

The Camargue in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 – 10 May 2015



Greater Flamingo



Little Egret with chicks



Black-crowned Night Heron



Red Fox

Report & Images compiled by Ian Nicholson



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 And 15 Naturetrek clients

Tour Summary

This short holiday in the Camargue region of France gave a good insight into the wildlife to be found in the varied habitats within easy reach of our base near Arles. The marshes and reed beds of the Camargue itself, along with the stony arid landscape of La Crau and the limestone hills of Les Alpilles, not to mention the extensive salt pans and lagoons, are home to a remarkable variety of species including birds, dragonflies, butterflies and plants. It is an excellent area for a first experience of an overseas wildlife watching holiday.

Day 1

Wednesday 6th May

Eleven of the group, including the two leaders, assembled at Gatwick for the short flight to Montpellier Airport, where we met four more participants; the remaining two meeting us at the hotel the following morning. Our flight was more or less on time, and with the minibuses organized we were quickly on our way to our hotel, located in the countryside north of Arles. On the way we saw several small flocks of flamingoes, along with many Glossy Ibises, which are becoming more common in the Camargue every year, as well as Cattle and Little Egrets, Black Kites and a Common Buzzard.

Once the rooms had been allocated, some of the group went birding along the track adjacent to the hotel. Andy found two Rollers which, very surprisingly, turned out to be the only sightings of this species in the whole tour. A Melodious Warbler was also a good find, amongst the numerous Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers. After a drink on the terrace and a discussion of our plans for the next few days, we enjoyed an excellent dinner and most of the group retired early following a long day travelling.

Day 2

Thursday 7th May

As we were finishing breakfast the final two members of the group arrived. Our plan today was to head down the western side of the Camargue, making several stops along the way. Our first stop was just north of Mas d'Agon where two birds spotted at the far side of the field turned out to be Stone Curlews, which gave reasonable, albeit distant views. Also present were several Crested Larks and two Bee-eaters, but the biggest surprise came just as we were preparing to move on when a large raptor was seen on a distant fence post. After much discussion, and after eliminating every other possibility, it was identified as a juvenile Bonelli's Eagle – an unusual, but very welcome, sighting for this location.

Later than planned we moved on to Mas d'Agon where the first birds seen by some of the group were three Bearded Tits, quickly followed by Reed and Great Reed Warblers, a Marsh Harrier and several Purple Herons. About five Common Terns and a single Whiskered Tern were also present, and the Sand Martins hunting insects over the reedbeds probably numbered well into the thousands. As we walked along the road a Honey Buzzard glided overhead and an Osprey flew north giving excellent views. Finally, as we were boarding the vehicles to leave, a Hobby shot by.

Our next stop was at the Parc Ornithologique at Pont de Gau where we had lunch before walking around the reedbeds and lagoons. We were quite fortunate that a large party of schoolchildren were just vacating the picnic tables as we arrived, so we had no problem setting out our picnic.

After a leisurely lunch we began our exploration of the parc by looking briefly at the aviaries containing Eagle Owls, Black Kites and an Egyptian Vulture, and also pausing to photograph a White Stork which nests each year on top of one of the aviaries, ignoring the nearby platform which was erected for it. We had a lengthy stop at one of the two mixed heron and egret colonies where there were young birds ranging in age from newly hatched to virtually ready to fledge. Then we moved on to admire the several hundred Greater Flamingoes which use the parc to preen and rest. There was a good range of ages present, allowing comparison of the fairly dull plumage of last year's young with the bright pink and white of the adults. Some of the group had good views of a Black-crowned Night Heron standing at the water's edge, while a Short-toed Eagle soared high overhead: a photograph later revealing that it had caught a snake, which is its principal prey. We found a pair of Little Terns amongst the large colony of Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls, and several Black-winged Stilts fed in the shallower areas of the lagoons.

All too soon it was time to head back to the hotel as we had arranged an early dinner this evening, with a view to going out again after dinner to attempt to see an Eagle Owl. This plan worked well as an owl was in view as soon as we arrived at the location, which is most unusual. On previous tours we have had to wait for a bird to appear, but there it was, perching on a ledge in full view, and pretty much in broad daylight. After some time it moved to another rock from which it called loudly, and we watched it until it was too dark to see, being entertained as well by at least three Nightjars singing and calling, and also a Cirl Bunting which sang just before dusk. On returning to the hotel, some of the group decided on a celebratory beer and watched the Moorish Geckos which inhabit the walls by the patio, and listening to a Scops Owl calling distantly. We also thought we heard a Stone Curlew, although that would be a first for this area.

Day 3

Friday 8th May

We had a short pre-breakfast walk along the track by the hotel after first seeing a male Black Redstart on the roof of the industrial building on the opposite side of the road. Birds seen on the walk included a Kestrel and a couple of Red-legged Partridges, plus the usual Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers.

After breakfast we set off to visit various sites in the eastern part of the Camargue, intending, time permitting, to finish on the beach at Piémanson. We stopped at several of the viewing areas along the Etang de Vaccares, most of which were unusually quiet, probably due to the water level being the highest seen in recent years. Flamingoes were feeding in areas which are usually virtually dry at this time of year, and the water was almost onto the road at one point. However we saw Great Crested Grebe, Red-crested Pochard and Shelduck as well as a couple of Marsh Harriers and Yellow Wagtails. Several Cuckoos were heard and one was seen, and a tree near the road contained the nests of three Grey Herons and a White Stork.

We moved on to the car park at La Capelliere, intending this to be a 'comfort stop' and also an opportunity to visit the small gift shop at this nature reserve, but we stayed slightly longer than anticipated, having good views of a Nightingale, plus the bonus of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a Garden Warbler.

Moving on again, we stopped at an area which we hoped would produce sightings of Collared Pratincole, and we were not disappointed as up to eight of these spectacular birds were hawking for insects like giant swifts. Also here were several Bee-eaters, two Marsh Harriers and four White Storks, making it a very worthwhile stop.

By now it was about noon so we had a slightly early lunch by the viewing platform at Marais des Grenouilletts. While the picnic was being laid out, a Bittern was seen low over the reedbeds, a Squacco Heron fed in the shallows and a Great White Egret was seen distantly on the far side of the lake. Melodious Warblers and Nightingales sang while we ate lunch, and at least three Zitting Cisticolas performed their song flights around us.

After lunch we had a stop at a local café for about 30 minutes where Blackcap and a Spotted Flycatcher were seen in the garden, and we then headed towards the coast. Today was a public holiday in France (VE Day) so we expected the beach to be busy, which it was, but we still managed to see some waders on the disused salt pans, including Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Little Stint, Dunlin and Common Sandpiper. Also present were three Avocets, a Caspian Tern and many Little and Common Terns. There were lots of camper vans using the beach as a makeshift campsite, but we still managed to see a couple more Kentish Plovers plus about 25 Slender-billed Gulls, which are a speciality of this location.

It was now time to head back to the hotel, which was just under an hour's drive. We saw a few Black-winged Stilts and Glossy Ibises on the way and we arrived in plenty of time to relax before another excellent evening meal.

Day 4

Saturday 9th May

We had arranged a slightly earlier breakfast today, but nevertheless Mark took a pre-breakfast stroll along the track and found two Stone Curlews in an area where they have not been previously recorded. This went some way in confirming that we were correct in thinking that we had heard this species a couple of nights previously.

The reason for the early breakfast was that we intended to head towards Peau de Meau, in the northern part of La Crau. This is an arid, stony area formed from the estuary of the River Durance, which changed its course many centuries ago. It is useful to arrive there reasonably early, as the heat shimmer can make viewing difficult once the sun gets high in the sky. However this proved not to be much of a problem today, as the morning was overcast with quite a strong breeze.

Inevitably we had a couple of stops on the way. A Quail was heard in a roadside field, but there was never much chance of seeing it, and a few Black Kites and Corn Buntings attracted our attention. On arriving at the Peau de Meau car park, we first of all admired the many Copper and Banded Demoiselles by the stream, and then had a walk along the track where we found Tawny Pipit, Skylark and Crested Lark, and some of the group also saw a Short-toed Lark. We eventually found six Stone Curlews, including three in flight. Black Kites and White Storks soared overhead, along with a Short-toed Eagle.

We normally include a visit to Les Alpilles on this tour, but past experience has shown that on windy days such as this the birds there are very reluctant to show themselves. As several of the group had Lesser Kestrel and Little Bustard on their list of 'target' species, we visited another area of La Crau in an attempt to catch up with these. After a quick drive down the dual carriageway, and a slow drive along a very bumpy track during which a

Hobby shot past us, we arrived at a Lesser Kestrel colony where around 20 of these attractive little raptors were nest-building and feeding. Unfortunately the Little Bustards were less cooperative, but we did manage a fairly close view of another two Stone Curlews on the way back to the main road.

Lunch today was at the shaded picnic site at the Marais de Vigueirat, a large nature reserve near the village of Mas Thibert. We were slightly delayed on the entrance track by a flock of very obliging Bee-eaters which posed nicely for photographs, and also by two male Golden Orioles, which unfortunately only those in the front of the leading vehicle saw as they dashed out of and back into deep cover. During lunch we were visited by a very tame Fox which had obviously become accustomed to people sharing their picnics with it, as it hung around until it was fed.

After lunch we had a walk around part of the reserve which is open to the public seeing four Squacco Herons as well as many Little and Cattle Egrets, a Purple Heron, three White Storks and a Green Woodpecker. In addition we recorded several species of dragonflies, which seemed to be on the wing early this year, including Red-veined Darter, Black-tailed Skimmer and Lesser Emperor.

Having had an early start this morning, we arrived back at the hotel earlier than usual at just after 5pm. Bruno and Marie-Jo had kindly laid on tea and biscuits by the pool, which rounded the day off nicely before our final evening meal.

Day 5

Sunday 10th May

Everyone was up and about early this morning as we needed to be on the road to the airport by about 7.15am. We said goodbye to John and Christine who were catching a train to Paris to continue their holiday in France, and then we had a trouble-free journey to Montpellier. Some of the lucky ones saw two Hoopoes (the only ones of the tour) on the way, and there were plenty of Glossy Ibises and egrets in the rice fields, although there were far less Black-winged Stilts than usual. At the airport we said our goodbyes to four members who were travelling independently and to Ian who was waiting at the airport for a second group on the incoming flight from Gatwick. Although this was a relatively short tour, we managed to pack a lot into a few days and had some memorable wildlife sightings, as well as enjoying the attractive Provence countryside and the peaceful surroundings of our hotel.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2015				
			6	7	8	9	10
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1	6	3	1	
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		4			
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1		
4	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		1			
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	20+	20+	40+	50+	15+
6	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			1	4	
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	30+	20+
8	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1	1	3	
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	10+	8	2
10	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		4	8+	1	
11	Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>		1H	1		
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		2	10+	8+	
13	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	40+	30+	2	2	20+
14	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
15	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	1	2	15+	2	2
16	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	2	8	2	4
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		6	8	6	
19	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	1	c5	20+	4
20	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		2	4		
21	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2			
22	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>		1			
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	1	1	2	
24	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1		1	
25	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		1			
26	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1			
27	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>				20+	
28	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	4	1	c6	1
29	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		1		1	
30	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			2	4	
31	Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				1H	
32	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			2	1	
33	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2			
34	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	✓	
35	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		10+	10+		8+
36	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			c8		
37	Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		2		9	
38	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>			c8		
39	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			c8		
40	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			3		
41	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1	1	1		
42	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			c8		
43	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			c6		
44	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			2		
45	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2015				
			6	7	8	9	10
46	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>				c25	
48	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	10+	50+	6	2	10+
49	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		c25	4	1	
50	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		2	10+		
51	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			1		
52	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>		5			
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>		4H	1+2H	2H	
58	Eurasian Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>		1			
59	Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>		1H			
60	Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>		3H			
61	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	c10	c10	c25	✓
62	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		c15	c20	c30	
63	Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>	2				
64	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				1	
65	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>			1		
66	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>				1	
67	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		2	2	2	
68	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	10+	15+	
69	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		1,000's			
70	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		2	3	c8	
72	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>			5	3	
73	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		1	10+		
74	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			2		
76	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			4		
77	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1H		1	
78	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		5	15+	7+	
80	Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		c6	1		
81	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>		10+			
82	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>	1	2	2	2	
83	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>			1		
84	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			1	1	
85	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>			5		
86	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			1		
87	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>		4			
88	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			H		
89	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			1		
90	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		2	1	2	
91	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>				2	
93	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1H			

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2015				
			6	7	8	9	10
94	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>				1	
97	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
98	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		c6			
100	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	1	H			
101	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		5	c8	c10	
102	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1			
103	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		4	10	c6	

Butterflies

1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>	✓				
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	✓	
3	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		✓			
4	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>				✓	
5	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>		✓	✓	✓	
6	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓			
7	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria aegeria</i>		✓	✓	✓	
8	Western Marbled White	<i>Melanargia occitanica</i>				✓	

Dragonflies

1	Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>				✓	
2	Copper Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx haemorrhoidalis</i>				✓	
3	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>		✓	✓	✓	
4	Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>		✓			
5	White-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum albistylum</i>		✓			
6	Scarlet Darter	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>		✓			
7	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>		✓		✓	
8	Four-spotted Chaser	<i>Libellula quadrimaculata</i>				✓	
9	Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>	✓			✓	

Mammals

1	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>		2		3	
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			2		
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				2	
4	Pipistrelle bat sp	<i>Pipistrella sp</i>	✓				

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Common Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis muralis</i>		2	2	1	
2	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>		2			
3	Stripeless Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>		H	H	1	
4	Iberian Water Frog	<i>Rana iberica</i>		✓		H	