

# Go Slow in the Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 28th May 2023

---



Camargue White Horses



Glossy Ibis



Common Kingfisher



Black-winged Stilt

Tour report and images by Marcus John

---



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants: Marcus John and Lol Bodini (Leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

**Sunday 21st May**

After flight changes, some of the group had arrived the previous day and so came back to Marseilles airport to meet up with the rest of us mid-afternoon. Marcus and Lol collected our vehicles, we bought sandwiches and drove off to our hotel. On the way, we passed a wetland containing both Black-winged Stilts and Avocets, as well as getting our first views of the stony plains of La Crau. Once at the hotel, we had time to settle in before an introductory talk from Marcus and the first delicious, three-course dinner.

## Day 2

**Monday 22nd May**

### La Capelière - Étang de Vaccarés - Mas d'Agon

Our pre-breakfast walk was very productive. We heard a male Little Bustard calling and soon had good views through Marcus's scope. Although partially hidden by the vegetation, we could clearly see his head and neck, with puffed out black feathers neatly demarcated by thin white borders. Tom spotted a male Montagu's Harrier as it flew low across the wheat fields. Also of interest was a roost of over 20 Cattle Egrets; several more were also feeding close to the track.

After a good breakfast, we set off in warm sunshine, driving around Arles and into the Camargue. We were heading for the huge lake that lies at the heart of the wetlands, Étang de Vaccarés. But before we reached our destination, we had to stop three times: once each for Roller, Bee-eater and Short-toed Eagle!

We spent the rest of the morning exploring the reserve of La Capelière. An active White Stork nest next to the car park was a good start. As we followed the circular, two-kilometre path through shady woodland and across scrubby areas, it took us to a number of hides and viewpoints overlooking various lakes and pools. We had great views of a range of wetland birds, including Red-crested Pochard, Greater Flamingo, Glossy Ibis, Cattle Egret, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, migrant Grey Plover (in breeding plumage) and Zitting Cisticola.

After our first picnic lunch, we drove slowly back around Étang de Vaccarés, stopping frequently to check the lake shore and adjacent fields. Another Roller and two more Bee-eaters did not stay long but everyone had good scope views of a pair of Red-backed Shrikes. From the Mas d'Agon viewpoint, we enjoyed watching Glossy Ibis, Cattle Egrets and Black-winged Stilts feeding around a small group of the famous white horses. We also found our first blue-headed Yellow Wagtails and Corn Buntings.

As we headed back past Arles, a huge thunderstorm brought torrential rain, so we were very glad to get back to our hotel!

On our evening walk we saw our first Night-heron as it flew past at dusk. But only David saw a single Little Owl, which eluded the rest of us.

## Day 3

**Tuesday 23rd May**

### Salon de Giraud - Plage de Piémanson - Le Sambuc - Étang de Vaccarés

On our pre-breakfast walk, we again saw the calling Little Bustard and this time, we found a second bird in the same large field, from where a single Stone Curlew took flight. A flock of Gull-billed Terns looked superb as they fed low over a wheat field in the early morning sun. Better still, a Roller flew across, the sun catching the iridescent blue on its wings.

Today we drove all the way down through Salon de Giraud to the beach of Piémanson. We stopped near the village of Le Sambuc to check flooded paddy fields and were rewarded with another fly-past from a Roller. Glossy Ibis, Egrets and more Gull-billed Terns were numerous, and we saw our first Short-toed Eagle of the day.

The main focus for the morning was the avifauna of the vast saltpans that lie south of Salin de Giraud (and give the town its name). Most obvious were hundreds of Greater Flamingos, sometimes singly, sometimes in big flocks. On one island we found a number of Spoonbills breeding amongst Cormorants and Yellow-legged Gulls. On another island, a large flock of migrant waders contained hundreds of Dunlin, 20 Grey Plover, Curlew and Redshank. Other waders seen included several Kentish Plovers and our first Common Sandpiper. Perhaps the rarest species seen was Slender-billed Gull; a group of six flew quite close to us. A flock of Little Terns were a charming sight, and we found our first Sandwich Terns. We greatly enjoyed getting good views of several Blue-headed Wagtails, a pair of Whinchats and an obliging Sardinian Warbler - at one point we had all three species together in the same small tree!

After a coffee stop in Le Sambuc, we enjoyed a leisurely picnic lunch before driving along the shores of Étang de Vaccarés and back around Arles to the hotel. As we parked the vans, a Short-toed Eagle flew quite low overhead - making a total of six for the day!

## Day 4

**Wednesday 24th May**

### Les Baux de Provence - Arles

Today we headed north into the Alpilles mountains, our destination being Les Baux-de-Provence, a picturesque hilltop village that has a long and fascinating history. Inhabited for 8,000 years, it was fortified by the Romans before reaching its zenith in the 11th Century, when the princes of Baux ruled over much of Provence.

As soon as we got out of the vans, we saw several Alpine Swifts as they flew across the limestone cliffs. We walked around the base of the hill to a small Roman temple, finding Swallowtail and Spanish Gatekeeper butterflies. As we returned, Lol found a Blue Rock Thrush high on one of the rock faces; we were able to get better views through the scope. Lots of Crag Martins were also flying around, our first of the tour. Several Sardinian Warblers and Cirl Buntings were singing but we only had brief views.

We walked up through the narrow, winding streets to the summit, finding at least three Black Redstarts and one Serin. Two more Swallowtail butterflies were much easier to see and photograph at the top. Before returning to our vehicles, we stopped at one of the many cafes to enjoy the ambience of this unique location.

We drove into Arles to enjoy our picnic lunch in the Jardin d'Été, a public park made famous by Van Gogh. We were surprised to find our first Tree Sparrows and Greenfinch here. As clouds were beginning to build, we headed back to the hotel to enjoy a relaxed afternoon and for some, a swim in the pool. After dinner, a few of us had a lively game of pétanque!

## Day 5

Thursday 25th May

### St Martin de Crau - Peau de Meau - Marais de Vigueirat

It was cool and cloudy when we arrived in St Martin de Crau, the small town that houses the office of the conservation body for La Crau. This large area of flat, steppe-like habitat lies immediately east of the Camargue and was formerly the flood plain of the river Durance. A flat, arid and rocky plain, it is home to some very special birds. With our permits secured, we drove into the reserve of Peau de Meau.

As we walked out onto the plain, it began to rain, and the temperature was 17 degrees. We soon find a pair of Iberian Grey Shrikes and had great views through the scope. Greater Short-toed Larks were calling all around us but were very hard to see: we did eventually find them as they sang overhead. We heard several Stone Curlew, but they are perfectly camouflaged in this habitat, so only a few of us managed to see one!

As we walked back towards our vehicles, Lol found a superb Tawny Pipit sat right at the top of a bush. We also had our first proper look at a singing Melodious Warbler. In a little stream that runs along the edge of the reserve, we found several Banded Demoiselles.

We spent the afternoon at the excellent wetland reserve of Marais du Vigueirat. The sun finally came out as we drove slowly along the entrance road and we had good views of Roller, Bee-eater and a pair of Common Cuckoos. As we ate our picnic, a group of Glossy Ibis flew over and a Hobby was hawking overhead. When we entered the reserve, we soon saw our first Great Egrets, Purple Herons and Common Terns. Three Coots showed well, both Common and Green Lizards scurried across the boardwalk and European Pond Turtles swam very close to one of the hides. In a shallow, reedy part of the reserve there were at least twenty pairs of Black-winged Stilts, some sitting on nests only 50 metres from the path!

## Day 6

Friday 26th May

### Parc Ornithologique Pont de Gau - Les Baux de Provence

Today the weather reverted to the normal sunshine and temperatures in the high 20s. We drove around to the western shores of the Étang de Vaccarès to visit the Parc Ornithologique Pont de Gau.

We were greeted by a hawking Hobby as we parked the vans after the 40-minute drive. We had a brief introduction from Marcus and then spent about an hour and a half walking around the southern half of the reserve, which was teeming with wetland birds, most of which were very approachable. Islands in the shallow lagoons were home to several heronries which contained Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret and Glossy Ibis. Dozens of Flamingos were clustered in groups and there were Black-winged Stilts everywhere! This reserve used to be focused on the

rehabilitation of injured birds and many of the breeding birds are semi-habituated; it is a photographers' paradise! A large breeding colony of Mediterranean Gulls was a noisy spectacle and they were joined by both Little and Common Terns. There were a small number of White Stork nests, a couple of Spoonbills and several Avocets were also feeding on the lagoons.

After a break for drinks in the shady, open-air café, we visited the larger northern area of Pont de Gau, where birds are not habituated. We saw mostly the same species, but we also had our only views of Western Swamphen. A couple of us briefly saw a singing Moustached Warbler. Other passerines seen well included Cetti's Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Reed Warbler and Yellow Wagtail.

After another delicious picnic lunch, we drove back to the hotel via an area renowned for Camargue's white horses and sure enough, we found a small herd resting behind a reedy mire - lots of photos were taken!

After dinner, most of us headed out towards Les Baux-de-Provence, to look for Eagle Owl. We arrived on site at dusk and within minutes we heard the haunting call. After patient scanning, we found the Eagle Owl perched on the limestone cliffs. Everyone had good scope views of "Le Grand-Duc". Nightjars were also calling nearby, and a large bat species flew very close.

## Day 7

**Saturday 27th May**

### Reserve de Scamandre

We spent the day in the less well-known area to the west of the "Petit Rhône", known as the "Petite Camargue". The main site that we visited was the reserve at Scamandre. We knew that we were going to have a good day when we found a relatively confiding Hoopoe in the area next to the reception building - the very bird that the majority most wanted to see!

As we walked out through the tamarisks and giant reeds, the open water held a tremendous variety of wetland birds (and several Coots). We saw our first Great Crested Grebes, alongside Red-crested Pochard, Flamingo and three species of egret. Grey, Purple and Squacco Herons flew overhead, and several Common Terns fed close to the boardwalks. Several Reed Warblers showed surprisingly well, and we saw Cetti's Warbler.

After visiting the main hides, we walked out to a viewpoint that overlooked a very large heronry. This was simply stunning! Dozens of bright Cattle Egrets were nesting side-by-side with Little Egrets, Purple Herons, Squacco Herons and Black-crowned Night Herons.

We were joined at our picnic lunch by the resident Hoopoe, which flew around several times. We then left the reserve to drive along quiet roads to the Pont de Tourradons. Here we could scan the open water and reedy islands of the Petite Camargue, where we soon found a flock of somewhat distant Collared Pratincoles and a few Whiskered Terns. A Golden Oriole was calling nearby but we just couldn't see it.

A problem with one of the vans meant an extra hour back at Scamandre but this gave us an opportunity to photograph the Hoopoe and an obliging Squacco Heron. We arrived back at the hotel a little later than planned but very pleased with our day.

## Day 8

Sunday 28th May

### Arles - Marseilles Marignane Airport

After our final breakfast, some of us headed into Arles, whilst others chose to “chill” around the pool for a couple of hours. In the early afternoon, we headed back to the airport and arrived in good time to catch our flight home. It had been a truly memorable week in a bird-rich area of southern France. We had enjoyed taking our time to truly appreciate the scenery and the cultural heritage of Provence.

## Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) to sign up.

## Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



[www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays](https://www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays)



[www.twitter.com/naturetrektours](https://www.twitter.com/naturetrektours)



[www.instagram.com/naturetrek\\_wildlife\\_holidays](https://www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays)

## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	2	20			10	20	20	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		1	30			4	6	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>					4	4	4	
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		6			2		5	
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>							2	
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>						H		
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>					H		H	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		1						
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>							6	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	40	100	400		2	400	50	30
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	2	6	8		4	12	6	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		50	50		10	60	100	1
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			18			2	4	
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		1					6	
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>							5	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					3		4	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		1	1		3		3	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		4	6	1	1			
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1				
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		1						
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1	1					
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	6	4	6	1	6	7	3	1
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	1		1		1	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>								2
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		1	2	1	1	1	1	1
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					H			
Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>							1	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>	1		1		1			H
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			1					
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	2	6	3		50	80	10	2
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	3	4	12			6	2	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			2					
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		2	20					
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			2					
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		3	5					
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		3	2					
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			1					
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1					
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			320					
Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	1						7	
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			6					

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>		5	25	8	7	4	2	4
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			2					
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		2	14			4	1	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>					2	4	8	
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>							4	
Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		H					H	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H	1		3	H	2	
Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>						1		
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1				H		
European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>						H		
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>				12				
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>	1	2	6		3	2	1	3
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					1			
European Bee-Eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		3			4	4	4	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>							H	2
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>							1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	4		3	2			
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>							1	
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	1	1			2	1		
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>		2						
Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>					2			
Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		H					H	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				2				
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓		✓				
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓				
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					4			
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		2		1		1	1	
Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>					10			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				10				
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		1						
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		3			4			
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		H			H	2	2	
Moustached Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus melanopogon</i>						1		
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		H			1	1	H	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		H	1	1	1	3		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			1	1	1	1		
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				3	1		1	
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2				
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			2					
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				3			3	
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		2	4		2	1	1	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>					1			
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				3				
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					1	1	H	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				1				
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		1		4	2		2	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				1				2
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		2	1	2	H			
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1				
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			1					

## Others

		May 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
BUTTERFLIES									
Scarce Swallowtail	<i>Iphiclides podarlis</i>		✓						
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				✓				
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>					✓			
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>				✓				
Spanish Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia bathseba</i>				✓				
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria aegeria</i>		✓		✓				
Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>					✓			
MOTHS									
Garden Tiger	<i>Arctia caja</i>								
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>								
Spurge Hawkmoth (caterpillar)	<i>Hyles euphorbiae</i>								
ODONATA									
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>						✓		
Copper Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx haemorrhoidalis</i>					✓		✓	
Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>								
Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>					✓		✓	
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>		✓						✓
Blue Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Scarlet Darter/Broad Scarlet	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
						✓			
OTHER INSECTS									

Common name	Scientific name	May 2023							
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
European Stick Insect	<i>Bacillus rossius</i>					✓			
Carpenter bee sp.			✓						
Grasshopper sp.					✓	✓			
<b>MAMMALS</b>									
Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>					3	8	4	
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>								3
<b>REPTILES/AMPHIBIANS</b>									
European Pond Turtle	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>			2					
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	1			1				2
Western Green Lizard	<i>Lacerta bilineata</i>					2		1	
Ladder Snake	<i>Rhinechis scalaris</i>						1		
Stripeless Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	H							
Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>	H	H			H		H	
Lizard sp.						4		2	