

# France: The Best of Brittany

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 20th May 2025

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Bluethroat



Little Egret



Avocet



Marsh Fritillary

Tour report by Martyn Williams  
Photos by Steve Lovick



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Tour participants: Martyn Williams (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

## Summary

This was a two-centre tour. We were based first at La Roche Bernard, which lies on the estuary of La Villaine near the southern Brittany coast, between the great birding sites of the Golfe du Morbihan and La Grande Briere, the second largest marshland in France. The second venue was Perros Guirec on Brittany's Northern coast in the Côtes-d'Armor, famous for its granite coast and for the first LPO (*Ligue Pour la Protection des Oiseaux*) reserve of Les Sept Iles, a series of islands off the coast and a sanctuary for many nesting seabirds, including the only breeding colony of Gannets in France.

The tour explored the various habitats offered, including the flower-laden verges of Brittany's roads. The weather was mainly sunny a few clouds and a little breezy but warm on the whole.

## Day 1

**Monday 12th May**

The group made the overnight crossing from Portsmouth to St. Malo.

## Day 2

**Tuesday 13th May**

The group of seven clients was picked up at 8.15am from the ferry terminal, after a night's crossing from Portsmouth on the brand-new boat, the St. Malo. Once all their bags were packed into the minibus, we started out towards our first venue.

We drove towards the headland of Cancale, Pointe du Grouin, and the Île des Landes, on the north-west edge of the bay of Mont St. Michel. Here, we disembarked and walked along the cliff edge, mainly to search for seabirds on the island. We saw Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, Common Shelduck, two Peregrine Falcons, and Shag and Cormorant roosting on the island, while Oystercatchers flew between the island and mainland. There were Stonechats and Linnets in the weathered shrub of the headland, and a short viewing of a Dartford Warbler on some gorse was enjoyed by a few of us. Lots of Painted Lady butterflies were around, and a Swallowtail butterfly was also seen. We had a great view of a European Green Lizard, seen by all the group; it was a good start to the week.

Then, travelling back towards St. Malo, we went to the Île Besnard, a beautiful peninsula with great views of the surrounding cliffs and various small islets. It was a lovely sunny day with a cool breeze on the headland, and we enjoyed the close-growing shrub typical of windy headlands, comprising Gorse, Bramble, Burnet Rose, Heather, and a myriad of coastal flowers: Blue Button Haze, Milkwords, Queen Anne's Lace, and carpets of Thrift. We had our picnic on a beach and then walked along the dunes overlooking a small island with Great Black-backed Gulls, Shag, and Oystercatchers, before making our way on the two-hour journey to La Roche Bernard and our first hotel. We had a lovely meal in a local restaurant and all retired to bed.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 14th May

After a lovely, filling breakfast, we headed off to meet Anthony Mahé, a barque operator on the western side of the Grand Brière, the second largest marshland (after the Camargue) in France. It was a beautiful day as we set off around the marshes in a barge propelled by an electric motor and a punt, in case we got stuck in the mud. Anthony took us out into the most amazing environment, silent except for bird song and calls. The barque slowly floated amongst the reeds and we watched Whiskered Terns swooping around us, Little Egrets, and a good number of both Grey and Purple Herons. We saw Spoonbills, Marsh Harriers, Black Kites, (heard) Savi's Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Zitting Cisticola and Yellow Wagtails. The highlight of the morning was coming across a Bluethroat singing in a prominent position in the reed bed. As usual, in the areas around the marsh, we heard Turtle Doves cooing and Cuckoos calling, and after a stroll around the edge of the marsh, we heard, very briefly, a Golden Oriole calling.

The other sight, which was quite impressive, was thousands of Green Oak Tortrix (*Tortrix viridana*) flying around the Oak trees. They can defoliate trees, but the Oak tree has a defensive mechanism of producing new growth of leaves with a toxin that is avoided by the moth.

After our picnic, we drove around to the eastern part of the Brière and had great views of the 7000ha of marshes from a large, very tall viewing tower. We walked down a track to the Reserve Pierre Constance and searched for more Bluethroats, but none were to be found in their usual nesting area. Unfortunately, the heavens opened and we had to abandon any likelihood of seeing anything here, so we reluctantly headed back to our hotel. We had a great meal in another restaurant in the old port area of La Roche Bernard.

## Day 4

## Thursday 15th May

We enjoyed another hearty breakfast before heading out to the Golfe du Morbihan, the marshes at the Château du Suscinio, the Marais de Duer, and finally the salt pans at Lasne St. Armel.

With an amazing backdrop of the Château du Suscinio, this was a great place to enjoy the ambience of salt marsh and dunes, and a long boardwalk along the marsh section. There were numerous Black-winged Stilts nesting, plus Avocets. Common Terns, with Black-headed Gulls, were on some islets on the marsh, but on the whole, a rather low number of species was observed. There were Stonechats, Sedge Warblers, and Eurasian Skylarks singing in the surrounding shrub and hedges of the marshes.

We moved on to have our picnic in a raised hide overlooking the old salt pans at the Marais de Duer. It was great to see Avocets with lots of recently-hatched chicks, motoring around like wind-up toys, plus Black-winged Stilts and the odd Common Redshank.

We moved on to some working salt pans at Lasne, near the village of St. Armel. Here, there were again Black-headed Gulls, a few Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and Common Redshanks, but very few small waders were to be seen, which was becoming a slightly worrying theme.

Finally, we were back in La Roche Bernard and had an excellent meal in another local restaurant. The hotel is in the old historic pedestrianised centre of the town, and in the narrow streets, we were treated every evening to mobs

of Swifts screaming through the streets. House Martins and Swallows were hawking around the town and over the port area; it was a magical place.

## Day 5

Friday 16th May

On our last day in La Roche Bernard, we headed into the ancient city of Vannes and its port to catch a boat to Île d'Arz, one of the biggest islands in the Golfe du Morbihan. It was another beautiful sunny day, on a lovely island with a variety of habitats. We observed Linnet, Meadow Pipit, Goldfinch, and a Melodious Warbler singing on a Blackthorn bush. We enjoyed the call and sight of a Green Woodpecker flying up from a meadow, plus numerous Eurasian Oystercatchers, Little Egrets and Whimbrel on the shoreline.

Again, there was no great number of birds, but the landscapes and habitats were lovely. A few butterflies were on the wing, with lots of Speckled Wood, Painted Lady, and some Six-spot Burnet moths feasting on the pollen of the meadows around the island. We found some lovely Lax-flowered Orchids in one of the many meadows, and although this was not the best of birding sites, we managed to see 34 species of birds and hear another four, including Cuckoo and Turtle Dove.

A very pleasant inland sea journey by boat, lasting around half an hour each way, allowed us to encounter Great Black-backed Gulls, several Cormorants, Herring Gulls and Little Egrets on the rocky shorelines. Finally, we were back in La Roche Bernard, and had another excellent meal in a local crêperie near our hotel.

## Day 6

Saturday 17th May

After our final breakfast and saying goodbye to La Roche Bernard, we headed to the north coast of Brittany, to Perros-Guirec, our next destination for the last three days.

We stopped at Talroch, the home of the tour leader, and took a stroll around the riverside, meadows, and woodlands. We had a great couple of hours walking alongside the River Sarre and watching clouds of Beautiful Demoiselles, with the brilliant blues of the males, and the green with bronze wings of the females. Then we walked through a fantastic meadow full of Heath Spotted Orchids, Ragged Robin, Clover, Meadow Buttercup and many more plants attracting insects. Our first Map Butterfly was found and photographed, and there were Brimstone, Large White, and Speckled Wood butterflies flitting around. We continued into the surrounding woodland and riverside, enjoying watching the Water Crowfoot just beginning to flower, and Royal Fern unfurling on the riverbank. We enjoyed our picnic under a Lime tree at the local Chapel, surrounded by woodland and meadows, listening to birdsong.

After our picnic lunch, we had a pleasant drive through beautiful countryside and picturesque villages to Perros-Guirec; we finally arrived at our next hotel in time to unpack our bags and head out for another lovely restaurant meal.

## Day 7

Sunday 18th May

Today we made a trip inland to the highest part of Brittany, in the National Park of Monts D'Arrée. Our first stop was at the Lande de Cragou, a moorland-type landscape with gorse and heather and small copses. We parked the

minibus and followed a track into the woodland, to be greeted with birdsong of the wonderful Garden Warbler, Blackcap, and Firecrest, easily heard but altogether harder to see in a fully-leafed, wet woodland. Having enjoyed the ambience of this walk, we eventually reached a boardwalk where the view of the moorland was open, and we set up the scope. With binoculars, we sat and enjoyed the landscape in front of us. Almost immediately, the leader, in his excitement and wishful thinking, shouted “harrier!”, and then promptly said “Oh no, Buzzard”. We sat enjoying the view, surrounded by Cuckoos calling, and were rewarded with one flying in front of us; most of the group managed a good view. Finally, at a distance, we spotted another Buzzard, but this time also a Montagu’s Harrier harassing it. The Buzzard flew off, and then we were lucky to see both male and female Montagu’s Harriers, evidently protecting their nest, which we guessed was by a rock outcrop in the long grass.

Finally satisfied with our views, we headed off for a late picnic lunch at Brennelis, by the Venec peat bog. We had a lovely picnic sitting on a bridge over a stream meandering through the peat bog, listening to Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs, and watching Beautiful Demoiselles and Large Red Damselflies. Fast-flying butterflies were flitting here and there, and after one had landed, photographs were taken and later identified as Marsh Fritillaries. Although in other years we have been lucky enough to find signs of Beaver feeding, unfortunately on this occasion there were no fresh signs to show the group. Several members managed to catch a close glimpse of a Kingfisher from the bridge; then we reluctantly made our way back to Perros-Guirec and our hotel.

## Day 8

## Monday 19th May

Today started with an early breakfast and a quick drive down to the port at Perros-Guirec for 8.30am. We boarded a boat to take us on a trip to the Sept Îles, an LPO reserve, and the most southerly and second-largest colony of breeding Gannets in Europe.

It was an ‘interesting’ crossing, with breezy weather and a somewhat agitated sea. The series of seven islands, which was the first LPO (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux) reserve established, in the 1960s, was a fantastic spectacle. The boat manoeuvred fairly close to the rocky inlets of the main island of Rouzic. Here, we were introduced to the vast numbers of Gannets, and also numbers of Guillemots, Razorbills, Fulmars, and Puffins. There was also a small group of Grey Seals, their heads appearing every now and then from the sea around us. The Gannets were amazing, some fishing, some carrying seaweed for nesting material, many on their nest sites (with almost exactly a metre between each one), to which they return every year.

The guide explained the effect avian flu had had on the nesting populations. In 2019, there were estimated to be around 17,000 breeding pairs; this dropped to below 8,000 after avian flu decimated the colonies in 2022. After introducing biosecurity measures, the numbers have already reached the current estimate of 14,000 breeding pairs. Despite the rough weather, everyone thoroughly enjoyed this wonderful boat trip, but needed to warm up with a hot chocolate when finally back on shore.

After the boat trip, we stopped and enjoyed a picnic on a nearby beach. We went on to the Île Grande, a headland west of Perros-Guirec and an LPO care centre and hospital for injured seabirds. It was a really interesting headland, and we saw lots of Narrow-bordered Five-spot Burnet moths and good numbers of Pyramidal Orchids, and also wild Gladiolus. The rocky headland gave us great views of Gannets diving in for fish, and we watched both Meadow and Rock Pipits on the rocks and surrounding grass. Finally, we returned to the hotel and had our last evening meal together at a local restaurant.

## Day 9

Tuesday 20th May

We said goodbye to the owner of our hotel, packed all of our luggage into the minibus, and started to head back east towards St. Malo, via the Sillon de Talbert. This is a large spit of land made up of pebbles and sand, protruding into the sea for nearly three kilometres. It was formed by the currents of two rivers, creating this narrow piece of land, and is a very important site for breeding birds, notably Kentish Plover and Little Tern.

We saw Sanderling and a few Dunlin among them, as well as Ringed Plover, and we decided to have our picnic looking over the sea and taking in the calmness of the area, before making our way towards St. Malo via Huyaunde Château and forest. Unfortunately, there were roadworks on the route, and we ended up going in circles before giving up on the château, but we had a short, relaxing walk under the trees on a forest track.

We finally departed to the ferry terminal at St. Malo and said our goodbyes. It had been a really good week, even though the numbers of birds and species in general were fairly low. However, the beauty of Brittany, with flowery meadows, pretty villages, great food, and peace and quiet, was appreciated by all of us. It was a wonderful group, and with any luck our paths will cross again.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	May 2025							
		14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		✓						
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		✓						
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓						
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓					
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>				✓				
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓						
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H	H	H		✓		
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		H		H	H	H	H	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓					
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓					
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓			✓				
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			✓					
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>								✓
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓						
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				✓				
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓	✓				
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>								✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>							✓	✓
Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>		✓						
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>			✓	✓			✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓					
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓			✓				
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓			✓	
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>							✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>							✓	
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>							✓	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>							✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>							✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓				
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓						✓	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>								
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		✓	✓					
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		✓						
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			✓					
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Ardea ibis</i>	✓							
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		✓						
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>						✓		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓						

Common name	Scientific name	May 2025							
		14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		✓						
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>						✓		
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		H						H
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		H		✓				H
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓		✓				✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓							
Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		H						H
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓			✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>								
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓	✓			
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	H		✓	H	✓		H	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>								
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	H				
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H		H	H				
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓			
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>						H		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	H	H	H	✓	H		
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓	✓					
Common Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		✓						
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>				✓				
Savi's Warbler	<i>Locustella luscinioides</i>		✓						
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	✓			✓				
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	H	✓	H	✓	H		
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		H			H	H		
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>	H							
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>	✓							
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>						H		
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	H					H		
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>						H		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓		H	✓	✓		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓		✓		H			
Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>		✓						
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>						✓		
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓		✓			✓		✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓			✓	
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		✓						
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓						
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓			✓	✓
European Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓			✓	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>								

Common name	Scientific name	May 2025							
		14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓			✓			✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	H			✓				
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓							
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓	✓				
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	✓							

## Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	May 2025							
		14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>		✓						
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>						✓		

## Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name	May 2025							
		14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>					✓			
Black-veined White	<i>Aporia crataegi</i>		✓						
Orange Tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>						✓		
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>		✓						
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>	✓	✓				✓		
Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>	✓				✓			
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>			✓					
Little Blue	<i>Cupido minimus</i>			✓					
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>				✓			✓	
Map	<i>Araschnia levana</i>					✓	✓		
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>				✓		✓		
Marsh Fritillary	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>						✓		
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>	✓							
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>			✓					
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>			✓					
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		