



Spain
September - October 2022
11 days

Sophie, Manuel and Sam Baumgartner, Valentin Moser, Lorenz Achtnich and Ruben Vernieuwe

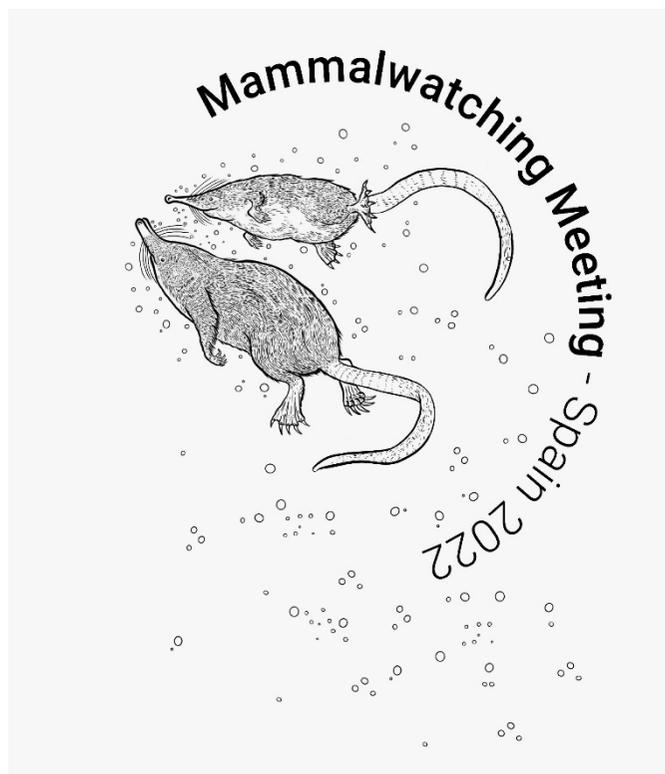
with: Jon Hall, Charles Foley, Martin Royle, Colin Slator and Quentin Philipps

Back in late 2019 Manuel and Sophie had the idea to plan a mammalwatching meeting. We wanted to share knowledge and stories and get to know other fellow mammalwatchers. But most importantly we wanted to discuss how we, as a community, can be (even) better and do more to protect our beloved mammals. **Pierre Boutonnet** was among the first interested people, and he immediately suggested to help as a guide and to welcome the meeting in Asturias, Spain. A few weeks before the planning started, a fantastic trip report came out and it became clear that possibly the best mammalwatching trip in Europe could take place in Spain. Nevertheless, we voted democratically on the places suggested by everyone interested in participating, and a majority voted for Spain. We therefore started with the preparations, but COVID unfortunately got in the way. 2 years and a baby later, a lot of had changed, but we stuck to our idea and in October 2022 it was finally carried out.

Pierre has been a naturalist guide for over 20 years and runs the travel company Yuhina (<https://www.yuhina.fr/accueil.htm>). He has been living in Asturias with his family for 8 years and has built a fantastic guesthouse, the Casa Folgueras (<http://www.casafolgueras.com/>). Pierre is a fantastic guide and it's clear that he is a naturalist at heart. Behind his guiding is an enormous effort to pass on his passion for animals to other people, while disturbing the animals as little as possible.

His friend and small carnivore expert **Frédéric Chiche** (frederic.chiche@hotmail.fr) was there to support him. Fred clearly has a special bond with the common genet, but also has a lot of knowledge about other species. It was noticeable that the two of them were a well-coordinated team and complemented each other perfectly.

Part of our group stayed at Hotel El Sabil (<https://www.elsabil.net/>) and we all enjoyed their great food.





The mammalwatching
meeting

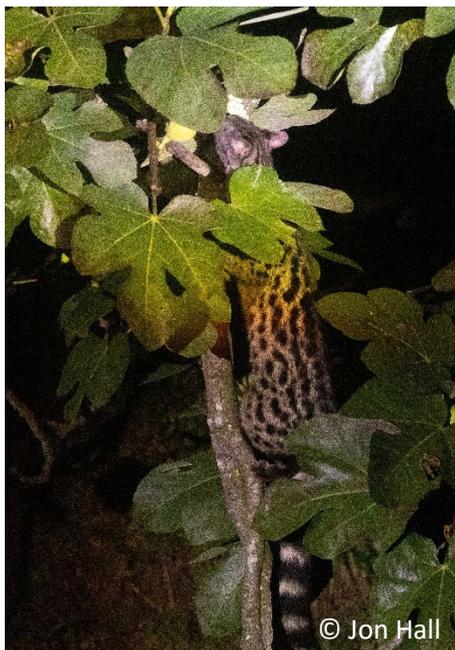
Villanueva / Asturias

30.09-02.10.22

The Felis team arrived already on Thursday to start preparations. After getting to know the guiding team with an apero while scanning for bears from the house and having dinner together, we did a little night walk around the house. We tried to reach the openings around Castañedo del Monte but walking on a small path with dense vegetation on both sides, while dodging one of the at least 81 salamanders, the only activity we saw was around the house, a **West European Hedgehog** back at the Casa Folgueras.

The next morning, we went in search of Brown Bears. At this time of year, brown bears eat mostly nuts and we were in a place where we had a chance to see the bears walking up the mountains after a night of eating nuts. We saw one **Catabrian Chamois**, several **Wild Boars**, **Red Deer** and finally two young **Brown Bears** running up the mountain scared of hunting dogs. Friday afternoon the participants started arriving and we had welcome dinner at the conference hotel "El Sabil". Between the meeting, in the morning and in the evening, we always used the time to go mammalwatching, so the first mammalwatching session started on Saturday morning. Pierre knows a steep valley where it is sometimes possible to see bear quite close at the opposite side. We started looking, but even with some of the most experienced mammalwatchers of the world, the bears made us wait. But then, Pierre somehow found a bear, very well hidden! While we admired the occasional head or body, Ruben started gesturing, eyes wide open - he must have found something good! Indeed, there was a much closer Brown Bear in a meadow 200 metres away, in the complete open. We were lucky to have a fantastic observation and watch the bear dig in the ground to successfully catch and eat a water vole *Arvicola sp.*





In the evening we went to the famous fig tree. Shortly before, we made a detour to scan for Brown Bears. We had no luck with the bears, but some **Common Pipistrelle** flew overhead. Pierre and Fred together scouted many fig trees in the region and chose the best one for observing small carnivores. It was the perfect combination of sweet fruit, a river close by and enough distance from the village. Over time, they realised that the common genet eats there almost every night during the fig season and usually in the early evening. The Beech Marten and the European Pine marten are also regular visitors to this fig tree. So, we all sat in front of this tree at the beginning of the evening and waited for visitors. A **Pine Marten** appeared briefly, giving us just enough time to identify it. We spotted what was probably an *Apodemus* using the thermal scope a little further back. Also observed only with the thermal scope was a Garden Dormouse, which Fred identified as the expected species with this by movement, shape and size. Finally, the celebrity of the evening, the **Common Genet**, came by and comfortably ate his figs in our presence. It didn't seem to mind us at all, and it was a very special observation for all of us.

As we walked happily back to the car, some spotted another Brown Bear eating nuts practically in the village, just a few metres away. He got scared of our group and quickly took off. Back at the Casa Folgueras, Valentin again spotted the West European Hedgehog which seems to be a regular visitor.

The next morning, we decided to look for the American Mink and the Eurasian Otter. We had several short but good sightings of a **Eurasian Otter**.

In the evening our target species was the Broom Hare and for this purpose we went on a pass. After walking only 5 minutes in alpine pasture, a **Broom Hare** appeared. A total of seven different ones could be observed. We also saw Red Fox, European Badger, Wild Boar and a **European Free-tailed Bat**.

Another small group went back to the fig tree. That evening the common genet did not come, but the **Beech Marten** did. On the way to the fig tree, a **European Rabbit** was spotted.

The next morning, we had to say goodbye to part of the group and with the others we went on to the next region, to 'Picos de Europa'.



The meeting

On Friday everyone arrived, and we took time to get to know each other enjoying local Spanish cuisine. In between a couple of local beers, we would listen to Jon Halls's mammalwatching story and how it all started for him.

After the successful bear search in the morning, we started the meeting on Saturday with a presentation from Charles Foley on how mammalwatchers can contribute to conservation, a perfect start for the discussions and the meeting. Several ideas were discussed such as visiting and supporting local projects. These projects also help conservation directly which including local people, helping them on a socio-economic level and giving them a sense of pride as their region has a special mammal.

Next up was Valentin Moser's presentation on why and how to report observations and the importance of reporting them in a standardised way. Simple tools for recording observations are platforms like observado.org and [iNaturalist](https://www.inaturalist.org).

In the afternoon Jon Hall presented the current mammalwatching guidelines and it was discussed how these could be reformulated, supplemented and above all disseminated.

On Sunday we started the meeting with Sophie Baumgartner, giving a presentation about 'Felis'. Felis is a small NGO, founded by mammalwatchers, who volunteer to preserve habitat with small wild cats as flagship species (<https://www.projectfelis.org/>). It has been founded recently and besides the mammalwatching project, they have projects in Switzerland, Brazil and India.

Next was the presentation of Quentin Philips showing the truly amazing diversity of Ficus trees in Borneo and how important they are for the ecosystem. He introduced his website <https://borneoficus.info> and showed us how they aid conservation with planting ficus trees near palm oil plantations or other places, significantly helping nature, as figs in Borneo are a keystone species, meaning they support a lot of species such as the Binturong.

The last of our participants presenting was Martin Royle (<https://www.royle-safaris.co.uk/>). He talked about the current trend in the mammalwatching community as he experiences it with his travel company. In his point of view, the community is getting bigger and bigger and it is very important to start as exemplary as possible from the beginning.

The online part started around lunchtime with 10 participants from many different places around the world sharing their views and ideas on how mammalwatchers can contribute to conservation. It was very nice to see that the online participants overall had the same views and ideas with some very interesting additions. This online meeting was conducted in a hybrid way and at the end the ideas were summarised together with the team on site, and it was discussed how to proceed. Last but not least we hosted Vladimir Dinets who gave an online presentation on identifying small mammals in the field. Finally, we plan the following steps of the meeting:

- Revise the mammalwatching guidelines and make them better known.
- Revive the mammalwatching awards with a focus on conservation (more on this in early 2023)
- Redesign parts of the website with several elements that support mammal conservation.
- Encourage sustainable mammalwatching as the norm, with actions like carbon offset, reporting sightings, supporting local projects and guides.

Picos de Europa

03-05.10.22



The desperate mammalwatchers waiting for a glimpse of the Desman

We arrived in Picos de Europa around noon. After a quick lunch we wasted no time and started looking for what would be the hardest and most sought-after target of the trip: The Pyrenean Desman. This quirky looking animal is found in riverine habitats, usually associated with fast flowing water. We went to a suitable river, where Pierre and Fred had found evidence in the form of excrements in the past. The strategy with the group was to spread out along the banks of the river. Keeping an eye on the water and informing one another if we spotted one. Some people could not sit still the whole afternoon and preferred walking up and down along the river. It was after 3 hours searching; over the walkie-talkies we received the news that Pierre had just seen a Desman. Everybody ran as quickly as possible to Pierre but by the time the first ones arrived the Desman had swum out of sight. The group spent another hour waiting but with no result. The Desman did not reappear.

Right where Pierre had seen the Desman, we discovered a small burrow perfectly suited for a Desman. As Desmans have an active period in the afternoon and then again during the night, we expected the Desman was peacefully sleeping instead of making a bunch of desperate mammalwatchers to the happiest people of Spain! We were able to set up a camera trap keeping an eye on the burrow.

On our way to the hotel, we passed by some good meadows for European Wildcat but with no success.

info@projectfelis.org

After settling down in the hotel we still had time to look for Wild Cat as dinner in the hotel was Spanish time - late. Only a few minutes from the hotel we found a beautiful **European Wildcat** in the middle of a meadow where the grass had been cut recently. This gave us the opportunity to admire it with the whole group. After a while a second individual appeared that walked over the meadow. After half an hour we left the cat undisturbed, still sitting in the meadow and listening for vole activity.



Passing the last few meadows before entering the village of the hotel Pierre suddenly shouted, “what a big dog over there - no it’s a wolf!” Pierre halted the car, but the Wolf quickly disappeared with only some record shots being taken, but sure enough, a beautiful and unexpected **Grey Wolf!**

After dinner a small walk in the village to the river with the thermal yielded a closer Red Fox and some **Common Pipistrelle** and **Daubenton's Myotis** hunting over the river.

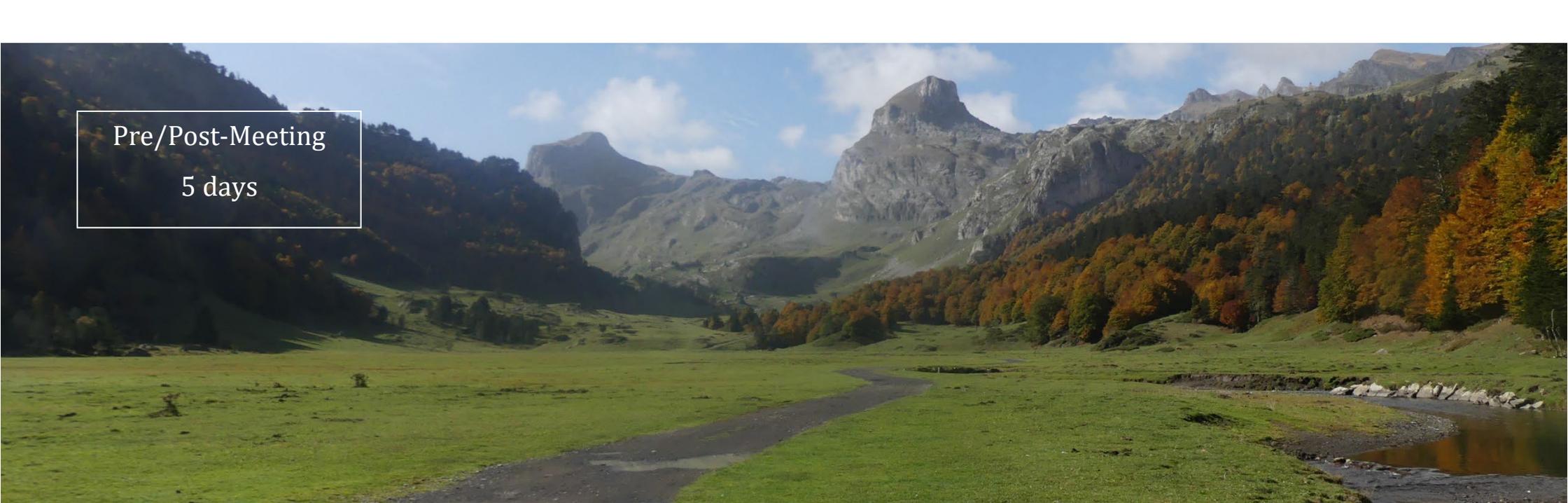
The next morning, we got up early and had a small breakfast before being picked up by two 4X4 to go and look for wolves. A nearby area hosted a pack of wolves and while the adults went out hunting during the night the young ones would stay in the “meeting area” of the pack and can therefore be found quite reliably. We positioned ourselves some distance from the hill where they are often visible so as not to disturb them. Arriving before sunrise we played the waiting game. We saw some red deer and roe deer, but no grey wolves. After a few hours the local guides suggested we try a place with a view on the other side of the hill. Ten minutes after arriving, we spotted a Grey Wolf quickly followed by another one. In total we saw 4 young Wolves!

We went back to the hotel for a second breakfast and to have an early siesta. Early afternoon, we went to look for the Desman. This time around a bridge where Pierre had seen them before. Once again, we spread out keeping an eye on the river but without any luck. Around 3 pm we went back to the river we visited the day before, trying to intercept the Desman from the day before. After half an hour we heard Pierre shout again and we all ran towards him. He had seen something move but was unsure if it was a Desman. We spread out near Pierre hoping the animal would reappear but unfortunately it did not.

As a last activity of the day, we went to a pond where we had the chance to see otters and mink. With the thermal we had a glimpse of a distant mustelid but because of the distance and short duration it could not be further identified. We heard Red deer and saw several Chamois. We spotlighted on the way back yielding some Red foxes.

On the last morning we visited a nearby narrow gorge with steep sides which is good habitat for **Iberian Ibex**. Sure enough we found some groups of females with kids from the last spring. The male adults are higher in the mountains at this time of the year.





Pre/Post-Meeting
5 days

Team Felis travelled from Switzerland and back, Sophie and Manu with son Sam with the car, Lorenz, Ruben and Valentin with train and rental car. Of course, we did some mammalwatching on the way! Before the trip we met all in Mañaria, when spotlighting the **Fat Dormouse** was the most abundant animal by far, we also saw **Apodemus sp** and heard Red Deer. After the meeting everybody stopped in the French Pyrénées to try one last time to see the elusive Desman - unsuccessfully...



Lorenz, Ruben and Valentin started with an inland trip towards the dryer, open plains. The goal was a slightly different biodiversity. This resulted in a Spanish Imperial Eagle as the honorable bird of the trip. We prepared for a long night, as we planned to spotlight our way from Burgos to Vitoria-Gasteiz, where we planned to try our luck for European Mink at the Reservoir of Ullíbarri-Gamboa. The night started well, when at an abandoned building near Quintanapalla we found **Algerian Mouse** and a **Greater White-toothed Shrew**. The main target of the night was Iberian Hare, so we continued spotlighting the fields. Besides the abundant small mammals, which we think were mainly Algerian Mice as well, we found some Roe Deer, a European Rabbit and a Wild Boar, but not the expected Hare! Maybe the agricultural plains are too intensively managed and we should have looked more in the hills. We then did a short night walk at the Reservoir, where we also did some birding in the morning. Next day we were supposed to go Whale Watching in Bermeo with verballenas.com - well very poor planning on our side, we missed the boat. Obviously, that put a big damper on the mood, but we tried to stay positive and use the time for more Desman searching. We drove up in the Pyrénées and started on the French side

of the Col du Pourtalet. Soon we found some latrines and we stayed positive for the night even if the afternoon passed without sighting. The night would also pass, although we had a rather good supporting cast with Red Fox, Pyrenean Chamois, **Least Weasel** and some Arvicolas sp, as well as a **Neomys sp**, which got us very excited first, as Ruben spotted it as a dark, swimming shade in the water! Having spent the 4th afternoon looking unsuccessfully for Desman, we decided to try the well-known place at the Refuge Ayous (42.842171, -0.494646). Sophie and Manuel had tried unsuccessfully to find the Desman there two days before. An employee of the 'refuge' reported that a lot of people come here for the Desman, she said that she had 13 nationalities in the refuge one evening, all hoping for a Desman sighting. Long afternoon caught short, no Desman, but five Neomys again. One of the "excrement traps" of the Desman monitoring program did contain some faeces, so the Desman is still around, but maybe not the "famous individual" anymore. A new location needs to be stacked out! From all the places we were, these mountain lakes looked most promising to view the Desman, as the water is perfectly clear and calm. If you go up and see a Desman, we would very much appreciate a message!



We stayed until dusk, when the Neomys (at least 2) started to be much more active (from one sighting per hour to every few minutes). We were back for spotlighting, starting at the same spot and slowly working our way down the river, all three with the thermal. We did find some activity again, a Neomys. Habitat and behaviour points towards fodiens (one was in very fast-flowing water), unfortunately as there is some records (also high-altitude) from Neomys anomalus close by, things need to be considered carefully. Based on the pictures it looks like the animal has a keel and the snout to foot line is straight, which also supports fodiens. Well, we arrived a bit knackerd to the car, and after a short night, were back on the train to Switzerland.

Meanwhile, Sophie and Manuel tried to look for a "new place" and it seemed that the Desman was everywhere. All the people we talked to, reported having seen the Desman before, sometimes even in the village. We tried to find a local guide who would assist us, but it was very difficult to find anyone. Finally, a brave and spontaneous guide contacted us but he was more specialized as a mountain guide. We explored the region behind the "Pont d'Espagne" near Cauterets. It looked promising, but we also found many Eurasian otter tracks and did not see any Desman. We hope that more places will be discovered in the future so that "Desman Tourism" will spread a bit.

It was a great trip with great people and amazing wildlife overall and a great trip. And for you Desman, we will be back!

For the carbon offset of this trip, we donated to the Spanish NGO 'Fapas' and planted 14 trees.

'Fapas' carries out the CO2 compensation plantations on farms owned by the association, thus guaranteeing the conservation of the trees. At the same time, they are fruit-producing species for the bears to eat.



Mammal list:

		Villanueva / Asturias	Picos de Europa	Before and after the meeting
		4 nights	3 nights	
European edible dormouse	<i>Glis glis</i>			X
European water vol	<i>Arvicola sp.</i>	X		
Apodemus	<i>Apodemus sp.</i>			X
Brown rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	X		
Algerian mouse	<i>Mus spretus</i>			X
Broom hare	<i>Lepus castroviejo</i>	X		
European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	X		
West European hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	X		
Greater white-toothed shrew	<i>Crocidura russula</i>			X
Eurasian water shrew	<i>Neomys fodiens</i>			X
Daubenton's myotis	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>		X	
Common pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pipistrellus</i>	X	X	
European free-tailed bat	<i>Tadarida teniotis</i>	X		
European wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>		X	
Common genet	<i>Genetta genetta</i>	X		
Grey wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>		X	
Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	X	X	
Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	X		
European otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	X		
Beech marten	<i>Martes foina</i>	X		
European pine marten	<i>Martes martes</i>	X		
Least weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>			X
Wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	X		
Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	X	X	
Roe deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	X		
Iberian ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>		X	
Pyrenean chamois	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica</i>	X	X	X
Total	27	17	8	7