

France

Wallcreepers, Camargue & Provence

Sat 9th-Fri 15th March 2019



Tour highlights: Just two of many Greater Flamingos • Rock Bunting • Little Egret • Stripeless Tree Frogs • White Stork • A pair of beautiful, pink-hued Slender-billed Gulls © tour participant Peter Monahan and David Fairhurst (tree frogs)

**Report compiled by tour leader:
David Fairhurst**

France | Camargue & Provence

Tour Leader: David Fairhurst

With: Kay Adamson, Robert & Pauline Blewitt, Peter & Janet Monahan and Peter & Bron White

Saturday 9th March

After a trouble-free flight from Heathrow we arrived at Marseille mid morning. We purchased lunch from a café at the airport and once all the minibus formalities were taken care of, we headed west toward Arles. We enjoyed our lunch in the hotel garden surrounded by Carpenter Bees in the warm sunshine before leaving our bags at our hotel and heading out into Les Alpilles and to the beautiful town of Les Baux.

It was rather busy with tourist folk and parking was a problem, but DF dropped the group off and parked the mini-bus down the hill. On his return the group had already located a Wallcreeper!! We were able to watch the bird for ages as it moved around the cliff-face and even showed it to some interested locals. Whilst watching the Wallcreeper a smart male Blue Rock Thrush was spotted on the same cliff and it was great to be able to see both birds.

A short meander along the track below the citadel produced another Wallcreeper and quite a few butterflies were flying in the warm sunshine. As we headed up and into the town yet another Wallcreeper was spotted this time a male with quite a bit of black on his throat. Around the town there was no sign of any Alpine Accentors but given the warm weather that this part of France has been having for several weeks it wasn't surprising.

Sunday 10th March

Once breakfast was over, we travelled the short distance to the stony, steppe-like area of La Crau. It doesn't take us long to locate at least 30 Little Bustards walking about in the open, including some very smart males. Small groups would fly around and land again in what looked like some sort of display. Once in the air they were completely transformed with startling white wings. Also here were two rather distant Iberian Grey Shrikes but several Stone-curlews showed much better. Nearby at Étang des Aulnes we spent a pleasant while scanning the water and exploring the small reedbeds and were rewarded with some dapper Red-crested Pochard, plenty of Cetti's Warblers, lots of Chiffchaffs and a couple of Red-eared Terrapins.

We lunched on the edge of La Crau proper before heading out along the tracks. It was great to be strolling around this amazing habitat with the smell of Thyme everywhere. Skylarks were singing continuously, and it didn't take us long to locate several singing Calandra Larks. They were difficult to spot on the ground, but we had super views as they sang just above our heads! Calandra Lark is one of France's rarest breeding birds, being restricted to just a few tens of pairs here on La Crau. A couple of Stone-curlews were seen and a female Merlin was spotted on a perch before whizzing off across the stony ground. Yesterday's calm weather had gone and it was starting to get rather breezy and back at Mas Chauvet we spent a while searching for the wintering Richard's Pipits. We potted about in the rough grass and juncus and were rewarded with up to four of these large pipits mixed in with the Meadow Pipits.

Our final stop of the day was to another area of La Crau but in the strong wind birding was difficult but our efforts were rewarded with a superb group of newly arrived Lesser Kestrels. This is a species that breeds on La Crau; though our trips are normally too early in the year to see them, with this year's early spring they were a great sight.

Monday 11th March

We started the day in the freshwater wetlands of the Petite Camargue and our first stop found us scanning across the reedbeds and pools. Quickly we had seen many Marsh Harriers, Great Egrets and the incredible sight of over 90 (!) Western Swampheens feeding out in the open in a large area of cut reed! A Eurasian Bittern was heard booming. Further on we saw a small group of Bearded Reedlings and a few Tree Sparrows.

From here we headed south to the coast at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. Just outside the town a stunning group of several 100 Glossy Ibis fed in a roadside pool affording great views. The beach and breakwaters held Yellow-legged, Black-headed and more Mediterranean Gulls, plus a nice group of Sandwich Terns. The salt pans just north of town produced our first of many (many) Greater Flamingos, Crested Larks, Little

Stints and plenty of roadside Giant Orchids. The large étang had a lovely group of Kentish Plovers and yet more flamingos.

We lunched at Consecanie along with a few showy Sardinian Warblers! After lunch, we had a stroll along the track just to the north of our lunch spot and managed to find a group of about 15 Little Ringed Plovers. The reedbed and pools back toward the tarmac road were full of birds and we had yet more super views of Western Swamphens.

Heading back north, we stopped in the freshwater reedbeds and pools at Mas d'Agon. Here we were rewarded with yet more egrets and herons, huge numbers of Glossy Ibis and a group of Eurasian Spoonbills. After a short break at the hotel we took a short drive to one of our Eagle-Owl sites. We spent an hour at dusk waiting but due to the strong wind blowing nothing was seen or heard.

Tuesday 12th March

This morning saw us leave the hotel early and head to Mont Ventoux. After about an hour-and-a-half drive we parked at Chalet Reynard and under crystal blue skies and no wind (!) took a short stroll through the pines to the east and the area around the cabins. Crested Tits performed very well along with Firecrest, Marsh Tit and Common Crossbill. Above us in the sky was single Red Kite and as we watched it a superb pair of Goshawks started circling as well. Back in the car park a pair of Rock Buntings were located with one bird giving wonderful views. We drove higher up the mountain and parked at the barrier and lunched in the warm sunshine. A short stroll beyond the barrier post lunch produced a smart male Ring Ouzel, singing Woodlark and overhead a least a dozen Griffon Vultures sailed by.

As we descended the mountain we stopped at a regular Black Woodpecker spot and no sooner had we exited the minibus than one was heard calling, unfortunately despite waiting a while it failed to show. From Mont Ventoux we headed to the world heritage site of Pont du Gard. This impressive Roman aqueduct, as well as being a cultural spot, is also great for birds. About 15 Crag Martins buzzed around the bridge and several were in the process of making nests under the huge arches. Black Redstarts, Serins and a Firecrest were seen and after a short wait at least 20 Rock Sparrows came in and perched right on top of the structure.

Wednesday 13th March

Day five and the wind had returned so our first stop of the day on La Crau again to try for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse was soon aborted and we headed back to the Camargue. At Mas d'Agon the species seen were similar to last time but as we left the site an eagle was spotted from the minibus. We all piled out of the van and watched a cracking sub-adult Spotted Eagle circle over the fields before drifting off high over the reedbeds. Spotted Eagles winter in very small numbers in the Camargue so it was great to catch up with one.

From here we headed south to Étang de Vaccares and the small reserve of La Capelière. Three Spotted Redshank were located in a roadside pool but otherwise it was hard work in the blustery conditions. We lunched at the platform overlooking Tour du Valat and enjoyed the selection of wintering wildfowl including Shoveler, Wigeon, Gadwall, Pintail, Mallard and Greylag Geese. As we watched the ducks a female Wild Boar and three of last year's young began walking about on the marsh. They were on show for a while and it was interesting to watch them.

From here we headed to the salt pans and mudflats at Piemanson. On the approach road we found some gorgeous Slender-billed Gulls, small numbers of Black-necked Grebes and a nice close group of Dunlin and Little Stints. The pools at the end of the road held a nice flock of Ringed Plovers and with them several Kentish Plovers. We returned back to La Capelière and had a gentle stroll around the reserve. Green and Common Sandpipers were seen from the hides but the undoubted highlight were the wonderful Stripeless Tree Frogs.

Thursday 14th March

Our final full day saw us back in the morning to the wetlands of the Petite Camargue. Here eventually we found at least two showy Penduline Tits feeding on the buds of Poplar trees. Overhead a pale Booted Eagle gave super views. In the reedbeds we heard several Moustached Warblers but despite quite a bit of effort we only managed very (very) brief views. A couple of impressive White Storks were on a nest and a pleasant stroll around the reserve boardwalk produced a male Vagrant Emperor dragonfly.

From here we headed back into Les Alpilles and had lunch at the start of the walk to La Caume. The walk towards La Caume was lovely: several Hummingbird Hawkmoths buzzed past and a Bath White butterfly performed well. We didn't even have to start the climb up to the radio tower, because as soon as we left the forest behind and were out in the open an adult Bonelli's Eagle flew past us! It soon reappeared and gave great views as it tumbled in the sky with a Raven.

Returning to the minibus we drove the short distance to Les Baux and enjoyed a wander around the town. There was still no sign of any Alpine Accentors.

After a short break at the hotel we tried again for Eagle-Owls and again drew a blank.

Friday 15th March

After breakfast we bid '*au revoir*' to the hotel and headed for one final visit to La Crau. The hoped-for sandgrouse didn't play ball but we were rewarded with fantastic views of a first-summer Great Spotted Cuckoo sunning itself in a bush. A short stop back at Étang des Aulnes didn't produce anything new, but it was nice to be in the sunshine.

All too soon it was back in the mini-bus and off to the airport and our flight back to London

Systematic List of Birds (n=140)

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

A single at Tour du Valat was our only sighting

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*

One roadside bird on 13/03

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

Small numbers seen on four dates at various locations

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Small numbers seen in the brackish areas in the Camargue on two dates

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

Seen on four dates at various sites within the Camargue

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*

Small numbers seen at Tour du Valat on 14/03 were our only sightings

Eurasian Wigeon *Mareca penelope*

Two drakes at Tour de Valat on 14/03

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Small numbers seen at a variety of locations.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

A handful seen on 14/03 within the Camargue

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Small numbers seen in the Camargue

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

Small numbers of these cracking looking ducks were seen at two sites in the Camargue

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

20 on Étang des Aulnes were the only ones noted

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Seen in small numbers on two dates, in the dry habitats

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

A roadside male on 14/03 was our only sighting

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Seen on four dates at various sites in the Camargue

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Recorded on four dates

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Eight including several in summer plumage at Piemanson

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

Seen in large numbers (many, many 100s) on the two dates we visited the Camargue

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Seen in small numbers on four days, including several pairs on nests – always a great sight!

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Seen on three dates in the Camargue, with huge numbers (c. 400) at Mas d' Agon

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

Up to 32 seen at Mas d' Agon on two dates

Eurasian Bittern

Heard 'booming' in the Camargue on three dates

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Many seen daily

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Common even in the 'dry' areas

Great Egret *Ardea alba*

Small numbers seen daily

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Small numbers seen daily

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Seen on every date at many locations

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

12 over Mont Ventoux on 12/03

Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*

A superb sub-adult was seen at Mas d' Agon on 13/03

Short-toed Snake Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*

One seen over La Crau on 15/03

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

A stunning pale morph bird gave superb views as it circled low over our heads in the Petite Camargue

Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata*

A cracking adult was seen display fighting and at times tussling with a Raven at La Caume on 14/03.

Another perhaps the same bird (?) flew over Les Baux on the same date

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Singles on three dates

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

A pair were displaying on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Common in the Camargue

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Two males seen in the Camargue including one that gave outrageously close views and was at times buzzed by an adult male Merlin!

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Singles on just two dates

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Seen daily at many sites in good numbers

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Seemingly everywhere, every day!

Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*

30 at Vergières on 10/03 gave brilliant views on the deck and in flight!

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

Heard at several sites in the Camargue

Western Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*

We had the incredible sight of at least 90 birds in a large reed cut area in the Petite Camargue and then another dozen gave even better views at Consécanière. Bonkers!!

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Seen in small numbers in the Camargue

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Good numbers at many sites on four dates

Common Crane *Grus grus*

Due to the early season only nine were seen in the Camargue on 11/03

Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*

At least half a dozen seen and heard at Vergières, Mas Chauvet and on La Crau on 10/03

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

A handful seen in the Camargue on the 11/03

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

20 at Piemanson on 13/03

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Small flocks seen on three dates

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Just one flock of about 15 birds on La Crau on 10/03

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Small numbers seen at Consécanière and Piemanson

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*

A flock of 15 were at Consécanière on 11/03

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Four at Consécanière and a large flock of 50 birds at Piemanson

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

A superb male was with two females at Consécanière on 11/03 and four were at Piemanson on 13/03

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Noted in small numbers at two sites within the Camargue

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Small numbers seen at three sites in the Camargue

Ruff *Calidris pugnax*

A single recorded at Mas d'Agon on 13/03

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

Our only sighting was of 20 at Piemanson

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Six at Consécanière on 11/03 and 40 at Piemanson on 13/03

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Good numbers seen at four sites within the Camargue

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

A single noted in the Camargue on 13/03

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Small numbers noted on three dates in the Camargue

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Small numbers seen in the Camargue on two dates

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

Three at La Capelière on 13/03

Slender-billed Gull *Chroicocephalus genei*

60 (!) gave brilliant views at Piemanson on 13/03

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Seen daily at many sites

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*

Moving through in small numbers, seen daily in a variety of locations

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Common

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

About a dozen at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer on 11/03

Feral Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Common

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Small numbers seen most days

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common.

Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius*

A first-summer bird gave brilliant views on La Crau on 15/03

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Small numbers on three dates in the Camargue

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

A superb bird performed well at the hotel on the 12/03

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*

A single heard calling but not seen on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Heard calling around the hotel every morning

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Seen daily

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

A flock of 14 were watched hawking over La Crau on 10/03

Merlin *Falco colombarius*

A female on La Crau on 10/03 and a stonking male in the Camargue on 13/03 which was hassling a smart male Hen Harrier!

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

A rather distant bird was at Les Baux on 09/03

Iberian Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

Two at Vergières on 10/03 were the only birds noted

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Small numbers noted on three dates

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

Common

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Common.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Recorded daily

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Common

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

Small numbers recorded on Mont Ventoux and La Caume

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Small numbers seen on Mont Ventoux and at La Caume

European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

Small numbers on Mont Ventoux on 12/03 some giving fantastic views

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*

A pair on Mount Ventoux on 12/03

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Ones and twos seen on four dates

Great Tit *Parus major*

Common

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

Heard calling but not seen on two dates in the Camargue but then seen well with at least three birds feeding on poplar buds in the Petite Camargue on 14/03

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*

Three in the Petite Camargue showed well but rather briefly

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Seen at various locations in good numbers

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Small numbers seen on three dates at a variety of locations

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

One singing on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

At least 20 were seen singing and displaying on La Crau on 10/03

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Singles noted on two dates

Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Noted on four dates

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Seen and heard on five dates at a variety of locations

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Seen daily in good numbers

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*

Four birds heard singing well (and close), but only one gave very brief views in the Petite Camargue on 14/03

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*

Recorded in small numbers on three dates

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atrocapilla*

Seen daily around the hotel and ones and twos seen elsewhere most days

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

Ones and twos seen daily

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*

Noted on two dates and one or two gave good views

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Small numbers seen on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seen on four dates

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

A single seen well on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

Three at Les Baux on 09/03 performed superbly; the highlight of the trip for most of us!

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*

Small numbers recorded on two dates

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Common.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Only noted on one date

Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*

A single male on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Singles noted on just two dates

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Two on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Seen daily in good numbers

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

A stunning male at Les Baux on 09/03 was sharing the cliff face with a Wallcreeper!

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

Noted daily

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Small numbers recorded on four dates

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*

At least twenty came into roost at Pont du Gard

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Singles seen on two dates.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Ones and twos seen daily

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*

Four at Mas Chauvet on 10/03

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Common

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Recorded in good numbers in the Camargue on two dates

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*

A single flew over the hotel on 12/03

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Small numbers at several sites

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*

A small group of at least three seen on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Small numbers seen at quite a few sites

Citril Finch *Carduelis citrinella*

Ones and twos seen briefly on Mont Ventoux on 12/03

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

Noted in small numbers daily

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

Small numbers recorded on three dates

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

Several noted on Mont Ventoux including one that gave wonderful views

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Noted on four dates

Other notable flora and fauna seen included

Butterflies & Moths

Red Admiral
 Wall Brown
 Painted Lady
 Holly Blue
 Cleopatra
 Small White
 Orange Tip
 Clouded Yellow
 Bath White
 Hummingbird Hawkmoth
 Lunar Double-stripe

Flowers

Paper-white Narcissus
 Jack-go-to-bed-at-Noon
 Mediterranean Cat's-ear
 Wallflower
 Shrubby Globularia
 Grape Hyacinth
Ophrys forrestieri
 Giant Orchid
 Sweet Pea Shrub
 Stinking Hellebore

Mammals

Eurasian Red Squirrel
 Coypu
 European Hare
 Wild Boar

Amphibians

Red-eared Terrapin
 Stripeless (Mediterranean) Tree Frog

Dragonfly

Vagrant Emperor