

Go Slow... in the Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly France and transfer to Arles
Day 2/7	Daily programme of birding walks and excursions in the Camargue region
Day 8	Fly London

Departs

June

Focus

Birds and other wildlife

Grading

Grade A. Easy birdwatching walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA29) or brochure

Highlights:

- Perfect introduction to European birdwatching
- Gentle & varied Mediterranean birding from a comfortable base
- Enjoy lagoons laden with Flamingoes, Black-winged Stilts, waders, terns & gulls
- Stone Curlew, Lesser Kestrel, and perhaps Little Bustard & Pin-tailed Sandgrouse at La Crau
- Raptors, including Short-toed Eagle, Honey Buzzard and Montagu's Harrier
- Guided by expert Naturetrek ornithologists



From top: Camargue Wild Horses, Black-crowned Night Heron, and Flamingos



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NB. 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.

Introduction

The Camargue, in the Provence region of France, is arguably Europe's best known wetland. The Camargue itself, covering about 750 square kilometers, lies in the very heart of the vast Rhone delta, a few minutes south of Arles in south-central France. It is a veritable oasis for a great many resident and migratory species, in an area otherwise acclaimed for its sunny Mediterranean beaches, ancient Roman ruins and fine Provençal cuisine.

Throughout this relaxing early summer break we will be based at the same pleasant family-run hotel just outside the historic town of Arles. We will use our hotel as a base from which to explore the different habitats of the Camargue and surrounding area, and to enjoy the exceptional variety of birds and other wildlife of the region. The programme outlined below must only be used as a rough guide, as so much will depend on the weather, and how we feel each day - there is such a choice of things to do in this area, and having possibly two vehicles (if the group size permits) will further extend our options.

Day 1

Arles

We will depart London on a direct flight to Marseille or Montpellier depending on the flight schedules.

If our arrival time allows, we may be able to stop at one of the birding locations in the area, after which we will make our way to our pleasant hotel near Arles, where we will enjoy the first of several tasty French meals.



Flamingos in the Camargue

Days 2/7

Exploring the Camargue and surrounding habitats.

We will have the luxury on this holiday of having six full days to explore this bird-rich with all sites within easy striking distance of our well placed hotel. The programme will be flexible and a great variety of habitats will be visited. The hotel has a swimming pool and some adjacent farmland that can be walked to should anyone want a day to relax during the week and the tour is designed to see a wonderful array of birds but at a very leisurely pace.



Black-winged Stilt

Over the coming days we shall mainly be focusing on the Camargue proper, mostly within the 13,117ha nature reserve that encompasses the Etang de Vaccarès and the saltpans south towards the sea. As access is largely restricted, we will be sure to utilise various viewing platforms and parking areas, as well as visiting the nature reserve at Marais de Vigueirat and the Parc Ornithologique near Saint Maries-de-la-Mer. With the historic town of Arles on our doorstep we shall also take the time to visit and explore.

With the Camargue the viewing platforms on the banks of the Etang allow good views both into the brackish marshes on the water's edge, and into the shallows where the Flamingos feed. From these platforms we may also see Black, Whiskered, Gull-billed and Caspian Terns, together with any lingering waders.

Marais de Vigueirat is a huge reserve near the village of Mas Thibert. In the time available to us we will not be able to cover the whole area, but we will spend part of one morning exploring the marshes, wet grassland and wooded areas before using the shaded picnic area at lunchtime. The reserve is an excellent location for various species of herons and egrets, while Spoonbills often put in an appearance. Melodious Warblers and Nightingales sing from the trees and bushes, and Hoopoes, Bee-eaters and Rollers are frequently seen. A herd of the famous Camargue wild horses have the run of most of the reserve, so there is a good chance of seeing them close up.



Hoopoe

The Parc Ornithologique is outside the boundary of the nature reserve to the west of Vaccarès. Originally a bird hospital caring for birds and animals which were sick, injured or shot, it looks at first glance like a small zoo with local species in cages, but these are either too maimed to be released or have been captive bred from injured birds. However those that have been released still come back to the area to feed and some

nest (such as the White Storks which nest on top of the White Stork aviary!). Hundreds of flamingos visit the parc to feed and rest, and this is probably the best place in Europe to observe and photograph them at close quarters. Other attractions include several breeding colonies of Mediterranean Gulls, Common and Little Terns, various herons and egrets and Black-winged Stilts, plus numerous Avocets and the occasional Glossy Ibis.



European Roller

During our time here in the wetlands we will also make time to visit the rice fields and marshes at Mas d'Agon, which is the favoured area for Collared Pratincole and also a good site to watch Whiskered and Black Terns feeding, together with many heron species including Squacco.

We will also visit the salt pans and brackish lagoons near the coast at Piémanson where we can expect to see good numbers of waders including Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint and Kentish Plover, and there is a good chance of finding Slender-billed Gulls here. Gull-billed Terns can often be seen alongside the many Common Terns in this area, and on occasions we have found Caspian Terns as well.

Other habitats are also within easy striking distance; the ancient delta of the River Durance – now a tributary of the Rhone – forms the area known as La Crau covering some 50,000 hectares. This dry, stony steppe has been extensively irrigated and supports such crops as melons and the famous Crau hay which is used to feed race horses. The surviving areas of original habitat support Little Bustard – rare elsewhere in France – and the country's only population of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Other noteworthy residents include Stone Curlew, Lesser Kestrel, Short-toed Lark, Calandra Lark, Tawny Pipit and Southern Grey Shrike, while the scrubby areas on the approaches to La Crau often produce Woodlark, Golden Oriole, European Roller, Hoopoe and Red-backed Shrike.



Whiskered Tern

Day 8

London

Depending on the timings of the return flight to London, we may have time to have a final look at the Camargue, catch up with some species we may have missed.

Grading

On this holiday we are based at one hotel throughout. We will explore the wetlands, marshes, hills, steppes and ancient architecture of this attractive region with its varied natural history by means of regular stops in our minibus followed by short easy walks or simply pottering in the richer areas of which there are many. Our pace will be gentle to allow us to examine the birds and other wildlife.

Train travel

It is quite possible to join the tour by train via Eurostar and TGV from St Pancras to reach Arles. The hotel is around a 15 minute taxi from Arles. Tickets can be booked on Eurostar's website at www.eurostar.com You can either book the tour on a "Land Only" basis and book the trains yourself, or we can look at this for you and book the trains for you instead of the flights.



Spoonbill

Weather

The early June the weather should be warm and pleasant, but we need to be prepared for some wet and cool days, so bring a range of clothing.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the cost of this holiday. Picnic lunches will be taken out in the field with breakfasts and dinner at our hotel. Our hotel is located around 10 minutes outside of Arles. All rooms have private facilities. While vegetarianism is much more common and can be accommodated on this tour, it should be noted that the evening meals are likely to have some repetition. The hotel receive all the dietary requirements of the group and serves a set meal based on those requirements.

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, 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.



Roman Arena



Our hotel in The Camargue

