

Provence at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 27 December 2007

Report compiled by Sinclair Dunnett



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: Kathleen & Sinclair Dunnett

Participants: Joanna Chapman
Dave Cording
Marjorie Cording
John Geeson
Judy Geeson
Betty Gillett
Doug Gillett
Keith Kelsall
Peter Kelsall
Hilary Raeburn
Barbara Sharp
Ann Sime
Cherie Wilcox
Jane Wilde
Chris Yates
Mick Yates

Day 0

Wednesday 19th December

The tour escorts arrived in Arles at the Hotel des Granges. The only other guest was a Dutch-Irish viniculturalist who had a 20-hectare vineyard, producing 100,000 bottles per annum, or 2,000 bottles per acre - I would never have guessed so much!

Day 1

Thursday 20th December

Tour escorts picked up the second vehicle at Marignane Airport and met the flight which was running about 35 mins late. We reached the hotel at 2200 hrs, where our landlady, Marie-Claire Dumas, put on a fine cold buffet.

Day 2

Friday 21st December

Departed hotel 0930 and went by a supermarket so clients could pick up anything they wished.....then on to the Camargue and Étang des Vaccarès. We had our picnic lunch as usual at the SNPN centre at la Capelière. One notable observation was of the usually skulking Water Rail.

While getting the permits for la Capelière, Kathleen noticed another SNPN visitor facility further south at Badon. This turned out to be a highlight, with three hides, and I'm puzzled it didn't seem to have been visited on this trip before. One in particular gave spectacular views of a wide variety of water birds, including a fine parade of almost thirty Greater Flamingos. It was unfortunate that the seats and slots of this hide seemed to have been designed by the same person as the medieval punishment device known as the Cell of Little Ease.

An oddity of the Badon Reserve is that photography is forbidden.

Day 3

Saturday 22nd December

Weather: This was our only damp day; the showers were light but it was raw.

We departed at 0900 for the hills known as Les Alpilles topped by the famous village of Les Baux-de-Provence. Various small passerines were seen till two clients picked up a Wallcreeper. We moved to where we could see more of the cliff, where a female Blue Rock Thrush caught my eye. By now the group was quite widely dispersed and it took some minutes to regroup. The majority of the group wanted a break from the raw weather and we took them up to Les Baux while several remained lower and got excellent views of Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*. Les Baux is a very cutesy medieval village with steep streets and, at this time of year, a Christmas tableau. There were two very tame Alpine Accentors by the church.

This clearly was not a day for picnicking and we found L'Aiglons did an excellent lunch with speedy service. After lunch we spent twenty fruitless minutes looking for Rock Sparrow round the north side of Les Baux. We then left four clients to do the wooded and open-ground hike to La Caume.

The rest of the group had elected to go to Arles, we took them there in both cars and Kathleen picked them up later in the day in a shuttle operation while I went back to La Caume for the hikers, who had seen various small birds plus Jay and Raven. It had been damp but very clear with fine views. On the return journey we stopped at the usual rumoured spot for Eagle Owl but a compressor or other piece of equipment obviated any chance of hearing a call.

Day 4

Sunday 23rd December

Left the hotel at 0900 for Mont Ventoux. A little north of Carpentras we emerged from fog into bright sunshine with the top of the mountain brilliant white from the previous day's precipitation. We had lunch in the woods three-quarters way up the slope in very pleasant conditions. Few birds but Joanna Chapman found a Stinking Hellebore *Helleborus foetidus*.

We continued to Chateau Reynard where there is a large parking area. Here we realised a binocular had been left at the lunch spot. There was some confusion at Chateau Reynard about how far up the road was open - it presumably suits them business-wise to indicate the road may be hazardous above:

"Try not the Pass!" the old man said:
"Dark lowers the tempest overhead,
The roaring torrent is deep and wide!
And loud that clarion voice replied,
Montifringilla nivalis!

"Beware the pine-tree's withered branch!
Beware the awful avalanche!"
This was the peasant's last Good-night,
A voice replied, far up the height,
Prunella collaris!

In the event we recovered the binocular and got everyone ferried a couple of miles past the "Chateau". A short climb further on a score each of Snow Finch and Alpine Accentor were observed under excellent conditions.

Day 5

Monday 24th December

We breakfasted today an hour earlier at 0700 and were away by 0800, to be delayed by an overturned truck and no deviation signage through Arles. All features today were east of Arles. Lots of the usual water birds at the Étang des Aulnes. On to the Peau de Meau Reserve in La Crau 0945-1230. Part of group got two Little Bustard, and we all saw several Brown Hare. Back at the parking spot a client had his glass on a perched Peregrine; Sparrowhawk and Red Kite were also seen.

Picnic lunch back at Étang des Aulnes. Then east to airfield at Eyguirères where, after a short walk, we had excellent views of four Little Bustard on the ground and in flight.

We turned south and crossed the Rhône by ferry near Port Saint-Louis. We waited and walked south of Badon at a spot where the 2006 group had seen a Spotted Eagle. No eagle but nice light on the Camargue Bulls.

Day 6

Tuesday 25th December

Back to our old departure time of 0900, we drove west and made a short stop on request in Saint Gilles just over canal, they returned to the canal and oyster sellers and we then continued SWW to the reed beds by the Étang du Charnier for well over an hour. Here both Bearded and Penduline Tits were observed plus a number of raptors including Booted Eagle, new for this trip. During the journey we also had close views of a pair of White Stork pottering about on their nest.

We were at Aigues Mortes from 1245 to 1515hrs, having our Christmas lunch in brilliant sunshine below the south wall of this fully-walled city and leaving almost an hour to explore beyond the walls.

Then on to Saintes Marie de la Mer and its complex of fresh-water étangs and lagoons of various degrees of brackishness. We saw large numbers of Flamingo, Cormorant, plus various waterfowl and waders, including (as the light faded) a Marsh Sandpiper....new for this trip.

Along with the day to Mont Ventoux, this was probably the finest day of our trip weather-wise and also rich in wildlife. Back to the Hotel des Granges for Christmas dinner at 2000hrs.

Day 7

Wednesday 26th December

Departure today at 0930, a day primarily of cultural features:

Nîmes of the arena and Square House, 1030-1215; the traffic of Nîmes becomes ever more horrendous - or 'affreux', in our landlady's vivid expression;

Pont de Gard 1300-1500. This was our picnic spot; a light mistral had sprung up, and coffee might have gone down better for once than 'vin de table'. Crag Martin was new for the trip; Avignon 1530-1730.

Day 8

Thursday 27th December

We were at Marignane in good time for the flight

Summary: The weather was excellent for outdoor activities and wildlife viewing for most of the trip. The week before the trip had seen sharp frost in much of France, including Provence. During the trip itself temperature was generally from the 30s to high 40s Fahrenheit, dry, sunny & calm except for one damp day and one with Mistral.

Most target birds for the trip were observed with the exception of Citril Finch and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. At least two new species were added: Booted Eagle and Marsh Sandpiper. See the checklist for birds (and the few mammals) seen day-by-day. The group was fortunate in containing several members who were also knowledgeable of the southern European flora and fauna and were keen to share their knowledge.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.