

France – Wallcreepers and The Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 22 November 2019



Black Redstart by Neil McMahon



Alpine Accentor by Stewart Short



Greater Flamingo by Neil McMahon



Common Firecrest by Neil McMahon

Report by Neil McMahon & Matt Collis
Images courtesy of Stewart Short & Neil McMahon



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Tour participants: Neil McMahon and Matt Collis (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Monday 18th November

Marseille and Hôtel des Granges.

Nine of the group and the two tour leaders met at Heathrow Airport, Terminal 3 and took the early morning BA flight to Marseilles. Here we met up with the remainder of the group and took refreshments while we waited for one of the hire vehicles to be made ready. We left the airport at lunchtime and drove for about 30 minutes to Aerodrome de Berre-la-Fare. Birds en-route included plenty of Magpies, Carrion Crow, Chaffinches, Black Redstart, Yellow-legged Gulls and passing views of Cormorant, Coot and a group of Greater Flamingos.

The Aerodrome is normally a good spot for Little Bustard but today none could be seen. More Magpies were on view as were foraging Stonechats and Black Redstarts. A Sardinian Warbler was spotted next and a swirling flock of gulls in the distance included Black-headed and Mediterranean.

A garden opposite with a fruiting tree attracted more birds which included several Blackcaps and also two Red Squirrels. A few stops around the perimeter to scan the Aerodrome suggested there were no bustards present so with a Sparrowhawk the only extra bird added, we decided to press on to the hotel.

We arrived at the Hotel des Granges on the outskirts of Arles at about 2.45pm and after the room allocation, we met again at 3.30pm and took a walk along the farm track across the fields beside the hotel. It was cool and breezy but dry and sunny. A 'ringtail' Hen Harrier was seen quartering field edges whilst we were still at the hotel. During our walk, further raptors included another Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Common Buzzard and an escaped falconer's Peregrine! A couple of sizeable flocks of Starlings were feeding in the fields as were some fifty Corn Buntings, several Reed Buntings and one or two each of Yellowhammer and Cirl Bunting. Chaffinches were numerous and we saw Greenfinch, Linnet, House and Tree Sparrows. The larks were mostly Skylarks, but also a flock of six Woodlarks were seen and several distant Crested Larks. More hidden birds included Cetti's Warbler, Sardinian Warbler and Chiffchaff and we enjoyed views of both Goldcrest and Firecrest. Cattle Egrets were attracted to sheep corralled in a barn and a Great White Egret and a couple of Kingfishers added more variety.

With the sun lowering and the cold wind beginning to bite, we returned to the hotel to warm up and provide time for the guides to purchase picnic provisions from the nearby supermarket.

At 7pm we met to discuss the plan for the week ahead and half an hour later sat down to our three-course evening meal with optional wine and other beverages. A roosting Black Redstart kipped peacefully under the reception area roof – he/she had seen it all before!

Pascal and Christine (the hotel proprietors) looked after us for the evening and we retired to bed relatively early to catch up on lost sleep from travelling.

Day 2

Tuesday 19th November

Provencal Les Baux.

We awoke to a cold, windy, but dry day. The anticipated sunny periods didn't really arrive until late morning but we were well prepared. After our 7am breakfast and after enjoying two showy Firecrests in the car park, we motored off from the hotel just after 8am and headed for Provencal Les Baux. Driving slowly along lanes around the network of fields we saw plenty of Corn Buntings, Chaffinches and Skylarks.

On arrival at Les Baux, we parked up and took a walk along the path around and below the limestone cliff and castle ramparts. It was cold and windy and grey initially but it didn't stop Isobel picking out a Blue Rock Thrush perched on the rock-face. Tough Mediterranean vegetation dominates the slopes with broom, pines, Kermes Oak and strong-smelling thyme being dominant. A few Sardinian Warblers and Blackcaps called from the bushes and provided glimpses as we passed by. We strung out along the pathway as we scanned up at the cliffs willing for a Wallcreeper to appear! Matt heard a call and some minutes later a small bird was seen arriving on the cliff face – and there it was – a quite amazing bird in the shape of the enigmatic and quite unique Wallcreeper! Despite having an extensive range throughout Asia and upland Europe, this is not an easy bird to see. But there it was, a little grey bird with a fine, dark, decurved bill, nervously flicking its gaudy, vermillion wings, dark primaries and white oval spots. It worked the fissures and cracks, checking for invertebrate prey in its rock and stone habitat. Telescopes provided intimate views, almost taking us into this alpine and craggy environment. After some twenty minutes of continuous viewing, everyone enjoyed this rare privilege and we continued our walk, but not before scoping a second Blue Rock Thrush and spying a single Crag Martin. The wind whistled around the cliffs and we took the fairly steep section of steps into the village itself. As we entered the wooden entrance door, an Alpine Accentor flew overhead calling.

Inside this lovely walled village, many of us decided to celebrate our Wallcreeper sighting with a little warmth and hot drinks. So we found a café and enjoyed a short reprieve from the coolness outside.

Next, we headed up to the citadel which was unfortunately very windy, but at least dry. A small gathering of Serins hugged the weeds and Sardinian Warblers and Black Redstarts flitted around the bushes and stonework. Matt marched on to the opposite end of the castle ramparts and quickly found a small gathering of confiding Alpine Accentors. These cracking little birds fed right in front of us and very entertaining they were too! However, it was too windy along the cliff edges to look further for the Wallcreeper, so we took a slow walk back to our mini-buses. Unfortunately, we discovered that a window had been smashed in both mini-buses and items stolen from within. Some time was inevitably taken up sorting out all the issues associated with this incident but we managed to keep an eye on the nearby birds as we waited. We had managed to obtain all the necessary Police reports, particularly with the help of participant Louise Esher and her linguistic skills, replacement medicines and kit and, eventually, two replacement vehicles, thus ensuring we were ready to start afresh the following day.

Day 3

Wednesday 20th November

Camargue and Pont du Gard

Following breakfast, we drove around the town of Arles and checked the minor roads around the small agricultural settlement of Mas D'Agon. One of the first things we saw was a Wild Boar which was making a determined effort to befriend a pony in a small field – I don't think the pony was impressed! Birds next, and

having large flocks of small birds all around us was very impressive. Chaffinches were particularly numerous as were Skylarks and Corn Buntings. We saw flocks of Linnets and Goldfinches and Meadow Pipits, House and Tree Sparrows and we managed to manoeuvre closer to distant finch flocks in their hundreds, many of which were Bramblings. Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards were on almost constant view and Hen Harrier, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk were all visible too. We encountered the first flock of Common Cranes before we drove down to some small fresh water and reed-fringed étangs. As we arrived, three large birds flying around proved to be the three vagrant Great White Pelicans that had been reported touring the Camargue. They descended onto the water and a little while later we saw them fly away to the north. A Black Stork flying over was another scarce visitor. We heard Penduline Tit, the birds remaining out of view, but there was nowhere for the White Storks, Mute Swans and Great White Egret to hide. With wild-fowling activities all around, the ducks were in short supply and nervous but birds of prey included Marsh Harrier, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and what was possibly a Merlin. Kingfishers and Cetti's Warblers played hide and seek and a couple of flights of Glossy Ibis were much appreciated.

We left this excellent area and drove towards the shore of Etang de Vaccares, with a Hen Harrier flying alongside the minibuses for a short while. The visitor centre at Capeliere provided comfort facilities and some great views of wintering Goldcrests. We then took a slow drive, first south then east espying a variety of water birds en-route including rafts of Black-necked Grebes. And then it was time for our picnic and we set up our makeshift lunchtime buffet overlooking Marais de Grenouillets. Avian distractions while we ate included Kingfishers, Cetti's Warblers, Sardinian Warblers and a Dartford Warbler. Appetite for food stated, there were still more birds to enjoy as well as an appreciation of the landscape of this special area. A variety of waders, Greater Flamingo, egrets and herons and a gathering of Sandwich Terns among the ducks and grebes provided a nice cross selection as we re-traced our route back north. A super flock of pink-flushed Slender-billed Gulls were much admired.

We then drove further north and left the Camargue in order to visit the amazing arena of Pont du Gard. We were keen to visit this special historical site with its amazing aqueduct, splendid scenery and some iconic birds.

After paying our entry fee we pottered into the park-like grounds and there before us was the enthralling example of Roman architecture and engineering. The aqueduct took years to build, all for the purpose of providing running water to the Roman-controlled community nearby. The slow-moving and stately river below attracted Kingfishers and wagtails along the shores, two of the Kingfishers were clearly in deep and meaningful conversation about who should have the exclusive right to fish this stretch of the river! Finches and a 'scoped Cirl Bunting were feeding on an area next to the river and quite a flock of Crag Martins gathered overhead. The previous year Matt had found a good place for observing birds arriving on the sunny side of the aqueduct as the sun began to set. Within minutes of setting up he found a couple of Rock Sparrows and we all trundled up to join him. Firecrests and a Short-toed Treecreeper were in the bushes next to the pillars and the Rock Sparrow numbers increased as the afternoon dwindled. Black Redstarts joined in the fun and then of course the enigmatic Wallcreeper joined the party. Glimpsed in flight a couple of times earlier, the grey and vermillion stone creeper provided excellent views for everyone as it fidgeted along the cracks and crevices of the two-thousand years plus man-made structure.

Cormorants, Grey Herons and Great White Egrets flew down the river as we watched the sparrows and their friends balancing on the fissures and intricate designs still surviving on the stonework after all these years.

We reluctantly left just before dusk and drove back to Hotel des Granges for a very welcome evening meal.

An hour-long exploratory night drive around the fields in the general area of the hotel didn't produce any significant wildlife sightings – the torrential shower at the end didn't help!!

Day 4

Thursday 21st November

Camargue

Our last full day in the region and we were determined to make it a full day in the field. Our first venue was to be the delightful reserve of Marais de Vigueirat. With flooding on arrival and the staff not being ready to open up for us, it wasn't the best start. A heavy rain shower had us sheltering in a barn to wait. To our delight a Hummingbird Hawkmoth was active in the barn and came to inspect many of us! No doubt it wanted some nectar and was attracted to any bright clothing. The rain subsided and on entry to the reserve we walked around in an anti-clockwise direction for a change.

A few typical water birds were on show and we could hear Common Cranes in the distance all the time we were there, but didn't see them. A distant Coot or two popped up briefly and a Hawfinch was heard flying over. Kingfishers were about and occasionally showed and we managed views of various wildfowl, herons and Water Pipits feeding alongside Grey Wagtails. We saw White Stork as well as several views of Common Buzzard, Merlin and Marsh Harrier plus another Hen Harrier. Hidden Water Rail and Cetti's Warblers called and a vocal Lesser Spotted Woodpecker showed briefly a couple of times. Emerging from a woodland trail we were able to 'scope a feeding flock of Meadow and Water Pipits, with a few White Wagtails and Green Sandpipers thrown in for good measure! Posing Stonechats delighted, Chiffchaff, Goldcrests and Firecrests were rather more hidden. An active crayfish on the boardwalk challenged any passers-by!

Back at the centre, we were permitted to use the barn we had sheltered in earlier as a venue for our picnic. This proved to be a good move as another passing shower would have made us a little soggy outside!

Leaving Marais de Vigueirat, we headed south, connecting with another Merlin and flocks of the flying Common Cranes en-route. We took the short ferry across Le Grand Rhone into Salin de Giraud. We then explored the saltpans and étangs to the south, concluding where the road ends at Plage d'Arles ou de Piemanson.

Here again there were plenty of birds. The deeper, brackish water to the left of the road held good numbers of Mute Swans, Coots and grebes including plenty of Black-necked. Egrets and Grey Herons mixed with Greater Flamingos and gulls. To the right on the mudflats there were excellent numbers of waders, some showing nice and close. Avocets, Dunlin, Little Stint, Ringed and Kentish Plover flocks also attracted a few wintering Black-winged Stilts and even a lone Temminck's Stint. Sandwich Terns winter here in good numbers and we were able to see Lesser Black-backed and Mediterranean Gulls too. Zitting Cisticola, Linnet, Meadow Pipit and White Wagtails were the most obvious passerines and a brief sea-watch at the beach only added some passing flocks of Mediterranean Gulls and a couple of Gannets.

An hour's pleasant drive took us sedately back to our hotel with sufficient time to refresh before our last evening meal and check-list session.

Day 5

Friday 22nd November

La Crau and Arles

We were fortunate that our flight home on the last day for most of us was in the afternoon which provided us with an opportunity for some more birding and sightseeing.

After breakfast we drove around Arles and checked out La Crau, starting on the outskirts of the small community of La Dynamite. Etang des Aulnes held a surprise in the shape of a Black-throated Diver, not a bird anticipated on this trip. The bird was distant but permitted telescope views where all the discerning features could be determined.

A variety of common birds were noted including a flock of Cattle Egrets and we tried our luck at walking out on the exposed plain of La Crau. It was breezy and rain was never far away, but some astute scanning provided examples of a perched Southern Grey Shrike and a Merlin. There were Skylarks on the ground, but we didn't find any of the local specialities that this area is known for.

With the weather deteriorating we decided to head back to the waiting mini-busses and threaded our way back to the hotel. There we said good-bye to Christine as she had made alternative plans for heading back home. The remainder of the morning was used up with some sight-seeing in the historic town of Arles or an additional bird-watching walk down the track beside the hotel to the canal and back. We then enjoyed our last picnic together, albeit in the 'classroom' at the hotel. We never seem to be able to consume the last of the picnic goodies but we gave it a good go!

With the mini-buses cleaned out and the recycling completed, it was time to wend our way to Marseilles and catch our BA flight home.

Despite the cool weather of the first two days, this short trip to the Camargue and surrounds proved to be a successful one with an excellent array of wildlife encountered. The positive mood of the group throughout was welcome and once again, our hotel proved to be an excellent place for us to relax and dine.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			18	19	20	21	22
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>			✓	✓	
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			✓	✓	
3	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				✓	
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>				✓	
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	✓	
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>			✓	✓	
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	
8	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>					1
9	Red-legged Partridge - I	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓			
10	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓		
11	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓	✓	
12	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓	✓	
13	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			✓	✓	
14	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
15	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			1		
16	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			✓	✓	
17	Great White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>			3		
18	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			✓	✓	
19	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓		✓	✓	
22	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓	✓	
23	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓	
24	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
26	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
27	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			✓	✓	
30	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓	✓	
31	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓	✓	
32	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			✓	✓	
33	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>				✓	
34	Black-winged Stint	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>				3	
35	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
36	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				2	✓
37	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			5	✓	
38	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	
39	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>				✓	
40	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓		
41	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			12		
42	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			✓	3	
43	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓	✓	
44	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				✓	
45	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>				✓	
46	Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>				1	
47	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			18	19	20	21	22
48	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>				1	
49	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			46		
50	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	✓			✓	✓
52	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				1	
54	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			✓	✓	
55	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓		✓	✓	
59	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>				✓	
60	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓		H	
61	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				H	
62	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			✓	✓	✓
64	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>					✓
65	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓			
66	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓			
71	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓			
72	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>			H	H	
75	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	✓			✓	
76	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓		✓	✓	
78	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓		
79	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			✓	✓	
80	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓	✓	✓
81	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	
82	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			✓	✓	✓
83	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			✓		H
85	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	H	✓
86	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	✓	H	
89	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		1	1		
90	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓		
91	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓		
94	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	
95	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		✓			
98	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			18	19	20	21	22
99	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
101	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			✓		
102	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>		✓			
103	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓			
104	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
105	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
106	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>			✓	✓	
108	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
109	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			✓	H	
110	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				H	
111	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓			
112	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
113	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓	✓	
114	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓			
116	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			✓		
117	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓			✓
119	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓	✓		✓
120	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

Coypu, *Myocastor coypus*
 Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*

Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*
 Wild Boar, *Sus scrofa*

Other Taxa

Red Swamp Crayfish, *Procambarus clarkii*
 Hummingbird Hawk-moth, *Macroglossum stellatarum*

Moorish Gecko, *Tarentola mauritanica*



Greater Flamingo by Neil McMahon