloriously sweet hedgehog, not to mention a similarly adorable red fox, one of only a handful of foxes observed in a rural



location, so strictly are their numbers controlled in the countryside. Having been successful with the main mammals I had expected to see, I moved away from the moors to concentrate on my only specific target in Devon, Eurasian beaver in the River Otter, where, logically enough I guess, I also had a reasonable chance of seeing an otter. Whilst a very low number may possibly have survived in the odd isolated area until slightly later, beavers have been all but absent from the UK for around 500 years, hunted to extinction for their meat, fur and castoreum, a secretion used in combination with urine to scent mark territory, but also highly prized in medicine and perfumery. Beavers have been present in the lower reaches of the River Otter since at least 2008, having either escaped from a local reserve or been intentionally released, but it was only after video evidence emerged in 2014 confirming that they were breeding, that the UK government announced they would be removed from the river. Devon Wildlife Trust objected and it was agreed that a five-year study would take place to monitor their impact on the environment and ascertain whether they would be allowed to remain or not. From a conservation perspective, it was certainly the lesser of two evils, but still somewhat ridiculous that we were going to basically put an animal on trial that had lived on this isle for thousands of years until it was artificially removed. It is not as if we are not already aware that, as a keystone species and the most valuable of all ecological engineers, beavers have a profoundly positive effect on the habitat in which they occur. In fact, it has been suggested that man aside, beavers have more impact on the environment than any other species on the planet, but with none of the ecological catastrophes so continuously associated with our own hapless and misguided efforts. By damming rivers and streams, and constructing their own aquatic highways, they actually create habitat and by coppicing trees, they stimulate new growth and open the canopy to encourage a far greater variety of plants and vegetation. One study discovered that plant life had increased by a third following the reintroduction of beavers and this consequent increase in biodiversity

applies to all life, from mammals and birds, to reptiles, amphibians and innumerable invertebrates. By maintaining constant water levels, these remarkable creatures reduce the risk of both flooding and drought and in areas where they have returned, available water during droughts has increased by up to 160%. They produce food and protect or improve habitat for more species than we will probably ever realise and for us they reduce the risk of, and damage caused by, wildfires. If that is not sufficient, their dams also happen to make our water cleaner, trapping and filtering out the sediment and pollutants. Rather unsurprisingly, when the trial period had finished, it was miraculously discovered that actually those furry little rodents that we slaughtered centuries ago for a quick profit, had actually been pretty good for us and would be allowed to stay. The announcement was made in August 2020 and was immediately recognised as a momentous and ground breaking episode in the conservation history of our country, as this was the first legally sanctioned reintroduction of an extinct native mammal to England. Whilst utterly thrilled at the news, it was also difficult not to feel



somewhat ashamed that it had taken us twenty years of the 21st century to finally accept that one of the many species eliminated from these shores, should be allowed to return. Beavers are now flourishing on the Otter, and that again was not something that I had ever considered I would be able to write, and I had two evenings along the riverbank to search for them, although in reality, my programme was flexible and I would visit as many times as it took to see one. Fortunately that was not necessary and across two evenings I had prolonged views of at least four beavers, one for more than an hour. As with the wild boar, it was a real honour to be able to watch a native creature returned to the place of my birth and to call it one of the highlights of the tour would be a massive understatement. Much the same can be said of my otter sighting on the same river, when I had a brief view at dusk of one emerging right beside me and then diving again. I would have rather watched it for longer of course and in slightly better light, but it is always a real thrill just to glimpse these graceful aquatic predators, particularly in the very river named after them. Thankfully otters are now recovering all over the country after centuries of persecution and having missed them at several highly promising destinations in Wales, where I had made a concerted effort to search specifically for them, it was lovely to find one without really trying. This is actually not uncommon in terms of wildlife viewing and occurred again on the same river with a first kingfisher, which I had also devoted a great deal of time to elsewhere, without any success. In fact, I had been hoping that the same absurd rationale may apply to my search for a water vole and that I might suddenly chance upon one, as I had already tried several reserves renowned for these elusive rodents. My next attempt would be at Seaton Wetlands, three nature reserves protecting a variety of contrasting habitat in east Devon. For those who have not shared in the adventures of 'Mr Toad' and his animal chums, 'Ratty', one of four main characters from the beloved children's book 'The Wind in the Willows' by Kenneth Grahame, is not a rat at all, but a water vole and this inordinately sweet aquatic rodent was once the most common small mammal in Britain. It has been estimated that during the late Iron Age, water vole numbers would have totalled almost seven billion across the UK, but in recent years the species has suffered a cataclysmic decline and has disappeared from more than 90% of its former range. It was actually declared extinct in Cornwall and Devon in 2002, where I was

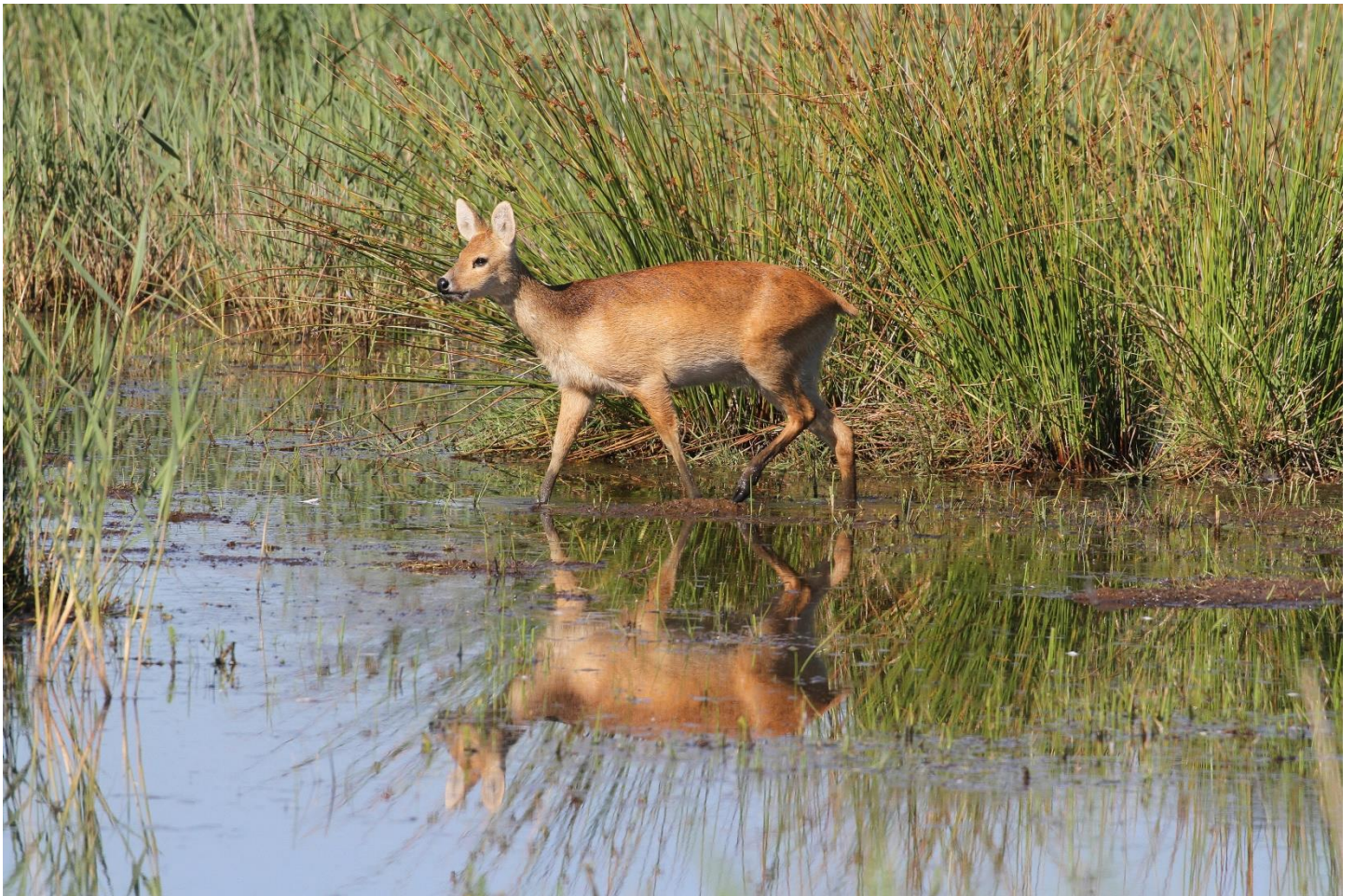


now hoping to see one of course, largely as a result of habitat loss, pollution and predation by American mink, which were imported for the truly appalling fur farming industry and are now widespread. Watching a water vole is my earliest childhood memory of a genuinely wild mammal and I remember sitting mesmerised as this amazing little creature swam to and fro across the tiny stream and sat up on the bank cutting down the grasses to feed. The water vole has been one of my favourite British mammals ever since and, wherever I am in the UK, I always look out for them. This trip was no exception and having missed them elsewhere, I had been told that the Borrow Pit section of Seaton Wetlands was a good area to try. I did not actually find one there, but they were nearby and I knew that I would be successful as soon as I heard the distinctive plop of ratty disappearing under the water. The sun was out, the riverbank was dry and warm and all I had to do was sit and wait, which I am always happy to do where wildlife is concerned, although not in any other aspect of my life. Sure enough, after maybe fifteen minutes, a water vole emerged from the vegetation and swam across the stream, taking me back more than half a lifetime, to that happy afternoon as a young boy. The next couple of hours passed in idyllic fashion, as I sat there watching the little vole going about his life quite happily in the sunshine. I returned the next day for another magical hour or so with the same animal and I spent the rest of my time exploring what is an interesting reserve, with plenty of trails and potentially productive habitat. A stoat had been seen a few days earlier and kingfishers are regularly observed at one of the hides, but I was not fortunate with either and my highlights at Seaton, ratty aside of course, were several brown rats scavenging beneath one of the bird feeders and a timid young fox just beyond the reserve. It had still been a great way to end my time in Devon, as I was now due to move on through sites in Dorset, Hampshire and Essex in order to reach Norfolk, my third and final major destination of the tour. However, before I leave the county, figuratively at least, I need to mention another sighting that occurred here, as it was one of the two most extraordinarily fortunate moments of the trip, which I am only mentioning now, because I did not want to reveal the exact location by writing about it in order. It involved a hazel dormouse, which are strictly nocturnal and incredibly difficult to find in this country, even at night in areas where you know they occur. You could search the same woodland 50 nights in a row and never find one, but on this tour, I not only found one, I found it during the day. I could not actually believe it at first, as I had been watching a grey squirrel and as it disappeared I thought that I had spotted a mouse, which would have been reasonably unusual in itself, as they are essentially nocturnal as well. However, when I looked again, I saw that it was clearly a dormouse and that it was feeding on something. As I approached for a better view, it must have heard me and looked round, but instead of just scurrying off back to its nest, it panicked and attempted to hide at the base of the fallen tree that it had been feeding by. As you can clearly see in the photograph on this page, the dormouse still has the dirt on him from where he tried to squeeze into or under the rotting log, before realising, incredibly luckily for me, that there were no gaps big enough for him to escape into. I therefore had one of the rarest nocturnal mammals in the country completely at my mercy in broad daylight, as it had nowhere to hide and consequently had to revert to 'small mammal plan b', stay still and hope you do not get eaten. I have watched this almost entirely optimistic behaviour more times than I can remember over the years, but having already dined, I instead just took a couple of pictures and stepped away to enable the dozy dormouse to run off, which it did enthusiastically enough. Several hours later I was still shaking my head at how unbelievably lucky I had been, as I have seen edible dormouse during the day before, but never a hazel dormouse in the UK and it remains a highlight of this or any other trip. In terms of species, if you include the grey seal glimpsed across the border

in Cornwall, the Devon section of the tour had produced eighteen distinct mammals, the same number as Wales, in around eight days less. Norfolk was likely to be similar and on the way I had arranged stops in Dorset, that I expected to produce two new species, sika deer and badger. Sika deer are easy to see at RSPB Arne, and indeed I was able to photograph several herds, and the badgers would hopefully be observed from a hide, which I had not visited previously. Unfortunately, whilst I did see two individual badgers, they were both clearly startled by the occupants of the hide next to mine, who kept making noise and flashing lights, and neither tarried sadly. No matter, as I had another far more promising opportunity arranged in Norfolk and I moved on to photograph the fallow deer in the New Forest, which were observed as routinely as usual here. My final stop would be at Rainham Marshes, a RSPB reserve on the outskirts of London and part of the Thames Estuary, although actually in Essex. The reserve had not been part of my original itinerary and I made a late decision to visit to again assess for water vole and also water shrew, as I had been informed that they occur here and have been looking for a reliable site for this venomous little mammal for some time. That I saw neither was disappointing in some respects, but as is so frequently the case with wildlife travel, there is always something amazing to see and often it is not at all



what you expect. On this occasion, a stoat bouncing along one of the boardwalks was a pretty decent consolation, as was the field vole that appeared on a path directly in front of me. These were the only sightings of both species throughout the entire tour, so not at all bad for what was really a last minute decision and of course the birdlife at Rainham Marshes is as impressive as you would expect on a RSPB reserve, particularly in terms of raptors. I was able to observe peregrine falcon, marsh harrier, kestrel and hobby without really devoting a great deal of time to the pursuit and two of my main targets in Norfolk would also be raptors, but in this case the nocturnal variety in the form of tawny and little owls. The final section of my tour was split into two parts and on the second I would meet a friend to visit a number of wildlife locations that she was familiar with, including sites for badger, water vole, water shrew, possibly otter, grass snake and both of those owls. Until then, I would explore on my own as usual and had decided to begin on the north Norfolk coast, firstly at Cley Marshes, which was likely to produce a first water deer, and then at Blakeney Point, home to a large permanent population of grey seals, as well as the harbour seals that arrive to have their pups during the summer months. Before I set foot on either, I took the opportunity to investigate a few old barns at my accommodation and was immediately rewarded with a glorious barn owl and a family of little owls, including a fluffy diminutive fledgling, which I would look in on each evening. Beyond the outbuildings, the extensive grounds of my secluded rural retreat were home to several hares and at least two hedgehogs and the photographs that appear on pages three and five were both taken here. I always try to spend a long time choosing accommodation for



this very reason, as where you stay can make a massive difference to what you see, not only regarding wildlife in the vicinity, but in terms of how early you can reach your destination each morning. I like to arrive just before first light if possible, as that gives you a chance of the nocturnal creatures before they return to the safety of their beds and also allows you to watch the countryside come to life, which is always a fabulous experience and often produces exceptional sightings. This was the case at Cley Marshes, where I saw several water deer at first light, although the photograph that features here was actually taken from a hide at Hickling Broad, a reserve



I visited on several occasions across both sections of my Norfolk adventure. In fact, the muntjac that appears above was also captured at Hickling Broad, but from a path and late in the evening, as the long summer nights had finally arrived and it was now possible to search until fairly late without a spotlight. With my first view of the water deer, I had succeeded in recording all six UK deer species on one trip and with the fallow deer image on page 34, which was taken in the New Forest, there are photographs of all six for readers to compare. Cley Marshes also produced two separate marsh harriers, which were almost extinct in the UK when I was young and are still relatively difficult to see in most regions, and several hares, which basically are not, at least not in certain parts of Norfolk, where



they are routinely encountered. Blakeney is barely a modest stroll from where I saw the distinctive v-shaped wingspan of a marsh harrier hunting and from here it is possible to take a boat trip to see the seals. They can also be viewed from land, but you cannot reach all the way to Blakeney Point on foot and you can actually get far closer in the boat, to within a few metres in fact. As these photographs illustrate, the seals are often conveniently hauled up on the beach to rest and there are usually a few inquisitive animals swimming around the boat as well. Both species are easy to see during the summer months, but in some respects it can be better to visit during the winter, as this is England's largest grey seal colony and over 3,000 grey seal pups are born here each year. It is





actually one of the country's great wildlife events and there is another far smaller grey seal colony further south along the coast at Horsey Gap, which I also intended to visit. Meanwhile, I spent much of my time exploring Hickling Broad, a nature reserve managed by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust and the largest of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads, an extensive network of man-made rivers and lakes across the easterly extremes of both counties. Quite remarkably, they were believed to be natural waterways until as late as the 1960s, when it was discovered that they were actually massive medieval peat excavations that had been flooded by rising sea levels to form



the landscape of predominantly navigable watercourses that we recognise today. There are 63 broads in all, unsurprisingly, none of which are very deep when you consider how and when they were constructed, and although they were never officially established as a national park, The Broads has been allowed to adopt that title, at least for marketing purposes, and receives the same level of protection. If it was a fully fledged national park, it would be the smallest of the fifteen across the British Isles. With its characteristic open water and equally distinctive reedbeds, Hickling could be described as a typical broad and the reserve itself protects a variety of habitat and a great deal of wildlife. Sadly, that protection does not extend to red foxes, which are killed to protect the birdlife as soon as they venture onto the reserve, as one of the Norfolk Wildlife Trust boatmen took great delight in telling me. Mink are also



eradicated of course, but whilst they are an invasive species and it is harder to make an argument to protect them, the same cannot be said of the native red fox. For this reason, I have never joined the RSPB, as they also persecute foxes and other native predators on their reserves, including stoats and weasels. All types of deer are culled in large numbers, in order to either preserve or restore habitat, which of course is only necessary in the first place because organisations like the RSPB have eliminated the predators capable of controlling deer populations. They even kill other birds, usually carrion and hooded crows to protect ground nesting birds, but gulls and geese as well. All are eliminated in the name of conservation, but the RSPB also maintain the right to slaughter foxes 'to protect neighbours' interests', which is basically killing them on behalf of local farmers and landowners. The only fox I saw here was a cautious individual on the periphery of the reserve and it remains telling that I encountered more foxes during my first night back home in an urban setting, than I did during the 38 days spent exploring the so called wild places of this land. Apart from the pretty amazing achievement of photographing four species of deer from one protected area, water deer, muntjac and roe deer were all inside the reserve, while red deer were photographed just beyond the perimeter but from within, the highlight of my first visits to Hickling Broad was a second otter encounter and this time I was able to watch it swimming for several minutes. Although I initially noticed it almost beside me, it did not remain at that distance and I had to be satisfied with some long range reference shots, which was fine considering I had it clearly in my binoculars for the majority of the sighting. I thought that I might get another one at my next destination, RSPB Minsmere in Suffolk, which has an excellent reputation in terms of otter sightings, especially from the Island Mere hide. To be fair, I might have with just a little longer, but my time was limited at Minsmere and I had to accept failure at dusk, if great views of red deer, muntjac, European hare and grey squirrel can be considered failure. I also stopped to photograph a single brown rat on the drive home, which would have made the day worthwhile regardless of the other species. In any case, I was now about to get



some help from a friend, which would once again demonstrate just how important local knowledge is in terms of wildlife viewing. Although the little owls were not visible at the site she took me to, that had always been a long shot and we were immediately successful with three tawny owl chicks she had been watching for several weeks. They were now well past the balls of fluff sitting on a branch stage, but at about twelve weeks old they were still together and it was wonderful to be able to enjoy such close views of these iconic British birds, although they were difficult to photograph well under the canopy. This was also the case with the badger



sett that she took me to, where it was practically impossible to take really good photographs in the evening light, shooting down into the woods from our position on a path, perched above what was a huge sett. No matter, as this was a magnificent experience and I stopped even trying to take pictures after a couple of initial reference shots to just enjoy the privilege of being able to watch badgers in genuinely wild conditions and not from a hide surrounded by other people. We visited twice and saw nine badgers in all, six on the second occasion for more than an hour. Truly magical and once again almost entirely impossible without the level of local expertise whereby you can go directly to a site and actually wait for an animal to appear, as opposed to having to just search for them. This was also the case on a small tributary of the River Yare, which she knew was a good site for water vole, water shrew and sometimes grass



snakes. Although we were not lucky with water shrew this time, we were able to observe multiple water voles in just a couple of hours, an extraordinary achievement when you consider how many reserves I had relentlessly trawled over to find just one throughout the previous five weeks. If anything, our grass snake sightings were even more incredible, as I had searched some of the best possible habitat for this animal over the course of the tour without success, albeit in generally poor weather, and yet we encountered three in a tiny stretch of water in the same two-hour period. At one stage we watched a snake swim past a clearly anxious vole on the edge of its burrow and although their diet mainly consists of frogs and toads, grass snakes will also take diminutive mammals if they get a chance. Whilst I was fairly confident that a water vole would be just too big for what is a relatively small snake, I must admit that I was also reasonably close to scaring ratty away, just in case. Out of interest, following research originally published in August 2017, it has been discovered that the grass snake found in the UK, plus some other areas of Western Europe, including France and Italy, is actually a different species to the Eurasian grass snake. Instead, the British version is now known as the barred grass snake and its scientific name has been updated accordingly from *Natrix natrix* to *Natrix helvetica*. This was the first time that I had encountered one in the UK since the revision and although I had seen them in Poland subsequently, the species that occurs there remains unchanged, not that it makes any difference on the ground of course or to the animals themselves. Having now seen two reptiles, I was keen to look for a third and when my friend recommended a reliable site for adders at Hickling Broad, I was only too happy to try. We were intending to visit this reserve together in any case, as she is an enthusiastic birdwatcher and visits Hickling regularly. Sadly, she was not actually with me when I eventually located this iconic British snake, as we had tried the area on a couple of occasions together without any success and I therefore returned for another attempt on my own. She has seen them here often enough though and that



was now five major species that I had been able to observe almost entirely due to her assistance and knowledge. Getting to reserves at first light helps as well and at Hickling one of my early morning sorties was rewarded with the decidedly incongruous spectacle of two common cranes strolling along one of the main visitor paths with their rather large chick. These are normally skittish birds, that would never approach people, let alone with young and presumably this was another consequence of the reduced human activity during the coronavirus lockdown, when the reserve was closed to visitors and the wildlife was free to roam more or less undisturbed. I was also delighted to observe a couple of spoonbills at Hickling and came very close to either a stoat or a weasel, as I discovered a dead rabbit that was still warm and am fairly certain that it was killed by one of these voracious little predators. I no doubt interrupted the process before the prey could be removed and although I watched the poor lifeless rabbit for some time, the reserve was now getting busy and whatever species had been successful, it did not reappear during my vigil. I tried for stoat at Weeting Heath Nature Reserve as well, where they are spotted with at least some degree of regularity, but in most cases, finding small carnivores is purely a matter of chance unless you live in an area and can visit the same territory day after day. Weeting Heath is probably a better place to



try than most, largely because rabbits are used to keep the grass cut to the appropriate length for the stone curlews that breed here and of course rabbits attract predators. With sufficient time, I am sure that you would be successful here, but unfortunately I only got two thirds of the reserve management plan, that is to say, the rabbits and the stone curlews, incredibly silly looking birds that visit southern England in low numbers to breed during the summer months. As if to confirm just how hard they are to find when you are looking specifically, I also failed in my quest for a stoat at Strumpshaw Fen or indeed an otter, as this RSPB reserve has a good reputation for both. However, I was still seeing a lot of wildlife, water deer, muntjac and brown rat at Strumpshaw for example, and



this is always a problem towards the end of a long tour, as you will have seen a lot of animals multiple times and are really now only looking for new or extremely rare species. Over my final two days I visited a succession of broads and reserves, largely on my own again by this point, and they all suffered in this way to some degree. I was still seeing a great deal of wildlife, including grey seals up on the beach at Horsey Gap, and instead of desperately trying to chase something new, I took the opportunity to assess different areas and to try to capture a few of the shots that I had missed to date. In truth, as was the case in Devon with the dormouse, I had already experienced an incredibly unlikely event in Norfolk, when I stumbled across a western polecat during the day. Unlike that poor befuddled rodent, this spectacular mustelid made no attempt to hide and darted away the moment it became aware of my presence. Fortuitously, it sprinted directly across my path and I was able to savour a really good view and even take a couple of rather poor reference shots. I could not believe how lucky I had been once more, not only to see another almost exclusively nocturnal mammal in daylight, but to just bump into a polecat so far from their stronghold of Wales, where even there they are ridiculously difficult to find after centuries of persecution. I was already aware that as their numbers continue to increase, they are slowly recolonising their former range and I have since seen another photograph of the same species on the same reserve, so possibly even the same animal, as well as a recent report of a polecat sadly killed by a vehicle in a different part of the county. Although the polecat is now protected in the UK under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, I have mentioned my wholly unexpected sighting out of sequence, to again avoid

disclosing the exact location, as I would not trust certain reserve managers not to kill it, particularly when you consider the other native predators that the RSPB and comparable wildlife agencies are prepared to eliminate in the name of conservation. In all, I encountered seventeen mammal species in Norfolk over about eight days, which was a slightly better average than elsewhere, but basically the three major destinations of Wales, Devon and Norfolk produced more or less the same number of species. When you include all of the sites visited, I was able to observe 38 of the 46 mammals that I considered I had a realistic chance of, again ignoring bats, which I love to see, but do not try to record, and the very unlikely possibility of whales. I have already described the seven terrestrial mammals that I missed and you can add to those risso's dolphin, which I devoted a fair amount of time to and had at least a reasonable chance of encountering. Apart from being so close to that poor departed mole at Magor Marsh, the only real disappointment was not seeing a water shrew in Norfolk, as that is usually a productive site and I was just unfortunate, perhaps even due to the grass snake activity, which of course I was equally delighted to share. You have to remember that wildlife giveth and wildlife taketh away and whilst on this occasion I was not lucky with a shrew or indeed a weasel, I did somehow manage to chance upon a hazel dormouse and a western polecat, both in broad daylight. That is the beauty of what I love to do and to further illustrate the slings and arrows of my very existence, who would have thought that a boy from London would be able to drive from his home in Sussex to see an Arctic walrus in Wales, let alone a special Arctic walrus called Wally.



No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Irregular sightings in rural areas and more commonly observed in and around towns.
2	Eurasian Otter	Lutra lutra	An extended sighting at Hickling Broad in Norfolk and a fleeting glimpse on the River Otter in Devon.
3	Eurasian Badger	Meles meles	Observed at setts in Norfolk and Dorset and occasionally encountered whilst driving at night.
4	Stoat	Mustela erminea	An individual running along a boardwalk at Rainham Marshes in Essex.

5	Western Polecat	<i>Mustela putorius</i>	An individual at an undisclosed reserve in Norfolk.
6	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Large herds on Exmoor, two at Teifi Marshes Nature Reserve and low numbers in Norfolk and Suffolk.
7	Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	Several herds at Arne Nature Reserve.
8	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Encountered in low numbers at most major destinations, but not at all in Wales.
9	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	One at Dolydd Hafren, low numbers at the Forest of Dean and large herds in the New Forest.
10	Water Deer	<i>Hydropotes inermis</i>	Routinely observed at Cley Marshes, Hickling Broad and Strumpshaw Fen in Norfolk.
11	Reeves' Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	Common at several sites in Norfolk and also observed in the Forest of Dean.
12	Wild Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>	Several sightings in Snowdonia, including at Dinorwic Quarry.
13	Kashmir Goat	<i>Capra aegagrus hircus</i>	Close views of two small herds at Great Orme in North Wales.
14	Dartmoor Pony	<i>Equus ferus caballus</i>	Observed on several occasions among other breeds at Dartmoor National Park.
15	Exmoor Pony	<i>Equus ferus caballus</i>	Several encounters at Exmoor National Park.
16	Water Buffalo	<i>Bubalus bubalis</i>	A small herd at Teifi Marshes Nature Reserve in Pembrokeshire.
17	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Several sightings within the Forest of Dean, including of large family groups with young.
18	Western European Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	Two at my accommodation in Norfolk and three individuals in Devon.
19	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Common in Norfolk, but only observed elsewhere at the Dolydd Hafren Nature Reserve in Montgomeryshire.
20	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	The most regularly observed mammal of the tour.
21	Eurasian Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	A female and two adolescents and another adult on separate occasions on the River Otter in Devon.
22	Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	Commonly observed at several sites throughout the tour.
23	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	One on Caldey Island in Pembrokeshire and several at Plas Newydd and Llyn Parc Mawr in Anglesey.
24	Hazel Dormouse	<i>Muscardinus avellanarius</i>	An individual during the day at an undisclosed woodland location in Devon.
25	Field Vole	<i>Microtus agrestis</i>	An individual on a path at Rainham Marshes in Essex.
26	Bank Vole	<i>Myodes glareolus</i>	Two members of a colony in the heart of Elan Valley.
27	Water Vole	<i>Arvicola amphibius</i>	Multiple sightings on a tributary of the River Yare in Norfolk and probably the same animal on two occasions near Borrow Pit at Seaton Wetlands in Devon.
28	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	Several at bird feeders at Seaton Wetlands and Strumpshaw Fen and an individual at night in Norfolk.
29	Yellow-necked Field Mouse	<i>Apodemus flavicollis</i>	One confirmed sighting at Dolydd Hafren in Wales.
30	Long-tailed Field Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	One whilst spotlighting near Lynton in Devon.
31	Harvest Mouse	<i>Micromys minutus</i>	Two in the same area near Yarner Wood in Dartmoor.
32	House Mouse	<i>Mus musculus</i>	One within the grounds of The Cliff Hotel on Cardigan Bay.
33	Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>	Several sightings of an itinerant adolescent male on the lifeboat slipway at Tenby in Pembrokeshire.
34	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	Encountered at several locations in Wales and Norfolk and on one occasion in Cornwall.
35	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Small group at Blakeney Point in Norfolk.
36	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	Several views between St Davids and Ramsey Island and one on a boat trip out of Teignmouth in Devon.
37	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	Three pods on two boat tours out of St Davids and another pod on a tour from Ilfracombe.
38	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Several by boat and one from land in Cardigan Bay.









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