

# Dragonflies & Birds of The Camargue

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly either Marseille or Montpellier
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- Days 2 - 7** Natural history excursions in the Camargue and surrounding wildlife areas, including Les Alpilles and La Crau
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- Day 8** Return either Marseille or Montpellier; fly UK
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### Departs

June or July

### Focus

Dragonflies, birds & Mediterranean natural history

### Grading

A (easy) Short day walks only

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA05) or brochure



### Highlights

- About 30 dragonfly species, most not found in Britain.
- Little Bustard & Pin-tailed Sandgrouse at La Crau.
- Copper Demoiselle, Yellow Clubtail, Orange-spotted Emerald, Banded & Spotted Darters.
- Lagoons laden with Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, waders & storks.



From top: Banded Darter, Les Alpilles and Greater Flamingo



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## Introduction



Les Alpilles

This Naturetrek holiday offers an exciting opportunity to explore the wetlands of Provence, the nearby stony desert of La Crau and the limestone hills of Les Alpilles. Together, these make up one of Europe's premier destinations for dragonflies, birds and other wildlife.

The tour's focus is on the Camargue, a vast wetland lying within and around the arms of the Rhône Delta that conjures up romantic images of wild white horses, flamingoes, black fighting

bulls, gypsy festivals and the best olives in the world. It is also France's premier dragonfly site and in July we hope to see around 30 species, many of which do not occur in Britain.

If you seek to be inspired by dragonflies, this is the trip for you, both for the sheer numbers and for the brilliance of the species that we should see. However, the region is better known to naturalists for its birdlife, and we will not neglect this aspect of the natural world during our dragonfly-quest, enjoying the Camargue's large breeding population of Greater Flamingos, abundant herons, egrets and storks, and healthy population of raptors, including Lesser Kestrel and perhaps the rare Egyptian Vulture and Bonelli's Eagle.

The Camargue is famous for the Camarguais, herds of wild horses that inhabit the region and we should see them. We will make excursions to the scenic limestone hills of Les Alpilles in search of Eagle Owls and also to the bizarre pebbly landscape of La Crau, not only to look for birds of this semi-desert, but also to enjoy the superb dragonfly stream flowing through it. Indeed, we offer the opportunity to understand and enjoy at first hand the quintessentially Mediterranean habitats of the garrigue and maquis and their associated wildlife on this action-packed and varied holiday!



Naturetrek group in the Camargue

## Itinerary

*Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.*

### Day 1

### Fly UK to Montpellier or Marseille, transfer Arles

We depart from London this morning (usually Gatwick) on a direct, two-hour flight to Montpellier or Marseille. From there we will drive to Arles, our base throughout this single-centre holiday, from where it is generally just a short drive to the areas that we shall be exploring on foot.

There should be time after settling in at the hotel for our first excursion through the adjacent farmland. The holiday begins here and we hope to see some of typically colourful species of the Camargue, such as Red-veined Darters and Rollers. Although it can be hot in the midafternoons at this season, the famous Mistral wind can generally be relied upon to blow on most days to varying degrees, providing a measure of relief to the Mediterranean heat experienced elsewhere.

### Day 2

### Arles, The Camargue

Today we will begin by taking a short drive to focus on the dry garrigue habitat and olive groves. Provence produces some of the very best olive oil in the world, and we will walk through one of its old olive groves in order to visit a section of a 1st Century Roman aqueduct. The water it once carried originally drove flour mills, and was part of the first industrial site in the world. Today the area is rich in wild flowers, including sweet-smelling wild rosemary, and attracts many butterflies such as Southern Gatekeeper and Striped and Great Banded Graylings, as well as enormous antlions and



Antlion

*Saga pedo*, a predatory bush-cricket. We'll scan from a viewpoint for raptors and Rollers, then check alongside the water channel for White Featherleg damselflies and other dragonflies.

We will return to the hotel for lunch and a siesta during the heat of the day, before heading into the limestone hills for a complete contrast in habitats and to look for Alpine Swifts, Crag Martins and Crested Tits near La Caume in Les Alpilles. This is also a viewpoint for spectacular views across the Camargue to the south. We will enjoy an evening picnic, with wine for those who wish, before moving to a quiet spot where we wait for the stars to come out and the Eagle Owls to emerge from their cave roosts.



## Day 3

## Arles, The Camargue

We spend today immersed in the rich wildlife of the Camargue National Park, on an exciting exploration of Les Marais du Vigueirat, a large wetland nature reserve teeming with dragonflies and birds. Soon after our arrival we should begin to see species that we don't encounter in Britain, dragonflies such as White-tailed Skimmer and the brilliantly-coloured Scarlet Darter, as well as Tree Frogs and European Pond Terrapins.



Scarlet Darter

Throughout this trip you will get fascinating insights into the lives of dragonflies, their ecology, and tips on how to identify them at rest and in flight... and often we will encounter colourful European Bee-eaters, feeding on the very dragonflies that we are keen to watch!

Special permits will allow us to venture further into the reserve than the general public, and we will spend the day wandering through marshes, woodland, open dry meadows and along disused canals where, as well as looking for dragonflies, we will also enjoy a large concentration of egrets and herons comprising eight different species. The silence is impressive, for this is an extensive wild area with no traffic and virtually no other people. Only for the wildlife enthusiast is there plenty to see, though the famous white wild horses of the Camargue may usually be seen in the meadows, accompanied by their surprisingly dark foals.

After lunch at the visitors' centre, we will take a short drive to visit a selection of hides that overlook the large expanses of open water. From here, plenty of birds may be seen, including numerous herons and egrets, Marsh Harriers, Black Kites, various gulls and terns, Fan-tailed Warblers and Crested Larks.

## Day 4

## Arles, The Camargue

This morning we will look at the northern section of the Camargue, looking for Bee-eaters, which feast largely on dragonflies (most probably including Red-veined and Scarlet Darters). An uncommon avian highlight, the Collared Pratincole, breeds in this area and it, too, feeds on our favourite insect! Black-winged Stilts and Wood Sandpipers are also be found feeding in these fields, with occasional flocks of Glossy Ibis, a fairly recent addition to the Camargue's avifauna. Before returning to the hotel for lunch, we will view an area of extensive marshland, where Great Reed Warbler songs grate loudly from the reeds and marsh terns stop to take insects from the open water.

In the afternoon we visit the Vallee des Baux with dragonflies in mind. Here the wide canal and adjacent wetlands hold Orange Featherleg, Orange-spotted Emerald and if we are lucky Pronged Clubtail, all species endemic to South-west Europe.

## Day 5

## Arles, The Camargue

Today we will focus on an exploration of La Crau, the semi-arid stony area created by the River Durance back in prehistory. Originally the region spanned over 60,000 hectares, but it has been encroached by agriculture over the centuries and now covers just 11,000 hectares. An ancient myth tells how, when Hercules was herding sheep, he was attacked. Zeus came to his aid by raining stones down upon his enemies who occupied the land we now call La Crau. Shepherds used to herd their flocks from here, up into the French Alps for the summer months, and return in the autumn when the rains made the grass on La Crau grow again. Even in the 21st Century the sheep are still moved between these lowland and mountain pastures, though today they are transported by truck!

The layer of stones and sediment that make up La Crau has a particular structure that prevents tree growth, for over many years the sediment has become solidified into pudding stone, a kind of natural concrete which prevents water from seeping far into the ground and allowing trees to grow. Nonetheless, the whole area is under threat from politically powerful peach farmers who want to break up the pudding stone and add fertilizers. Fortunately for us and the wildlife, the Peau de Meau nature reserve has been created.

Running along the edge of the reserve is what could well be Europe's number one site for dragonflies: a narrow, flowing canal with lush green banks that provides exceptionally good viewing and photographic opportunities. Among the many species to be found here are showy Copper Demoiselles, demonstrating their stunning courtship displays, together with Mediterranean Bluet (hard to find amongst the hordes of Mercury Bluets), Western Spectre and Large Pincertail.



Copper Demoiselle

Despite the appearance of a flat, featureless semi-desert, La Crau is buzzing with insects, spiders and other wildlife – much of it food for the birds. We may find the praying mantids, antlions, grasshoppers and wolf spiders that are preyed upon by many birds, amongst them Southern Grey Shrike, Hoopoe, Little Owl, Little Bustard and Stone Curlew.

After lunch we will visit another part of La Crau to view a colony of Lesser Kestrels that breeds in terracotta nest boxes, designed to prevent Polecats from taking their chicks. We will go in search of the Calandra Larks that breed in a very restricted area, while keeping a constant watch out for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse; La Crau is the only part of France where these two species breed.

## Day 6

## Arles, The Camargue

Today we will make a cross-section of the Camargue wetlands, south to the flat open coast. We will stop at freshwater and brackish wetlands, including the huge Étang des Vaccarès lagoon, which can be lined with Flamingoes and waders, while the open water is peppered with Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes in summer finery.

Nearer the sea, we will view the extensive salt pans where sea salt is extracted. We will spend time here watching the distant Flamingo colony and looking out for flocks of waders, gulls and terns, including specialists such as Avocet, Kentish Plover and Slender-billed Gull. The secretive Spectacled Warbler might sit on top of the salt-tolerant plants around the edges, though usually it is the local form of Yellow Wagtail that adorns them. Our journey will end at the sea, where cold drinks and ice creams may be in order!

## Day 7

## Arles, The Camargue

After a day spent concentrating on birds, our final day is likely to be spent looking for mainly for dragonflies, although the programme is flexible enough to revisit a specific locality if desired; alternatively, you may wish to take a day off to visit the historic sites in Arles. Typically, the group will visit wetlands near Marais du Vigueirat. Blue-eye, Yellow Clubtail and Blue Chaser are among the species likely at one regular spot, while two rare darter species will be the final target. Spotted Darter is a scarce and very localised species and at this particular site the gorgeous little Banded Darter also breeds. A terrific way to end to a rich and varied holiday!

## Day 8

## Fly UK

We leave our hotel in the morning to drive towards Montpellier or Marseille, spending some time en route in the north-western part of the Camargue. The extensive reedbeds here hold Little Bitterns and Bearded Tits, while introduced Purple Gallinules can sometimes be seen plucking the stems of emergent vegetation and eating the pithy core. But all too soon it will be time to head for the airport to catch the afternoon flight back to England.



White Stork

## Tour Grading

Grade A (easy). We will travel to our target sites by minibus, then take leisurely walks to explore the area, generally over easy terrain. Trainers should provide adequate footwear both for our walks on the level and for hill walking on rocky surfaces. Some areas will be marshy and wet underfoot, so be prepared to get your feet wet! There will be a couple of short walks with steep gradients over rocky ground in Les Alpilles. Anyone who is reasonably fit will find this trip easy-going.

## Weather

The south of France is generally hot in July, with most days being clear and sunny with the odd thunderstorm. The famous Mistral wind that blows down the Rhône Valley from the Alps provides a breeze that is cooling and at times strong – a welcome relief from the hotter days. Light clothing and a sunhat are essential, together with rain gear to cope with any showers.

## Food & Accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. We will be staying in a comfortable, air-conditioned hotel serving good local food, where all rooms have private facilities.

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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