

France – Christmas in Provence

Naturetrek Tour Report

21-28 December 2006

Report compiled by Mark Galliot



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leaders: Mark Galliot (tour leader and naturalist)
Sue Galliot (co-leader)

Tour participants: Maggie Holland
Don Tyzack
Susan Tyzack
Pat Howe
Noor Mather
Mick Best
Dorothy Best
Chas Gardner
Hazel Gardner
Geoff Naylor
Lynne Hallam
Rose Leonard
Simon O'Neill
Pauline Lewis

Day 1

Thursday 21st December

Cold, dry.

The foggy conditions prevalent throughout the UK meant the inevitable late arrival of the flight into Marseille, although in view of many other cancellations everyone was just thankful to have arrived. Mark and Sue, the resident tour guides were waiting at the exit of the baggage reclaim area, so after quick introductions we were on our way down the auto route for the hour and a quarter journey to our hotel, situated on the outskirts of Arles. Having been allocated our rooms, we then assembled for a belated splendid dinner, the first of many we were to enjoy throughout the week.

Day 2

Friday 22nd December

Sunny, cold, windy

We awoke to a cold, clear morning, with the Mistral wind blowing strongly down the Rhone valley, consequently bringing cold air directly from the glaciers further north in the Alps. Unfortunately, this was to accompany us for most of the week and would make birding quite difficult at times, the smaller species being especially hard to locate amongst their shelter in the vast reed beds of the Camargue.

Leaving the hotel, we skirted Arles, before stopping to inspect the lagoons either side of the road at Mas d'Agén. Here we saw our first typical Camargue wetland birds, including Cattle, Little, and Great White Egrets, Bewick's Swans, Gadwall, Shoveler, and two Spoonbills, the latter increasingly wintering here in the last few years. Moving on to the observation tower at Mas Neuf, Hen & Marsh Harrier, Water Rail, Tree Sparrow, and Cetti's Warbler were all added to the list, while we also had good close views of Water Pipit. Reaching the edge of the huge

Étang de Vaccarés we then stopped in a lay-by and walked back a short distance to observe a small flotilla of Black-necked Grebes that were swimming and diving close to the shore.

Unfortunately it seems that it is not safe to leave vehicles unattended anywhere nowadays, even for a very short time, as when we returned to the mini-buses we were shocked to find that the windows had been broken and that many of us had had our rucksacks with some valuables and cash stolen. Obviously this was not the start to the holiday that we had expected, but after making various phone calls, and waiting in vain for the local police to arrive, we drove to the nearest station at Salin-de-Giraud. The rest of the afternoon was then spent filling out the incident reports and itemising everything that had been stolen for insurance purposes.

We were then able to return the hotel, arriving as it was getting dark. Mark and Sue dropped everyone off, and then immediately went back out again as they needed to try and get the three broken windows replaced. Because of the impending Christmas holiday, this proved impossible, but thankfully with the help of Madame Duclos at the hotel, they were able to arrange to pick up two replacement buses the next morning at Marseille Airport

Day 3

Saturday 23rd December

Sunny, cold, windy

To save time, Mark and Sue left early before breakfast for the cold drive to Marseille, where they exchanged the buses and immediately returned to pick up the rest of the group at the hotel. We had to go into Arles to withdraw more funds, stock up on picnic supplies, and replace some essential items, so it was decided to change the itinerary around and see the extensive roman remains today, rather than later in the week. As half of the group preferred to stay there for the whole day, Mark arranged to meet the birders after lunch for a trip into the Crau, while Sue stayed with the remainder.

The Crau is an area of extensive stony desert, the only area of its kind in Europe outside of Spain, and was formed when the Durance River once flowed this way depositing glacial deposits, before it changed course to enter the Rhone further north. It is a very large area, being home to a specialist avifauna, but access is difficult and restricted to certain areas such as the Peau de Meau, where a permit is necessary to visit the reserve. On the way we stopped to view the Étang des Aulnes, where birds seen were Marsh Harrier, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Green Sandpiper, Red-crested Pochard, many Meadow Pipits, Reed Bunting and amazingly a single Swallow hawking over the lake for insects.

Moving on to Peau de Meau, a small flock of Cranes passed over en-route, their distinctive calls very recognisable. At the reserve itself, and in line with numerous previous bird trip reports, it was soon very apparent that the huge expanse of area to search made it extremely difficult to locate the so-called target species. Presumably they are still to be found here somewhere? As recompense though, we did enjoy a dashing male Hen Harrier and the magnificent sight of thirty seven White Storks returning to their roosting site towards the west.

Day 4

Sunday 24th December

Sunny, cold, windy

A full day in the Camargue today spending the morning at La Capalière visitor centre, where there is a 1.5km trail with many hides and viewing platforms which overlook lagoons and reed beds. Various ducks and egrets were seen, but the cutting wind was keeping the reed dwelling birds out of sight, although we firstly heard and then had fleeting glimpses of both Penduline Tit and Fan-tailed Warbler. The highlights here at this time were the mammals, with a large family party of Wild Boar (complete with youngsters) passing just in front of one of the hides, and very close views of Coypu, in one spot one very obliging individual eating its reed stem lunch right next to the path.

After our own picnic lunch we continued skirting the huge Étang de Vaccarès, stopping at appropriate places to scan for birds noting Great-crested, Little and more Black-necked Grebes, Shelduck, a single Sandwich Tern and at a distance our first sightings of Greater Flamingo, their pink colour shimmering in the sunshine. We then took the rather rough track that leads through the salt marshes along the Digue à la mer towards the Phare de la Gacholle, a lighthouse which towers over the desolate landscape here. Birds seen were more Flamingos (much closer), Ringed Plover, Redshank, Curlew, Common Sandpiper, Grey Plover, and a large mixed flock of Little Stint and Dunlin.

Our last visit was to a spot that Mark had been reliably informed was a roosting site for an immature Greater Spotted Eagle, which has over-wintered here for the last few years. With the light fading, we were treated to three flights of Greylag Geese passing over on their way to roost, but then great excitement as an eagle came over the hedge in the distance. Instead of flying towards us though, it veered off to the left over another hedge, thankfully giving us glimpses of the diagnostic white patches on the upper wings, before it disappeared. A fitting end to a very good day in the field.

Day 5

Monday 25th December

Sunny, cold, very windy

Yet another cold sunny day as we left the hotel and headed for Les Alpilles, a range of limestone hills that rise up sharply to the north-east of Arles, with a short stop en-route at a site in the Crau where Richard's Pipits are known to winter. Unfortunately today there were only flocks of Meadow Pipit, White wagtail and Skylark, although we did see three Red Kites circling in the distance, and a Red Squirrel running across the road in front of us.

As we neared Les Alpilles, we marvelled at the chateau and village of Les-Baux-de-Provence perched spectacularly on an impressive slab of rock, with cliffs falling away steeply on all sides. We then walked around the base of these cliffs past a statue of the Virgin Mary, noting Crested Tit, Dartford Warbler and two or three Blue Rock Thrush, but had perhaps only a fleeting distant view of our main target, the elusive Wallcreeper. It was very cold in the shade of the cliffs, with the wind now stronger than ever, so Mark decided that we would have more chance on the other side of the valley in direct sunlight, and also in the lee of the rocks there. Almost immediately after we had stopped there were cries of Wallcreeper, with the whole group having good long views of a bird directly above us on the cliff face as we ate our picnic lunch.

The afternoon was spent either looking around the old medieval village itself, with the added bonus of a dozen Alpine Accentors in residence around the car park area, or some people preferred to walk to the top of the ridge

in search of raptors. Apart from the wonderful views northward towards Mont Ventoux, the only highlight there was a pair of Ravens who seemed to be rather enjoying the brisk wind. After reassembling at Les Baux, we then made our last stop just outside the village at a known Eagle Owl site, but once again the howling wind and cold temperature meant that the owls decided to stay tucked away inside their warm rocky roosts within the cliff.

Arriving back at the hotel we were able to savour a delicious French version of Christmas dinner in front of a roaring log fire. We started with “foie gras”, followed by roast capon, finished off with a huge home made chocolate “Buche de Noel” (Christmas log).

Day 6

Tuesday 26th December

Sunny, cold, windy at first

After breakfast we headed back across the Rhone into the Camargue, parking at the Mas du Rousty information centre and taking the trail that leads into the marshes there. Raptors were frequent with Sparrow Hawk, Merlin, Hen & Marsh Harrier, Buzzard, and Booted Eagle all attracted by the numerous water birds and flocks of small birds. Other notable species here were Corn Bunting, Snipe, Penduline Tit (heard), and both Sardinian and Moustached Warbler, the latter unfortunately only seen by two of the party.

Leaving this site we had a café lunch in the evocative and very photogenic walled medieval town of Aigues Mortes, totally surrounded by marshes, and while half of the group chose to enjoy the sights there, Mark took the others out to the extensive reed-beds of the Marais de Charnier. Here both Bewick’s and Mute Swan could be identified, but the majority of the many water fowl were just too distant for a positive identification, although we did have a good view of a Kingfisher. The highlight though was an immature Long-legged Buzzard, yet another individual bird that regularly winters here in search of the abundant prey available.

Rejoining the rest of the group, we then made our way to the coast and Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer, an attractive small resort on the Mediterranean Sea. Since lunch the northerly wind that had plagued us all week had at last abated, giving us slightly better conditions for sea watching, a few Gannet, and two small rafts of Razorbills being spotted in the scopes. At the harbour we were entertained by numerous Sandwich Terns, who showed us their considerable diving skills as they caught many small fish, while in the salt marshes behind the town there were many more Flamingos, Grey-lag Geese, and our only Avocets of the week.

Day 7

Wednesday 27th December

Cold, foggy at first, clearing sunny, mild

We left the hotel in cold but still conditions for the long drive to lofty Mont Ventoux, a western extension of the Alps, and immediately we encountered thick freezing fog. Thankfully as we climbed out of the valley on the other side of Avignon, the fog cleared leaving us bathed in sunshine with the summit of the mountain rising impressively to the north. On the way up we stopped for a short walk in the extensive pine woods, sighting Goldcrest, Siskin, and Short-toed Treecreeper, while also hearing Coal Tit calling to each other in the treetops.

Continuing on up, we were unable to reach the summit as the barrier was across the road; surprising really as there had not been any snow yet this winter. We pulled in alongside a small water fountain, at the same time scattering a large flock of finches that were obviously quenching their thirst. We quickly realised they were practically all Citril Finches, at least forty, with a few Linnets scattered amongst them. To see this rare and elusive bird in such numbers and at very close quarters was an unexpected bonus and one that was to be appreciated. After admiring the wonderful views, we then descended to eat a very good lunch in the small café at Chalet Reynard, a small ski resort which because of warmer winters is now very rarely used for its original purpose! Here a pair of inquisitive Ravens decided to put in an appearance, along with a single male Crossbill, although we did subsequently see a large flock as we moved further down the mountain.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent in visiting the famous and very photogenic Pont du Gard, a well preserved roman aqueduct spectacularly spanning the rocky gorge of the Gard river to the south west of Avignon. This was actually part of an impressive 50km canal system that carried water from a spring near Uzès to supply the roman city of Nimes. Here before returning to the hotel for the last time, we were also able to enjoy the many Crag Martins that obviously roost in the nooks and crannies of the old structure.

Day 8

Thursday 28th December

Sunny, mild

We awoke to a crisp sunny morning, ate an early breakfast, made our farewells to Monsieur and Madame, before negotiating the Arles ring road for the last time on the drive to the airport. After an uneventful journey we arrived nice and early, Mark and Sue dropping everyone off at the entrance to the departure lounge, before taking the minibuses to the car hire point and returning to wish the group “bon voyage”. Despite our unfortunate problems on the first day and the unusually cold windy weather it had been a very successful week with a long list of bird species, with wonderful scenery, a superb architectural heritage, and many other cultural and culinary delights.

Species lists

Birds

Legend: H = heard but not seen; x = more than ten birds seen (counting not thought worthwhile)
 few = a few (one to ten) birds seen; imm = an immature bird

Common name	Scientific name	April 2006						Total
		22	23	24	25	26	27	
Great-crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	x	few	few		few		x
Black-necked Grebe	<i>P. nigricolis</i>	30+		x				40+
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	few	few	few		few	2	x
Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					few		
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	few	few	few		few	1	x
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	x	x	x	few	x		x
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	x	x	x		x	few	x
Great White Egret	<i>E. alba</i>	few	few	x		x	few	x
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	few	few	x		x	few	x
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		37	few				40+
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	2						2
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	30+		40+		20+		x
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>	few		few		20+		x
Mute Swan	<i>C. olor</i>	3		few		few		few
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			50+		3		50+
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2		40+		few		x
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	few	x		x	few	x
Gadwall	<i>A. strepera</i>	few						few
Shoveler	<i>A. clypeata</i>	few		few		few		few
Teal	<i>A. crecca</i>			60+				x
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		4					
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		20+					20+
Tufted Duck	<i>A. fuligula</i>			x				x
Greater Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila clanga</i>			1 imm				1
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>					1		1
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	few	2	few	few	few	1	x
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>B. rufinus</i>					1 imm		1
Sparrow Hawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1		1		2
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				3			3
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1 Fem	1 Male	1		2		5
Marsh Harrier	<i>C. aeruginosus</i>	few	2	few		few	1	x
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	1	few	2	few		few
Merlin	<i>F. columbarius</i>					1		1
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			1				1
Crane	<i>Megalornis grus</i>		4					4
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	H		1		1		3
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	few	few	few		few		few
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	100+	20+	few		50+		x
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	few		few	few	few	2	x
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			6				6
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			3		few		few
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					4		4
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			100+		20+		x
Little Stint	<i>C. minima</i>			30+				30+

Common name	Scientific name	April 2006						Total
		22	23	24	25	26	27	
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			few		few		few
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			few				few
Green Sandpiper	<i>T. ochropus</i>		1	3				4
Common Sandpiper	<i>T. hypoleucos</i>			2		1		3
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1		3		3+		few
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	x	x	x	few	x	few	x
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>L. fuscus</i>			1				1
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>L. cachinans</i>	x	x	x	few	x	few	x
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>			2		20+		20+
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>					6+		6+
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	few	few	few	x	x	x	x
Wood Pigeon	<i>C. oenas</i>						2	2
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2		few	few		few
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1		1		1		3
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H	1	H				3
Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1					1
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		few	few		few		few
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		1					1
Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				few		x	x
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	few		few		H		x
Meadow Pipit	<i>A. pratensis</i>	few	x	x	x	few		x
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	few	few		few	few	few	x
Grey Wagtail	<i>M. cinerea</i>		1			H		2
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	few	few	few	H	few	few	x
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			1				1
Alpine Accentor	<i>P. collaris</i>				12			12
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	few	few	few	few	few	few	x
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochurus</i>	few	2		few	few	2	x
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	3	2	few	1	few		x
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				6			6
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1	1	2	2		few
Song Thrush	<i>T. philomelos</i>				1		1	2
Fan-tailed warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			2				2
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	3		2		H		6
Moustached Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus melanopogon</i>					2		2
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>				1			1
Blackcap	<i>S. atricapilla</i>		1 Fem	H	1		H	few
Sardinian Warbler	<i>S. melanocephala</i>	few	H	few	few	2		x
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	3	1	few		1		few
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>						few	few
Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>			few		few		few
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>						3	3
Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>				few		few	few
Blue Tit	<i>P. caeruleus</i>		few		few	few	few	x
Great Tit	<i>P. major</i>	few	few		few	few	few	x
Coal Tit	<i>P. ater</i>						H	few
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>						1	1
Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>				2			2
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	few	few	x	few	x	x	x
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>						1	1
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	few	few	few	few	few	few	x
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	few	few	few	few	few	few	x
Raven	<i>C. corax</i>				2		2	4

Common name	Scientific name	April 2006						Total
		22	23	24	25	26	27	
Carrion Crow	<i>C. corone</i>	x	x	x	few	x	few	x
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	few				few		few
House Sparrow	<i>P. domesticus</i>	x	x	x	few	x	few	x
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	few	x	x	few	x	few	x
Citril Finch	<i>Serinus citrinella</i>						40+	40+
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>						few	few
Greenfinch	<i>C. chloris</i>				few			few
Goldfinch	<i>C. carduelis</i>	2		3	few	3		few
Linnet	<i>Acanthus cannabina</i>		few				few	few
Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>						few	few
Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	x				x		x
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirrus</i>		2					2
Yellowhammer	<i>E. citrinella</i>	few						few
Reed Bunting	<i>E. schoeniclus</i>		1	few		few		few