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ON A YOUNG MONK SEAL THAT LOST ITS WAY IN 1927

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On the 4th of August 1927 a young male monk seal (*Monachus monachus* Hermann, 1779) was found at Le Cormier, a small village on the Atlantic coast of France, about 13 km south of the mouth of the river Loire (Baudouin-Bodin 1964). Whether the animal was still alive or already dead is not known. The seal was mounted and brought to the Natural History Museum at Nantes in France (see figure). This museum, where the specimen is still present in the display collection, is worth visiting. As far as is known, the monk seal from Le Cormier is the second specimen to have been found on the French Atlantic coast.



The 1927 Le Cormier specimen, now on display in the Natural History Museum in Nantes.

The first, a young animal with a length of two meters, was discovered at the lower reaches of the river Gironde, northwest of the town of Bordeaux, in March 1817. The seal was mounted and exhibited in the Museum Rodrigues, but was subsequently lost when the museum closed down (Burguet 1843).

The discovery of these two monk seals poses an interesting question. Did they originate from the Mediterranean population or from the Atlantic? In her short article, Mrs J. Baudouin-Bodin, the former director of the Nantes Natural History Museum, expresses the belief that the Cormier specimen came from the Mediterranean one.

The present author, however, finds it more logical that the French Atlantic specimens originated from the Atlantic monk seal population. Despite the fact that no extralimital records of *Monachus monachus* are known from the Spanish Atlantic coasts and from Portugal (Teixeira 1979, Ibanez 1981, Reiner 1981), the discovery locations are closer to the Atlantic population than to the Mediterranean population. In the absence of firm evidence, however, the question of origin remains guesswork.

Another interesting aspect of the two records of monk seals on the French Atlantic coast is that so few extralimital records of *Monachus monachus* are known. Marine mammals which have no superable barriers can be found very far from their normal distribution range. Arctic species, for instance the hooded seal (*Cystophora cristata* Erleben, 1777) can be found on the coast of Portugal and southern Spain, as well as in the Gulf of Mexico, the northern Caribbean Sea and on the coast of California. A southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina* Linnaeus, 1758), an Antarctic species, has been found on the coast of Oman on the Arabian Peninsula. Many more examples of extralimital records of seals and cetaceans can be cited, but would be beyond the scope of this short article.

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