

France – Wallcreepers and The Camargue

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 28 January 2020



Common Buzzard (Ian Nicholson)



Greater Flamingo(Chris Griffin)



Wallcreeper (Chris Griffin)



Black-winged Kite (Chris Griffin)

Report compiled by Ian Nicholson
Images by Ina Nicholson & Chris Griffin



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Ian Nicholson and Chris Griffin (Leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This short tour to southern France took in a variety of habitats, ranging from the wetlands of the Camargue to the hills of the Alpilles and the arid plain of La Crau. We saw a wide range of species, notably Wallcreeper and Common Crane, and had the added bonus of seeing a vagrant Black-winged Kite – a species who's normal range is much further south and west, although they have occasionally bred in some parts of southern France.

The weather was quite challenging at times, but with a degree of flexibility we were able to work around it, and all agreed that it was a very successful tour.

Day 1

Friday 24th January

Six of the group met up with Ian and Chris at Heathrow's Terminal 3 for the flight to Marseille, with the remaining five participants due to meet us either at Marseille airport or at the hotel. We boarded the flight in plenty of time, but the captain then announced that due to industrial action by French Air-traffic Controllers, there would be a delay of about 1 hour 45 minutes! Needless to say, this was quite disappointing, but obviously there was nothing that we could do other than wait, and we duly departed for the short flight.

On landing the weather was overcast but dry, but by the time we had organised the minibuses it was raining heavily. It continued to rain for most of the journey to Arles, although it had almost stopped by the time we arrived. The rooms were allocated and we met the remaining members of the group who had made their way to the hotel independently, after which Ian and Chris went to the supermarket to buy the picnic food for the next couple of days.

In the meantime some of the group had a short walk along the lane next to the hotel, seeing two Hen Harriers, a Buzzard and two Cirl Buntings as well as various commoner species.

We met up at 7.00pm to discuss plans for the next few days, after which we had the first excellent evening meal of the holiday, and most then retired early after a long day travelling.

Day 2

Saturday 25th January

The weather forecast for today was not at all promising, but in fact it turned out to be quite reasonable with just the occasional very light shower. We had breakfast from 7.30 and were on our way just before 8.30, heading first of all towards the Mas d'Agon area where we hoped to find flocks of Common Cranes as well as plenty of herons, egrets and wildfowl.

As nearly always happens, we made a couple of unscheduled stops on the way to our intended destination, first of all to look at some huge flocks of Corn Buntings (still a common bird here, unlike in the UK), and then when we saw first a few, but then hundreds of Cranes flying over and feeding in the margins of a reedbed. The sight and sound of these magnificent birds were quite spectacular, and none of us are likely to forget the experience in

a hurry. We also found Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards, Tree Sparrows, Stonechats and a Sparrowhawk, not to mention several hundred Glossy Ibis flying overhead.

Moving on to Mas d'Agon itself, where the road runs between two extensive wetland areas, the first few out of the vehicles had a brief sighting of a Kingfisher, and while walking along the road we also had several more Marsh Harriers, a Chiffchaff singing, Great, Little and Cattle Egrets and more Cranes and Ibises flying over.

Eventually we had to drag ourselves away and we then drove via the hamlet of Villeneuve to the shores of the Etang de Vaccares, where we made our way along the eastern side, stopping at a couple of places to scan the water and surrounding vegetation. Here we found yet more Marsh Harriers, a small flock of Red-breasted Merganser, a solitary Sandwich Tern, plus Teal, Shoveler and more egrets.

Our next stop was at the small reserve at La Capelliere, where some of us visited the gift shop/visitor centre while Ian and Chris set up lunch on the picnic table which we had brought with us.

After a fairly leisurely lunch we continued south, seeing a couple of Hen Harriers by the roadside, and we eventually stopped at a viewing platform in an area which can be good for Penduline Tits. None were present today, but more than ample compensation was provided by a stunning Black-winged Kite. This is basically a North African species, with a small but increasing population in Spain and Portugal, but it certainly would not be expected in the Camargue. We were aware that this bird had been seen in the general area, but we didn't really think we would be lucky enough to come across it so easily. To be fair, two English birders had just been watching it when we arrived and told us the area where to look, which made things simpler. We watched this impressive bird hunting over the fields and marshes for about 30 minutes before moving on to see what else we could find. However, the water level at the Etang de Fangassier was really too high for any small waders, and the best we could do was a small flock of Redshank and about a dozen Shelduck.

It was time to make our way slowly back north towards the hotel, but we had a stop on the way at the viewing platform at Marais des Grenouilletes where there were numerous Mute Swans but not a great deal else, other than a Zitting Cisticola and a brief view of a Kingfisher for some. We then headed back to the hotel after a very full and successful day.

Day 3

Sunday 26th January

There was a spectacular thunderstorm during the night and we awoke to heavy rain. The forecast was saying that this would continue for most of the day, so during breakfast we formulated an alternative plan, which would allow us to have our lunch at the hotel rather than outdoors in the pouring rain.

The two English birders to whom we spoke yesterday had told us about a flock of about 17 Temminck's Stints, plus two Citrine Wagtails, which they had seen at a location not far from the hotel, at a place which we normally only visit on our mid-summer "Dragonflies and Birds" tour. We decided to go there first of all, and then move on to the Parc Ornithologique near St Maries de la Mer before returning to the hotel for a slightly late lunch.

We duly arrived at the first place, and although it was about 9.15 when we arrived, it had barely got light and it was still raining heavily. We decided to give it about 15 or 20 minutes to see whether the rain would ease, but it

didn't, so we moved on, arriving at the Parc Ornithologique at 10.00am. This should have been perfect, as this is the winter opening time, but the gate was locked and there was no sign of anyone in the office. We wondered whether it was just a case of someone arriving late, but there was still no activity by 10.15, so we called the number on the notice board, and got a recorded message saying that this number doesn't exist!

A French couple then arrived, obviously expecting to get into the reserve, as they had purchased their tickets the previous day. They tried a different number and eventually spoke to someone who said they would call back, which they did, saying that they would not be open until noon at the earliest, and possibly not then if the rain continued. Contrary to the forecast, the rain had in fact stopped by now and the sun was coming out. However, we decided that we couldn't really wait around until noon just on the off-chance that they might open, so we got into the vehicles and set off.

Driving past the entrance however, Ian noticed that the gate was now open, so we made a U-turn, went back into the car park and went to ask the man who had opened the gate, and who was now in the ticket office, if they were open. He replied "Oui?" with a Gallic shrug, giving the impression that this was a ridiculous question, and why would they not be open!!

As it turned out it was well worth the wait, as we had the closest imaginable views of literally thousands of Flamingoes, as well as lots of egrets and herons, a handful of Avocets, two Black-winged Stilts and a Booted Eagle. Back near the entrance we had brief views of a Sacred Ibis feeding amongst the numerous egrets. Although this species is not native to France, and attempts to eradicate them are ongoing, there is a self-supporting wild population and it is on the French equivalent of Category C of the national list, rather like the parakeets in the UK.

We arrived back at the hotel for a very late lunch, after which we returned to the place where we had gone first thing this morning. This proved to be a good decision, as we saw several Buzzards on the way as well as three Bramblings in a flock of Chaffinches, plus lots of Cranes flying over to roost. We scanned around the wet fields trying to find the stints and wagtails, with no joy, but we did see a really smart male Hen Harrier hunting over the fields before landing at the edge of a reedbed, where it was joined by a Marsh Harrier. We wondered whether we had stumbled across a harrier roost, but thought no more about it while we continued looking for the stints, but all we found were three Green Sandpipers, and we heard a Little Owl calling.

Looking back to where the harriers had landed, it was clear that more and more were arriving, both Hen and Marsh, and in the end there were at least eight Hen Harriers (four each of adult males and ringtails) and at least 15 Marsh Harriers. To round things off, the flock of Temminck's Stints flew by while we were watching the harriers, but we were unable to locate them on the ground.

We returned to the hotel in the dark after an excellent day, which showed very well the benefits of having a flexible approach to the itinerary.

Day 4

Monday 27th January

Yesterday morning's delays spilled over into this morning, our late return to the hotel meaning that we couldn't visit the supermarket to stock up on picnic food, as it closes at 1pm on Sundays. After a quick breakfast Ian

headed for the supermarket (where there were about six White Wagtails in the car park), and was back by just after 9.00am ready to set off.

The weather forecast was quite correct in predicting a foggy start, but by the time we were approaching our first destination, the medieval village of Les Baux, which is at a higher altitude than the surrounding land, the sun was shining. We parked up and set off to walk around the base of the cliff into which the village is built, and had a spectacular view over the next valley which was still shrouded in fog. Almost immediately we found a small flock of Crag Martins, and then had an outstanding view of a Cirl Bunting – a rare species for those of us who live away from its stronghold in south-west England. We also saw Serins, Song Thrushes, a couple of Blackcaps, several Black Redstarts and several Blue Rock Thrushes.

After about an hour scanning the cliff face, Steve eventually spotted our main target species – a Wallcreeper! It gradually moved further up the cliff face and was then spooked by a low flying aircraft and flew off to our left. After a few minutes Ian managed to re-locate it, and we spent another 20 minutes or so watching it, before it disappeared from view, and we decided to head up into the village. A lot of the coffee shops and bars were closed for the winter, but we managed to find one open, and some of the group decided to stop for a coffee break, while five of us opted to climb up the slope and steps into the ancient citadel which stands above the main village and fortress. We hoped to see Alpine Accentors here, but were disappointed not to find any, although we were far from disappointed with the fantastic views over the surrounding countryside.

We made our way back down to the minibuses, which we moved the short distance into another car park where it was easier to set up the picnic table for a very welcome lunch.

After lunch we packed everything away and headed to our second destination of the day, the Roman Aqueduct at Pont du Gard – another potential Wallcreeper site. Arriving at just after 3.00pm, we were pleased to find that there was no admission charge today as there was maintenance work in progress, although we didn't actually see any. We made our way down to the aqueduct and scanned round for any sign of a Wallcreeper, but initially there was very little sign of any sort of bird life.

Chris and Ian went up some steps at the side of the structure, from which we could see along the length of the western side, and after a short time Chris spotted a Wallcreeper feeding on the top level of the aqueduct. He dashed off to tell the rest of the group while Ian kept tabs on it, and eventually most of the rest of the group arrived, some rather out of breath, and managed to get views of the bird. It was slowly working its way towards the far end of the aqueduct, and would soon be out of sight due to the slightly curving nature of the structure, so we decided to take a chance and go across to the far side of the river to see whether the view was better from there. Good decision!

Initially we were closer to the bird, but predictably enough it slowly began making its way back in the direction from which it had come, i.e. away from us. However, we all had decent views, and in addition there was a flock of Crag Martins circling round and also about 15 Rock Sparrows came in to roost on the aqueduct.

Eventually we decided that we really had to leave, so we returned to the car park and drove back to the hotel, arriving at about 6.30pm. We met up later for our final checklist, followed by another excellent evening meal.

Day 5

Tuesday 28th January

Today we only had the morning for birding, as we needed to be at the airport for about 3.30pm, so we would need to leave the hotel at about 2.15. We decided to visit another totally different habitat – the arid, semi-desert of La Crau. Before we set off however, Steve found a Stripeless Tree Frog in the hotel garden.

We had a couple of stops on the minor road which leads to the car park at the northern end of La Crau, from one of which we could see the Etang des Aulnes, a large lake. Among the birds on the lake were a Great Crested Grebe, four Black-necked Grebes, five Gadwall and a large raft of Coot.

Moving on, we parked the minibuses and walked out along the track. There were a few Meadow Pipits around and the odd Skylark, but initially not much else. A large flock of about 100 Greylag Geese flew overhead, which was a little surprising, and Chris spotted an extremely distant Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flying by, before seeing an almost equally distant Southern Grey Shrike. A little later we found a rather closer Shrike which gave reasonable views.

We took an alternative route back to the hotel, having a very good view of a pair of White Storks which were already back at their nest, and a Chiffchaff was in the same area.

Back at the hotel we had our final picnic in the meeting room, before Ian took Jane B to Arles where she was spending a couple more days, and we then loaded the minibuses and said our goodbyes to our hosts Pascal and Christine and to David and Ann who were also staying on for a few more days at a different hotel.

The journey to the airport was uneventful and the flight departed on time, and actually landed ahead of schedule. Having collected our luggage, we wished one another a safe onward journey after a short but very enjoyable holiday in the varied habitats of this part of France.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January				
			24	25	26	27	28
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		5			100+
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓		2
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		13	2		
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	2		
5	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>					5
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓		✓
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		250+	25+		
8	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>					1
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		4			
10	Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		3	1		1
11	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2	2		
12	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					1
13	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					4
14	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		50+	✓		
15	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		4	2		2
16	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓	✓		✓
17	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		c10	c5		1
19	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	1
21	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		1			
22	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			1		
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1			
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		20+	20+		1
25	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	2	3	8+		
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	15+	20+	2	2
27	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		H	H		
28	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	2	1	✓		
29	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓		✓
30	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		c3000	c750		4
31	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			6		
32	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			2		
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		50+	100+		
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		2			
35	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		c10	H		
36	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		8+			
37	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2	3		
38	Temminck's Stint	<i>Calidris temminckii</i>			c17		
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		1			
42	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>					1
43	Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1H		
47	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		2	1		1

	Common name	Scientific name	January				
			24	25	26	27	28
48	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				1H	1
49	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	c4	c6	c4	3
50	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1			1	
51	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>					2
52	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓		
55	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		2	6+	c5	✓
57	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1	3	3	✓
58	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		30+	✓		✓
59	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		c5	1		
60	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				c15	
61	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H	H		H
62	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		3	2		1
63	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		2			
64	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	1			2	
65	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	1H		1		
67	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			1	1H	
68	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1		1		
69	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>				2	
70	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		c4	2	✓	2
72	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				c8	
73	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	✓	2	4	2
74	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	c4	10+	✓	✓
75	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				4+	
76	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		c6	c5		1
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		c15			
79	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				15+	
80	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				2	
81	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	1	c7	1
82	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		3	✓		30+
83	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			3		
85	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	1	1			
86	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓				
87	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				c10	
89	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
90	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	2			1	
91	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓		
Other Taxa							
1	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>		✓	✓		
2	Pipistrelle Bat sp	<i>Pipistrellus sp</i>		1			
3	Stripeless Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>		H	H		2