

Wallcreeper and The Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 – 23 November 2018



Firecrest



Western Swampen



Stripeless Tree Frog



Spoonbill

Report compiled by Matt Collis
Images courtesy of Neil McMahon



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Tour participants: Matt Collis & Neil McMahon (leaders) with 16 Naturetrek clients

Summary

A short birding trip to the very special Camargue district of southern France provides an excellent opportunity to experience good views of typical waterbirds of the west Mediterranean. Utilising a family-run hotel on the outskirts of the ancient city of Arles as our base, the itinerary provided an easy opportunity to look for flamingoes, herons and wading birds using the shallow waters and reed-fringed lagoons as a breeding area or a suitable stop-over for migrants. The mountainous areas attract different and more localized species and we located special birds such as Wallcreeper, Rock Sparrow and Booted Eagle, together with a selection of other stunning species that call the Camargue home.

Day 1

Monday 19th November

Arriving in the early evening, leaders Neil and Matt met 15 of the 16 clients at Marseille airport, before collecting the minibuses and beginning the journey to the hotel. French protests and road blocks meant the route was more cross country but after just over an hour or so we arrived at our destination, Hotel des Granges. We were greeted by Bruno and Marie-Jo, our wonderful hosts and owners of this classically French Hotel, and a lone Black Redstart, the first bird for our trip, sat roosting over the entrance porch. Our hosts provided us with a very late dinner before showing everyone to their rooms. Once everyone was checked in and baggage delivered to their door, it was time for bed to ensure we were all well rested for the days ahead.

Day 2

Tuesday 20th November

Following yesterday's travel day, breakfast was at a leisurely 8am which was followed by a short briefing and introduction by the leaders where the tour itinerary was explained. With all questions answered and a rough itinerary set, we made our way to the vans and set off for our first stop at Marais du Vigueirat. Once again we were forced to take a more scenic route than usual as strikes continued but this gave us a chance to connect with a few additional birds early on including a nice group of Corn Bunting sitting on powerlines and big flocks of Cattle Egret in the sheep fields.

Arriving mid-morning, we made our way into the reserve via the long entrance track and spotted a couple of Stonechat, White Wagtail and a Robin in the adjacent field. At the end of the track we got our first view of the Camargue Horses with their beautifully iconic white colouration and excitable nature. We stayed to enjoy the view before heading into the visitor centre and out onto the marshland reserve. With the weather a bit showery, small passerines were limited but the first lagoon had many birds including ducks such as Mallard, Shoveler, Wigeon, Teal and a lone Red-crested Pochard. Others birds seen included Mute Swan, Grey Heron and our first Great Egret which was catching fish.

As we walked around the reserve we stopped to look out from the many hides and viewing points dotted around the long circular route where we spotted several great birds; two Western Swamphens proved elusive for a while before stepping clear out into the open and a White Stork which stood preening amongst a long line of Great Cormorants on the bank. As we ventured through several of the more wooded areas we managed to find several woodpecker species including Great Spotted, Green and Lesser Spotted. As the weather improved, so did the

number of passerines with both Common Chiffchaff and Firecrest in good numbers but the latter proving difficult to see. Several species were flying in and around the site including Water and Meadow Pipit, Grey and White Wagtail, Chaffinch, Yellowhammer and a single Serin. Few waders were present with only a group of four Green Sandpipers in flight and a lone Snipe noted.

After several hours on the reserve, we took advantage of the dry weather and large picnic area in order to have our first French inspired picnic lunch which included a number of local cheeses and home baked bread. With stomachs full and the weather still holding we loaded into the minibuses ready to set off, but not before a flock of one hundred Greater Flamingos flew right overhead giving some great views of their spectacular pink wing plumage.

We headed south down the River Rhone before catching the small ferry across to Salin-de-Giraud and onto the salt pans. With only the last hour or so of daylight, we scanned the many pools as we made our way down to Grau de Piémanson, stopping on the side of the road in several places. Large flocks of Greater Flamingo were dotted across the area as were large groups of gulls including Yellow-legged, Black-headed, Mediterranean and 17 Slender-billed Gulls in a mixed flock. Waders were also more numerous with several flocks of Dunlin and a number of Little Stint and Ringed Plover. Pied Avocets were also present in high numbers forming flocks of almost 300 strong standing close to the road giving everyone brilliant views.

As we approached the end of the road and the beach, we managed to add a few more birds to our list including Great Crested and Black-necked Grebe, and a lone Common Sandpiper which landed on the shore next to the minibus. With the final minutes of daylight and a very strong wind blowing, we ventured onto the beach for a very brief sea watch; several small flocks of Mediterranean Gulls, a juvenile Gannet and a large flock of Sandwich Tern all battled their way into the wind close to the shore before going out of view - a nice end to our birding day.

We travelled back to the hotel in the dark and despite getting briefly caught up in the protests at a roundabout just outside of Arles, we managed to find a route back into the countryside and around to the hotel. Another wonderful three course dinner provided by our hosts was a welcome meal in our bellies as was the wine and other drinks. Once the meal was finished, we completed the checklist for the day and said our goodnights, including to the Black Redstart who was already fast asleep in the hotel porch.

Day 3

Wednesday 21st November

It was an earlier breakfast time of 7am, allowing for an earlier departure with everyone in the bus by 8am. We headed off towards the Camargue, this time visiting the large wetland area of Mas d'Agon on the northern edge of the reserve. A few of the common species were spotted en route including corvids and gulls but a new addition to the trip list was a lovely Hen Harrier which flew low across a field adjacent to the road before being lost behind a hedge. As we approached Mas d'Agon our attention was drawn to a group of six large birds flying over the road ahead: Common Cranes! Landing in some fields 200m away or so, they were in an area where 500 or so birds had gathered feeding in the flooded grasslands. We observed from the side of the road for a while, watching groups both flying in and out of the wider flock, calling the entire time. A memorable first stop.

We then headed south through Mas d'Agon stopping on the road between two large wetland pools. We left the vehicles, opting to explore on foot, and walked down from one end to the other in the hope of picking up more birds. Our luck was in and we got some fantastic views of some notoriously difficult birds to see including a small group of Bearded Tit which came right to the edge of the reedbed, and a male and female Penduline Tit, far less confiding, as they headed through a sparse section of reeds. Reed Buntings and Stonechats were notably common here giving everyone the chance to connect and compare to other similar looking birds. We also had a number of good flyover views of Marsh Harrier, Snipe and a flock of ten Glossy Ibis.

We returned to the vans and made our way to another small reserve called La Capelliere on the eastern side of the Etang des Vaccares. Driving around the edge of this large Etang, we spotted several more Marsh Harriers and to our delight two Black Storks in a neighbouring field. Further on we had better views of the open water of the Etang where we could see a large raft of Coots with several other species mixed in including two Red-breasted Merganser, two Tufted Duck, Great Crested Grebe and several Black-necked Grebe. Four Slender-billed gulls also flew along the shore as we observed the raft as did a Common Kingfisher, although all too brief.

Once at the reserve we took advantage of the facilities where a Tree Frog was spotted, the first of several we then subsequently saw as we walked the main loop around the site. Due to extensive hunting adjacent to the site, water bird numbers were low on the various pools but we did see a few species in Teal, Mute Swan and a Kingfisher which sat perfectly on a post for everyone to enjoy. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Chiffchaff and the occasional Firecrest were also seen in the wooded and scrubby areas and a single Sardinian Warbler was heard calling from a perch in a hedge.

Our final stop for the day was on the opposite side of the Etang de Vaccares at the Parc de Ornithologique. We began our visit with another French inspired picnic lunch which was made all the more enjoyable by some Common Firecrest which gave incredible views as they hopped along in the scrub. Walking into the reserve, you couldn't help be taken aback by the incessant sounds of Greater Flamingo which dominated this site; approximately 1,500 birds spread out across the numerous pools. They treated us to some wonderful displays, flashing their wings and twisting their heads as they paraded around in small groups.

Following the footpath, we managed to spot a few other birds in amongst the flamingoes including a couple of Avocet, Mallard, a handful of Wigeon, and numerous Grey Heron, Little Egret and Cattle Egret. From one of the tall platforms which overlook the site, we also managed to pick out three Little Grebes and several Yellow-legged Gulls sat on posts. But arguably the best bird was a lone Spoonbill, actively feeding in amongst the legs of the Flamingoes, a dwarf in comparison to those around it – a fantastic bird to end the day.

We returned to the buses and made our way back to the hotel, thankfully with greater ease as the ongoing road blocks appeared to have ended giving everyone plenty of time to rest before dinner. The food didn't disappoint either and after all plates were emptied we ended our day with the checklist. Suitably fatigued from an active day, we all retired to our rooms ready for our beds.

Day 4

Thursday 22nd November

Today we turned our focus to a completely different area and type of habitat for some new species of bird. Once our breakfast was complete, we headed north east towards the village of Les Baux-de-Provence; a small French

commune set atop a rocky outcrop in the Alpilles hills. The village is stunning, full of boutique shops and cultural history, but more importantly it is a wonderful place to see altitude-favouring birds including our target species, Wallcreeper.

Standing in the car park we could already pick out several birds including a few new species for the trip; Crag Martins whizzed overhead while elusive Cirl Buntings could be heard singing in the trees. The odd Serin flew over too and a Short-toed Treecreeper could be heard distantly with its whistle-thin call. We decided to move on and started our exploration by taking a stroll around the base of the town, following a well-established footpath, with the rocky face at the base of Les Baux to our left and low scrub with pines to our right. We scanned the many rock faces for signs of a Wallcreeper but had no luck. Spotting this starling-sized bird on such vast surfaces is never easy and the only sighting we got was a distant bird flying towards the eastern end of the village before disappearing out of view. Fortunately we spotted several other birds including Black Redstart, Greenfinch, Firecrest, Sardinian Warbler and some flyover Woodlark. However, by far the best birds seen on the walk were two Crested Tits which came to the trees right above our heads and stayed for several minutes giving everyone intimate views.

Heading up into the main village, we made our way through the stone streets up towards the Castle ruins at the apex of the outcrop. As we entered the citadel, we were immediately faced with large flocks of Serin feeding on the gravel paths with Black Redstarts mixed in amongst them. We headed to the southern viewpoint which looks out across the valley below; a spectacular view for a spectacular place. From here we continued to scan every rocky surface we could see with the leaders splitting up to increase the chances of a sighting.

An hour passed with only a brief sighting achieved and only a small number of the group seeing the bird. We endured another hour without a sighting until at the last moment, and with the majority of the group already heading down the village, two Wallcreepers flew in from the eastern side chasing one another before splitting up and settling somewhere on the rock face below us. After a brief search, both birds were found on the ruined castle wall and, after a tricky climb up some stone steps, a handful of people got great views as one fed on the wall.

With less than half the group getting any view of a Wallcreeper, feelings were mixed as the group reunited back at the buses. We decided to give ourselves one last chance and set up lunch at the eastern end of the village near the ruined castle where the birds were last seen. What a decision this turned out to be as there in full view was a Wallcreeper which continued to show for almost 20 minutes; feeding, preening and resting on the wall just 20m or so in front of us. Everybody finally had their view.

It stayed so long we ended up having our lunch with a Wallcreeper in view before it flew off not to be seen again. So we packed up our things and we made our way over towards Pont de Gard for the last part of the day. Spirits were obviously high and the momentum clearly with us as the birds just kept coming. From the car park we spotted many White Wagtails and Chaffinch and high in the sky a beautiful pale morph Booted Eagle soared around for a few minutes before heading south. We then continued on into the visitor centre and made our way down to the aqueduct. The structure is some quite remarkable with towering stone arches spanning the full width of the river Rhone.

We searched around for a little while, lingering along the main path at the foot of the Pont de Gard in the hope of spotting a few birds. Grey Herons, Egrets and a Kingfisher occupied the river below and a flyover Hawfinch was picked up although lost when it landed in some shrubs. As the light began to fade, several flocks of Rock Sparrow flew in and began exploring the numerous crags and holes in the stonework. We watched as around 30 birds actively scurried along its surface when all of a sudden a Wallcreeper flew in from the eastern end to dazzle all those watching. We watched it for just over a minute before it was chased off by the sparrows to somewhere unknown. You couldn't ask for a more eventful day!

Thoroughly satisfied with our days birding, we made our way back to Hotel des Granges for the checklist, our last evening meal and, of course, some packing in preparation for the last day tomorrow.

Day 5

Friday 23rd November

With our departure mid afternoon, there was just enough time for a visit to Arles and to wander around some of the town's iconic Roman Amphitheatre and shops. Although birds were not the focus of this excursion, it still provided Black Redstart, a flyover Booted Eagle and a new species; Eurasian Nuthatch found in a park. We said goodbye to two guests who were staying behind, extending their holiday by a few days, while the rest climbed into the minibuses and headed off to the airport. A short flight later and we all landed at Gatwick Airport, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end and everyone said their goodbyes after a wonderful trip with some wonderful birds.

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Species Lists

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

	I = introduced		November				
	Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22	23
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓			
2	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓			
3	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓		
4	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓			
5	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓			
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓		
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓		
8	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓			
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓		
10	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>		1			
11	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			2		
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			2		
13	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		✓	✓	H	
14	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			3		
15	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	✓		
16	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		67	✓		
17	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		✓	✓		
18	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			2		
19	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		1	✓		
20	African Sacred Ibis - I	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>			2		
21	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			✓		
22	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			1		
23	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
24	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
25	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	
26	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓	
27	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		1			
28	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
29	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus peenatus</i>				✓	✓
30	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓		✓	
31	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			✓	✓	
32	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓	✓	
33	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
34	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		H	H		
35	Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		3	H		
36	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓		
37	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓		
38	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			300+		
39	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓	✓		
40	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓		
41	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓			
42	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓		
43	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		4	1		
44	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1			
45	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		✓			
46	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			
47	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>		17	4		

	I = introduced		November				
	Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22	23
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓		
49	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		✓			
50	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
51	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓		
52	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		150			
53	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	
54	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
55	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	
56	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		H	H		
57	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
58	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>		✓	✓		
59	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	H	H	
60	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓		✓	
61	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
62	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				H	
63	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	
64	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
65	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>			✓		
66	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	
67	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				2	
68	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				2	
69	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
70	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
71	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>			2		
72	Bearded Reedling	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			3		
73	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				✓	
74	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
75	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				✓	
76	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	✓		
77	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
78	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	
79	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			✓		
80	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	
81	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		H	✓	✓	
82	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	
83	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	H	
84	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					✓
85	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>				3	
86	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				H	
87	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	
88	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
89	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				H	
90	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
91	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓		
93	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
94	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
95	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				30	
96	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	H	✓	
97	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓	
98	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	

	I = introduced		November				
	Common name	Scientific name	19	20	21	22	23
99	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
100	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		✓	✓		
101	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	
102	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>				1	
103	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				1F	
104	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		✓	
105	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓		
106	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
107	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
108	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓		✓	
109	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓			
110	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓	
111	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓			
112	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				H	
113	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓		



Slender-billed Gull