

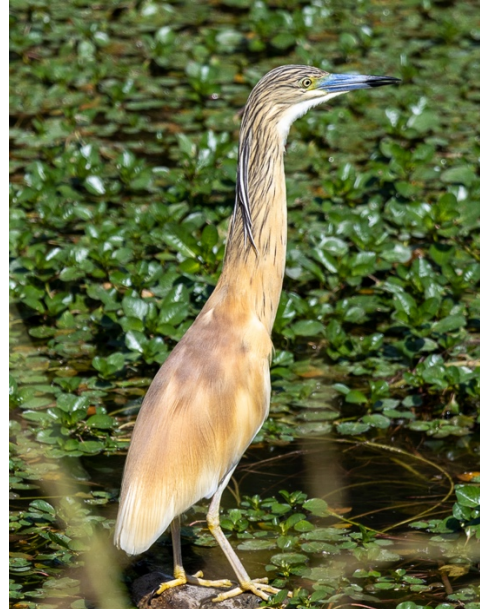
Go Slow in the Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th May – 4th June 2023



Glossy Ibis



Squacco Heron



Cattle Egret



Black-winged Stilt

Tour report and images by Marcus John



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

Day 1

Sunday 28th May

Marseilles Airport - Hotel Des Granges (Arles)

After an afternoon arrival at Marseilles Marignane airport, there was plenty of time to check in and relax around the pool before an introductory talk from Marcus and the first of many superb three-course dinners, featuring the best of local ingredients.

Day 2

Monday 29th May

Mas de la Capelière - Digue à la Mer - Chemin de Fangassier - Bras de Fer

After breakfast, we walked out along the track behind the hotel, which leads into mixed farmland. We soon heard the distinctive sound of a calling Little Bustard and some of us were able to see it through the scope. Gull-billed Terns flew past, and we heard the lovely song of the Nightingale.

At 10 o'clock, we drove around Arles and entered the Camargue national park for the first time. We soon pulled over to watch a high-flying Montagu's Harrier. As it flew off, we spotted another raptor flying low over an adjacent field, which turned out to be a Marsh Harrier. And finally, as we drove away, we flushed a huge Short-toed Snake Eagle from a roadside tree!

We spent the rest of the morning visiting the reserve at Mas de la Capeliere, where we saw a wide range of wetland species typical of the Camargue. These included Red-crested Pochard, Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, White Stork and Glossy Ibis. We also saw Zitting Cisticola and Melodious Warbler but better still, we were all able to watch a singing Nightingale.

After our picnic lunch, we drove out onto La Digue à la Mer and along the shores of the Étang de Fangassier, we found a lovely little pair of Kentish Plover. Crested Larks were also present, and a pair of Slender-billed Gulls flew low across the water (our only sighting of the tour).

We stopped on our way back to the hotel to check another Short-toed Snake Eagle and within minutes, we were simultaneously watching three feeding Bee-eaters, a blue-headed Yellow Wagtail and a Turtle Dove! We returned to the hotel with time to relax before dinner.

Day 3

Tuesday 30th May

Reserve de Scamandre

This morning, several of us rose early to walk along the lanes behind the hotel. It was rather cool and slightly misty after yesterday's thunderstorms; the Alpilles mountains were shrouded in low cloud. But the sun soon burnt off the mist and the early morning light was wonderful. We all enjoyed excellent views of the calling Little Bustard through the scope. A small flock of Gull-billed Terns looked beautiful as they flew low over the golden barley.

Today our destination was the Petite Camargue, which lies to the west of the Petit Rhône. Soon after we crossed the river, we stopped when we saw a Bee-eater fly across the road. For the next twenty minutes we were captivated by a flock of at least ten birds as they swooped low around the feet of black bulls; frequently one would perch in a low shrub, allowing close views through the scope.

Once we finally arrived at the Scamandre reserve, we walked out to view the huge heronry. We could hear the gurgling calls of Little and Cattle Egrets some time before we could actually see them. The nests extend across a wide area, and many are not visible so it's impossible to count but there are certainly hundreds. In addition to the aforementioned, other birds nesting here are Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron and Glossy Ibis - all of which we could see from our vantage point! Elsewhere around the reserve we also found Great Egret and Little Bittern, though the latter only briefly in flight. We also enjoyed good views of Red-

Crested Pochard, Greater Flamingo, Common Tern and White Storks on their nests. We saw several Coypu, including two tiny youngsters right next to the boardwalk! This reserve is also good for dragonflies; at one viewpoint we watched several Black-tailed Skimmers, Lesser Emperors and Scarlet Darters flying together.

As it was a very hot afternoon, we headed straight back to the hotel from the reserve to cool off and enjoy a relaxed late afternoon. After dinner, some of us strolled out along the lanes to look for Little Owl and we were rewarded with good views of a bird perched on a telegraph pole.

Day 4

Wednesday 31st May

Arles - Marais d'Agon - Mas de l'Ange

The weather forecast was for rain and possible thunderstorms, so we headed into Arles for the morning. We sauntered through the Wednesday market, enjoying the bustling atmosphere. Marcus also picked up a few local delicacies for our picnic lunch. We walked through the Jardin d'Été, where Van Gogh painted his "Entrance to a public park in Arles" and on up to the amphitheatre. This impressive Roman building was extensively renovated in the 19th century and lies at the heart of this ancient town. We enjoyed browsing the many "ateliers" and stopped for coffee on the terrace of a cafe overlooking the golden stone walls. Dozens of Common Swifts screamed around us (they nest in the cracks between the stones of the amphitheatre) and we saw several Black Redstarts.

We returned to the hotel for a short break and to enjoy a relaxed picnic lunch. After that, we headed back out into the Camargue and the flooded fields and lagoons around Mas d'Agon. Amongst dozens of Coot were a few Red-crested Pochard. A Great Bittern flew across, our first of the tour, and a Black-crowned Night Heron, a Spoonbill, and total of three Purple Herons also flew over. We heard two very loud Great Reed Warblers, but they stayed hidden in the reeds. Much more obliging was a family of Bearded Tits, which sat up in the reeds only about 20 metres in front of us! We also had good views of Reed Warbler and Zitting Cisticola. Before heading back to the hotel, we stopped at Mas de l'Ange and had great views of a close pair of Squacco Herons and were surprised to see seven Purple Herons in the air together.

Day 5

Thursday 1st June

Marais de Vigueirat - Salin de Giraud

Today our main destination was the large wetland reserve at Vigueirat. The morning was bright and sunny as we drove the long entrance track and before we even arrived in the car park, we stopped to admire three Bee-eaters, one of which duly perched up on a fence post.

Having paid our entrance fees, we set off on the "Palette" trail that runs for three kilometres around the entire perimeter. The first lagoon contained several species of heron and egret but as there was nothing new, we continued our walk, listening to the songs of Nightingale, Cetti's Warbler and Reed Warbler as we continued through a shady section that led to the first of two large hides. Before we even entered, Marcus stopped us because a Kingfisher was perched on a post just three metres in front of the window! It soon flew away when we entered but to our delight, another flew up about 20 metres away and proceeded to fish right in front of us for the next ten minutes!

We continued along the trail until we reached an area of reedy marsh, where a small herd of white horses were feeding. It was a classic Camargue scene, even including two young, chestnut-brown foals. Another great photographic opportunity!

We eventually walked away from the horses and back into another wooded area. Here we heard both Turtle Dove and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker but frustratingly, neither could be seen. We had more luck at the second hide, where we saw four Great Egrets, a Purple Heron feeding out in the open, a close European Pond Turtle and two Marsh Frogs.

After our usual picnic, we drove down to Salin de Giraud, via the ferry across the Rhône. We stopped to enjoy the view of the pink saltpans just south of the town, truly a remarkable sight. We continued south to explore the old

salines and found a range of interesting birds including Kentish and Common Ringed Plover. In the far distance were a flock of about a thousand Flamingos, one of which flew all the way across and almost over our heads! It was soon time to return to the hotel, though we did have one last, brief stop to admire a Roller perched high in a roadside tree.

After dinner we set off to the foothills of the Alpilles to look for a very special bird. We arrived as dusk was falling and after a few minutes, we heard the haunting sound of an Eagle Owl. It flew across between two cliffs, showing well against the sky before alighting on a high perch, where we were able to admire it through the scopes. Before we left, we also heard and then saw European Nightjar.

Day 6

Friday 2nd June

Les Baux de Provence - La Caume - La Civadière (Aureille)

Today was a complete contrast to the wetlands of the Camargue as we headed up into the low mountains of the Alpilles. We started with a walk around the base of the cliffs below the picturesque village of Les Baux-de-Provence. Almost as soon as got out of the vehicle, Marcus found a Blue Rock Thrush on the edge of a high escarpment, and we all had good views through the scopes. Crag Martins were coursing through the air and were joined by three Alpine Swifts. We saw a Sardinian Warbler and heard a Cirl Bunting.

Walking slowly up through the village we stopped to buy ice-creams and to find a singing Black Redstart. Then from the plateau at the very top, we had point-blank views of Crag Martins flying past at eye level. We returned to have a coffee on the terrace of a friendly cafe before leaving for our picnic. This we had in the open pine woodland of La Caume, where we found a singing Redstart.

Our last stop of the day was at the stunning location of La Civadière, Aureille. We scanned the limestone crags and soon found our main target: a Bonelli's Eagle perched right at the top of a high peak. Although distant, it was readily identifiable through a scope, and we later saw it in flight. Before we left, Lol spotted six Griffon Vultures soaring high in the far distance. By sheer coincidence, as we drove back across the farmland near our hotel, two more were flying much closer and we pulled over to enjoy excellent views of this huge raptor. A great way to complete a memorable day!

Day 7

Saturday 3rd June

Parc Ornithologique Pont de Gau - Peau de Beau (La Crau)

Our last full day was spent back in the Camargue at the famous Parc Ornithologique Pont de Gau. This began life as a rehabilitation centre for injured birds but attracted wild birds as well and over many years it has evolved into an outstanding reserve. Though wild, the birds on the smaller southern section are very approachable - a photographers' paradise! We spent two hours getting incredibly close views of Flamingo, White Stork, Glossy Ibis, Grey Heron, Cattle and Little Egret, Black-winged Stilt and Avocet. There is also a large Mediterranean Gull colony with at least a hundred pairs on an island only 50 metres from the path. We also saw several Common and Little Terns, as well as Cetti's, Reed and Moustached Warblers.

Having spent around two hours in the southern section, we met up for drinks in the cafe before most of us walked out to the northern section. From the path, Coypus were much in evidence along with two more Spoonbills. We spent an enjoyable twenty minutes in a hide watching Avocets, Little Terns and a very close Sardinian Warbler before it was time to walk back for our last picnic.

We finished our day with a visit to the Peau de Meau reserve on La Crau. This steppe-like, flat and stony plain holds some unusual species. We saw a pair of Crested Larks on the path and heard several Short-toed Larks - but only had tantalisingly brief views. Much easier to admire was a pair of distinctive Iberian Grey Shrikes. Before we left, we finally managed to find a couple of Hoopoes; though somewhat distant, these were the first we'd seen!

Day 8

Sunday 4th June

Hotel Des Granges - Fontvieille - Marseilles Marignane Airport

Before heading off to the airport and our flight home, we had a last drive around the gravel lanes between our hotel and the village of Fontvieille. Marcus and Lol took their time to check posts, wires and old building and eventually this paid off when we found two Hoopoes that flew close across the road and away to a nearby farm. Marcus then found a Little Owl perched on the barn roof of the very same farm and we all had great views through the scopes. What a lovely way to complete the tour!

We said farewell to Pascal and Christine, who had looked after us so well, and arrived at the airport in plenty of time for our flights home. It had been a memorable week in the Camargue with a variety of birds (and other wildlife) in a truly stunning location. We had also had time to enjoy the town of Arles and the picturesque village of Les Baux de Provence. And every day featured relaxed picnics and excellent three-course dinners at our comfortable hotel.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	May - June 2023							
		28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					31			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				2				
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		4	7	8				
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				H	2			
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			9	1				
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		100	40	10	1000		250	20
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		3	4	1	17		6	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		20	60	50	50		50	
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>				1			3	
Eurasian Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>				1				
Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>			1					
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>			10	1	1		1	
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			4	2				
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			10	2	8		15	
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		1	4	10	2			
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			1	1	6		1	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		2	1					
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>						1		
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		1						
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1						
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			1	2	3	2	1	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>							9	
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		1	1	1		2	1	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2	1	2	1		2	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		1	2	30	12		12	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		1						
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		7	4	6	10		30	2
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		2			2		10	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					8			
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>					2			
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		3			2			
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		1						
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>		2						
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>		5	6	2			5	
Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>							8	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			10	1	2		4	

Common name	Scientific name	May - June 2023							
		28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		1			H	3		
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H	1	H	H		H	
Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>					1			
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1					1
European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>					1			
Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>						3		
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>			2	2	4	2	1	
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1		2			
European Bee-Eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>		3	10		3			
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>							3	2
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocops minor</i>					H			
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1		2	2	2		
Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>			1					
Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>							2	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>							1	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>						✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓				✓	✓	
Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>				4				
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>						H		
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>							H	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		2	4	4			H	
Greater Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>							H	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>						10		
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			✓		✓			
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	1	H	H		1	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H						
Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>			H	H	H			
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>			2	4			2	
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		H	1					
Moustached Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus melanopogon</i>							1	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		1	1	1	H		10	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		H	H	1		2	2	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1				H		
Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		3	H	H	H	1	2	H
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				3		1		
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>						1		
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>						2		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			3					
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		3			2			

Common name	Scientific name	May - June 2023							
		28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>				1	3	1		
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>						3		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			H				1	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>						H		
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			2					
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>						H		
Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				1				

Others

		May - June 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
BUTTERFLIES									
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>						✓		
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>							✓	
Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>						✓		
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>				✓		✓	✓	
Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i>						✓	✓	
Spanish Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia bathseba</i>						✓	✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria aegeria</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
MOTHS									
Spurge Hawkmoth (caterpillar)	<i>Hyles euphorbiae</i>					✓			
Six-spot Burnet	<i>Zygaena filipendulae</i>)						✓		
ODONATA									
Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx splendens</i>					✓		✓	
Blue-tailed Damselfly	<i>Ischnura elegans</i>			✓	✓	✓			
Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthanope</i>			✓					
Scarlet Darter/Broad Scarlet	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>			✓		✓			
Black-tailed Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum cancellatum</i>		✓	✓		✓			
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>					✓			
MAMMALS									
Bat sp.						1			
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			2				1	
Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>		4	7	6	2		4	
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>					1			
REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS									
European Pond Turtle	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>				✓	✓		✓	
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>				✓		✓		
Common Lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>			✓		✓		✓	
Ladder Snake	<i>Rhinechis scalaris</i>					✓			
Stripeless Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>				✓				
Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>		✓	✓		✓			

				✓		✓		✓	
OTHER TAXA									
European Stick Insect	<i>Bacillus rossius</i>					✓			
Grasshopper sp.					✓				
Millipede sp.				✓					
Common Carp	<i>Cyprinus carpio</i>			✓	✓	✓			