

France

Wallcreepers, Camargue & Provence

Sat 4th-Fri 10th March 2017



Clockwise from top left: Greater Flamingos • Wallcreeper • Bearded Reedling • Mediterranean Gull • Common Cranes • Booted Eagle © Tour participant Elizabeth Grynberg & David Fairhurst/Limosa Holidays

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

France | Camargue & Provence

Tour Leader: David Fairhurst

With: Bob Bailey, Marek & Elizabeth Grynberg, Alan Needham, Roger & Evelyn Richardson, Chris Rose.

Saturday 4th March

After a trouble-free flight from Heathrow (although a wee bit bumpy at times!) we arrived at Marseille mid-afternoon. Once all the minibus formalities were taken care of we headed west toward Arles. From the motorway we spotted at least 20 Black Kites over the large rubbish dump before arriving at our excellent hotel late afternoon. After folk had time to acquaint themselves with their rooms and the hotel layout, we had over an hour wandering around the meadows and hedges adjacent to the hotel. Familiar birds here included Black Redstarts, Green Woodpeckers, Stonechats and masses of Cattle Egrets. Several Zitting Cisticolas buzzed about over the long grass and a single White Stork flew over.

Sunday 5th March

Once breakfast was over, we travelled the short distance to the stoney steppe-like area of La Crau. It didn't take us long to locate a few of this area's arid bird specialists including Stone-curlew, Southern Grey Shrikes and three Little Bustards. Whilst watching the bustards, four Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew back and forth across the sky; these increasingly rare breeders are getting harder to find so we were very fortunate to see them. Several large groups (into the hundreds) of Common Cranes were watched heading north-east – birds leaving their wintering grounds in the Camargue and migrating to Hungary where they rest before heading to the far north to breed. Nearby at Etang des Aulnes we spent a pleasant while scanning the water and exploring the small reedbeds and were rewarded with up to five Penduline Tits, a couple of Common Kingfishers, plenty of Cetti's Warblers and a showy singing Moustached Warbler. The Common Crane migration continued and we enthralled with the sight and the sound of many more hundreds circling over our heads – one of the highlights of the trip for most of us! Cloud arrived mid-morning but it didn't stop us heading out onto the main area of La Crau. Even before we had stopped the minibus we had spotted a cracking Calandra Lark. A search of the area produced at least a dozen singing male Calandras and many Skylarks. Calandra Lark is one of France's rarest breeding birds, being restricted to just a few tens of pairs, all breeding here on La Crau.

We lunched nearby at Mas Chavet but the post lunch hunt for Richard's Pipit was cut short due to rain. Heading up into Les Alpilles and to Les Baux, the rain stopped and within just a few minutes of leaving the van we located a Wallcreeper! The bird was rather distant but we all enjoyed scope views, quickly followed by several Crag Martins and a smart young female Blue Rock Thrush that performed well on a boulder for us. Walking below the cliffs and to the south of the town it wasn't long before we found another stunning Wallcreeper, this time the bird was much closer and we were all able to enjoy prolonged views of this incredible rock-dwelling bird. We had time left to wander up into the town and quickly located four Alpine Accentors. Like the Wallcreepers these birds breed in the high mountains and descend to lower altitudes for the winter.

Monday 6th March

Despite a rather damp start in the wetlands of the Petite Camargue we did rather well with a superb group of displaying Red-crested Pochards in a roadside pool. On the other side of the road was the incredible sight of over 20 Purple Swamphens feeding right out in the open in a large area of cut reed. A beautiful male Bearded Reedling showed very well and many Marsh Harriers quartered the reedbeds. With the rain increasing we decided to head south to the coast at Saintes Maries de la Mer and a welcome coffee. The rain eased and on the beach we discovered a nice flock of summer-plumaged Mediterranean Gulls along with several Sandwich Terns and Yellow-legged Gulls. The salt pans just north of town produced our first of many (many) Greater Flamingos, a Common Sandpiper and a first-summer Slender-billed Gull. An elusive Dartford Warbler sang well but refused to show for more than a brief second. Further along the road a stunning adult Slender-billed Gull fed on the water right next to the minibus, enabling some excellent photos to be taken.

We lunched at Consecaniere surrounded by yet more flamingos, a single Eurasian Spoonbill flew over and a male Sardinian Warbler showed well. With the wind picking up we had a stroll along the track just to the north of our lunch spot and managed to find half a dozen Kentish Plovers amongst a small group of waders including Dunlin and Grey Plovers. Large numbers of Avocets roosted out on the mud and a group of Golden Plover sheltered on the dry salt pans. After a 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 7th March

This morning saw us leave the hotel early and head to Mount Ventoux. On arrival it was clear that there was a fair amount of fresh snow. We parked at Chalet Reynard and, with a rather chilly wind blowing, took a short stroll through the pines to the east and the area around the cabins. Common Crossbills were some of the first birds we spotted and one particular male gave us outstanding views as it fed on a pine cone right in front of us! A few Citril Finches buzzed about and Crested Tits performed well. Retreating lower down the mountain to the sheltered forests we watched a superb display-flying male Citril Finch for quite a while. We lunched *al fresco* in sunshine further still down the mountain in a lovely sheltered spot and were serenaded by two male Short-toed Treecreepers.

From Mount Ventoux we headed to the world heritage site of Pont du Gard. This impressive Roman aqueduct, as well as being a cultural spot, is great for birds. Over 100 Crag Martins buzzed around the bridge and several were in the process of making nests under the huge arches. A Firecrest showed very well and amongst the Crag Martins we spotted several Barn Swallows and House Martins. A single Alpine Swift joined the flock for a short while. Rock Sparrows have a winter roost on the aqueduct and you normally have to wait till the sun is setting before the birds arrive but, much to our surprise, one arrived nice and early in the late afternoon. As we strolled back to the minibus, a cracking male Cirl Bunting show well in a dead tree.

Wednesday 8th March

Day 5 saw us back in the wetlands of the Camargue, this time the eastern portion. Our first stop was at Mas d'Agon where the reedbeds and pools were rather quiet. We had yet more great views of Penduline Tits and a nice group of sparrows contained both House and Tree. Another Alpine Swift headed north over our heads. A little further on and at the wonderful reserve of La Capeliere the warm sunshine had encouraged three species of butterfly to come out and in the small stand of poplars a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was seen. We lunched at the platform overlooking Tour du Valat and enjoyed the masses of wintering wildfowl including Shoveler, Pintail, Wigeon, Gadwall, Teal, Mallard and Greylag Geese. On the edge of the reeds, we spotted a small group of Wild Boar. From here we headed to the saltpans and mudflats at Piemanson. At least 10 gorgeous Slender-billed Gulls floated on the water and we spent time going through the throngs of wading birds, picking out Sanderling, Dunlin, Little Stint and Grey and Ringed Plovers. The waders were repeatedly spooked by kite-surfers and whizzed right around our heads!

The day ended with a stunning Eagle Owl; the wind from the previous few days had now completely gone and it was a flat calm evening, so we returned to Les Alpilles. Expecting a wait it was a huge surprise to hear the male Eagle Owl start calling well before sunset. We eventually located him on the limestone cliff and had fantastic views as he called away and then flew across in front of us – incredible!

Thursday 9th March

Our last full day and for the first few hours we returned to the Petite Camargue. With most of the Common Cranes now left it was quite a surprise to find a few tardy family parties feeding in the stubble fields. The warm sunshine from yesterday was continuing and it was pleasant wandering along the boardwalks at the reserve Scamandre. The White Stork nest next to the reserve centre was a stick hotel for many House and Tree Sparrows. We found some very showy Penduline Tits and Bearded Reedlings and a stunning pale morph Booted Eagle drifted right over our heads – a superb sight against the crystal blue skies. Back at Mas Chavet there was quite a breeze and conditions were a bit difficult but we did manage to locate a Richard's Pipit.

We had a picnic lunch back up in Les Alpilles, at the start of the track to La Caume. We spent the afternoon having a lovely stroll through the pinewoods here and further up towards the radio mast on the impressive limestone crag. Good numbers of Cleopatra butterflies, Green Hairstreaks, Bath White and Hummingbird Hawkmoths were taking advantage of the beautiful sunshine and were nectaring on the Rosemary plants. Once out of the pines we scanned the hillsides and soon located a Bonelli's Eagle perched on a favoured hump. We had a leisurely wander back down from the crag and through the pinewoods to the minibus.

Friday 9th March

After breakfast we bid goodbye to the hotel and spent a short while back on La Crau, seeing similar birds as before such as Little Bustards, Crested Larks and Stone-curlew. Another brief stop at Etang des Aulnes was rewarded with huge numbers of migrating Mediterranean Gulls. We had a hassle-free drive back to Marseille airport and a trouble free flight, arriving back in London ahead of schedule.

Systematic List of Birds

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

A dozen were seen at Tour du Valat on 08/03.

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.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Small numbers seen at several sites within the Camargue

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Recorded in small numbers on two in the Camargue

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Small numbers seen at a variety of locations.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Seen on four dates at various sites within the Camargue, by far the largest numbers (many hundreds) were at Tour du Valat on 08/03

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

10 were seen at Tour de Valat on 08/03

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Small numbers seen in the Camargue

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

Small numbers seen at three sites in the Camargue

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Small numbers seen on two dates in the Camargue

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Seen in small numbers on three dates

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Singles heard calling on two dates.

Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan*

Three seen offshore at Saintes Maries de la Mer on 06/03 and another offshore at Piemanson on 08/3.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Seen on three dates at various sites in the Camargue.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Recorded on three dates with by far the largest numbers (many hundreds) seen at Etang des Aulnes.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

About 80 on Etang de Vaccares on 08/03, including several in breeding plumage.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

Seen in large numbers (many hundreds) on the three dates we visited the Camargue.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Seen in small numbers most days, including several pairs on nests.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Small numbers noted on three dates in the Camargue.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

A single flew over our heads whilst having lunch at Consecaniere on 06/03.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Many seen on five dates.

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.

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

A pale morph bird gave wonderful views circling over the reserve Scamandre on 09/03

Bonelli's Eagle *Aquila fasciata*

A single perched on top of a bare hill at La Caume on 09/03

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Singles on two dates.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Common in the Camargue.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

Recorded on three dates in small numbers at various locations with c30 over the rubbish dump just outside Marseille on our way to and from the airport

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Seemingly everywhere, every day!

Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*

Three at Vergieres on 05/03 and then 9 the same day on the main Crau

Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus*

Heard at several sites in the Camargue and one seen well

Western Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*

The incredible sight of at least 35 birds in a large reed cut area in the Petite Camargue was one of the highlights of the trip!

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*

Around 1300 moving north-east in small groups throughout the day on 05/03 was very memorable, then seen very well on the ground in the stubble fields in the Petite Camargue.

Eurasian Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*

A single at Vergieres on 05/03

Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

About 400 at Consecanaire on 06/03

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

Small flocks seen on two dates.

Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Flocks of several hundred seen in the Crau and in the Camargue.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Small numbers seen at Consecanriere and Piemanson

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

About 12 at Piemanson on 08/03

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Eight at Consecanaire on 06/03

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

Several birds seen on 3 dates in the Camargue

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Small numbers seen at three sites in the Camargue

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*

About 10 at Mas d'Agon on 08/03 was our only sighting

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

One at Mas d'Agon on 08/03

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Small numbers seen in the Camargue on two dates.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Five singles on three dates in the Camargue

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Singles on 2 dates at 2 sites within the Camargue

Little stint *Calidris minuta*

About 1000 with the wader flock at Piemanson on 08/03

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

About 100 at Consecanriere and c 1000 at Piemanson

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

A flock of c14 at Mas d'Agon on 09/03

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*

An adult and 2cy/1st summer were just north of Saintes Maries de la Mer on 06/03 and then 10 superb birds were at Piemanson on 08/03

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Seen daily at many sites

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*

Moving through in large numbers with over 1000 seen on three dates in a variety of locations.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Common.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

Up to 10 birds seen at Saintes Maries de la Mer on 06/03 and 3 at Piemanson on 08/03

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*

Four seen in flight at Vergieres on 06/03

Feral Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Common.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Small numbers seen most days.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common.

Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*

A stunning male called and showed superbly, well before sunset in the Les Alpilles on 08/03

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba*

Singles noted on four dates at various sites

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Ones and twos seen at various sites on four dates

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dryobates minor*

A female at La Capeliere on 08/03

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

One heard calling at Mount Ventoux on 07/03

European Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

One calling around the hotel most mornings

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Seen daily.

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

One at Vergieres on 05/03 was our only sighting

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

Common.

Eurasian Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Common.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*

Recorded on three dates

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Common.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

Singles at Les Baux and Mont Ventoux

Coal Tit *Parus ater*

Small numbers seen on Mount Ventoux on 07/03.

European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

Small numbers on Mount Ventoux on 07/03 and similar numbers at La Caume on 09/03

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Ones and twos seen on just two dates

Great Tit *Parus major*

Common.

Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*

Recorded on three dates in the Camargue with some giving wonderful views

Bearded Reedling *Panurus biarmicus*

Noted in small numbers on 3 dates with several in the Petite Camargue showing very well

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

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

At least 15 birds were seen very well on the Crau on 05/03, including many singing and displaying birds

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Three at Pont du Gard on 07/03

Eurasian Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Noted on four dates but best were well over 100 were at Pont du Gard on 07/03

Common House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Two at Pont du Gard on 07/03

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Seen and heard on four dates at a variety of locations.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Small groups seen on four dates.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Seen daily in good numbers.

Moustached Warbler *Acrocephalus melanopogon*

A male showed very well at Etang des Aulnes on 05/03

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*

Recorded in good numbers on five dates at a variety of locations

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atropcapilla*

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

Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata*

A male was heard singing and seen just north of Saintes Maries de la Mer on 06/03

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

Ones and twos seen at a few sites.

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*

Recorded on three dates

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Small numbers recorded on Mount Ventoux on 07/03

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seen daily

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

A single on Mont Ventoux on 07/03

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

Two at Les Baux on 05/03 performed superbly, the highlight of the trip for most of us!

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*

Several birds heard singing and seen on Mount Ventoux on 07/03 and then heard singing and calling again in small numbers at La Caume on 09/03

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Common.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common, seen daily.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Singles and small groups at many locations daily.

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

A young (2cy/1st summer) female gave excellent views at Les Baux on 05/03 .

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

Small numbers seen most days

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Common.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Small numbers recorded on three dates

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*

A single came into roost early at Pont Du Gard on 07/03

Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*

Three at Les Baux on 05/03

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Singles seen on three dates.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Ones and twos seen daily.

Richard's Pipit *Anthus richardi*

One was seen at Mas Chauvet on 09/03

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Common.

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

About 10 at Mas d'Agon on 08/03

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common.

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Small numbers at several sites.

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*

Half a dozen seen on Mount Ventoux on 07/03, including one male that gave outstanding views

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Small numbers seen at quite a few sites.

Citril Finch *Carduelis citrinella*

Four seen very well on Mount Ventoux on 07/03, including several display-fighting males!

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

Noted in small numbers on just three dates.

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

Many hundreds recorded on three dates

Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus*

A male at Pont du Gard performed superbly

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Small numbers on three dates.

Other notable Flora and Fauna seen included

Butterflies

Red Admiral
Brimstone
Cleopatra
Small White
Green Hairstreak
Speckled Wood
Holly Blue
Western Bath White
Large Tortoiseshell

Moths

Hummingbird Hawkmoth

Mammals

Coypu
Eurasian Red Squirrel
Wild Boar

Flowers

Giant Orchid
Forestier's Bee Orchid
Wall Flower