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WINTER WATCH



Part 1
by Mick Austin

As the snow and frost lays its white shroud over the countryside, the warm temperatures, luxuriant growth and abundant resources of those summer months seem a million miles away.

Winter can be a challenging time for our wildlife. For some it's a time for hibernation, for others it will be a time to use whatever resources they can in their great battle for survival. France is packed with life. Just use your eyes and ears (a pair of binoculars will also help) and embrace it and the wildlife it has to offer.

Many of our 'regulars' will still be around – foxes, hares, buzzards, owls, lapwings, kingfishers, blackbirds, woodpeckers etc, etc – but here we'll try and give you just a little flavour of those perhaps slightly more unusual mammals and birds out there waiting for you. Welcome to The DSM Winter Watch.

MAMMALS

(1) Wild boar (*Sus scrofa scrofa*, Sanglier).

Widespread and much prized for its meat, the boar is probably the most hunted mammal in France. Large, powerful and capable of causing plenty of damage with its tusks, it is usually shy and seldom seen. But it can become aggressive if cornered or protecting its young. Lives in dense forests and undergrowth and is mainly nocturnal, living in close-knit family groups. Diet consists mainly of berries, fruit, fungi, roots, grass and acorn. It will also root for worms and insects. Breeding usually takes place between September and March, during which time there can be violent confrontations between males.

(2) European mink (*Mustela lutreola*, Vision d'Europe).

One of Europe's most endangered mammals and can easily

be confused with the American mink (*Vison d'Amerique*) or the Polecat (*Putois*). You might be lucky and spot one, but probably only if you are in the Aquitaine or the south of Poitou-Charentes. Mainly nocturnal, it feeds on small mammals, birds, fish and frogs. It's a poor diver – unlike the otter, for example – so it's unlikely to catch fast fish. It uses many different dens, rarely far from water, which are holes in the ground, tree hollows or old tunnels. Mink can be extremely dangerous if cornered. If you are bitten by one you should get medical treatment immediately since some may be carriers of *Wiel's Disease*.

(3) Pine marten (*Martes martes*, Martre).

Belonging to the weasel family and about the size of a domestic cat, it is native to Europe. Its fur is a dark chocolate brown and it has a cream-coloured bib on its throat. In winter its coat is thicker and it also has fur growing on the pads of its paws. A solitary, territorial animal, it marks its territory with droppings or 'scats'. Most active at night, pine martens are arboreal (living mostly in trees) and have large paws and retractable claws to help them climb. Diet consists of birds, small mammals, mice, beetles, berries and carrion and its food is hunted mostly on the ground.

(4) Stone marten/Beech marten (*Martes foin*, Fouine).

Very similar to the pine marten, but slightly smaller in size. The easiest way to tell them apart is by their creamy white bibs. The stone marten's bib is more fork-shaped, like an upside-down V. Generally nocturnal, it can often be found over-wintering in the roof space of buildings. If you find one there the kindest and simplest way to get rid of it is by spreading mothballs!

(5) Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*, Rat musque).

Introduced in the last century as a result of fur farming, it's now widespread across France causing extensive damage by burrowing into banks. An excellent swimmer, staying submerged for up to 15 minutes at a time. Sometimes mistaken for a beaver, muskrats occasionally build a conical-shaped lodge with escape exits and a feeding and breeding chamber.

(6) Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*, La Loutre).

Can be found in all departments of Poitou-Charentes and at any time of the year. Everyone knows what they are but very few of us have seen one. Keep a look out for their faeces (spraints) on rocks, flat surfaces and under bridges in rivers and streams.

(7) Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*, Chevreuil).

Found in much of rural France, roe deer are quite small and easily identified as they run away by their telltale white rump. Only males have antlers and they are lost each year and regrown in winter. Mainly seen at dawn and twilight, eating grasses, berries and leaves – and the occasional garden plant! It's at dusk on quiet roads and paths that you're most likely to surprise it. And it's often heard 'barking' a warning to others as it goes.

(8) Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*, cerf male, biche female).

Found in most of the forested areas of France. Usually feeds from dusk to dawn so less frequently sighted during the day. Females usually live in small herds, whereas the males often live alone or in pairs. Herbivorous, with a diet depending on the region. Pine trees, brambles, grass and young tree shoots are commonly eaten, as is fruit and sometimes maize. Only the male red deer has antlers.

BIRDS

(9) Common crane (*Grus grus*, Grue cendree).

Well worth looking out for. Although the main migration path is to the east of our region, it's still possible to see them in the west of the Deux-Sèvres and Charente-Maritime. There are no over-wintering lakes but there is the Parc Naturel at Brenne, just to the east of Poitiers, in the Indre. They have also been spotted in the Baie de l'Aiguillon, north of La Rochelle, in the Vendée.

(10) Golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*, Pluvier doré).

A bird of open moorlands and bogs, where the vegetation is short enough to allow it to run easily. Feeds on the ground, pursuing small soil invertebrates and takes flight only if disturbed. Outside the breeding season it moves to lower levels to form flocks – sometimes mixed with lapwings – on open arable land and the upper reaches of estuaries.

(11) Gadwall (*Anas strepera*, Canard chapeau).

At first glance a rather drab duck. Abundant throughout Europe in winter and breeds on wetland with open water; in winter on lakes and marshes. The nest is on the ground beside water. The gadwall can often be found alongside coots.

(12) Wigeon (*Anas penelope*, Canard siffleur).

One of the most attractive of European ducks, the plumage of the male being subtle rather than gaudy. Breeds on northern lakes and wetlands; in winter can be found on saltmarshes and coastal grassland.

(13) Teal (*Anas crecca*, Sarcelle d'hiver).

One of Europe's commonest ducks; likes shallow fresh water when nesting and in winter can be found on flood meadows or saltmarshes. If disturbed it's quick to take to the air, rising almost vertically from the water when alarmed. It flies off rapidly with whirring wing beats and swerving flight patterns.

(14) Tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*, Fuligule morillon).

Male is very distinctive, looking black and white at a distance. Dives frequently and often for a long time, covering considerable distances under water. Its winters are spent in large flocks on open water.





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(15) Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*, Garrot à l'oeil d'or).
A rare winter visitor in these parts. Spends the winter on lakes and reservoirs, occasionally on the coast. It spends much of the time diving, but it can also be spotted perched in a tree! Its nest is usually in a tree hole.

(16) Grey partridge (*Perdix perdix*, Perdrix grise).
Fairly sedentary, although birds will flock together in winter. Found in lowland grassland and cultivated areas. When alarmed it will run for cover, eventually taking flight in a flock and dropping quickly when out of danger.

(17) Red-legged partridge (*Alectoris rufa*, Perdrix rouge).
Both sexes have a red bill and...red legs! Its call, a harsh repetitive 'kchoo-kchoo', gives away its presence. It's heard when several birds are feeding in an area of dense vegetation and they need to keep in contact.

(18) Water rail (*Rallus aquaticus*, Rale d'eau).
More often heard than seen, being usually well-concealed within dense reed beds. When moving through the reeds, this secretive waterbird may walk slowly, crouch, run, climb or freeze at any hint of danger.

(19) Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*, Alouette des champs).
One of Europe's commonest larks, its familiar song is delivered while it maintains a fluttering position high in the sky. One of the great sounds of a winter's day. Large flocks can often be seen moving ahead of winter snows. In winter, skylarks from northern Europe move south and gather in feeding flocks that may number several hundred birds. Local resident flocks remain separate.

(20) Woodlark (*Lullula arborea*, Alouette lulu).
Resembles the skylark but is smaller and sligher. Its short tail and blunt wings make the woodlark look quite different in flight, with a hesitant, fluttering action. On the ground, the bright face and black and white wing markings are good features to look for.

(21) Mediterranean gull (*Larus melanocephalus*, Mouette mélanocéphale).
Seems most at home on the coast and usually avoids flying far from land. In winter it frequently joins mixed feeding flocks of gull species in harbours or near refuse tips, where there's plenty of scope for scavenging.

(22) Black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*, Mouette rieuse).
One of Europe's commonest gulls, turning up in winter in most habitats from agricultural land, city parks and coastal marshes to the open sea, where it will follow fishing boats. In winter many birds congregate in huge roosts, dispersing during the day to regular feeding areas. In winter the adult's head is white with two blackish smudges around the eyes and on the neck.



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NEXT MONTH...

Birds of prey and the large, semi-aquatic rodent that suffers from frostbite!

Mick Austin is a freelance journalist based in the Pays-de-la-Loire. He has had his work published in several expat magazines and newspapers and has also written the Mayenne Tourist Board's only English-language brochure. He also runs a gîte business at www.gitefortwo.com.