

# The Camargue in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 23 May 2007

---



White Horses by Ian Nicholson



Les Alpilles by Ian Nicholson



Wild Boar by Ian Nicholson

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 Leader: Ian Nicholson

Participants: Wendy Atkin  
Robert Cave  
Valerie Maddams  
Geoff Tweddle  
Bryan Williams  
Denise Williams

## Day 1

**Saturday 19th May**

After something of a delay passing through Passport Control at Montpellier, the group assembled in the Arrivals Hall and met Ian. The minibus was already organized, having been in use by the previous week's group, so it was simply a case of loading the luggage and heading off towards the Camargue. There were plenty of flamingos to be seen along the way to our first stop, which was alongside the canal which runs adjacent to the Etang du Charnier near the village of Gallician. Virtually the first birds that we saw on exiting the vehicle were two White-winged Black Terns which were hunting over the water along with at least 20 Whiskered Terns and four Black Terns. All three marsh terns within the first two minutes birding was not a bad start!

This is always a reliable site for herons and egrets, and today was no exception. By the time we left the area about 40 minutes later we had recorded Grey, Purple, Night and Squacco Herons as well as Little, Cattle and Great White Egrets. Amongst the many gulls feeding on the lake was a single Little Gull, and a female Bearded Tit in the reeds right at the roadside was enjoyed by the group. Two Black-necked Grebes were also slightly unusual for this site.

We drove the short distance to the visitor centre at the Etang du Scamandre where we had our picnic lunch accompanied by the songs of Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers, whilst hundreds of swifts and swallows hawked for insects overhead.

The group were fairly exhausted after a very early start to catch the flight from Gatwick this morning, so it was decided that the best plan was to go to the hotel near Arles, which was to be our base for the next few days, for a siesta. We had a brief stop along the way to view and photograph a White Stork's nest on a roadside building. Although there were two well grown chicks in the nest, the parents were nowhere to be seen.

After a couple of hours rest, we re-assembled and decided on a quick visit to the Mas d'Agon just south of Arles. Unfortunately this was dry this year, unlike previous years when it has been a vast area of shallow water and reedbeds, but nevertheless there were a few birds to be seen. There were plenty of Crested Larks, Cetti's Warblers and Fan-tailed Warblers and a few Yellow Wagtails, and a constant stream of egrets and herons overhead going back and forth to the nearby colony. Three Collared Pratincoles were seen, although the distance and the heat haze made viewing conditions quite difficult. A number of Ringed Plovers were with the pratincoles alongside the only remaining pool of water. On the way back to the hotel a Marsh Harrier was seen. This had been a very long day, and after a delicious evening meal prepared by our hostess Marie Claire, everyone decided on an early night.

## Day 2

Sunday 20th May

Today we planned to cover the eastern side of the Camargue, stopping at Marais de Grenouillet, La Capelliere and any other promising locations. Our route took us via the Mas d'Agon which we visited the previous afternoon, although as we had more time today, we stopped several times along the way when we saw birds in the roadside fields and rice paddies. We had close views of a flock of Mediterranean Gulls and several Black-winged Stilts, and a very close view of a White Stork right by the road. Several Black Kites were seen overhead along with a couple of Buzzards and a male Marsh Harrier.

At Mas d'Agon we saw basically the same species as yesterday, with the addition of three Spoonbills flying in the distance. In the wooded area at the southern end of the road we found a Spotted Flycatcher and a Blackcap, as well as plenty of the very numerous Cetti's Warblers. A very confiding Coypu was photographed by most of the group.

Moving on, we took the minor road along the eastern shore of the Etang de Vaccares, and stopped at the roadside when three Black-necked Grebes were seen. Scanning around the area, we eventually found a total of seven of these very attractive birds along with several Great Crested Grebes. Also in the area was a large feeding flock of flamingos. A little further on, a Roller flew high across the front of the minibus, but unfortunately only Ian and Bryan in the front seats were able to see it.

We stopped at the roadside on the way to the observation tower at Marais de Grenouillet as several Bee-eaters were seen. As is often the case, when you stop to look at something, other birds are seen as well, and this happened here, as a Short-toed Eagle came into site from behind a nearby wood. Several Nightingales were singing from roadside bushes. A few Southern Marbled White butterflies were seen here, and there were good numbers of Lizard Orchids growing in the sandy banks of the small river.

A little further on, the observation tower gave excellent views over the shallow water and marshes, where Whiskered and Black Terns were feeding. There were large numbers of egrets (particularly Little Egrets) and herons here, and a Spoonbill was also seen feeding in the shallows. Some of the group had a good view of a Cetti's Warbler which sang from the top of bush – unusual for this normally skulking species. A Melodious Warbler was heard singing close by, and was seen in a nearby tree and in some low undergrowth.

After about 40 minutes, we decided to move on to La Capelliere, which is a small nature reserve and visitor centre, and which has a picnic area available. It was decided to walk around the nature trail before lunch, which we estimated would take about an hour, but in the event it took considerably longer, mainly because when we looked out from the first hide we saw a Wild Boar wading in the water on the opposite side of the lake. Although these animals are not particularly rare in the area, they do not often show themselves so readily, so this was an opportunity not to be missed. It melted away into the undergrowth, only to reappear in the same place about 10 minutes later. It soon moved back into the trees and was not seen again. Unfortunately Bryan was standing outside the hide on the two occasions that it showed itself and missed it both times! The group was also entertained by some Swallows which were bringing nesting material into the hides and by Coypus in the water very close to the hides.

Whilst eating a slightly belated lunch, we were entertained by a Blackcap, a Melodious Warbler and several Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers, all of which were heard but not seen.

As we had arranged an early evening meal today, we headed back towards Arles, stopping at a roadside café in Villeneuve, where we had excellent views of two Hoopoes carrying food to their nest, and of a number of Bee-eaters. The reason for the early meal was to enable us to go out after dinner to visit a fairly reliable location for Eagle Owl. We arrived in plenty of time, and soon had a superb view of a Short-toed Eagle which flew by at low level. Several Crag Martins were hunting insects over the hillside and a Turtle Dove was singing nearby. A Jay flew past us, and Sardinian Warblers were singing, but there was no sign of the Eagle Owl.

The light was fading fast, and in fact some of the group were observing the Moon and Venus through the telescopes, when Geoff saw an owl flying across the face of the crags just below the skyline. It entered a small cave, and a few minutes later with the rest of the group now watching, it emerged from the cave and perched in full view on the cliff top. Unfortunately this was to be a brief view, as a short time later it flew away from us down the other side of the mountain.

## Day 3

## Monday 21st May

Today we set off along the western side of the Camargue, and again the route took us initially along the roads south of Arles towards Mas d'Agon, which is where the roads along the eastern and western sides of the Etang du Vaccares meet. Just before Mas d'Agon we saw at least three Stonechats on the roadside fence, and we had a brief stop to photograph some Black-winged Stilts close to the road. Whilst photographing the stilts, we heard the distinctive song of a Great Reed Warbler, and soon located it singing high up in some tall reeds. A little further on a Grey Heron was standing in the middle of the road struggling with a snake which it had caught!

We had a short stop at the Mas Neuf observation tower, but that area was very quiet, and then pressed on towards the Parc Ornithologique at Pont du Gau, stopping at the supermarket in Stes Maries de la Mer to top up the picnic supplies. The Parc 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 reedbed and open water which attract huge numbers of wild birds. The flocks of feeding flamingos were extremely popular with several keen photographers in the party, as was the mixed heron colony which contained Grey and Night Herons, Little and Cattle Egrets and, surprisingly, a pair of Sacred Ibis. This species has 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.

After leaving the Parc, we stopped for lunch overlooking the saline lagoons just outside Stes Maries de la Mer, where flamingos and stilts were feeding in the shallows and many Yellow-legged and Mediterranean Gulls were overhead. A little further along the road, a stop at Cacharel produced a Spoonbill and two Avocets in addition to more gulls and terns, and a small number of Shelduck.

On the way back towards Arles, we took the minor road towards the shore of the Etang du Vaccares at Mejanes, where Avocets, Stilts and various egrets fed in a freshwater lake, and many more egrets waded in the edges of the

Etang itself. Sardinian Warblers were in the scrub and a Marsh Harrier and several Black Kites circled overhead. Needless to say, Cetti's and Fan-tailed Warblers were abundant, as they are virtually everywhere in the Camargue. As we had plenty of time, the group paid a brief visit to the ruined abbey at Montmajour, where a Buzzard was seen, before heading back to the hotel for our evening meal.

## Day 4

**Tuesday 22nd May**

The last full day of the tour was to be divided between the stony plain at Le Crau and the limestone hills of Les Alpilles. The weather was very hot today – well over 30 degrees even in the morning - and the heat haze at Le Crau made viewing difficult, but we had good views of a pair of Stone Curlews and of a Short-toed Eagle. In addition, there were many Crested Larks and several Tawny Pipits, and a very handsome Southern Grey Shrike which performed very well by sitting on top of several low bushes. Back at the car park, a Melodious Warbler gave very close views indeed and a Hoopoe was seen in a tree overlooking the road. Shortly after leaving the car park, a Roller was seen in the top of a small dead tree, and everyone was at last able to get good views of this species which the party had been hoping to see throughout the tour. A little further on, a very pale Short-toed Eagle was seen, initially in flight and then perching on an electricity pylon.

After a stop in the town of St Martin le Crau for supplies, we drove to the airfield at Eyguieres in the hope of finding some of the Little Bustards which inhabit the area, but the heat haze made things very difficult and we were unsuccessful. The decision was made to go into Les Alpilles where it was hoped that the temperature would be lower.

We parked at the picnic area at La Caume, which is home to many Crested Tits, and after a leisurely lunch, relatively free of mosquitoes today, we set off to walk up the road towards the radar station on the hill top. Along the way we heard, but failed to see, Firecrests but were able to add Raven to the day's list. We also had fleeting views of several Sardinian and Spectacled Warblers, which were reluctant to show themselves on such a hot day. Unfortunately very few birds were active in the high temperature, the only raptors seen around the hill top being Black Kites and Kestrels. However, on the way down, Robert and Ian had a brief sighting of a Peregrine before it disappeared behind pine trees. On the lower slopes of the hills, just above the picnic area, Geoff found a Short-toed Treecreeper.

In view of the heat, we decided upon an early finish to the day's bird watching, and on arrival back at the hotel several of the group had a cooling dip in the swimming pool before enjoying the final evening meal of the tour.

## Day 5

**Wednesday 23rd May**

In order to check in on time for the flight home from Montpellier we had to be on the road by about 11.30am. The group decided that they would like to spend the available time looking around the historic town of Arles, so the whole party arrived in town just before 9.00am. Ian later returned to the hotel to collect the luggage, and then picked up the rest of the group for the journey to the airport. In the park in the centre of town several Black Redstarts, Blackcaps and a Serin had been seen.

After an uneventful journey to the airport and flight back to Gatwick, the group said their goodbyes and continued their onward journeys home.

## Species lists

### Birds

Common name	Scientific name	May				
		19	20	21	22	23
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	3	✓			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1				
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	2	7			
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	6+	10+	✓		
Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	3	1			
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	1	2	1		
Black-crowned Night-heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	2	5	✓		
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	3	3			
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		3	1		
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	1				
Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>			6+		
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			5		
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	3		✓		✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			1		
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	2		✓		
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			10+		
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		2		2	
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1	1	2		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	1	1	4	
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	2	3	1	1
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		1	2		
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			1		
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			5		
Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>				2	
Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	3				
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	10+	10+			
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1				
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1	4	2		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Little Gull	<i>Larus minutus</i>	1				
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	3	1	✓		

Common name	Scientific name	May				
		19	20	21	22	23
Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	2		2		
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	20+	10+			
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	6	✓			
White-winged Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>	2				
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia "feral"</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	1	1			
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		1	1		
Eurasian Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>		1			
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarpis melba</i>				4	
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	4	10+	✓	✓	
Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>		1	1	1	
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1(H)	2	1	2	
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				1(H)	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1(H)	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	4	✓	✓	✓	
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2	✓	✓	
Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		5+			
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>				2	
Blue-headed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	2	2	2		
Spanish Yellow-wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>			4		
Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>					3
Blue Rock-thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1(H)		1(H)	
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>			3		
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1			
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	6+	✓	✓		
Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>	1(H)		1		
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		1	3+	2	
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓		✓	1
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1(H)	2	✓	
Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>				10+	
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		1			
Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>	1				
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		4			
Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>				15+	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		2			
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				1	
Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				1	
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>				1	
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1			

Common name	Scientific name	May				
		19	20	21	22	23
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				4	
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓		✓		
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓		✓	
Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>					1
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			2	2	
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		1	1		
Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>				1	

## Butterflies

Speckled Wood (Southern Form)  
 Swallowtail  
 Scarce Swallowtail  
 Provence Chalkhill Blue  
 Meadow Brown  
 Spanish Gatekeeper  
 Southern White Admiral  
 Small White  
 Red Admiral  
 Small Tortoiseshell

## Mammals

Coypu  
 Rabbit  
 Brown Rat  
 Wild Boar  
 Pipistrelle Bat

## Reptiles & Amphibians

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

## Dragonflies

Scarlet Darter  
 Black-tailed Skimmer

## Orchids

Lizard Orchid