

The Camargue in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 8 May 2016



European Bee-eater by Ian Nicholson



Camargue White Horses by Ian Nicholson



Slender-billed Gull by Ian Nicholson



Greater Flamingos by Terry Goble

Report compiled by Ian Nicholson
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Summary

This short holiday in the Camargue region 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, the limestone hills of Les Alpilles, and 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 to experience an overseas wildlife watching holiday for the first time!

Day 1

Wednesday 4th May

The leaders met up with most of the group at Gatwick airport for the short flight to Montpellier where, after organising the minibuses, we set off on a drive of around one hour to our hotel in the countryside just north of Arles. On arrival, our hosts Bruno and Marie-Jo allocated the rooms and Ian and Terry went to the local supermarket to buy the food for the following day's picnic. Later we met for a drink and a chat to go through our plans for the following few days. We also met Hilary, Mike and Margaret who had made their way to the hotel independently. After an excellent evening meal everyone retired fairly early, as it had been a long day travelling for most of the group.

Day 2

Thursday 5th May

A few of the group had a brief walk along the track beside the hotel this morning seeing Sardinian Warbler, Common Kestrel and three European Rollers. The latter flew by very quickly and were silhouetted against the light, so it was not the best view. We also heard, but failed to see, numerous Common Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers. Terry also found a Red-backed Shrike but, unfortunately, none of the group were with him at the time.

After breakfast we set off to travel through the western side of the Camargue, with several stops along the way. Our first stop was at an area which has produced Eurasian Stone-curlew and Great Spotted Cuckoo in the past. As soon as we got out of the vehicles we found a Great Spotted Cuckoo perching on a metal gate. As we watched it was joined by a second bird, but then we were distracted by a large raptor overhead. It turned out to be a Rough-legged Buzzard which is very unusual in the Camargue this late in the year. They are found here in winter but are usually long-gone by May. We also heard at least one Common Cuckoo and saw a very distant Eurasian Stone-curlew. Surprisingly a third and possibly a fourth Great Spotted Cuckoo appeared.

Moving on a short distance, we stopped by a bridge over a drainage channel where we heard Eurasian Reed and Cetti's Warblers and another Common Cuckoo, and saw many Western Cattle and Little Egrets, a Great Egret, several Purple Herons and a Squacco Heron. A Short-toed Snake Eagle soaring overhead was an impressive sight. A flock of around 20 Whiskered Terns fed over an area of open water and closer examination revealed that there was a solitary Black Tern with them.

After just over an hour it was time to move on again, this time to the Parc Ornithologique at Pont de Gau. As today was a public holiday in France we expected the Parc to be quite busy, but we easily found a parking place and as it was about lunchtime, we had our picnic before spending the rest of the afternoon walking round the

reserve. We occupied a couple of picnic tables which were at least partly in the shade as it was quite warm and sunny by now, and enjoyed a leisurely lunch of cold meats, pate, cheeses, salad and bread, accompanied by wine or fruit juice and followed by fruit and biscuits.

After lunch we looked briefly at the aviaries near the reserve entrance, stopping to photograph a White Stork on its nest which was built on the remains of an old aviary, rather than on the nearby platform which was erected specifically for it to use. The mixed colony of Grey Herons, Western Cattle Egrets and Little Egrets was in full swing, with chicks of all sizes from recently hatched to Grey Herons which were almost ready to fledge. There were hundreds of Greater Flamingoes feeding, sleeping and preening in the lagoons, and this is probably the closest that anyone will ever get to a wild flamingo. Also present in and around the lagoons were many Black-winged Stilts, six Pied Avocets, two Little Terns, three Spotted Redshanks, two Wood Sandpipers and a Common Sandpiper. Overhead there were several Black Kites plus a Short-toed Snake Eagle. A Eurasian Hobby was seen briefly by a few of the group as it sped by. Also noteworthy was a Common Nightingale singing out in the open, which was enjoyed by some of the group.

We returned to the hotel for an early evening meal as we were going back out afterwards to a place which has been reliable for sightings of Eagle Owl in the past. Bruno at the hotel told us that a group who were there in March had good views of an owl, so we were optimistic about our prospects. When we arrived we met an English birder who we have seen here in the past. He had not seen anything but it was still quite early. Unfortunately we didn't see or hear an owl this evening, and in fact there was very little activity of any sort other than a few bats flying round at dusk, so we returned to the hotel disappointed on this occasion.

Day 3

Friday 6th May

Our plan today was to travel down the eastern side of the Camargue with several stops along the way in varying habitats, finishing the day on the beach at Piemanson. After driving out of Arles and along the minor road through the villages of Gageron and Villeneuve, we had our first stop at a viewing platform beside the Etang de Vaccares, the vast lake which lies at the centre of the Camargue. Here we found Little Egret, Eurasian Coot and Melodious Warbler. Next we moved on to another viewing area which was considerably more productive. Yellow Wagtails, which appeared to be of the Italian subspecies *cinereocapilla*, flitted amongst the vegetation and a Spectacled Warbler was seen by most of the group as it moved between the low bushes. Little Gull and Whiskered Tern fed over the open water on the opposite side of the road to the etang, and a Great Egret fed in the shallows. Two Collared Pratincoles flew quickly overhead giving fairly brief views, and Great Crested Grebes were feeding out in the lake. Just as we were about to move on we found four Black-necked Grebes among their larger relatives, so of course we had to stay a little longer to admire these attractive birds. At our final stop beside the lake we found six Pied Avocets, three Western Marsh Harriers and a Short-toed Snake Eagle. We also saw a White Stork on its nest and heard a Common Cuckoo, which although it sounded very close, we failed to see.

Close by was the car park and visitor centre of La Capelliere Nature Reserve, so we parked there to allow everyone to visit the gift shop and use the toilet facilities before moving on to our next planned stop. We drove slowly along the road past the Marais des Grenouillets seeing a number of European Bee-eaters along the way and also a Squacco Heron in the roadside drainage channel. We then stopped again and saw a Collared Pratincole, a Western Marsh Harrier, two Short-toed Snake Eagles and several White Storks including three on active nests. On returning to the viewing platform overlooking the Marais it was lunchtime so we unpacked the

picnic, which we ate to an accompaniment of singing Common Nightingales and Zitting Cisticolas, while also enjoying the sight of a Western Osprey soaring overhead.

After lunch we headed towards Piemanson with several stops by the disused salt pans on the way to the beach. There were at least 100 Pied Avocets feeding on the mud along with around 50 Little Stints and smaller numbers of Dunlin and Curlew Sandpiper, plus a handful of Common Redshanks and a single Common Greenshank. Common Terns were plentiful and there were also a few Gull-billed and Little Terns. In the distance, on a small sandbank, four Caspian Terns were dwarfing the Common Terns which were roosting alongside them. Nearer the beach we came across several small flocks of Slender-billed Gulls which are a particular speciality of this location. Further on still was a larger flock of around 30 of these elegant gulls, along with a mixed flock of waders including Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone and Kentish Plover.

As it takes around an hour to drive back to the hotel from here, we had to drag ourselves away from all these birds, but not before a few brave souls had ventured onto the beach to paddle in the Mediterranean, which is not particularly warm at this time of the year.

Day 4

Saturday 7th May

Today was going to be completely different. After two days exploring the wetlands of the Camargue, today we began by driving to La Crau, a large arid area which was formed when the River Durance changed its course thousands of years ago, leaving its estuary dry and stony. This habitat supports some very specialised birds and insects, some of which we hoped to encounter.

On the way we stopped to look at a Eurasian Stone-curlew which was fairly close to the road. When we arrived at the car park at Peau de Meau we checked the stream for Copper and Banded Demoiselles, both of which we found but in smaller numbers than usual - a sign perhaps that spring is rather late this year. Tawny Pipit, Eurasian Skylark and Crested Lark were singing all around us, and two Common Buzzards and a Short-toed Snake Eagle soared overhead. Nearer the ground were several butterflies including Western Marbled White, Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail and Small Heath. We managed to see at least another two Eurasian Stone-curlews, two White Storks and a Western Marsh Harrier before moving on. On the roadside we came across some French birders who had their telescope on something on the far side of the field. We enquired and it turned out that there was a very handsome male Red-backed Shrike in the hedgerow, so naturally we stopped to admire it.

Our next destination was the nature reserve at Marais de Viguiérat where we planned to have lunch. We had a lengthy stop along the entrance track to admire and photograph the European Bee-eaters which have established their colony close to the road, and also to have a fairly close look at a herd of the famous Camargue white horses with their brown foals. Lunch was eaten at the shaded picnic area and was a fairly leisurely affair. When we had finished we returned to the vehicles to drive to another part of La Crau where we hoped to find Little Bustard, Eurasian Hoopoe, more stone-curlews and also to visit the Lesser Kestrel colony.

We managed all four target species. For a while it was looking as if we might miss out on bustard and hoopoe because we were actually on our way back to the main road when a Eurasian Hoopoe was seen in flight so we stopped, having seen where it landed. Amazingly, close by it was a male Little Bustard! Initially we could only

see its head and neck, but as it moved slowly around we saw a little more of it. We watched the hoopoe, which was joined by another, and the bustard for quite a while before deciding it was time to head back to the hotel for our final evening meal.

Day 5

Sunday 8th May

This morning a pre-breakfast walk produced six Red-legged Partridges as well as the usual Common Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers. One nightingale in particular gave a superb performance in full view.

After breakfast it was time to load up the vehicles and say our goodbyes to Bruno and Marie-Jo who had looked after us so well, and also to Mike, Margaret and Hilary who were continuing their holidays independently. We planned to make a couple of stops on the way to the airport to fit in some more birding to make the most of the time available in this relatively short holiday. First of all we went to Mas d'Agon, where we had been on the first morning, and found presumably the same Rough-legged Buzzard, and also a Great Spotted Cuckoo perching on exactly the same gate as previously. There were about 10 Whiskered Terns plus many herons and egrets, and a Coypu also put in an appearance.

After leaving Mas d'Agon we drove to the Etang du Charnier via the villages of Albaron and St Gilles, stopping briefly on the way to photograph a White Stork on its nest on an old farm building right by the roadside. Having parked at the end of the road we scanned the reedbed where a Western Marsh Harrier was hunting and several Red-crested Pochards flew by, as did a Eurasian Hobby and a Great Egret. We had a final stop by the side of the water where there were more Red-crested Pochards, Black-winged Stilts and Common Terns.

On the way to the airport we saw our last few flamingos, and some of the group in the second minibus had a fairly fleeting view of a European Golden Oriole. On arriving at Montpellier Airport everyone checked in and went through security, except Ian who was awaiting the arrival of another group on the incoming flight. Once back in the UK another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

This was a short holiday, but we managed to fit in a lot of wildlife watching in a variety of habitats, and everyone agreed that it was a very successful tour with some saying they would like to return again for a slightly longer visit.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May				
			4	5	6	7	8
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		10+	50+		
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	3	4		
3	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			1		
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		2			
6	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					6
7	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		1			
8	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1				
9	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			15+		
10	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			4		
11	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓	✓	✓	2	✓
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		3	8	c8	3
13	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		1			
15	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		2	1		
16	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	10+	4	4
18	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		3	2	1	2
19	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		4	2		
20	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		4	10+		
22	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			1		
23	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		4	5	1	
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			4	1	
25	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	2	4	5	30+	4
26	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Burteo lagopus</i>		1			1
27	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	2	2	
28	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				3	
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2	✓		
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓		✓
31	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>		1		6	
32	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		25+	2		c8
33	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		6	100+		
34	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			1		
35	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			30+		
36	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>			10+		
37	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			1		
38	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		3			
39	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>		2			
40	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1			
41	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			4		
42	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			3		
43	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			50+		
44	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>			20+		
45	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			25+		
46	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>			3		
47	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			40+		

	Common name	Scientific name	May				
			4	5	6	7	8
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	2	✓
49	Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>			1		
50	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
51	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>		1	10+		2
53	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			4		
54	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		2	15+		
55	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		6+	10+		c5
56	Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		25+	1		
57	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>		1			
58	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>		c4			
62	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		2H	3H	1H	
63	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>		6			
65	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	2	4	20+	30+	c6
66	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				2	
67	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>				20+	
68	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	6	✓	✓	3
69	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		1	3		
70	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>				1	
71	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1	1		
72	European Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>					✓
73	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Rook	<i>Corvus corone</i>	□	□	1	□	□
76	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	1	1	
78	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
79	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				6+	
80	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		1			
84	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		8+	1H	H	
85	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>			c6	c6	
86	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	□	□	□	1H	□
88	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1	1	3	
89	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		1			
93	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		2	10+		2
94	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>				6+	
95	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		1H			
96	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		c4	2	c5	c4

	Common name	Scientific name	May				
			4	5	6	7	8

Butterflies

1	Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podarlis</i>				2	
2	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				1	
3	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓		✓	
4	Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>			1		
5	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>				1	
6	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			✓		
7	Wall	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>	✓	✓		✓	
8	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria aegeria</i>		✓	✓	✓	
9	Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
10	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		□	□	1	
11	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>				1	
12	Marsh Fritillary	<i>Eurodryas aurinia</i>			1		
13	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>				1	

Moths

1	Small Emerald	<i>Hemistola chrysoprasaria</i>	1				
2	Square Spot	<i>Paradarisa consonaria</i>	1				
3	Cream Spot Tiger	<i>Epicallia villica</i>		1			1
4	Latticed Heath	<i>Chiasmia clathrata</i>			1		
5	Goat Moth (caterpillar)	<i>Cossus cossus</i>		1			

Dragonflies & Damselflies

1	Copper Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx haemorrhoidalis</i>				✓	
2	Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>		✓	✓	□	
3	Common Blue Damselfly	<i>Enallagma cyathigerum</i>		□	□	✓	
4	Norfolk Hawker	<i>Aeshna isosceles</i>			1		
5	Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>		1			

Mammals

1	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
2	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			1	2	
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1		

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Common Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis muralis</i>			✓		
2	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauretanic</i>	6+	4	□	4	
3	Stripeless Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>		H			
4	Iberian Water Frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>		H	1		
5	European Pond Terrapin	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>		1			

Other Taxa

1	Egyptian Grasshopper	<i>Anacridium aegyptum</i>			1		
2	European Mole Cricket	<i>Gryllotalpa gryllotalpa</i>		1			
3	Four-spotted Leaf Beetle	<i>Clytra quadripunctata</i>			1		
4	Carpenter Bee sp				1		