

# The Camargue in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 19 May 2007

---



White Horses by Ian Nicholson



Les Alpilles by Ian Nicholson



Greater Flamingos by Chris Gomersall

Report compiled by Ian Nicholson



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour Leaders: Chris Gomersall  
Ian Nicholson

Participants: Elsie Bascombe  
Nick Boyes  
Geoff Briggs  
Phil Briggs  
Dorothy Cheyne  
Brian Day  
Margaret Day  
Peter Ekin-Wood  
Joan Goffin  
Celia Graham  
Neil Manthorpe  
Lynn Rix  
Frances Spracklen  
Samantha Timms

## Day 1

## Tuesday 15th May

With the exception of Brian and Margaret, who had arranged to meet us in France, the whole group arrived at Gatwick Airport in time for our 11.15am flight to Montpellier. The flight was on time, and on the approach to Montpellier Airport some of the party saw their first flamingos – a bird which was to become very familiar over the next few days.

Once the minibuses had been arranged and the luggage safely stowed, we headed west towards the Camargue, passing many lakes with feeding flamingos along the way. The first stop was at the nature reserve/visitor centre at the Etang de Scamandre, where we had arranged to meet up with Brian and Margaret, who had travelled to the area a few days previously in their own motor caravan, and were including this tour in an extended trip to France.

Having met Brian and Margaret as planned, we stopped a short distance away alongside the road which runs between the Etang du Charnier and the adjacent canal. It was immediately clear that a considerable number of water birds were present on the lake, and Grey, Purple and Squacco Herons were quickly sighted, along with Little, Cattle and Great White Egrets. At least 10 Whiskered Terns and four Black Terns were fishing over the lake, and these were joined occasionally by a couple of Common Terns. Three Marsh Harriers were hunting over the reed beds beyond the lake. Many Black-winged Stilts waded along the margins of the reed beds and Reed Warblers were heard and occasionally seen amongst the dense reeds. A little further along the lakeshore we had a further brief stop where a small party of Red-crested Pochard were feeding close to the road. A Kingfisher was seen along the canal, and a Turtle Dove was in roadside bushes.

Eventually we decided to continue towards our hotel at Arles, stopping on the way to view and photograph a White Stork's nest on an old building at the roadside. One of the adults was at the nest, which contained two well grown chicks.

On the drive to the hotel, several small flocks of Bee-eaters were seen, as were good numbers of Black Kites and some large flocks of Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls. On arrival at the hotel, rooms were quickly allocated and we later enjoyed the first of the excellent dinners prepared by our hostess Marie-Claire.

## Day 2

Wednesday 16th May

The plan today was to drive along the western side of the Camargue, stopping at various points along the way. After leaving the busy autoroute just outside Arles, we drove through the quiet lanes towards our first stop at Mas d'Agon. Stopping briefly at several points, we had good views of Mediterranean Gulls and Black-winged Stilts, and also flight views of Bee-eaters and Black Kites. Some of the party had a brief view of a Roller which flew across the road above the leading minibus, so unfortunately only Dorothy in the first bus was unable to see it, whilst those in the second bus were more fortunate.

On arriving at Mas d'Agon, it was immediately obvious that things had changed since last year. Where there was previously a vast area of open shallow water with many reed beds, with a road running through the middle, there was now dry land with Crested Larks running around! This happens from time to time, and the area is normally fairly dry by late summer/early autumn, but it is unusual for it to be dry so early in the year. However, the area still proved to be productive, with all the herons and egrets seen yesterday being seen overhead, in addition to Night Heron. We had excellent views of a Squacco Heron which remained virtually stationary for the duration of our visit. For a time a feral pigeon stood close to it, giving an indication of the small size of this attractive little heron.

There were plenty of Yellow Wagtails in the area, along with Fan-tailed, Reed and Cetti's Warblers and Nightingales, and a female Red-backed Shrike perched in the bushes. The group walked along the road at different speeds, and those in the lead were treated to the sight of two Collared Pratincoles in flight, hawking for insects along with the hundreds of swifts and swallows. A very tame Coypu proved to be a popular subject for the photographers in the party, being seen at very close range, as were a number of frogs in the roadside dyke.

Leaving the Mas d'Agon after about an hour, we drove the short distance to the observation tower at Mas Neuf. From here many of the group were able to photograph some of the famous Camargue horses in the field opposite, and good views were obtained of Nightingale and Cetti's Warbler.

We then continued to the Parc Ornithologique at Pont de Gau. This began life as a hospital for injured birds, and still has aviaries containing birds which have not recovered sufficiently to be returned to the wild. The Parc has expanded over the years, and now includes large areas of reed bed and open water which attract huge numbers of wild birds. The flocks of feeding flamingos were extremely popular with several keen photographers, as was the mixed heron colony which contained Grey and Night Herons, Little and Cattle Egrets and, surprisingly, a pair of Sacred Ibis. Phil had seen one of these birds in flight shortly after arriving at the Parc, and it was assumed to have been an escape from captivity. However, on enquiring at the visitor centre we were informed that they have been breeding in the Camargue area since 1976, and there are now about 20 pairs, and

many more in France as a whole. They are apparently all descended from a pair which escaped many years ago, and the species has been on the French equivalent of Category C of the national list for some time.

A large, and rapidly expanding, colony of Mediterranean Gulls has become established on an island in one of the lakes, and large numbers of Black-winged Stilts waded in the shallow water. Unfortunately we were unable to locate any of the small number of Moustached Warblers which breed in the Parc, which was something of a disappointment.

We had considered having our picnic lunch at the Parc Ornithologique, but it is very popular with parties of local school children and would have been very crowded and noisy, so we decided to move on to an area just outside the seaside town of Stes Maries de la Mer where we could have lunch whilst looking out over the coastal scrub and saline lagoons. Lunch, consisting of local meats, cheese and salad, accompanied by wine, orange juice or water and followed by fruit and biscuits, was soon laid out in the back of one of the minibuses, and we spent just over an hour relaxing in the pleasantly warm sunshine. Three Gull-billed terns were a welcome addition to the day's list, and Common and Little Terns also fished in the shallow water. Several Yellow Wagtails were in the sandy, scrubby area immediately in front of us, and these appeared to be closer to the Spanish race than to the Blue-headed form normally found in most of France.

After lunch, we move a short distance along the road to another point from which good views of the lake could be obtained, and from here several Avocets were seen along with a single Slender-billed Gull. A Spoonbill flew overhead and a large colony of Yellow-legged Gulls could be seen distantly on an island in the lagoon.

We then decided to head back towards Arles, with a stop at Mas du Pont de Rousty en route. This was a fairly brief stop, but a Spotted Flycatcher was seen, as was a Red Squirrel. The mosquitoes were particularly aggressive at this location, and as time was getting late, an early dinner having been requested this evening, the decision was made to leave.

The reason for the early dinner was to allow us to have an evening trip to a fairly reliable location for Eagle Owl. On arrival at the site at about 8.15pm we set up telescopes and waited. A few Crag Martins were noted as we waited for an owl to appear. After only about 15 minutes and just as Ian was explaining where an owl had been seen on last year's tour, the bird appeared from precisely that point and flew across the hillside in front of us, before settling on a rock on the cliff face. The whole group then enjoyed good, although fairly distant, views for about 30 minutes when the owl flew away down the far side of the mountain. At one point the owl was mobbed by a Jay, although it really seemed to be taking very little notice.

On arrival back at the hotel, some of the party decided on a drink to round off a successful day, whilst others opted for an early night.

## Day 3

## Thursday 17th May

Today our route would take us along the eastern side of the Camargue, with a view to eventually arriving in the area of the lighthouse at the southern edge of the delta (Phare de Gacholle). We began by taking the same route as yesterday along the back roads around Mas d'Agon. Once again there were large numbers of gulls and egrets in the rice fields, and many Cetti's and Fan-tailed Warblers at the roadside.

At Mas d'Agon itself we were able to obtain distant views of Collared Pratincoles on the ground by the side of the only remaining pool of water, and some of the group also had excellent views of a Night Heron in a tree not far from the roadside. The friendly Coypu was again the subject of many photographs.

Shortly after leaving Mas d'Agon, some of the group had a brief view of two Bearded Tits flying across the road, and soon afterwards a Hoopoe also flew across in front of the vehicles, but was only seen by those in the front seats of the leading minibus. Our route took us along the eastern shore of the Etang de Vaccares, and on the way Ian suddenly realized that the second minibus was no longer visible in his mirrors. On stopping, a radio message was received that the other bus had stopped to look at a Black-necked Grebe close to the shore, so the first bus turned round to return. A short distance back along the road we came across eight of these attractive grebes – a very late sighting, as they are normally only a winter visitor and passage migrant in the Camargue.

After a brief “comfort” stop at La Capelliere, where we would return later for lunch, we carried on towards Marais de Grenouillet. Shortly before the viewing platform at this location, we rounded a slight bend to find a Black Kite and a Buzzard involved in a dispute over a snake which the kite had caught. Both birds flew off when we appeared, but as we followed them with our binoculars an eagle appeared from behind a nearby wood, which was identified as a Short-toed. This gave very good views as it soared and circled in the wind, which had by this time freshened considerably. Also at this location we had close views of Bee-eaters, and we suspected that they were breeding in the banks of a small river, although this was not confirmed.

We carried on to the viewing platform, which overlooked a large area of shallow water and marshes. There were many egrets and herons, as well as good numbers of Whiskered, Black and Common Terns and three Spoonbills. Amongst the numerous Mallards were a pair of Gadwall, but there was no sign of any Garganey in what appeared to be an ideal habitat for them. A further Short-toed Eagle, very different in appearance from the one seen earlier, was watched for some time perching in a tree.

Everyone was now becoming hungry, so we returned to the La Capelliere nature reserve for a walk round the nature trail, followed by lunch. Along the trail we found several Blackcaps, a Sardinian Warbler and a few Melodious Warblers, but by now the breeze was even stronger so all the birds were keeping fairly low in the bushes.

After lunch we headed south towards the coast and set out driving along the rough track which leads towards the lighthouse. Although we stopped at a couple of places, the wind was now making things very difficult and the only birds seen, apart from flamingos and gulls, were a mixed flock of Ringed and Kentish Plovers. We decided to have an early finish today as some of the group wished to spend some time in Arles, so after a refreshment stop at the café in Villeneuve on the way back, where we saw Hoopoes and Bee-eaters, we headed back towards our base.

Ian dropped off one group in Arles, and then, assisted by Neil, did the shopping for the following day's picnic, and Chris took some of the others bird watching at an area close to the hotel. This produced decent sightings of three Rollers, much to the delight of Geoff and Phil. After collecting the Arles group, we were back at the hotel just in time for the evening meal.

## Day 4

Friday 18th May

The wind had dropped somewhat during the night, but it had returned with a vengeance this morning. The plan was to initially visit Le Crau, an arid stony area which was originally the estuary of the River Durance before it changed its course many years ago. On arrival at the parking area, it was immediately clear that things were going to be made very difficult by the extremely strong wind, but we decided on a walk along the track in any case. We managed to see a Melodious Warbler at the car park as well as a couple of Black Kites and a Buzzard, and along the track some of the group saw a Stone Curlew and a Red-backed Shrike. There were also a number of Crested Larks, and a Blackbird in what seemed totally unsuitable habitat. Conditions really were very difficult, it being impossible to keep a tripod steady – in fact it was quite difficult to even stand still in the wind – so we cut the visit short and returned to the car park. This turned out to be an excellent decision, as immediately on returning, two Rollers were sighted in the field adjacent to the car park, and two White Storks flew overhead.

We had a brief stop at the Eyguieres airfield to try to see the Little Bustards for which the site is known, but the wind was making it impossible, so we carried on towards Les Alpilles (a range of limestone hills to the north of the Camargue). After a stop for drinks at the attractive village of Mouries, we pressed on into the hills and stopped at the car park at La Caume where there is a good picnic area which we made use of. Crested Tits were calling around us as we prepared lunch and Phil and Ian heard a Firecrest, but unfortunately it was not seen.

After the usual substantial lunch we walked through the woods, and some of the group decided to ascend a fairly steep slope to a plateau which provides good views in all directions. Unfortunately very few birds of prey were on the wing today, other than a few Kestrels and a solitary Buzzard, but we were able to add Raven and Alpine Swift to the week's list. There were also some interesting butterflies seen along the way, including Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Southern White Admiral, Southern Marbled White and Provence Chalk Hill Blue.

On the way back to the hotel we passed by the ancient village of Les Baux which was completely overrun with tourists, and stopped at the Eagle Owl site. We hoped to find Subalpine Warbler here, but the only warblers positively identified were Sardinian.

## Day 5

Saturday 19th May

The early flight time meant that no outing was possible today, and in fact a very early breakfast had to be arranged before heading off for the airport. Many egrets, flamingos and gulls were seen along the way, and Cetti's and Fan-tailed Warblers could be heard even above the noise of the minibus engine. After refuelling the vehicles the group was back at the airport in plenty of time for the flight home to Gatwick.

## Species lists

### Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	May			
			15	16	17	18
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1		2	
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1			
3	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			8	
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		✓	
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	2
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	
7	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	6+	2	2	
8	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	1			
9	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	6	10+	10+
10	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	1	3	1	
11	Black-crowned Night-heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		3	4	
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	3	1		2
13	Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		1	3	
14	Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>		4+		
15	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	4	3	2	
17	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		1		
18	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	1	4	15+	
19	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			2	
21	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	8	6		
22	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		6+		
23	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			2	
25	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	3	5	
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	1	1
27	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	1	2	5
28	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	2			
29	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			2	
30	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		4	✓	
31	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓	
32	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1	3	2	
33	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		6		
35	Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>				1
36	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>		2	4	
37	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			15+	
38	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			15+	
39	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓	
40	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			1	
41	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularis</i>		1	3	
42	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		1		
43	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May			
			15	16	17	18
46	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
47	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>		1		
48	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>		3		
49	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	8	2	
50	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>		6		
51	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	✓		✓	
52	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	✓	6+	8+	
53	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia "feral"</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	1			
56	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	2	2	2	2
58	Eurasian Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>		1		
59	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>				6+
60	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1		2	
62	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>		1	3	2
64	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		2	3	
65	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			1	
66	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1(H)
67	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		2	2	4
68	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓
69	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		2		
70	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Blue-headed/Spanish Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		✓	✓	
73	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>			1	
75	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			1	1
76	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
79	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>		1		
80	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>			2	1
81	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			4+	
82	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓		✓
83	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>				
84	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			1	
85	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>				1(H)
86	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		1		
87	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			2	
88	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>				✓
89	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	2	
90	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>		1		
91	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1		
92	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓



	Common name	Scientific name	May			
			15	16	17	18
94	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				1
96	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓	✓	
99	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1	4+	
100	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓		✓	
101	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓
102	Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		✓		
103	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		2	1	
104	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>				1

## Butterflies

Green-veined White  
 Speckled Wood (Southern form)  
 Swallowtail  
 Scarce Swallowtail  
 Provence Chalkhill Blue  
 Meadow Brown  
 Spanish Gatekeeper  
 Southern White Admiral  
 Large White  
 Red Admiral

## Mammals

Coypu  
 Rabbit  
 Red Squirrel

## Reptiles & Amphibians

Sand Lizard  
 Common Wall Lizard  
 Green Lizard  
 Stripeless Tree Frog  
 Marsh Frog

## Dragonflies

Scarlet Darter  
 Black-tailed Skimmer