

France

Wallcreepers, Camargue & Provence

2022 Saturday 19th - Friday 25th March (7 days)

Single centre, small group tour with David Fairhurst



The picturesque limestone hills of Provence are a regular winter haunt of Wallcreeper © Robert Dolezal, birdwatcher.cz

France Birding Tours with Limosa Holidays

Set yourself up for the spring with this delightful, small group birdwatching tour to the south of France. Looking for Wallcreeper, Eagle Owl and Alpine Accentor amid the beautiful limestone hills of Provence, Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Calandra Lark on the stony desert of La Crau and Greater Flamingo, Glossy Ibis and Penduline Tit in one of Europe's premier wetland sites: the amazing Camargue. Chock full of excitements, this March birding tour to France offers a rewarding out-of-season holiday and is led by Limosa's David Fairhurst making his 15th visit to the area.

Highlights

- Join us for a wonderful week of late winter birding in Provence in the south of France
- The legendary Camargue wetlands, Les Alpilles and the arid La Crau 'desert'
- Specialities in March include wintering Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor and Richard's Pipit
- Greater Flamingo, Bonelli's Eagle, Little Bustard, Western Swamphen, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Eagle Owl
- Good chance of seeing the season's first Black Kites, Booted Eagles and White Storks
- Mont Ventoux for Black Woodpecker and Citril Finch
- From stands of Giant Orchids to Rock Sparrows roosting on the famous Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard
- Small group tour with maximum of 7 participants
- Expertly led by Limosa guide and all-round naturalist David Fairhurst

What's Included?

- Limosa Tour Leader
- 6 nights accommodation in France, staying near Arles
- All main meals and drinking water provided
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees and permits
- All tour-based tips and taxes
- Limosa checklist of birds for the tour



Looking like a giant butterfly, we will hope to find Wallcreeper during our time in Provence © Elizabeth Grynberg, tour participant

Outline Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Marseille, drive to hotel. Afternoon birding in Provence. Night near Fontvieille, near Arles

Days 2-6

We explore the Camargue and Provence including La Crau, Les Alpilles, the historic Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard and Mont Ventoux. Five further nights at Fontvieille

Day 7

Return to Marseille, fly to UK

Tour Overview

Situated at the heart of the immense Rhône delta in southwest Provence, the Camargue is one of Western Europe's largest and most important wetland sites. Though rightly famous for its spectacular colony of Greater Flamingos in summer, the fact that this wonderful corner of France has been largely ignored by birdwatchers during the winter months is surprising. For not only are large numbers of flamingos still present, but the marshes are an important refuge for a wealth of wintering birds. When the nearby stony flats of La Crau, picturesque limestone hills of Les Alpilles and the alpine habitats of Mont Ventoux are added, the birdlife of this quiet corner of France assumes even greater appeal.

In addition to its beautiful flamingos, Provence boasts an impressive list of speciality birds in winter including a number that can be difficult to see elsewhere in Europe. Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Slender-billed Gull, Eagle Owl, Alpine Accentor, Penduline Tit and Citril Finch are all possible on our visit here in March and this is an excellent trip for anyone wishing to look for Wallcreeper, which has a penchant in winter for the limestone hills that lie inland of the coast.

Common Cranes winter in the south of France and the cereal fields of the Camargue offer a good opportunity to see these majestic birds.

We will also check some favoured spots for the often-elusive Western Swamphen and keep watch for the first spring migrants such as Garganey, Black Kite and White Stork; indeed some of the latter may already be back at their nests. The Iberian Grey Shrike is resident (occurring here at the northernmost limit of its range).



The extraordinary Greater Flamingo will be one of the species we can expect to find in the Camargue © Chris Collins

The farmland fringing La Crau is a regular wintering site for Richard's Pipit (which breeds in Siberia). These much larger cousins of the Meadow Pipit normally winter in southeast Asia, but a handful come to Western Europe and in March we have a chance of seeing them here!

On one day, we will head north to explore Mont Ventoux (1912m), where upland forests of beech and pine offer chances of Black Woodpecker, Firecrest, Common Crossbill and Citril Finch.

To make the most of our stay, we spend all six nights at a pleasant hotel on the edge of the village of Fontvieille, a few miles northeast of Arles. The hotel has a reputation for serving delicious Provençale food and its location is perfect for easy access to all the best birdwatching spots including our favourite cliffs for Eagle Owl!

Our March 2022 tour will be guided by **David Fairhurst's** eleventh visit to the Camargue and Provence in winter.

Daily Itinerary

Day 1

TO MARSEILLE & FONTVIEILLE, NEAR ARLES

Our winter birdwatching tour to the south of France begins with a flight to Marseille, where it is an easy drive to our hotel in Fontvieille, a few miles northeast of historic Arles. We stay here for all six nights of our tour.

We will then enjoy our first taste of winter birding in Provence. *Night at Fontvieille, near Arles*

DAYS 2 - 6

CAMARGUE, CRAU & LES ALPILLES

With roads radiating out to the north, south, east and west, we have easy access to the region's key birding sites including the limestone hills of Les Alpilles, the unique Crau, the remarkable Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard, Mont Ventoux and, of course, the famous Camargue.

Few of Europe's wetland sites rival the Camargue for birds. While much of the northern part of the immense Rhône delta has now been converted to rice fields, further south there are still wide expanses of reed marsh, lakes, salt pans and Mediterranean steppe. During a typical Provençal winter (when there is no snow or ice), this whole area remains rich in birds and spring comes early. Our March visit is designed to catch the best of the Camargue's winter birds before they disperse, as well as offering good chances of seeing early returning migrants such as White Stork, Stone-curlew and Hoopoe.

In winter, flocks of Black-necked Grebes, Cormorants, Red-crested Pochard and other waterfowl gather on the vast Etang de Vaccares, which lies at the heart of the reserve. About a quarter of the Camargue's 20,000 Greater Flamingos remain year-round, affording excellent views from the roads that skirt the reserve. Winter waders could include Avocet, Kentish Plover, Spotted Redshank and Little Stint.

We will check through the flocks of Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls for the scarce Mediterranean Gull and an early Slender-billed Gull or two.

In the reedbeds and fringing scrub, we will listen for the spring songs of Cetti's Warblers and Chiffchaffs, Zitting Cisticolas (previously known as Fan-tailed Warblers!) and booming Bitterns. These species are resident in the Camargue and can be heard on bright sunny days from late February onwards.

Water Rail, Water Pipit and Bearded Tit also frequent the winter marshes and one or two Whiskered Terns are sometimes about, as is the diminutive Penduline Tit, though this is generally easier to hear than to see!

Cattle Egrets add a 'Mediterranean' flavour and winter brings increasing numbers of stately Great Egrets. We will also keep a keen eye open for the first Garganey and Swallows of spring and may see flocks of Common Cranes passing overhead. The incredible sight of at least 90 Western Swamphens feeding in an area of cut reed was an undoubted highlight on our 2019 tour!



A March visit to the Camargue offers good chances of early returning migrants such as Hoopoe © Dr Kevin Elsby, wildlifeontheweb.co.uk

The Camargue is also an excellent place for birds of prey. Marsh Harriers are plentiful and, come March, we may add the odd Merlin, Hen Harrier, Black Kite and Booted Eagle. Our March 2019 group enjoyed all of these, plus great views of a wintering Spotted Eagle!

Northeast of Arles, the wooded limestone cliffs and canyons of Les Alpilles are prime breeding habitat for Eagle Owl. These enormous birds are typically at their most vocal in late winter, making this the optimum time to try for them. No guarantees, of course, but the sight of one glaring back at us with fiery orange eyes would be something never to be forgotten!

In March, we also have an excellent chance of finding Wallcreeper and Alpine Accentor, two high alpine specialities that come down from Europe's highest mountains to spend the winter months in the lower and milder limestone hills of Provence. Once found, both species can be very confiding.

With luck, we might spot a Bonelli's Eagle soaring over the bare limestone crags and bluffs of Les Alpilles, while the scrub-covered hillsides below conceal skulking Sardinian and Dartford Warblers. We will check the pine-clad lower slopes for Woodlark, Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper and Cirl Bunting, and keep an eye out for Raven, Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush, which also frequent these picturesque hills in winter.

Covering an area of 600 sq. km, La Crau is an arid, stony, steppe-like plain characterised by low growing herbs such as Rosemary and Thyme. This unique habitat holds some specialist birds including Little Bustard, Calandra Lark and an isolated and elusive population of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Red Kites roam the area in winter and the scattered trees and bushes make perfect lookouts for the scarce Iberian Grey Shrike.

In recent winters, small numbers of chunky Richard's Pipits have been found wintering in farmland fringing the Crau and we will check a couple of sites where we



Winter brings increasing numbers of Common Cranes to the Camargue © Elizabeth Grynberg, tour participant

seen this species previously. This is a bird which breeds in Siberia and normally winters in Southeast Asia, so it is quite a surprise(not to mention a challenge) to find them here!

Further north, Mont Ventoux rises to 1912m (6273ft). Well known to devotees of the *Tour de France*, its more sheltered southern slopes are clothed in forests of beech and pine, where Black Woodpecker, Crested Tit and Crossbill can often be found. In March, we have further chances to see Alpine Accentor and may again be lucky to find the elusive Citril Finch.

Our route back from Mont Ventoux may take us via the stunning Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard. Built in the first century AD, this fantastic bridge has three tiers of arches and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is not just the culture we are after here, for the bridge is also a regular winter roost site for the oft difficult-to-

find Rock Sparrow. In the late afternoon, small parties arrive to pass the night tucked away within the small nooks and crannies within the aqueduct. As a bonus, the Pont du Gard is also a reliable spot to see Crag Martins in March and we have sometimes seen Alpine Swift and Wallcreeper here.

If the sun comes out to warm the day, early spring butterflies in the Camargue can include Red Admiral, Painted Lady, Clouded Yellow, Bath White, Western Dappled White and Green Hairstreak. Giant Orchid is an early flowering species and some years there can be impressive stands to enjoy. *Five further nights near Arles*

DAY 7

RETURN TO MARSEILLE, FLY TO UK

We make our way back to Marseille this morning and catch our return flight to the UK, where our tour concludes.



A Limosa group watches a Wallcreeper as it picks its way around the historic Roman aqueduct at Pont du Gard © David Fairhurst

Trip Information

Group Size Max 7 participants and 1 leader

Birds 120-140 species

Accommodation 6 nights accommodation at a pleasant hotel on the edge of the historic village of Fontvieille and just a few miles northeast of Arles.

Meals All main meals are included in the tour price, usually commencing with lunch in France on Day 1 and concluding with breakfast at the hotel on Day 7 (*flight schedules permitting*).

Breakfasts and dinners will be taken at the hotel, where the restaurant serves delicious Provençale home cooking. Lunches will usually be picnics.

Walking Easy. The countryside of the Camargue and La Crau is flat and the going easy. Some hill trails in Les Alpilles and at Mont Ventoux but nothing too strenuous and always taken at a gentle pace.

Sturdy waterproof walking shoes or boots are recommended in the hills and walking shoes or trainers should be suitable elsewhere.

Weather In early March, the weather in the south of France is typically mild and sunny. Expect temperatures in the range of 6-15C (43-59F with daily averages of 11C/51F and up to nine hours of sunshine. March is typically the driest of the winter months (average of just 7 rainfall days).

It can, however, sometimes feel cold on days when the 'Mistral' is blowing down the Rhone valley and at altitude on Mont Ventoux, which rises to 1912m (6273ft). As a result, be **sure to pack** plenty of warmer clothing to 'layer up' as required even though we are in the South of France.

Flights Due to the pandemic, it is proving extremely difficult to predict future flight prices and schedules, especially when a trip is scheduled for beyond the period when flights can be booked. As a result, we have taken the decision to price our holidays as excluding all flights.

To keep the process as simple as possible for our clients, however, we are now working closely with a dedicated agent at Travel Counsellors who will be able to advise you which flights we are recommending and he will be able to book these for you.

For those not wanting to travel via London, there are options via some regional airports.

Ground Transport By minibus.

Tour Cost

2022 (7 days):

Land only cost: £1795

Single supplement: £350

Deposit: £500

Cost includes

- Limosa Tour Leader
- 6 nights hotel accommodation in France
- All main meals (with drinking water provided)
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, permits/entry fees to reserves, tour-based tips and taxes
- Limosa checklist of birds.

Cost excludes

International flights, insurance, drinks, airport/in-flight meals and snacks & other items of a personal nature.

About Your Guide

David Fairhurst Ever since he can remember, David has been passionate about birds and wildlife. This has led to a varied 25+ year career in conservation (working largely for the RSPB) and guiding bird and wildlife tours. His work has taken him to all four corners of the UK, from studying Wood Larks in Dorset to tour leading in Shetland and he currently runs the RSPB reserve near Snape (Suffolk).

David has also been involved in some fascinating projects around the world, ranging from studying Griffon Vultures in Israel to restoring fragile ecosystems on the Seychelles. He has travelled far and wide in pursuit of birds, including trips across Europe, Chile and South Africa.

David lives close to the Suffolk coast with his wife and two daughters. He is not only an exceptional birder, but an accomplished all-round naturalist with enthusiasm and humour as well as excellent leadership and bird finding skills.

David loves France and led our March 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 trips to the Camargue, as well as our June 2015, 2017 and 2018 tours to the French Pyrenees. Our March 2022 tours to Provence will be his eleventh visit to the Camargue in winter.

What You Say...

"What made this holiday / birding experience so good was the leader, who tailored each day so that we had the best birding given the weather and interest of the group. Good natured, good humoured and his knowledge was excellent."

AF, France (March Wallcreepers) tour

"Fine breadth of habitats and birding on this tour. David was a brilliant leader and invested a lot of effort in enabling us to see the target species. Very friendly and compatible group."

TG, France (March Wallcreepers) tour

"David was one of the best leaders I've encountered on a Limosa or any other company's birding tours... An excellent choice [of hotel] from points of view of location, setting, comfort and food."

RD, France (March Wallcreepers) tour

How To Enquire

Due to the considerable uncertainty created by the pandemic, Limosa Holidays are not currently accepting bookings for any trips, however, you are welcome to contact us either by email or phone to register your interest in any of our holidays.

Whilst some tour companies may be willing to take a deposit from you and say a trip is a “confirmed departure”, our approach is going to be to wait a little longer as we consider this both honest and realistic.

Once we are confident that the trip can run, we will be in touch to confirm your place and ask for a deposit.

We do encourage you to register your interest as we are expecting considerable demand, once the consensus is that it is safe to travel again.

Any Questions

Please do not hesitate to contact us by email or phone. Our office is generally open from 09:30-17:30 but you are welcome to contact us outside these times too. We are happy to take calls in the evening and at weekends but if no one is available the call will go to our answerphone.

Thank you for your interest in our tours. We do hope that you will be able to join us once the pandemic is over and we look forward to hearing from you.

