

Cranes & Champagne

Naturetrek Tour Report

30th Oct – 5th November 2021

Report by Jason Mitchell



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Tour Participants: Jason Mitchell (leader) with five Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Saturday 30th October

Paris – Mesnil-Saint-Père

With the Eurostar arriving on time at Gare du Nord in Paris, we made our way east along the autoroute towards Mesnil-Saint-Père spotting plenty of Common Buzzards, a few Kestrels and a Green Woodpecker as we neared our destination at the Auberge du Lac. Here we spent three nights enjoying the fantastic cuisine and excellent mini-spa facilities.

Day 2

Sunday 31st October

Lac d'Orient and Troyes

Following breakfast, we drove the short distance to the Port of Mesnil. In glorious sunshine, we passed a very pleasant couple of hours birdwatching across Lac d'Orient. It was immediately apparent there were large numbers of both Great Crested Grebes and Cormorants present but it was a couple of Black Redstarts that first caught our eye. Other passerines included several smart Water Pipits and dandy White Wagtails feeding on the mud of the dry port, where Black-headed Gulls numbered in their hundreds and three Common Snipe fed discreetly alongside. However, our attention was drawn by a stunning White Stork flapping across the lake and as it alighted on the far shore, we were amazed to find it had joined a further twenty of its kin, intermingled with 50 or more Great White Egrets. Returning to the minibus, we loitered to watch the Black Redstarts once more, then spotted a large Common Eel partly exposed in a shallow pool; we mused how it had got there and how it would escape but decided if the species can migrate to the Sargasso Sea and back, we needn't worry too much! Before moving on, we spent some time trying to locate a Middle Spotted Woodpecker that had been calling from a copse on the lake's shore but to no avail, however, a singing Short-toed Treecreeper was a nice find.

It was decided we would try for better views of the storks, so we drove around the southern shore and made our way down a slipway. Scanning the mud, we were disappointed to find they had flown but that was short lived, as suddenly the sky was darkened by the vast wingspans of eight White Storks soaring just above our heads. Furthermore, they were joined by a handsome Red Kite in the same thermal, making for a truly memorable encounter! In ever warming conditions, we watched as dozens of balletic Common Darter dragonflies hovered in tandem, egg-laying into a shallow pool where two impressive Southern Hawker dragonflies deposited eggs into wet mud nearby. Our first picnic lunch was taken in the shade of a woodland where Short-toed Treecreeper and Nuthatch called from deep in the woods and a Western Willow Spreadwing damselfly floated into the canopy.

We then drove to Troyes, where we explored its charming historic centre with 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. The prosperity of the city has left a very rich heritage, including ten churches with exceptional stained glass windows, fine Renaissance statuary, some of which we visited as part of a self-guided tour. Immersed in the history of this fine city, we almost missed a Sparrowhawk flying low over the roof-tops; no doubt attracted by the steady flow of Chaffinches and Skylarks migrating overhead. Returning to our hotel, we were briefly caught in traffic as footballs fans streamed from Troyes' football stadium.

Day 3

Monday 1st November

Lakes and Forêt d'Orient

To start the day we headed for the Anse de la Picarde, a bay on the north-west side of Lac d'Orient. Here, large congregations of birds made for impressive viewing and a mass of white proved to be a mix of Great White Egrets and White Storks, the latter numbering a record 34 individuals – it seems this elegant species has taken to wintering in the area in recent years, probably encouraged by a run of mild winters. A group of Cranes bugled as they passed south, while a loan juvenile picked at the mud giving an opportunity to study its smart plumage in more detail. A group of three Red Kites drifted over, beautifully illuminated by the morning sun and the harsh rattling call of a Mistle Thrush broke the silence.

Moving to the northern shore, we ventured along a slipway giving better views of a mass of ducks congregated at the water's edge. Here we added our first Pintail to the tour list, with both spiky-tailed males and elegant, long-necked females present. Wigeon were numerous too, making their presence known by the piercing whistles of the dandy golden-headed males. With the cold getting the better of us, we returned to the shore where we were drawn to the woodland by its stunning autumnal colours and a brief foray produced a fine list of trees and shrubs, including Wild Service Tree, Field Maple and Hornbeam.

Lunch was taken next to the Maison du Parc visitor centre, where a Middle Spotted Woodpecker teased us with its persistent calls but a confiding Nuthatch made for easier viewing. After a quick visit and warm up in the tourist information office, we took a walk into the Forêt du Temple. No sooner had we started along the forest path when a mixed party of foraging birds wafted through the trees; Blue and Long-tailed Tits were most noticeable but a Firecrest posed briefly, while a Short-toed Treecreeper showed really well as it 'moused' its way up the main trunk. However, the walk turned into an impromptu 'fungal foray', as it soon became evident the locals were out in force hunting for mushrooms. A chat with a friendly couple carrying a wicker basket brimming with little black 'treasures', explained the sought-after delicacy in fruit was the *Trompettes de la Mort*. And so it proved Phil, one of the group members, was especially knowledgeable about mushrooms. Before long and with several sorties off the path, we clocked up an impressive list of mushrooms including some cracking species; the rather smelly and other-worldly Devil's Fingers, the attractive Magpie Inkcap and the aptly named Yellow Brain fungus. Arriving at the bird hide, we gained our first view of Lac du Temple where parties of Cranes called excitedly and were joined by some large flocks of Greylag Geese. The return to the minibus was marked by more failed attempts to see either the Great Spotted or Middle Spotted Woodpeckers frequently calling but some impressively large flocks of Woodpigeons numbering in there many hundreds were note-worthy.

From here, we made a stop on the northern shore where a large sluice released gushing water back into the Aube; the river after which the department is named. Climbing the dyke wall was good for fungi and the lake offered some nice birds, the highlight being a pair of gleaming Goosander and a Kingfisher that landed several times on the dam wall between hovering sorties out over the water. Not much else stirred, so we moved on to the third and smallest of the three lakes.

Arriving at Lac d'Amance we set up in the hide and scanned for the Spotted Crake that had been viewed in recent days. Although we didn't find the crake we were equally content with excellent views of a Water Rail feeding at the edge of reeds in much the same manner as its rarer cousin. A scan of the lake showed up some fine Red-crested Pochard in the company of a sombre, yet distinctive female, however, it was a party of eight stately Bewick's Swans that create the most excitement.

Our next and final destination was the southern section of this attractive wooded lake where we stopped on a causeway allowing a different viewing perspective over the water. While some were entertained by a couple of chasing Kingfishers, the rest of the group poured over the large gathering of Pochard in hope of finding the recently reported Ferruginous Duck. Then it was back to 'base', where a few of the party enjoyed the hotel's spa facilities.

Day 4

Tuesday 2nd November

Forêt d'Orient and Champagne Drappier tour

Starting the day back at Lac d'Orient, in chilly conditions we ventured on a short walk which led to a tower hide where hundreds of duck loafed on the water. Although consisting mainly of Common Pochard, careful scanning produced a few of their Red-crested cousins along with a cracking drake Goldeneye. The birds seemed a little jumpy, so we scanned in the hope of finding a Marsh Harrier or Peregrine Falcon but with the cold setting in, we made tracks for the minibus.

Returning to the expansive Forêt du Temple, we followed a circular trail through broad-leaved woodland. Setting out, the elusive Middle Spotted Woodpecker was calling once more but despite repeated scanning we didn't get a sniff. Although birds were playing hard-to-get, we could hear the calls of several interesting species including Hawfinch, Marsh Tit and Siskin. Throughout the duration of the walk, we carefully checked under dozens of logs lying on the ground in the hope of finding a Fire Salamander but our luck was out on this occasion, however, a Palmate Newt was a good find and several Pill Millipedes kept us entertained for a while.

Following another well-received picnic lunch, we headed east for the Côte des Bar region and a visit of Campagne Drappier; a friendly, family-run and celebrated champagne producer. However, with birds never far from mind, we stopped on a quiet road where no less than five species of raptor graced the air: Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Red Kite, Hen and Marsh Harriers!

Arriving in Urville, we met with our knowledgeable guide Eric, who explained in fascinating detail the organic and natural methods of cultivation and production which underpin the award winning Drappier Champagne. 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 before leaving the area and heading north to our next hotel on the southern shore of Lac du Der.

Day 5

Wednesday 3rd November

Lac du Der

Following a comfortable first night in Giffaumont-Champaubert, we made our way to the best known viewpoint in Der on the Port de Chantecoq. Quickly we made contact with a large herd of Greater White-fronted Geese that were mingled with the more numerous Greylags. As with the first lakes we'd visited to the south, Great White Egrets were incredibly numerous and once more a few White Storks were keeping them company. Mute Swans, Mallards, Teal and lesser numbers of other duck were scattered across the wide expanse of exposed mud intersected by creeks. Then our leisurely scanning ended abruptly, swamped with a wave of excitement as we

spotted the bird celebrity of Der - after the Cranes that is! - in the shape of not one, but two White-tailed Eagles! These were young birds, lacking the trademark white tail but their huge bulk and wingspan were diagnostic. And so followed a memorable twenty minutes as the two youngsters put on a display rarely seen, as they chased each other and flirted with the attendant crows which were doggedly trying to steal scraps. Then, as quickly as they'd appeared, they were gone; somehow absorbed into the vastness of one of Europe's largest waterbodies.

Across the road, a brief stop at the Maison du Parc visitor centre and a hot coffee warmed the cockles. Walking from here, we visited two hides; the second was rather quiet but the first overlooking Etang des Landres had a decent showing of ducks and several Little Grebes. The return walk provided flight views of Redwing and a confiding Green Woodpecker, the latter was much to Jan's delight being rather rare where she lives in Scotland.

With the weather closing in, we opted for lunch in a local café running the gauntlet of 'Madame's' legendary sharp tongue! Here we cherished a hot bowl of soup, some delicious homemade apple pie and a good French coffee, which readied us for the afternoon ahead.

Next we drove to Nuisement Port where we found a flock of a hundred spangled Golden Plover along with a few 'clockwork' Dunlin. And after much speculation over the past days, we eventually caught up with a Little Egret, which was dwarfed by the bird alongside it – a Great White Egret! A walk along the jetty was fruitful too, with a myriad of ducks present; Gadwall, Mallard, Wigeon and Shoveler were numbering in their many hundreds along with a handful of Pintail and at least eight Common Snipe which picked at the mud. Returning to the minibus, we relocated to a more sheltered vantage point where we absorbed the sights and sounds of thousands of Cranes as they streamed overhead before dropping into their roost site on the lake.

Day 6

Thursday 4th November

Lac du Der and Etang de la Horre

A pre-breakfast walk to witness the Cranes leaving their roost was well worth the effort, with the air filled by the ringing cries of tens of thousands of birds leaving to feed in the surrounding fields or to continue their migration south. As incredible as it may sound, we decided the Cranes had been upstaged by the humble Cormorant; we watched in awe as thousands fished the shallow a hundred metres from where we stood. The sound of all those flapping wings and splashing bodies was quite breath-taking.

After a well-earned breakfast, we made a quick visit to the Port de Chantecoq on the off-chance the eagles had returned. Sadly not, but it was nice to see the White-fronts again, along with a lone stork. From here we moved to the Etang du Grand Coulon where Little and Great Crested Grebes fished in groups and a Kingfisher perched briefly just metres from the hide. However, the great surprise came in the form of a single Swallow hawking over the lake - "NON!" came the disbelieving cry from a local birder!

Moving on, we headed to a traditional Long-eared Owl roost, but having drawn a blank, we made an impromptu stop at the nearby splendid half-timbered church of Châtillon-sur-Broué before heading to our lunch stop in the village of Lentilles. Here a picnic bench is conveniently located next to a beautiful 16th century half-timbered church. As lunch was prepared a woodpecker alighted in a dead tree on the square and at last, we laid eyes on the species which had alluded us all week long – a Middle Spotted Woodpecker! It had the good grace to sit patiently for almost five minutes allowing us the rare opportunity to pick out the species' striking and characteristic plain face and pinkish under-tail.

Replete, we drove the short distance to Etang de la Horre where we chatted with a jolly bunch of fisher folk who had just netted the lake for carp. Jan was invited to take to the scales but politely declined. Lapwing, Black-

headed Gull and Mute Swans were all numerous but the hoped-for Bewick's Swans were absent on this occasion. The far lake was dotted with hundreds of duck and grebes and a Kingfisher flashed across the water making a swimming Coypu's progress look rather pedestrian in comparison.

Back at Lac du Der, we arrived at Presqu'île de Champaubert and crossed the foot bridge to the port of Giffaumont, where we were rewarded with yet more hirundines – this time a minimum of ten Swallows, accompanied by singletons of House and Sand Martin! On a jetty in the port, a Little Egret balanced on a hand rail and a Common Sandpiper and Oystercatcher fed quietly in a creek nearby; the latter was a real rarity this far inland. Returning across the footbridge, we took a look at the 'relocated' church and a memorial plaque reminded us of the three villages that disappeared under water when this huge artificial lake was created in 1974. From here, we gained excellent views over the lake and of habitat that was more reminiscent of an estuary, being further emphasised by the large number of Curlews present. A winter-plumaged Slavonian Grebe hanging out with a group of Great Crested Grebes was a good find and an interesting record for Der too. In fading light, we watched for the last time as Cranes flooded back to the lake, with their eerie cries echoing all around.

Day 7

Friday 5th November

Giffaumont-Champaubert – Paris

After breakfast, we made a final visit to the lake where a flock of two dozen White-fronted Geese 'loafed' on the shore amongst a larger number of Greylags. A short walk rewarded us with views of a couple hundred Dunlin, twenty or more Ruff and some Golden Plover. Passerines were present too, a flock of six Woodlark flew overhead and a young male Black Redstart flitted about the dam wall. Late morning we made our way back towards Paris, arriving at Gare du Nord in good time for the Eurostar. Here we said "au revoir" to one another, following what had been an excellent week full of wonderful wildlife and good humour.

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Checklist

Birds

			Date: 30 Oct-05 Nov 2021						
	Common name	Scientific name	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
1	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>						6	
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			200	60	300	300	x
3	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>					53	100	20
4	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	3	15	60	x	250	x	x
5	Tundra Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>			8				
6	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		3					
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				70	150		
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		1	100	150	250	x	x
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		40	300	x	1500	x	x
10	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			100	80	100	40	x
11	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			20	35	70	50	x
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		1	250	200	1000	500	x
13	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>				20	15	4	
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			12	400	200	100	
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					30		
16	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>				1			
17	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			2				
18	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					5	14	
19	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		20	100	x	x	200	x
20	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps autitus</i>						1	
21	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		3	30	30	100	100	x
22	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	50	150	100	400	500	x
23	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					1	5	
24	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		50	200	x	x	400 0	x
25	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	1	5	5	3			2
26	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>					2		
27	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				1			
28	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				1			
29	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1			1		
30	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	10	5	3	12	x	x	x
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2		1	2	1	x	6
32	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			1			h	
33	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			50		x	x	500
34	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		5	1500		5000	600 0	300 0
35	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>						1	
36	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		40	200	x	1500	x	x
37	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					120	4	6
38	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		3	5		23	3	x
39	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			10		6	20	6
40	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			4				
41	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>						1	
42	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						1	
43	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					65		200
44	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>					8		22
45	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	20	200	x	x	x	700	x

			Date: 30 Oct-05 Nov 2021						
	Common name	Scientific name	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
46	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	3	15	30	x	x	x	x
47	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		23	34		7	1	
48	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	100	50	x	x	x	300	800
49	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2	6	x	x	x	x
50	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		1	2		2	2	
51	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>					h		h
52	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>		h	4	h		3	
53	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		h		h	2	4	x
54	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	1				3		
55	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	1	6	x	x	x	x
56	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		6	x	x	x	x	x
57	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>					h	200	
58	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	x	20	x	x	x	x	x
59	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			6	6	1	x	h
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		3	x	x	x	x	x
61	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		1	x	x	x	x	
62	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>							6
63	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		20	20	20	x	x	x
64	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>						1	
65	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>						1	
66	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						11	
67	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>					h		
68	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	h			x		x	x
69	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					h		
70	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			2	4			
71	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			4	x	x	x	
72	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		h	6	x		2	
73	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		h	5	h	h	h	
74	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	c40	x	x	x	x	x	x
75	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	3	x	x	x	x	x
76	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					11		
77	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>					6	x	
78	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			4		h	x	
79	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		3	x	x	x	x	x
80	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		2					1
81	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x
82	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		x	x		x	x	x
83	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		3	x				x
84	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		3	10	x	x	x	x
85	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		100	x	x	x	x	x
86	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			2				
87	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>					3		
88	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		h	h		20		
89	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		2				1	
90	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				5	h	6	
91	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			h		h	3	

Other

Common name	Scientific name
European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>
Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>
Butterflies	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
Dragonflies	
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>
Southern Hawker	<i>Aeshna cyanea</i>
Western Willow Spreadwing	<i>Chalcolestes viridis</i>
Fungi	
Parasol mushroom	<i>Macrolepiota procera</i>
Shaggy parasol	<i>Macrolepiota rachodes</i>
Magpie inkcap	<i>Coprinus picaceus</i>
Shaggy inkcap	<i>Coprinus comatus</i>
Blackening brittlegill	<i>Russula nigricans</i>
Sulphur tuft	<i>Tricholoma sulphureum</i>
Verdigris agaric	<i>Stropharia aeruginosa</i>
Clouded funnel	<i>Clitocybe nebularis</i>
The deceiver	<i>Laccaria laccata</i>
Amethyst deceiver	<i>Laccaria amethystea</i>
Yellow field cap	<i>Bolbitis tiubans</i>
Butter cap	<i>Collybia butyracea</i>
Death cap	<i>Amanita phalloides</i>
False death cap	<i>Amanita citrina</i>
Common bonnet	<i>Mycena galericulata</i>
Lilac bonnet	<i>Mycena Pura</i>
Common earth ball	<i>Scleroderma citrinum</i>
Purple jellydisc	<i>Asocoryne sarcoides</i>
Yellow brain	<i>Tremella mesenterica</i>
Candlesnuff fungus	<i>Xylaria hypoxylon</i>
Devils fingers	<i>Clathrus archeri</i>
Birch polypore	<i>Piptoporus betulinus</i>
Hoof fungus	<i>Fomes fomentarius</i>
Turkey tail	<i>Trametes versicolour</i>
Meadow coral?	<i>Clavulinopsis corniculata</i>
Purple brittlegill?	<i>Russula atropurpurea</i>
Mild milk cap?	<i>Lactarius subdulcis</i>
	<i>Ramaria aurea?</i>