Go Slow in the Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Report

17th - 24th May 2025







Broad Scarlet



Stripeless Tree Frog



Avocet

Tour report by Marcus John



Tour participants: Marcus John and Neil Murphy (leaders) with fourteen Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 17th May

London – Marseille – Arles

Our late afternoon flight landed on time, and it did not take long to pick up our vehicles and head out of the airport and onto the road north towards Arles. We arrived at the hotel in the early evening and were delighted to hear a Nightingale singing in the garden. We enjoyed an excellent dinner before heading off to bed, ahead of an early start the next day.

Day 2

Sunday 18th May

Mas d'Agon – La Capelière

Most of us met at 6.45am for a walk down the lane which ran behind the hotel. The undoubted highlight was a male Little Bustard, which was calling and displaying in a field of alfalfa; we had great views through the scopes. Several Red-legged Partridges were seen on the lane and in the field opposite. Better still, we found a single Stone-curlew. Other species typical of this area of mixed farmland were Zitting Cisticola and Melodious Warbler, which both showed well. We even had a brief Roller!

After breakfast, we drove to the well-known area of Mas d'Agon, in the heart of the Camargue. We found two flocks of feeding Bee-eaters, getting close views. Dozens of Glossy Ibises were feeding in the rice paddies, along with good numbers of Mediterranean Gulls. There were Little and Cattle Egrets galore, and Gull-billed Terns seemed to be everywhere! Perhaps the most unusual sight was a pair of soaring Honey Buzzards.

Next, we visited the reserve of La Capelière. As soon as we arrived, we stopped to watch a White Stork nest with three youngsters, which was visible from the car park. We then walked the 2.5km circular trail, where the best bird was a Purple Heron, in fine breeding plumage. We also saw a pair of Red-crested Pochards, two Common Cuckoos chasing each other, a confiding Melodious Warbler, and even an elusive Nightingale.

On our way back, we drove back along the Chemin de Mas d'Agon and saw a good variety of birds: Marsh Harrier, three Great Egrets, two Spoonbills, and yet more Bee-eaters. We had closer views of another pair of Red-crested Pochards swimming in a flooded field. We were delayed by a big traffic jam on the D570, which necessitated a detour along the Chemin de Palun Longue. This actually provided good birding and close views of both white horses and black bulls.

Day 3

Monday 19th May

Marais de Vigueirat - Fontvieille area

Our early morning walk behind the hotel was successful: we saw a hunting Hobby and had even better views of the displaying Little Bustard. Group of Melodious Warblers were flying around the rape field, giving good views.

Rabbits and Serins were gathered on the gravel track, and on the walk back, two Stone-curlews called as they flew over the alfalfa field.

Most of our day was spent visiting the excellent reserve of Marais de Vigueirat. The weather was thankfully cooler than yesterday, and some high cloud made for perfect viewing conditions. We set off to walk anticlockwise around the Sentier des Palunettes, but had not gone far when we stopped to look across the main area of open water, where 63 Glossy Ibises and 3 Squacco Herons were present. Purple, Grey and Night Herons all flew across, as did a hunting Lesser Kestrel. In addition, there was a pair of Red-crested Pochards, a pair of Black-winged Stilts, a single Wood Sandpiper and several Common Terns. When we finally continued our way, a client found a beautiful Stripeless Tree Frog resting a reed right next to the path: a great photo opportunity! We had incredibly close views of White Storks on the nest, and found a group of European Pond Turtles. Black-tailed Skimmers were abundant, alongside several species of damselfly. Some of us had magnificent views of a Honey Buzzard as it flew slowly overhead.

We enjoyed a leisurely picnic lunch at the reserve, before heading back to the hotel for a mid-afternoon break. At 5.00pm we set off for the Alpilles, but we had only been driving for five minutes when we turned off the main road and immediately found two superb Rollers. We heard the characteristic raspberry call of Little Bustard, and realised there were three males chasing each other around a weedy field, close to the road. Next was a Stone-curlew in a strip of scrubby, bare ground, and then more Rollers at a cherry orchard. We also saw a couple of Hoopoes in flight and several Corn Buntings, and heard calling Quail. It was an amazing ninety minutes!

Day 4

Tuesday 20th May

Piemanson - Marais de Verdier - Mas de l'Olivie

It was an hour's drive south to the beach at Piemanson, but there was so much to see that it took longer! We first stopped to watch a flock of 70 Glossy Ibises feeding close to the road. Then, just south of Salin de Giraud, we paused to admire the salt mountain and the extensive pink saltpans. We made several birding stops on the way to and from Piemanson, where shallow, brackish lagoons held hundreds of Greater Flamingoes, which looked beautiful when they flew in lines low across the blue sky. Approximately forty Spoonbills roosted together on a low island, and on another island was a small group of breeding Yellow-legged Gulls, with several well-grown chicks. We saw at least forty Slender-billed Gulls, some at remarkably close range, along with our first Kentish Plovers and Avocets. Everyone had good views of Iberian Yellow Wagtail, with its white throat distinguishing it from the commoner Blue-headed race. Caspian and Sandwich Terns roosted on a sand bar, while several Little Terns were feeding closer to the road.

Once we finally arrived, the beach was deserted and looked beautiful in the warm sunshine. Two different sizes of distant shearwaters meant that the larger were certainly Scopoli's, and the smaller were Yelkouans. Much closer was a fly-past second-year Gannet.

We headed back north and stopped at the Café de Sambuc for a coffee break, before enjoying a relaxed picnic lunch at the local reserve of Marais de Verdier. Here, we watched a smart adult male Marsh Harrier and saw a couple of Great Reed Warblers. Both Grey and Purple Herons flew low in front of the viewing platform. We heard

male and female Cuckoos calling as we ate our lunch, and then watched two males chasing a female from the platform.

After dinner we set off for the nearby Eagle-Owl watchpoint at Mas de'lOlivie, arriving at sunset. Sadly, no owls were seen or heard, but we did hear churring Nightjars, and saw two flying against the darkening sky.

Day 5

Wednesday 21st May

Arles - Aureilles - Fontvieille area

As this was a "Go Slow" tour, we had plenty of time for a relaxed visit to the historic town of Arles, which was just a short drive from our hotel. We spent the whole morning walking through the extensive street market and exploring the Roman remains in the heart of the town. We lingered in the Jardin d'Été, a shady little park made famous by Van Gogh, who painted some of his most famous works in Arles.

The Roman amphitheatre was hugely impressive and dominated the old centre. Modelled on the Colosseum in Rome, and built at around the same time, it held over 20,000 spectators and played host to many gladiatoral events. It was restored in the nineteenth century and is now surrounded by artisanal shops and cafes. The taller buildings here were home to breeding Common Swifts and Black Redstarts, the latter often found perching on the Roman walls. One client even found a male Common Redstart singing in the park!

After a delicious lunch back at the hotel, we set off for the village of Aureilles, where we enjoyed breath-taking views of the Alpilles from a roadside viewpoint. Some of us opted to stay and scan the craggy limestone peaks from the car park, whilst others went for a stroll through the garrigue habitat, to look for passerines. We saw good numbers of raptors, especially Common Kestrels and Short-toed Snake Eagles. However, the undoubted highlight for everyone was watching a pair of Bonelli's Eagles as they displayed above the highest peak, before diving down to mob a passing Griffon Vulture! This is a very scarce breeding bird across its European range, and we felt privileged to have watched such an unusual interaction.

Day 6

Thursday 22nd May

La Crau – Marais de Verdier

Our early morning walk was a little different today, as we set off in the vans to explore the open farmland a little further away from the hotel. It was very productive, as we saw a total of five Little Bustards and found a Little Owl perched on a tumbledown barn in the early morning sunshine.

We popped into the Ecomusee in St Martin de Crau to pick up our permit, and then drove to the reserve at Peau de Meau. Just before the car park, we stopped to look at several raptors. We had good views of low-flying Griffon Vultures and Short-toed Snake Eagles, but more surprising was a single Egyptian Vulture: an excellent sighting!

It was a windy morning and so bird activity was quiet in the wide-open expanse of the Coussouls de Crau, but everyone appreciated the unique landscape and atmosphere of this remarkable place. We did find a family of

Iberian Grey Shrikes; the parents were feeding but always staying in sight of their chicks, which were hiding in a low bush.

We headed back into the Camargue to enjoy our picnic once again at Marais de Verdier (a few people dropped into the Café de Sambuc for a coffee on the way). After eating our fill of baguette, corn bread, local cheeses, ham, fresh salad, fruit and cakes, we went for a walk around the perimeter of the lake and reedbed. It was very pleasant strolling in the warm sunshine, and we were excited to see another Cuckoo, along with a Purple Heron. Better still, Neil found a hunting male Montagu's Harrier. It stayed in view for several minutes, so that everyone could admire its pale grey and black plumage, and its slow, buoyant flight. It was a wonderful way to round off another successful day!

Day 7

Friday 23rd May

Pont de Gau - Cacherel

Our last full day was spent visiting the most well-known site in all the Camargue. It attracts a lot of visitors, but most people stay in the area around the old rehabilitation centre, which was the original reason for the establishment of this place. The much larger and wilder area that lies to the north offers a more tranquil experience.

The shallow pools near the café played host to large numbers of Greater Flamingoes, which were quite accustomed to visitors, offering the chance to get close-up photographs. Similarly confiding were the breeding Black-winged Stilts, which enjoyed the protection of a colony of Black-headed Gulls. Common and Little Terns were also breeding here, and there were three heronries, where close views could be obtained. Little and Cattle Egrets were joined by Glossy Ibises, Grey Herons and Black-crowned Night Herons. This reserve offered us excellent opportunities to photograph the most iconic birds of the Camargue. We also found two new species of wader: Grey Plover and Black-tailed Godwit.

We ate our picnic lunch at the shady tables inside the reserve, before heading off to drive across the Camargue to our hotel. We took a detour to visit Cacherel, where we had wonderful views across the wide expanse of the Etang de Vaccares. On the opposite side of the road, a shallow pool held two pairs of Kentish Plovers, as well as a lone Slender-billed Gull. As we drove back through the reedbeds and rice-fields, we enjoyed a last look at this unique landscape.

Day 8

Saturday 24th May

Beaux-de-Provence – Marseilles

After breakfast, we drove up the steep access road to the historic hilltop settlement of Les Baux-de-Provence. Before entering, we went for a short walk along the base of the limestone cliffs that give the village its name (Baux is derived from a Provençal word for a rocky spur). We soon had splendid views of Blue Rock Thrush, a species that loves rocky, precipitous habitats. Flying overhead in the bright sunshine was a flock of Alpine Swifts, easily identified as they are much bigger than Common Swifts and have a creamy-white belly. Crag Martins are another species that breeds on steep cliffs, and this was the only place where we saw them. In the pine woodland immediately below the path, we could hear Crested Tits and Cirl Buntings, but we did not see them. Butterflies were numerous, and we saw some stunning species like Spanish Gatekeeper, Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail.

The highly-defensible situation of Les Baux has always made it an attractive location for human habitation. The site was used by the Celts and then the Romans, and in the Middle Ages, the princes of Les Baux controlled the whole of Provence from this fortified location. In 1642, the village was gifted to the Grimaldi family, and the heir to the throne of Monaco carries the title of Marquis of Les Baux. It is considered one of the most beautiful villages in France, and we enjoyed exploring the narrow streets leading up the plateau at the top. Coffee, ice cream and nougat were just some of the delights on offer!

Having returned to the hotel, it was time to pack up the vehicles and head back to the airport in Marseilles for the flight home. It had been a fantastic week: a combination of wonderful wildlife, superb scenery and convivial company. Everyone had their own personal highlights, but we all agreed that this exceptional part of France must be protected for future generations to enjoy.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

		May 2025								
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna		2	4	10			7		
Gadwall	Mareca strepera		4	4				2		
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	\checkmark								
Red-crested Pochard	Netta rufina		4	6			2	2		
Common Pheasant	Phasianus colchicus		1	1	1					
Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix			Н	Н	Н	н	Н		
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		6	1	1					
European Nightjar	Caprimulgus europaeus				2					
Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba								15	
Common Swift	Apus apus	\checkmark								
Little Bustard	Tetrax tetrax		1	4	Н	5	4	Н		
Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		2	1	4		1			
Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia	\checkmark								
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	\checkmark								
European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur		2	н	2					
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	\checkmark								
Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus		н							
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark		
Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		\checkmark	\checkmark				\checkmark		
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		1							
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus		2	2						
Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus		200	150	400			800	50	
Eurasian Stone-Curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus		1	3			1			
Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	2		2				50		
Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta				12					
Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola							3		
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus				1					
Kentish Plover	Anarhynchus alexandrinus				6			4		
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa							9		
Wood Sandpiper	Tringa glareola			1						
Little Tern	Sternula albifrons				20			10		
Gull-billed Tern	Gelochelidon nilotica		\checkmark							
Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia				5					
Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybrida						1			
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo		2	8	6			12		
Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis				\checkmark					
Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei				40			1		
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus		20	-	10		20	10		
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	\checkmark	0	\checkmark	√		0	\checkmark	\checkmark	
Scopoli's Shearwater	Calonectris diomedea	•	•	•	\checkmark		•	•	v	

	May 2025								
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Yelkouan Shearwater	Puffinus yelkouan				\checkmark				
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia		12	10	10		10	3	1
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus				1				
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		\checkmark	\checkmark	
Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus		250	100	300	1	20	100	
Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia		2	2	40			2	
Black-crowned Night Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax			3					
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta		\checkmark						
Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides			6	1				
Great Egret	Ardea alba		3	2	4			1	
Western Cattle Egret	Ardea ibis		\checkmark						
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	1	3	1	2		1	30	1
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea		2	2	1		4	1	
Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus						1		
European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus		2	1					
Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus				2	18	4	1	
Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus				2	4	4		
Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata					2			
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus						2		
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		1	1	2		2	2	
Black Kite	Milvus migrans	\checkmark	. √	√		\checkmark	_ _		~
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	•	3	2	2	1	1	1	v
Little Owl	Athene noctua		0	-	-	•	1		
Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops			2		1	1	1	
European Roller	Coracias garrulus		2	10	2	10	2		
Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		1	10	~	10	1		
European Bee-Eater	Merops apiaster		20	4	6		7	Н	
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor		20	H	0		'	11	
European Green	-								
Woodpecker	Picus viridis			1					
Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni			1					
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus			Н	2	5	6		
Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo			3	2		2	2	
Parakeet sp.	<i>Psittacula</i> sp.		1						
Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus		Н		1				
Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis						4		
Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio							1	
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	\checkmark							
Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	\checkmark							
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	\checkmark							
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus						\checkmark		
Great Tit	Parus major		\checkmark	\checkmark				\checkmark	
Bearded Reedling	Panurus biarmicus							Н	
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis		\checkmark		\checkmark		\checkmark		
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		May 2025								
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Sand Martin	Riparia riparia			\checkmark						
Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris								4	
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	\checkmark								
Western House Martin	Delichon urbicum		\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark		
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti		1	Н	н		Н	1		
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus			1						
Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus		Н		2		Н	Н		
Sedge Warbler	Acrocephalus schoenobaenus		1							
Common Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus		Н	1	3		2	1		
Western Olivaceous Warbler	lduna opaca							2		
Melodious Warbler	Hippolais polyglotta		4	8	Н	3	Н	1		
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis		\checkmark							
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla			1	Н	Н	Н			
Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala		\checkmark	\checkmark	Н	Н		2		
Western Subalpine Warbler	Curruca iberiae				Н					
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes			1	Н	1				
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	\checkmark								
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		Н		н					
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula						1			
Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	Н	3	2	Н	Н	Н	2	н	
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros					3			н	
Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus					1				
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius								4	
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra			1						
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola			2						
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus						2			
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	\checkmark								
Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava		3	6	6		н	6		
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba			\checkmark						
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis				1					
Eurasian Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs					Н				
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris			1	1	Н		Н		
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	\checkmark								
European Serin	Serinus serinus			4		Н				
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		1	3	1	1	3	2		
Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus					Н				
Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus					Н				

Mammals

		May 2025								
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Soprano Pipistrelle	Pipistrellus pygmaeus	10								
Brown Hare	Plepus europaeus		1					2		
Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus			Х	Х	Х	Х			
Соури	Myocastor coypus		6	4			1	6		
Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes					1				

Reptiles and amphibians

		May 2025								
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Moorish Gecko	Tarentola mauritanica	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х		
Stripeless Tree Frog	Hyla meridionalis			2						
Marsh Frog	Rana ridibunda		Х	Х	Х	Х	Х			
Wall Lizard	Podarcis muralis		Х	Х						
Egyptian Grasshopper	Anacridium aegyptum		1							
Common Lizard	Zootoca vivipara		1							
European Pond Turtle	Emys orbicularis			4						

Butterflies and moths

Common name	Scientific name
Scarce Swallowtail	Iphiclides podarlirius
Swallowtail	Papilio machaon
Large White	Pieris brassicae
Small White	Pieris rapae
Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui
Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria aegeria
Spanish Gatekeeper	Pyronia bathseba
Wall	Lasiommata megera
Cream-spot Tiger	Arctia villica

Damselflies and dragonflies

Common name	Scientific name
Broad Scarlet	Limenitis reducta
Blue-tailed Damselfly	Ischnura elegans
Black-tailed Skimmer	Orthetrum cancellatum
Beautiful Demoiselle	Calopteryx virgo

Other invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name
Mediterranean Spotted Chafer	Oxythyrea funesta