

# France – Wallcreepers and The Camargue

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Marseille/Montpellier; transfer Arles
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- Day 2/4** Daily programme of birding walks and excursions in the Camargue region
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- Day 5** Fly London
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### Departs

November - February

### Focus

Birds and other wildlife with a little culture

### Grading

Grade A. Easy birdwatching walks only

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA30) or Newsletter

### Highlights

- Search for the enigmatic Wallcreeper, with Cranes possible, wintering wildfowl and waders.
- Gentle & varied Mediterranean birding from a relaxed base.
- Enjoy lagoons laden with Flamingoes while raptors may include Hen Harrier and Merlin.
- Visit the spectacular Pont Du Gard.
- Guided by expert Naturetrek ornithologists.



Wallcreeper



Greater Flamingo



Common Cranes



Naturetrek

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## 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.

Provence and the Camargue are usually thought of as spring venues for birdwatchers, however this area of France is also an extremely rewarding winter destination. Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Penduline Tit, Rock Bunting, Alpine Accentor and indeed Wallcreeper are some of the dramatic passerines we can hope to observe during this trip. Wallcreepers drop to lower altitudes in Winter and can be more easily located and with careful and dedicated scanning of the walls of some known wintering sites we hope to find one of these most enigmatic and sought after birds. Up to seven species of warbler, including Cetti's, Sardinian, and Dartford, and six species of bunting, including Rock and Cirl may be found while raptors are well represented and include Bonelli's, Booted and possibly even a Spotted Eagle with one or two come here to winter each year. Flamingoes will be found on the saline lagoons, while wintering waders can include Avocets, Dunlin, Little Stint, and Kentish Plover in good numbers with Glossy Ibis another attraction. Large flocks of noisy Common Crane may be seen as these birds spend the winter here while wintering wildfowl can be enjoyed on the open water. As we travel we shall also keep a look out for the White Horses which make this area famous.

Provence is also rich in architectural and historical features with the name itself reminding us that the region was a Roman provincia and it is extremely rich in Roman antiquities, the spectacular Pont du Gard being one of the best-known. We shall visit the Pont du Gard on this itinerary and while it is fascinating and mightily impressive to appreciate this ancient aqueduct alone, Wallcreeper do regularly spend the winter here too and we shall of course look for them. We shall enjoy this famous site and scour the walls for Wallcreeper while a flock of wintering Rock Sparrow are also regular here.



## 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 Marseille/Montpellier

Our departure today will be on a London flight to Marseille or Montpellier, with the flexibility allowing us to select the best timings for the tour depending on flight schedules.

With this flexibility, we hope to 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.

## Days 2 – 4

## Excursions

We will spend three full days exploring the area and various sites. We shall visit the Camargue itself, sites near the Les Alpilles Mountains, visit the Pont Du Gard and also the stony open habitat of La Crau with other sites along the way fitted in where possible. The

## The Camargue

We shall mostly stay within the 13,117ha nature reserve that encompasses the Etang de Vaccarès and the salt pans south towards the sea. We will be sure to utilise various viewing platforms and parking areas, as well as visiting the nature reserve at Marais de Vigueirat.

The viewing platforms on the banks of the Etangs 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 see Common Cranes, Glossy Ibis, White and Black Stork, Great and Little Egrets and a range of waders while Bearded and Penduline Tits can also be found.

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 a morning exploring the marshes, wet grassland and wooded area. The reserve is an excellent location for a great many wetland and reedbed species. 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. As we travel we shall stop at various sites with other attractions including Purple Swamphen, Slender-billed Gull, plus a selection of waders with often numerous Avocets while Black-necked Grebe winter in large numbers.



White Horses of the Camargue

encounter a hunting Hen Harrier or Merlin, while the large numbers of wintering wildfowl have attracted a couple of Spotted Eagles to the area for many years so these are a possibility.

## Pont du Gard

On one day we shall make the longer drive to visit the great aqueduct known as the Pont du Gard. This aqueduct was constructed by Agrippa in about 19 BC to carry the water of the Eure (from near Uzès), to Nîmes, some 25 miles away. The maximum daily flow was 20,000 cubic metres - 400 litres of water per person.

It is generally regarded as one of the most remarkable feats of Roman engineering. We shall enjoy this most impressive aqueduct and also scan the aqueduct itself for Wallcreepers which regularly stay here for the winter. A flock of Rock Sparrows can also be found here with Blue-Rock Thrush and Black Redstart.

## Les Baux-de-Provence and Les Alpilles

One of our primary sites for Wallcreepers will be on the walls surrounding the striking village of Les Baux. This hilltop village, voted one of the most beautiful villages in the country, is on the edge of the Les Alpilles Mountains and in winter the Wallcreepers descent from their more high altitude and often inaccessible breeding grounds to feed on the walls and boulders here surrounding this impressive village.

We shall walk in a loop around the base of the village watching carefully for any movement and the crimson wing flash of our primary target. Blue-Rock Thrush, Serin and Black Redstart can also be seen here.



Les Baux

Set upon this rocky outcrop is the castle of Les Baux which dominates the medieval village and offers some stunning panoramic views over the Alpilles. Alpine Accentors can sometimes be found around the village and more likely by actually entering the castle and walking around this highest point.

Keeping an eye on the skies here is always wise here as Bonelli's Eagle can often be seen. In nearby woodland Crested Tit Short-toed Treecreeper and Firecrest may be found.

## La Crau

Other habitats are also within easy striking distance of our base and can be combined with the above mentioned sites. One such site is La Crau and this site provides a quite unique habitat in the region. 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 which is very rare elsewhere in France and the country's only population of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Other noteworthy species include Stone Curlew and Southern Grey Shrike while the scrubby areas on the approaches to La Crau often produce Woodlark.

## Day 5

## Arles

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 or to enjoy a quick exploration of the ancient town of Arles.

## Tour Grading

Grade A (easy). 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 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.

## Weather

We can expect weather not dissimilar to the UK in November through to February. We will need to be prepared for some wet and cold conditions and when the wind blows it can be chilly so a range of clothing I recommended and checking the weather shortly before is advised to help packing.



Greater Flamingo

## Food & Accommodation included in the price

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.

## Train Travel

It is quite possible to reach Marseille via the Eurostar and TGV from St Pancras. Tickets can be booked on Eurostar's website at [www.eurostar.com](http://www.eurostar.com). On arrival in France it will be a taxi journey to the hotel located just north of Arles (at an additional expense) or alternatively, depending on timings, you may be able to meet the group at the airport and use Naturetrek's transport to get to the hotel. If you plan to use train travel please state clearly that your booking with us is on a 'land only' basis when you book.

## 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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Marsh Harrier



Coypu