

# France – Wallcreepers and The Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 19 November 2018



Wallcreeper



Pont du Gard



Camargue White Horse



Firecrest

Report and images by Neil McMahon



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Tour participants: Neil McMahon and Matt Collis (Leaders) with 15 Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Thursday 15th November

Most of the contingent met at Heathrow's Terminal 3 and after a 30-minute delay our BA flight to Marseilles departed. Juliet, Chris and Philippa were already ahead of us, having travelled out a day early.

On arrival at a quiet Marseilles airport we quickly gathered our things and secured our two minibuses for the duration of our trip. The weather was remarkably mild with relatively warm sunshine and little or no wind. With clear skies but daylight already showing signs of dwindling we motored west to the Hotel des Granges on the outskirts of Arles. Here we were met by our hosts Marie-Jo and Bruno and following room allocation, there was just time for a short walk along the farm track next to the hotel.

It quickly turned to dusk, but birds encountered included Black Redstart, a couple of Firecrests, Common Buzzard, a few Crested Larks and several wintering Robins. A Little Owl could be heard calling in the distance and the last few wing-flaps belonged to Grey Heron, Magpie and House Sparrow (the latter roosting in the hotel hedging in good numbers).

After a short meeting and briefing session it was time for our evening meal (at 7pm) and we sampled the first of Marie-Jo's local dishes which was very well received. Some grocery shopping was needed then to set us up for picnics on the days ahead and with these preparations in place we retired to recharge our batteries for the three days of exploration ahead.

## Day 2

Friday 16th November

We awoke to a mild morning with heavy dew and swirling mists. After our breakfast (from 7am) the sun came out and quickly burnt off the remaining mist and shortly after 8am we headed off on a full-day excursion, arriving at the village of Mas Thibert. We drove slowly through the village after seeing our first grazing Camargue Black Bulls and White Horses, arriving on the long, straight entrance track to the Marais de Vigueirat.

It took us a long while to trundle along the track as we espied Stonechat, Black Redstart, Sardinian Warbler, Water Pipit, finches, three species of egret, Green and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Sparrowhawk. Wintering birds of the bramble and tangle included Wren, Cetti's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Robin and Dunnock. White Wagtail, Meadow Pipit and Reed Buntings fed in the wet fields grazed by more Camargue White Horses. On our eventual arrival at the reserve car park we saw a number of White Storks and a fly-through Hen Harrier.

We paid our entrance fee into the reserve and found Long-tailed Tits, more Chiffchaffs and two Firecrests waiting for us! We took a clockwise circuit around the longer of the walks, quickly seeing plenty more Grey Herons, Great Egrets, Cormorants and several unidentified dragonflies. Another Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was initially calling and then showed itself, followed by another one later along the woodland paths. If only they were this easy in the UK! New trip species included Great Spotted Woodpecker, Yellowhammer, Snipe, Green Sandpiper and various common dabbling ducks.

A number of Coypu came out of their hiding places and provided sustained viewing and Marsh Harrier, Wall Lizard and small numbers of butterflies and dragonflies added more diversity. We ate our picnic lunch at tables in the car park and after our fill finally left the Marais de Vigueirat reserve and enjoyed close views of a Kestrel and also a Merlin along the main track back to Mas Thibert.

A relatively short drive saw us at the ferry terminal to cross from the east bank to the west bank of the Rhone. After our crossing we drove via Salin de Giraud to Plage d'Arles ou de Piémanson. A few birds showed well including Water Pipit, Crested Lark and Common Buzzard. Some pink colour in the distance manifested into flocks of Greater Flamingos as we drove closer. Some of these birds flew and the vermilion pink of the wing features provided some extra colour across the saltpans. Yellow-legged Gulls were present in some numbers and the deeper lagoons hosted plenty of Coots, Mute Swans and Great-crested Grebes, and also good numbers of Black-necked Grebes too.

There were waders too, but not in huge numbers. We espied Avocet, Dunlin, Grey Plover, Ringed Plover and a flock of Little Stints.

We checked out the beach area but in general apart from some distant Sandwich Terns there didn't seem to be a great deal different to add.

With daylight waning we decided to start making our way back to the hotel, this time keeping to the west of the River Rhone. In the twilight we saw hundreds of Common Cranes lifting up in flight off the fields sandwiched between the Rhone and the remaining wetlands of the Parc Naturel Regional de Camargue.

The activities of the French fuel protestors caused us issues on the return drive to the hotel with closed roundabouts in and around Arles. We carefully threaded our way around and arrived back at Hotel des Granges much later than anticipated.

## Day 3

## Saturday 17th November

It was dull and cloudy for most of the day and with rain on and off too. However, it was still very mild so after breakfast we headed northeast to the fabulous Les Baux-de-Provence in the Alpilles limestone hill range. On arrival we were just about the only ones there so we took a slow circular walk around the base of the cliffs. We could hear Sardinian Warblers and Chiffchaff and even a couple of Cirl Bunting, but mostly they didn't show themselves, but a few Blackcaps and Black Redstarts did. Careful examination of the cliffs and walls paid off when a Wallcreeper was seen in flight butterflying around the buttresses but was then lost to view. Although most of us managed a sighting it wasn't a classic view. Despite our attentive scanning and hearing one calling from the other side of the valley, we didn't see it again.

A couple of Firecrests and then Crested Tits provided fleeting views and we entered the amazing 'village' among the ramparts. Sadly the rain became heavier but it didn't prevent keen observers seeing Black Redstart, Serin and a perched Blue Rock Thrush. After a coffee break we sauntered out to the vans and drove the short distance to some woodland at La Caume. The intention was to walk the woodland tracks up the hill to scan some rocky outcrops hoping for a raptor or two. However the rain and low cloud scuppered that, so some of us went for a short walk seeing some rather bedraggled Crested Tits, Firecrests and a quick-moving Short-toed Treecreeper.

With no apparent let-up in the weather we drove back to the Hotel des Granges and ate our picnic in the warm provisioned classroom that Marie-Jo and Bruno allow us to use for our check list sessions and meetings.

After drying out and refreshing we decided to try our luck at La Crau, an interesting stony plain to the southeast of Arles. Unfortunately, we had to negotiate a lengthy diversionary journey to avoid the yellow vests and barricades of the protesters but eventually we found ourselves at the small village of La Dynamite! We drove the narrow road to La Crau watching common birds associated with this fertile landscape – Cattle Egrets, Jackdaws and a few White Storks. Arriving at the north end of the complex a locked gate caused us to abandon our vans and walk out onto the unique open habitat. Skylarks were about, also Linnet, Kestrel, Corn Bunting and a Red-legged Partridge. An adult male Hen Harrier quartered past us and a distant flock of Common Cranes were as good to hear as see. The rain was still with us as we took in a circular walk, a couple of straggler Common Cranes providing much closer views in flight. Jackdaws, gulls and other birds flew over in flocks on their way to roost. Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Stonechat and more Skylarks seemed to be the only other birds on offer so we decided to follow the lead of the birds and head back to the hotel for our own pre-roost gathering! Our very comfortable hotel with fine cuisine and a selection of wines didn't make this an unpopular decision.

## Day 4

## Sunday 18th November

Our last full day in Provence was bright, sunny, breezy and a little cool. After our early morning breakfast we left our hotel and headed to the tourist magnet of Pont du Gard. We drove slowly along minor country roads, arriving just before the 9am opening time. En-route we saw a Hen Harrier and a few Common Buzzards and Kestrels and even a couple of Zitting Cisticolas.

Once through the entrance we sauntered down to the amazing Roman architecture – the awesome aqueduct spanning the river valley. A Booted Eagle showed briefly and a mix of passerines included Black Redstart, common finches and lots of calling Blackcaps. We progressed over the structure watching Grey Herons, egrets and Cormorants fishing the river below. Keen eyes picked out a fishing Kingfisher and other birds included Sardinian Warbler, Grey Wagtail and Firecrests. This is a possible site for Wallcreeper too and although we thought we heard one, there were no confirmed sightings.

We took a light lunch at the café there and a decision was made to revisit Les Baux instead of an afternoon in the Camargue marshes.

So a thirty minute drive took us back to the cultural wonderment of Les Baux-de-Provence and this time we filed through the ticket office and walked out into the citadel – and what an amazing view!! So we decided to wander about in search of the elusive Wallcreeper, coming across Black Redstarts and Serins as we did so.

Suddenly, there was excitement and much searching and there it was – a Wallcreeper – found and pointed out by Jenny. Perched on a slab of rock, this iconic and totally unique avian treasure flicked its crimson, white-spotted wings and fidgeted about and even preened for us in the late autumn sunshine. It then moved closer and the camera lenses twitched, but were denied as a Black Redstart drove the Wallcreeper away! Matt relocated the bird on a cliff face and we watched it creeping around the crevices, but sadly this time much further away. A Blue Rock Thrush and a lively flock of Crag Martins joined the sightings list for the day.

And so we left the citadel a very happy group of Naturetrekkers, the main target bird seen well by everyone. A half-hearted effort waiting for an Eagle Owl to emerge proved unsuccessful, our enthusiasm waning as the temperature dropped.

Our last night at Hotel des Granges may have seen a little extra wine being consumed in celebration of this first ever trip to this region in November proving highly successful

## Day 5

Monday 19th November

After an early breakfast, the morning was spent driving to Marseilles Airport, avoiding yet more fuel dispute blockades, the diversionary route proved successful and we arrived at the airport in good time. Here Matt and Neil said good-bye to everyone and the group embarked on their way home with the vision of ‘that bird’ still fresh in the memory.

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			15	16	17	18	19
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓			
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓			
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓			
3	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓			
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓			
6	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓			
7	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓			
8	Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓		
9	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	H		
10	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓			
11	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓			
12	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		✓			
13	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		✓			
14	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		✓			
15	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
16	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	
18	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓		✓	
19	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		✓	✓
20	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>				1	
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	✓	✓	
22	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		4			
23	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	1M	1	
24	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		✓	H		
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	H		
27	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓			
28	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		100s	✓	H	
29	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓			
30	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓		
31	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			✓		
32	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		3			
33	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓			
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓			
35	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		✓			
36	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		10			
37	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			
38	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
39	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		✓			
40	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		✓			
42	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
44	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H			
46	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	H		H	✓	
47	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓		✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			15	16	17	18	19
48	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>		✓			
49	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓		H	
50	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓	H		
51	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
53	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			H	✓	✓
54	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		3			
57	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
58	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			✓		
59	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
61	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>		H			
62	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
63	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	H		
64	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓	✓	
65	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	H		
66	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
67	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	
68	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		✓		✓	
69	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		H	✓	✓	
70	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓	H	✓	
71	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	H
72	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	H	✓	
73	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>			1	1	
74	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			2		
75	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓		✓	
77	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	
78	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓			
79	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
80	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			1	1	
82	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	
83	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				H	
85	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		H	H	✓	
86	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓	
87	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	
88	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
89	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		✓			
90	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	
91	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		✓			
92	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		✓	
93	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓		
94	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
95	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓	✓	
96	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		H		✓	
97	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓	✓	
98	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			15	16	17	18	19
99	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			H	H	
100	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓			

### Mammals

1	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓			
2	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>		✓			
3	Bat sp.		✓				
4	Water Vole	<i>Arvicola amphibius</i>			✓		
5	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			✓		
6	vole sp.					✓	
7	shrew sp.					✓	

### Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Common Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis muralis</i>		✓			
3	Marsh Frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>		✓			
4	Stripeless Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>				✓	

### Dragonflies

1	hawker sp.			✓			
2	darter sp.			✓		✓	

### Butterflies

1	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓		✓	
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓			
3	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓		✓	
4	Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Nymphalis polychloros</i>				✓	

### Plants

	Scientific Name	Common Name
	<b>Pinaceae</b>	<b>Pine family</b>
1	<i>Pinus halpensis</i>	Aleppo Pine
2	<i>P. pinea</i>	Stone (Umbrella) Pine
	<b>Lauraceae</b>	<b>Bay family</b>
3	<i>Laurus nobilis</i>	Bay Tree
	<b>Adoxaceae</b>	<b>Moschatel family</b>
4	<i>Viburnum tinus</i>	Viburnum
	<b>Araliaceae</b>	<b>Ivy family</b>
5	<i>Hedera helix</i>	Ivy
	<b>Boraginaceae</b>	<b>Borage family</b>
6	<i>Echium vulgare</i>	Viper's Bugloss
	<b>Brassicaceae</b>	<b>Cabbage family</b>
7	<i>Iberis sempervirens</i>	Evergreen Candytuft
	<b>Buxaceae</b>	<b>Box family</b>
8	<i>Buxus sempervirens</i>	Box
	<b>Caprifoliaceae</b>	<b>Honeysuckle family</b>
9	<i>Scabiosa columbaria</i>	Small Scabious
	<b>Compositaceae (Asteraceae)</b>	<b>Daisy family</b>
10	<i>Silybum marianum</i>	Milk Thistle

<b>Scientific Name</b>	<b>Common Name</b>
11 <i>Taraxacum agg.</i>	Dandelion
<i>Centaurea nigra</i>	Lesser Knapweed
<b>Fagaceae</b>	<b>Oak and Beech family</b>
12 <i>Fagus sylvatica</i>	Beech
13 <i>Quercus coccifera</i>	Kermes Oak
14 <i>Q. ilex</i>	Holm Oak
15 <i>Q. pubescens</i>	Downy Oak
<b>Lamiaceae</b>	<b>Dead-nettle family</b>
16 <i>Lavendula angustifolia</i>	Lavender
17 <i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	Rosemary
<i>Origanum vulgare</i>	Oregano
18 <i>Spartium junceum</i>	Spanish Broom
<b>Oleaceae</b>	<b>Olive family</b>
19 <i>Olea europaea</i>	Wild Olive
<b>Platanaceae</b>	<b>Plane family</b>
20 <i>Platanus orientalis</i>	Oriental Plane
<b>Plumbaginaceae</b>	<b>Thrift family</b>
21 <i>Limonium cf narbonense</i>	A sea lavender
<b>Salicaceae</b>	<b>Willow family</b>
22 <i>P. tremula</i>	Aspen
<b>Tamariscaceae</b>	<b>Tamarisk family</b>
23 <i>Tamarix sp.</i>	Tamarisk
<b>Araceae</b>	<b>Arum family</b>
24 <i>A. maculatum</i>	Cuckoo-pint