

# France - Cranes and Champagne

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 10 November 2018

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Autumnal colours by John Stevenson



Crane sunset by Liz Roberts



Fire Salamander by Jason Mitchell



Long-eared Owl by Liz Roberts

Report compiled by Jason Mitchell  
Images courtesy of John Stevenson, Liz Roberts & Jason Mitchell



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Tour participants: Jason Mitchell (leader) with three Naturetrek clients

## Summary

This tour was timed to provide a very special ornithological experience amid the delightful rural setting of northern France's Champagne country. First, we visited one of France's largest lakes - Lac du Der - which is well known for holding large numbers of migrating and wintering Common Cranes. In November, vast numbers of birds arrive at this huge lake to rest and feed before continuing their migration south. Although we narrowly missed a record passage of cranes, a mere 50,000 of these impressive, elegant birds had the good grace to await our arrival. Our main focus was watching the cranes during the day and the spectacle as they flew to roost in the late afternoon, but we also found a good many other star birds including Greater White-fronted Geese, a very accommodating Kingfisher and a group of roosting Long-eared Owls.

Next, we transferred to Mesnil-Saint-Père situated in the Parc Naturel Régional de la Forêt d'Orient; as the name suggests, the area is dominated by forest and three large lakes. Among the birdlife we enjoyed marvellous views of a large herd of Bewick's Swans and twenty stately White Storks; woodpeckers were also well represented and included Lesser Spotted, Middle Spotted and Black Woodpeckers. We also took advantage of being located in France's Champagne region and enjoyed a tasting at the Champagne Drappier vineyard along with a tour of its ancient cellars which date back to the time of its founders - the Cistercian monks. Another visit took us to the cathedral city of Troyes, where we had an excellent guided tour of its charming historic centre.

During our stay, we experienced largely fine weather with very little rain. The mercury stayed in the positive, dipping to 3°C early one morning and topping out at an unseasonal 20°C on one particularly balmy afternoon.

## Day 1

### Sunday 4th November

With the Eurostar arriving on time into the impressive Gare du Nord train station in Paris, we made our way east along the highway towards Montier-en-Der. Here we spent our first three nights in a pleasant hotel enjoying excellent local cuisine.

## Day 2

### Monday 5th November

Even before breakfast, we enjoyed amazing views of several hundred cranes calling excitedly as they streamed over the hotel. After a simple but enjoyable continental breakfast, we headed for Lac du Der spotting our first 'grounded' cranes along the way which were feeding close to the road. Shortly afterwards, a flock of unidentified birds in another field prompted a brief stop and with the aid of the telescope they were identified as Common Snipe - all 200 of them! Standing on the dyke wall, we had commanding views over the western side of the lake where many hundreds of duck were feeding, most were Teal but we also spied several Pintail, Wigeon and Shoveler. The water level was very low and we were amazed to see hundreds of exposed tree stumps dating back to before the land was flooded to create the lake back in the early 70's.

Arriving at the hide in the Port of Chantecoq, we saw several Reed Buntings beautifully illuminated by the low sun as they fed in adjacent reeds. Across the road, we visited the offices of the *Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux* (France's equivalent to the R.S.P.B.) where we learnt that a remarkable 100,000 cranes had been counted the

previous day and we also made a quick tour of a wonderful photo exhibition that was running. Outside the centre, a calling Middle Spotted Woodpecker alerted us to its presence in a large oak where it was feeding actively allowing several brief views. We next decided on a walk to the hide, where the local kingfisher was putting on a spectacle, landing repeatedly a matter of metres from its adoring public. Again, ducks were present in vast numbers with Teal the commonest alongside good numbers of Pochard. In rising temperatures, we were delighted to see several Common Darters on the wing and a second, larger species which was almost certainly a Migrant Hawker. Returning to the car, we enjoyed our picnic in balmy conditions which coaxed some butterflies to break cover: two Clouded Yellows, a Brimstone and a probable Large White. The shrill alarm call of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker had us quickly on our feet looking for this sought after tiny woodpecker but sadly it fell silent and could not be found. Fed and watered, we headed to the *Ferme aux Grues* – Farm of the Cranes. Unfortunately, on our arrival a local farmer was using his chainsaw and there weren't any cranes close to the hide, but a flock of Long-tailed Tits was something of a consolation.

Moving on to the Port of Nuisement on the north side of the lake, we added several species of wader to the tour list including Avocet, Greenshank and Grey Plover which were all taking advantage of the lake's low level to access areas usually covered by water. With the afternoon advancing, groups of cranes started to pass overhead and as their numbers grew their calls became more excited and prompted us to return to the western shore on a raised section of dyke affording excellent views with the sun behind us. Wave after wave of cranes continued to pass overhead seeking safe haven around the lake, until dusk had fallen. There were also large numbers of Greylag Geese present and careful searching turned up four Greater White-fronted Geese. Thoroughly satisfied by our first full day in the field, we returned to the hotel meeting an hour later for a very enjoyable dinner.

### Day 3

### Tuesday 6th November

The day started with a pre-breakfast visit to the southern section of Lac du Der where we were greeted by an amazing red-glowing sunrise and revelled in the sight of many thousands of cranes streaming from their roost. In addition to the cranes, at one point there was a feeding frenzy of cormorants and gulls both numbering in their thousands with an audience of hundreds of Great Egrets. The sight and sound of such huge numbers of birds, combined with the stunning sunrise made for a truly memorable experience. Following our early start, breakfast went down extremely well but we were soon on our way again this time heading for a very special rendezvous, not only with one of France's premier wildlife artists but also with the Long-eared Owls which roost in his garden. We were not disappointed, as five different birds were roosting just metres from our viewing position – a small window at the back of his garage! After a quick coffee, we took the opportunity to make a visit to a fabulous half-timbered church in the village after which the rest of the morning was spent walking the southern section of Etang de la Horre. The site is far less well-known than Lac du Der but is equally rich in wildlife and within minutes of arriving we were enjoying views of a young Grey Heron which was struggling to swallow a Pike.

Proceeding down the eastern shore of the lake, we stop several times at viewing platforms and were delighted to see not only hundreds of Lapwing but good numbers of Snipe and two Green Sandpipers bobbing in characteristic fashion along the shore. But the highlight of our visit was a herd of around 50 Bewick's Swans. On several occasions they became very excited and began to bugle, their calls echoing around the lake – a spine-tingling experience. Other interest came in the form of a 'red-head' Goosander and our first sighting of a Short-toed Treecreeper along with a more familiar Nuthatch. An interesting, if somewhat sad find was a dead Mistle

Thrush on the path, with all the signs suggesting a Sparrowhawk was responsible, yet for some reason it had been abandoned. It was a rare opportunity to examine its beautiful and intricate plumage.

Arriving at the dam wall which separates the north and south sections of the lake, we were amazed to see huge numbers of Little Grebe, which numbered close to a hundred birds, and some Coypu swimming close by were a popular find. With time marching on, we retraced our steps back to the main road, spotting a Common Buzzard flying away from us with something in its talons; it immediately became clear that it had collected the dead Mistle Thrush! Our picnic lunch was taken five minutes away in the village of Lentilles, where a picnic table is conveniently positioned outside the wonderful half-timbered church for which the village is famous. To finish the day we travelled to Presqu'île de Champaubert where, after a brief visit to the bird hide where we had fantastic views of a family party of cranes and dozens of hibernating Harlequin Ladybirds, we made our way to the church. Here we joined twenty or so other people who were waiting for the cranes to come into roost. Just as in the morning, there was a wonderfully colourful sky and several Curlews added to the ambiance with their ringing calls.

## Day 4

## Wednesday 7th November

Bidding farewell to Montier en Der, we made our way towards Troyes and the second part of our adventure. Meeting our guide Patrick, we enjoyed a fabulous visit to the historic city centre with its half-timbered houses and beautiful squares. Situated on the River Seine, the city was the capital of the ancient Province of Champagne in the 12th and 13th centuries and great trading fairs took place here, and this prosperity has left a very rich heritage, including ten churches with exceptional stained glass windows and fine Renaissance statuary.

At the end of the morning we made our way to Mesnil-Saint-Père and our next Hotel. After dropping off our cases, we headed for the Maison du Parc. While lunch was being prepared, the group took a look around the exhibition learning about the history of the three lakes – Orient, Temple and Amance. Similar to Lac du Der, the lakes were created to supply Paris with water but also to maintain sufficient river water levels for shipping traffic. With the first rain of the week falling, we were happy to be under the cover of a delightfully restored old barn and with lunch polished off, we made our way to a tower hide set in the woods with impressive views over the northern section of Lake Orient. It was immediately apparent that there were massive numbers of wildfowl in the area; Tufted Duck and Pochard were the most numerous with a supporting cast of Pintail, Shoveler, Teal, Gadwall, Mallard and hundreds of Great Crested Grebes. A Firecrest called from bushes close to the hide but to our frustration kept hidden from view. Many hundreds of cranes were also present, feeding at the lake margins. A little to the west, we took a walk along a beach and down a stony launch ramp which allowed us to get much closer to the birds. In addition to the thousands of ducks, there were some impressive rafts of Coot numbering close to a thousand individuals. Passerines were also present, with White Wagtails and Water Pipits feeding and chasing over the mud.

The wind had got up somewhat and we all agreed that it was a distinct change from two days earlier when we were sunning ourselves in temperatures of 20°C. Returning to the car, we headed down the eastern side of the lake back towards the hotel. But a gap in the trees encouraged us to stop in search of 'grey' geese. Immediately we spotted two distant birds and after scrutiny they were identified as Bean Geese. Having watched them for a few minutes we widened our search and it became evident that they were part of a much larger flock. In fact in total we counted close to fifty birds grazing at the edge of the mud. We all agreed it was not only exciting but an

interesting exercise in goose recognition. With several species of 'grey' geese visiting the Champagne region there are quite a few possibilities and they need to be identified with care especially when seen at distance. Returning to the hotel, some of the group enjoyed a visit to the spa before meeting again for dinner, which was quite an experience with silver service.

## Day 5

Thursday 8th November

Our first stop of the day was at the sluice gate of Etang d'Orient where crashing water discharges into the River Seine and it was here where we saw our first Grey Wagtail of the tour. A little further along, we stopped to explore an area of woodland where Great Spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper and Brambling were all heard calling and after some persistence, we eventually managed views of a handsome little Firecrest frenetically feeding amongst some ivy. We all agreed the autumnal colours were quite amazing and this proved to be one of our abiding memories of the tour. Opposite the woodland, we walked down onto the 'beach', and again ducks were very numerous but our attention was drawn by some noisy crows which were mobbing a Peregrine Falcon which quickly 'left the scene'. Several areas of the beach had been disturbed by Wild Boar and it was interesting to find the shed skins of several crayfish in the very same area leading us to assume this was the remains of their seafood supper. In lovely warm and sunny conditions a number of dragonflies were still on the wing, and although we never managed close views, their actions and orange hue suggested they were Common Darters.

After a warming coffee, we headed to another vantage point towards the north-west corner of the lake. Having parked up, we left the car and immediately saw a Black Woodpecker bounding across the sky, enjoying reasonable views of this exciting species as it flew over a narrow section of the lake. Scanning the area, ducks were the most obvious but it was a large black and white bird that caught our eye and closer examination with the telescope revealed a splendid White Stork. Not far from the stork, to our further surprise, we found what we assumed to be the flock of Bean Geese from the previous evening. Other interest came in the form of a striking Common Buzzard with a very white head and tail. A quick detour looking for a Great Grey Shrike was fruitless but a brief stop at Lake Temple turned up two stocky Wild Boar feeding under distant trees. Meanwhile, amazingly John found a Wall Lizard sunning itself on the dam wall and a noisy flock of cranes numbering over 100 birds drifted south high above us. Seeking a change of habitat, we entered the forest where after our picnic lunch we made a short circular walk. Here our goal was to find a Fire Salamander and after turning over dozens of logs we eventually found a small but very smart juvenile animal. Birds were also active, being mostly evident through their calls with Middle Spotted Woodpecker particularly vocal as were Goldcrest and Firecrest. And with persistence we eventually managed pleasing views of a dandy Crested Tit.

Late in the afternoon we paid a visit to Champagne Drappier, a friendly, family-run champagne producer located in the Côte des Bar renowned for its organic and natural methods of cultivation and production. The visit started in the magnificent 12th century vaulted cellars, originally built by Cistercian monks. We then continued to the winery where we saw the grape press, huge fermentation vats and the wooden ageing barrels, as well as the disgorging and labelling lines. A fascinating visit was rounded off with a tasting of several of the Drappier cuvées as the guide enthused, describing the "Rich, coppery-gold hues, expansive aromas and fine, subtle effervescence" of the Drappier champagnes. During our drive back to the hotel, we spotted a Wild Boar on the side of the road and a couple of Brown Hares in a field.

## Day 6

Friday 9th November

The morning began with a walk along the jetty in the port of Mesnil-Saint-Père allowing us to get close to the action, and again ducks were the dominant force. However, we were also pleased to see several species of wader, including a hundred or so Dunlin, a couple of Grey Plover and good numbers of Lapwing. Great Egrets were also numerous and a group of five Shelduck was a good find but we were most surprised and excited to see a flock of twenty White Storks on the far side of the lake. Water Pipits were joined by a handful of Meadow Pipits and a cheeky Wren fed along the rock armour. A brief coffee stop a little bit north of the port produced a calling Middle Spotted Woodpecker along with three distant Red Kites which helped keep the blood pumping. We next explored the middle lake, Lac du Temple, where low levels had seen the remaining water retreat to the northern section. Great Crested Grebe were common and two distant Shelduck brought our day total to seven birds – a good tally so far inland. Moving east along the northern shore, Greylag Geese were at their most numerous.

After lunch we explored Lac d'Amance - the smallest of the three lakes - where new birds included a wonderful pair of Red-crested Pochard. From the hide, other new species included Common Gull and a sleeping Spoonbill. Back at Lac du Temple, we made a final visit to see the cranes come in to roost one last time, and in addition to the many hundreds of birds streaming overhead, we spotted a Peregrine Falcon perched on a tree stump and as we returned to the car a flock of Long-tailed Tits encircled us. We then returned to the hotel via the western shore of Lac d'Amance stopping at a gap in the reeds where we added yet another sought-after species, a Red-necked Grebe, which was keeping company with its Little and Great Crested cousins. The final stop of the day was on the causeway which crosses the southern tip of the lake where the last few cranes passed overhead as if to bid us farewell. Back at the hotel some of us enjoyed a visit to the spa before spending our last dinner together, which was to the usual excellent standard.

## Day 7

Saturday 10th November

After a late breakfast, we made our way back to Gare du Nord in good time for our train, bidding each other “Au revoir”. All agreed that the wildlife had far surpassed our expectations but the success of the holiday was in no small part due to the fun dynamic of our small group.

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			5	6	7	8	9
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓				
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓				✓
3	Bean Goose sp	<i>Anser fabilis/serrirostris</i>			c.50	c.50	
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	100+	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	4				
6	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	100+	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Tundra Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>		c.50			2
8	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					7
9	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					2
16	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓	✓	400+	✓	✓
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	300+	✓	✓
18	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	1				
19	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		1			
20	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	60+			✓
21	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>					1
23	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>				1	20
24	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					1
25	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	500+	100+	✓	✓	✓
27	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	400+	3000+	✓	✓	✓
28	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>					3
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2		1		1
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
32	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1	2
33	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				✓	
34	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	600+	✓	✓
35	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	c.20k	c.20k	400+	200+	1000+
36	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	1				2
38	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	200+	✓			✓
39	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	3	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	h				
41	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	3				
42	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2			1
43	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	200+	✓			200+
44	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		9			
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					1
47	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			5	6	7	8	9
48	Common Pigeon/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>		5			
52	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	3	3		1	3
53	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>	h				
54	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>	1	h		h	h
55	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		h	h	h	h
56	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	h			1	
57	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	h	h		h	
58	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>					2
62	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			h	✓	
64	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
66	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				2	
67	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
69	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓			
70	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	h		h	2	
71	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				1	
72	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	2			1
73	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		2	h	✓	✓
74	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	h	1		h	h
75	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
77	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓	✓
78	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				1	
81	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
82	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					20+
83	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
84	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
85	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	h	h		h	h
86	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
87	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓				10
88	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	1				
89	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓				h

## Mammals

European Hare, *Lepus europaeus*

European Roe Deer, *Capreolus capreolus*

Wild Boar, *Sus scrofa*

Coypu, *Myocastor coypus*

## Butterflies

Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*

Clouded Yellow, *Colias croceus*

Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*

Dragonflies

Common Darter, *Sympetrum striolatum*  
Western Willow Spreadwing, *Chalcolestes viridis*

Hawker sp., *Anax/Aeshna sp*

Amphibians

Agile Frog, *Rana dalmatina*

Fire Salamander, *Salamandra salamandra*



Common Crane by Liz Roberts



Great White Egrets by Jason Mitchell



Kingfisher by Liz Roberts