

FRANCE: CAMARGUE & PYRENEES

September 5, 2009 to September 15, 2009

Guided by
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The south of France is a wonderful backdrop against which to enjoy the birds of Europe, offering a multitude of "draws". It has gorgeous scenery, ranging from the flat golden rice fields of the Camargue (surrounded by the blue Mediterranean and the white limestone hills of Les Alpilles) to the soaring, rugged peaks and grassy, boulder-strewn glacial valleys of the high Pyrenees. Excellent infrastructure leads to easy travel, while meandering back roads still lead through sleepy villages and rural landscapes largely unchanged by time. The country's foods and wines are justly famous -- heck, the croissants alone might be worth the trip! But chief among its attractions is the cross-section of European birds possible during this, the height of the continent's autumn migration. And, as usual, this year's tour turned up some quality sightings.

Best of show -- by a large margin, according to the end-of-tour tally for "Bird of the Trip" -- was the pair of Eurasian Eagle-Owls we found after wine, cheese and hors d'oeuvres on a "pre-supper" outing. The male's cliff top display (ear tufts flared, tail cocked, dancing enthusiastically in looping circles, looking for all the world like a giant prairie chicken) when he caught sight of an arriving female will long remain in the memory banks! But there were other treats as well. A peach-hued adult Lammergeier preened on a rocky outcrop, giving us up-close-and-personal scope views of its dangling "beard" and yellow eye. Seven Pin-tailed Sandgrouse crept across the stony Crau steppe, and a trio of Eurasian Thick-knees snoozed in the sunshine later the same morning. Two Alpine Accentors demonstrated their camouflage -- and their remarkably confiding nature -- high in the Col du Tourmalet. A mob of Little Bustards traipsed through a lime green clover field, then lifted into the autumn morning, revealing strikingly white wings. A flock of Citril Finches nibbled weed seeds in the immense Cirque de Gavarnie. Frosty-winged Mediterranean Gulls splashed enthusiastically amid crowd of bathing gulls, and a Slender-billed Gull floated on a salt pan. A quintet of Lesser Kestrels rested in a nearby tree. A female Black Woodpecker tapped challenges, peering around as she clung to a hollow tree. A vagrant White-winged Tern flashed among a handful of Black Terns over a roadside marsh, and a vagrant Temminck's Stint rummaged on a muddy island. A rusty-bellied young Montagu's Harrier hunted low over the steppe. And brightly colored Eurasian Bee-eaters and European Rollers proved that not all European birds are drab after all!

Jesse and I greatly enjoyed sharing the birds (and food and wine and scenery) of France with all of you. We hope to see you in the field again somewhere soon! -- Megan

List total: 155 bird taxa and 7 mammal taxa

*If marked to left of list, * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic,
N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant*

fra09-mec

Podicipedidae

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)

A few of these small grebes floated on channels at Scamandre; two were snoozing near the reeds, while a third dove repeatedly.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Easily the most common of the tour's grebes, including dozens floating on the lagoons around Aigues-Mortes on our first afternoon. The pink bill on this large species is diagnostic.

EARED (BLACK-NECKED) GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

A couple of these winter visitors paddled among the multitude of Great Crested Grebes on the lagoons near Aigues-Mortes, and another floated on the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

Phalacrocoracidae

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Dozens perched atop posts in the lagoons around Aigues-Mortes, with others in flight both there and at Mésjanès.

Ardeidae

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*)

Regular in the Camargue with scattered others at higher elevations; this species is resident over much of France, but birds from further northeast retreat to western Europe for the winter, expanding local populations.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*)

Jim spotted one along the highway on our drive from the airport to our first hotel, but -- surprisingly -- our only other sighting was a single gingery youngster which flew by as we drove around the Étang des Vaccarès one afternoon.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*)

Small numbers on various ponds and puddles around the Salin de Giraud and Scamandre. This species is a relatively recent arrival to western Europe, expanding from the east over the past half-century or so.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*)

Scattered birds throughout the Camargue region, including one picking along the back side of a pond near Aigues-Mortes, and others at Salin de Giraud and Scamandre. This species strongly resembles North America's Snowy Egret, but has gray (rather than yellow) facial skin, in non-breeding plumage.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*)

Surprisingly, we saw only a single one, standing in a pond at Scamandre with a couple of Gray Herons. Apparently, most had already headed south towards their African wintering grounds.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*)

Very common in the lowlands, often (as in the horse pastures near our hotel) hovering around the feet (or sitting on the back) of various livestock.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*)

A few, including a spotty brown youngster, roosted in a willow near Mas d'Agon.

Ciconiidae

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*)

Six soared over -- showing well their distinctively patterned black and white underparts -- as we searched for Spectacled Warblers on a dusty back road in the Camargue.

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*)

One soared in big lazy circles over the dry, cracked mud of Marais de Grenouillet, and another perched, silhouetted against the rising sun, atop a dead snag near our Camargue hotel. This is the "baby deliverer" of legend.

Phoenicopteridae

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*)

Clouds of these dusty-pink birds dotted salt pans throughout the Camargue, with numbers showing their handsome rose and black wings in flight. There were distressingly few gray youngsters in sight this year, probably indicating another bad breeding season.

Anatidae

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*)

A handful floated on one of the channels along the edge of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, and we saw others at Scamandre. Some of the group saw more along the road on our drive back to Toulouse at the end of the tour.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*)

Several sizable groups -- each containing many dull-billed youngsters -- floated on the salt pans of Salin de Giraud.

EURASIAN TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

A big group floated on the back side of the pond visible from the observation blind at Scamandre. Some authorities lump this species with North America's Green-winged Teal.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Small numbers on scattered days.

GARGANEY (*Anas querquedula*)

Unfortunately, only Megan and Jean spotted the single male, floating among the Eurasian Teal along the back side of one of the ponds at Scamandre, before he drifted out of sight behind one of the islands.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

A couple of females floated on the salt pans at Aigues-Mortes, and a male -- just coming out of eclipse plumage -- mingled with a group of Eurasian Teal at Scamandre.

Pandionidae

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*)

A few flapped over the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, where we found others sitting on dead snags or devouring fish on muddy islands.

Accipitridae

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*)

Unfortunately, our only sighting was of a very distant kettle of birds rising from the trees west of us at one roadside stop near the Etang des Aulnes.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*)

Jean spotted our first (well done!), soaring over a roadside field in the Camargue. They proved most common around the Pic du Pibeste, where we saw them hovering low over -- or sitting in -- recently harvested fields.

BLACK KITE (*Milvus migrans*)

A trio high above the chilly, windy pass at the Port de Boucharo were headed to warmer climes; Europe's birds head south of the Sahara for the winter. Some of the group saw another during our drive from the Camargue to the Pyrenees.

LAMMERGEIER (BEARDED VULTURE) (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

WOW!! Spectacular views of this impressive raptor on each of our days in the Pyrenees, including a lengthy study of a preening bird perched on a cliff at Lac des Gloriettes -- close enough we could easily see its "beard" and its bright yellow eye. It REALLY didn't like that sky-blue tag on its wing!

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*)

Common in the highlands, with dozens soaring over the ridges and passes of the Pyrenees -- we even got them on our Spain list, following our walk through the Port de Boucharo. This species is declining over much of Europe.

SHORT-TOED EAGLE (*Circaetus gallicus*)

Linnea spotted our first -- perched atop a tree near the town of Sambuc -- and we saw scattered others throughout the tour. This species specializes in hunting reptiles (particularly snakes); in fact, its large head is heavily feathered to help protect it from snake strikes.

WESTERN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*)

Widespread, though not especially common this year. As usual, most of the birds we saw were youngsters, though we did spot a striking adult male above the Port de Boucharo.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*)

Our first was a lovely gingery youngster quartering low over the stony plain of the Crau, rocking on narrow wings as it hunted. We saw others -- including a rare dark morph bird -- in the high passes of the Pyrenees.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*)

Scattered individuals seen on most days, including a big female circling over the fields near our Camargue hotel one morning, and another flapping through the Port de Boucharo.

EURASIAN BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*)

Seen daily, in a variety of plumages, including one perched in a tree near our first Corn Bunting, and several soaring over the rugged ridges of Gavarnie.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

Seen most days in the mountains, including one (being harried by a raven) over the Cirque de Gavarnie, several gliding over the ridges in the Vallée d'Ossoue, and a final one above the Lac des Gloriettes.

BOOTED EAGLE (*Aquila pennatus*)

One soared over us as we birded along the river near Mauran, on our transfer day; we saw a second near Cazères on the final day of the tour.

Falconidae

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*)

We spotted a few in rather distant flight over the stony pastures of the Crau, but our best views -- by far -- came shortly after we traded the dry steppe for the green agricultural fields around its edges, where we found a quintet of these social raptors sitting in a nearby tree together.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*)

Every day but our first afternoon, sometimes (as on the Crau steppe) in good numbers and sometimes (as with the hunting female hanging at eye level beside the road in the Port de Boucharo) outstandingly well.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*)

Seen on scattered days, with particularly good views of a pair hunting dragonflies right over us near Marais de Grenouillet's observation platform.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*)

A big female raked past the observation blind at Scamandre, scattering birds in her wake.

Phasianidae

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*)

A busy group of five scurried along the track -- occasionally stopping to rummage for a tidbit or two -- in the canyon where we looked for eagle-owls. Eventually, they all high-stepped their way across the olive grove and out of sight.

Rallidae

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*)

We all heard several calling -- and calling and calling and calling -- from the vegetation right near the boardwalk at Scamandre, but only Mike and Linnea happened to be in the right spot to see one actually dart across a gap.

COMMON MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*)

Regular in wet areas, including a handful of youngsters along the back edge of the pond where we watched the bathing Mediterranean Gulls, and others at Scamandre.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*)

A few in the salt pans near Aigues-Mortes, and more on the huge lake visible from Mésjanès. These are the vanguard of the massive flocks that overwinter in southern France.

Otididae

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*)

A foraging flock in a clover field near St. Martin de Crau proved obliging -- particularly when the tractor went by and pushed them first into the open field, and then into a flurry of white-winged flight.

Recurvirostridae

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*)

Common in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, and around the muddy edges of the lakes around Scamandre. A number of the birds we saw were brownish youngsters.

Burhinidae

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (STONE-CURLEW) (*Burhinus oedicnemus*)

Some great spotting by Jesse netted us scope views (increasingly better as we crept closer) of a trio of these goggle-eyed "shorebirds" near one of the sheep sheds on the Crau steppe.

Charadriidae

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*)

We found some two dozen sprinkled over the mudflats along the edge of the roadside lake at Scamandre, showing well their distinctive topknots.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*)

Small numbers pattered over the mudflats at the Salin de Giraud, and others hunkered into depressions there for a snooze.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*)

Quite common along the muddy edges of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud (where we could compare them with nearby Common Ringed Plovers), with a handful of others at Scamandre. This species is slimmer, longer-winged and paler-legged than is the previous, and has an all-dark bill and a pale eye-ring.

Scolopacidae

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*)

At least two used their long bills to probe the muddy lake edges near Scamandre. This species has been split from North America's Wilson's Snipe.

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*)

Fairly common, bobbing along the muddy edges of puddles and salt pans around Salin de Giraud and Scamandre. This species, which is closely related to North America's Spotted Sandpiper, has a similar stiff-winged flight.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*)

One flew past -- showing its distinctive dark underwings -- while we birded along the road near Scamandre, and a second foraged on a muddy island among a scattering of other shorebirds there.

SPOTTED REDSHANK (*Tringa erythropus*)

Jesse and a few of the group spotted a fly-by bird over the salt pans at the Salin de Giraud; fortunately, for most of those who missed that one, we found a small group -- still showing a few dark breeding feathers -- wading along the back edge of one of the ponds at Scamandre.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*)

A small group of these shorebirds poked along a muddy bank in one of the large lakes near Scamandre, showing their white rumps when they flew from one spot to another.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*)

One showed well the white wedge on the trailing edge of its wing (a distinctive field mark for this species) as it flew past at Scamandre; fortunately for those who missed it the first time, it later returned to forage on the mudflat in front of us.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*)

A trio flew past, flashing their distinctive black and white patterned wings, while we studied tern flocks in the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*)

Small numbers were sprinkled across the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, some still showing traces of their brighter breeding plumage.

TEMMINCK'S STINT (*Calidris temminckii*)

One rummaged on a muddy island along the road near Scamandre -- the second time in three years we've found one on the same exact spot! The dark breast band and pale legs help to distinguish it from the previous species.

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*)

Small numbers, some still sporting considerable traces of their colorful breeding plumage, foraged in the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

RUFF AND REEVE (*Philomachus pugnax*)

Sadly, most didn't get the news that one of these pot-bellied shorebirds was strolling along the back edge of the pond at Scamandre until it had already moved out of view.

Laridae

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*)

Hundreds and hundreds flew, swam, snoozed and foraged in the Camargue; this is the common large gull seen on the tour. Though this species was traditionally (and sometimes still is) lumped with Herring Gull, DNA evidence shows it is actually more closely related to the Lesser Black-backed Gull.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Larus ridibundus*)

The "de facto" small gull of the tour, seen by the hundreds each day in the Camargue.

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Larus genei*)

Jesse spotted us a first-winter bird paddling among the Black-headed Gulls, looking quite long-billed, on a salt pan near Salin de Giraud. The European breeding range of this species is restricted to the southern edge of the continent, and it is uncommon even there.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Larus melanocephalus*)

Long and satisfying views -- both in flight and on the water -- of good numbers at the salt pans around Aigues-Mortes. The all-pale primaries of adult birds are diagnostic.

Sternidae

CASPIAN TERN (*Sterna caspia*)

A few of these big terns -- the largest species of tern in the world -- hunted over the lakes at Scamandre, and a couple of others did the same at Mésjanes.

SANDWICH TERN (*Sterna sandvicensis*)

Good numbers, showing their pale-tipped dark bills, loafed with the next species on islands in the salt pans at Salin de Giraud. We also saw a single bird over the salt pans at Aigues-Mortes our first afternoon.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*)

Common in and over the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, where many loafed on sandy bars.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*)

Small numbers flashed back and forth over some roadside ponds near Mas d'Agon, looking larger and paler-winged than the following two species.

WHITE-WINGED TERN (*Chlidonias leucopterus*)

One with the Black Terns over a pond near Mas d'Agon was a nice surprise; this species is a vagrant to southern France. The white rump of this species helps to separate it from the next species in non-breeding plumages.

BLACK TERN (*Chlidonias niger*)

A busy group, already in winter plumage, flapped back and forth over a pond near Mas d'Agon.

Pteroclididae

PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE (*Pterocles alchata*)

A group of seven, creeping through the sere vegetation of the Crau, showed how well their plumage and behavior camouflages them; they proved to be a bit of a challenge to pick out from the nearby (slightly less mobile) rocks! Great spotting, Dennis!

Columbidae

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*)

Daily, generally around towns and cities. Wild Rock Pigeons have long since disappeared from most of southern France.

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*)

Seen most days, though less common in the highlands. The bold white wing stripe, particularly visible on these large pigeons in flight, is diagnostic.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

Regular in the lowlands, though far less common in the Pyrenees (where they were largely restricted to towns). This species is a relatively new arrival to most of Europe, having arrived from further southeast within the last 100 years.

Strigidae

EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL (*Bubo bubo*)

WOW!! A pair of these enormous owls gave us quite a performance on our evening of owling and hors d'oeuvres. First the male appeared atop one of the rugged cliffs -- super spotting Peter! Then he started calling, his hoots echoing down into the olive grove. And when a big female appeared and perched below him, he went into an absolute "prairie chicken" frenzy -- cocking his tail, raising his ear tufts and stomping around in circles on his clifftop dance floor, hooting enthusiastically. What a treat!

* TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*)

Some of the group (those WITHOUT mountain views) heard one calling from the hill behind our Gedre hotel late one night. Unfortunately, despite multiple attempts, we never did connect with one.

Apodidae

ALPINE SWIFT (*Tachymarptis melba*)

Regular in the morning over the fields around our Camargue hotel, with a handful of others near the Étang des Aulnes. These huge, white-bellied swifts have a wingspan of nearly two feet!

COMMON SWIFT (*Apus apus*)

One, looking smaller and dark-bellied compared to the nearby Alpine Swifts, fluttered above us one morning on a pre-breakfast walk near our Camargue hotel. We spied others over the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Alcedinidae

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*)

A few of the group saw one zoom past along the little stream that bordered the Peau de Meau, and others spotted one near Mas d'Agon. But our best view was of one that briefly sat on a dead snag near Cazerès.

Meropidae

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*)

A noisy flock hunted near St. Martin de Crau (while we enjoyed our Little Bustards), and others sailed over the fields around the Peau de Meau. As we saw, this species migrates in sizable flocks.

Coraciidae

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*)

Scattered individuals daily in the lowlands, including one hunting from a wire behind our Camargue hotel and one flashing past us (showing off those turquoise wings) during our walk in the Peau de Meau.

Picidae

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos medius*)

One high in a tree behind our Gedre hotel proved fairly obliging as it hitched its way up through the leaves. This is the second time we've found the species here, and the records are intriguing; it's generally a resident species, but the higher mountains aren't really where it's typically found -- so what's it doing there?

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*)

Peter and Fay spotted (and photographed) one along the stream while they waited for us at the start of the road up to the Lac de Gloriettes; most of the rest of the group caught up with another tapping on a series of trees near Cazerès on our final afternoon.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*)

A female drumming on a dead trunk in the forests at Le Lienz was a nice finale to our time in the mountains, particularly since she hung around long enough to allow everyone multiple scope studies.

GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*)

At least one put in regular appearances during our pre-breakfast walks around our Camargue hotel, with our best views coming one morning when it sat for a while in a small tree not far from the parking lot. Folks in Jesse's van also spotted one flying across the road on our drive back to Toulouse at the end of the tour.

Alaudidae

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*)

Quite common on the dry Crau steppe, with dozens seen scurrying across the stony ground or flitting ahead of us on roads or paths. The peach colored underwings of this species are distinctive.

EURASIAN SKYLARK (*Alauda arvensis*)

A small group rummaged on the stony Crau steppe, mingling with pipits and wheatears -- great spotting, Jean! The trailing white edge on their wings, white outer tail feathers and gray underwings help to distinguish them from the far more numerous Crested Larks.

Hirundinidae

BANK SWALLOW (SAND MARTIN) (*Riparia riparia*)

A few among the more numerous Barn Swallows on most days in the Camargue.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*)

Abundant in the highlands, including hundreds boiling around their nest ledges near the Lac des Gloriettes, and others flashing overhead in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*)

Seen every day of the tour, sometimes in sizable numbers. The subspecies found in Europe -- rustica -- is much paler below than are North American birds.

NORTHERN HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbica*)

Peter spotted one above the salt pans at Aigues-Mortes, but the rest of us had to wait for a look -- until we got to the mountains, where they proved particularly plentiful along the sheer cliff faces around the Lac des Gloriettes. We had others on our walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

Motacillidae

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*)

One hunted along the road edge near where we enjoyed our picnic lunch west of Carcassone, and we saw numerous others in the mountains -- including several small groups wagging their way through the grassy forest openings at Le Lienz.

YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*)

Best seen at the Salin de Giraud, where numbers of these bright wagtails -- all of the nominate "flava" subspecies -- patrolled the dirt track or the edges of the salt pans. We had others winging through the pass on our windy day at the Port de Boucharo.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*)

Daily in the highlands, generally around water -- including a few bobbing their way across the gravel bars in a river near Mauran, and others poking along streams around Gedre and Gavarnie. This is the longest-tailed of Europe's wagtails.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*)

Fine views of these pale pipits on the Crau steppe, where we found them scurrying among the pebbles and engaging in occasional battles.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*)

Two trundled along the edge of a track near our Camargue hotel, periodically disappearing into the grass. Many in the group had an even better look at another pair in a tree (appropriately) in the forest near Mauvezin.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*)

Regulidae

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*)

Seen most days in the mountains, with particularly nice views of several twitchy birds in a mixed group of tits along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. As with the next species, the crown stripe of adult birds is always visible.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapillus*)

Our best looks came at our picnic stop just west of Carcassone, when we found a pair in some nearby pine trees; some in the group saw another near the parking lot at Scamandre. This species has a striped face and a distinctive golden nape.

Cinclidae

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*)

Quite common in the highlands, where we spotted them on many of the region's waterways. We had particularly nice studies of a busy pair hunting from wet boulders in the stream beside the road up to Gavarnie.

Troglodytidae

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

Our best views came on our walk up to the Lac des Gloriettes, when we found a busy pair flicking through the vegetation along the road. Some of the group spotted another behind our Gedre hotel one morning, and Peter and Fay saw one along the stream near Gavarnie.

Prunellidae

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*)

A pair of these handsome mountain dwellers on a small rock outcropping near the summit of the Col de Tourmalet proved exceptionally confiding. As we saw, they are remarkably well-camouflaged against the region's rocks!

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*)

Regular in the mountains, with especially nice looks at several twitching atop juniper bushes down the hill from where we ate our picnic lunch in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

Turdidae

RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*)

One sat atop a big boulder at the base of the rockfall in the Vallée d'Ossoue, showing the subtly striped belly of birds in non-breeding (or female) plumage. This species leaves Europe for the winter, migrating to Africa, south of the Sahara.

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*)

Scattered individuals in the highlands, from a single female high in a conifer along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie to a couple of jet-black males foraging in red elderberry bushes in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus philomelos*)

Most of the group spotted one or two in the forest at Le Lienz, hanging out with the larger Mistle Thrushes we found on our way down from the Black Woodpecker spot.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*)

A trio flew past, flashing their white underwings, as we headed down from the Cirque de Gavarnie, and most of the group saw one or more of the birds we found foraging under the trees at Le Lienz. This species is larger and grayer than the previous.

Cisticolidae

ZITTING (FAN-TAILED) CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*)

Good looks at this small species around our Camargue hotel, where we found them perched on the wires of the horse pastures, looking tiny beside the Stonechats and Whinchats. We also heard them "zitting" as they bounced over the fields in enthusiastic display flights.

Sylviidae

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*)

Certainly FAR more frequently heard than seen, but we did get very nice looks at one moving through the tamarisks at Scamandre.

GRASSHOPPER WARBLER (*Locustella naevia*)

This one was unexpected -- the first time in 11 years we've found one on the tour. We spotted a buffy youngster preening low in a shrubby tree along the road up to the Lac des Gloriettes -- useful, since it allowed us to catch our collective breath.

EURASIAN REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*)

One near the observation tower at the Marais de Grenouillet was not particularly cooperative; fortunately, we had far better looks at a very obliging bird as it flicked through the tamarisks along the boardwalk trail at Scamandre.

MELODIOUS WARBLER (*Hippolais polyglotta*)

One -- looking decidedly yellow, and showing well its orangish lower mandible -- sat atop a tree beside the parking lot at Scamandre, proving that not ALL European warblers are hard to see. Some of the group saw another nibbling berries in a hedgerow near our Camargue hotel.

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)

Small numbers on scattered days: a few among the willows (appropriately!) at Scamandre, with others seen on our walk up the hill to the Lac des Gloriettes. This species is quite similar to the next, but has pale legs and a yellower tone to the plumage.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*)

Regular once we left the Camargue, including a loose flock showing well their distinctive "tail wagging" behavior along the stream at Mauran. This species typically has darker legs than the Willow Warbler does.

BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*)

Seen most days in the mountains (usually nibbling fruits from one of the plentiful fruiting trees); brown-capped females also made regular appearances.

GARDEN WARBLER (*Sylvia borin*)

We found one nibbling mulberries in a shrubby tree along the track near our Camargue hotel, and Peter and Fay spotted another near the start of the road up to Lac des Gloriettes. The plain face and gray collar of this species are distinctive.

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*)

One, briefly atop a hedge near our Camargue hotel one morning, was seen by many in the group. Peter spotted another near our mountain hotel one morning before breakfast.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*)

After long minutes listening to one chirring from the bushes near the Marais de Grenouillet observation tower, we were (finally) rewarded with super views of a male in a shrubby bush across the canal.

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*)

*A quartet -- probably a family group -- flicked through the *Salicornia* scrub near Mésjanès, regularly popping up to the top of the bushes for a look around. This species breeds in southern Europe, and retreats across the Mediterranean to northern Africa for the winter.*

Muscicapidae

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*)

Abundant throughout; all of them, including the males, are in drabber brown and white plumage for the winter.

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*)

Daily in the mountains, including a handful seen on our walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with others near the rockfall in the Vallée d'Ossoue and in the forest of Le Lienz. Hard to believe the colonists thought our big fat American Robin resembled this little cutie!

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)

We saw our first in a horse pasture near our Camargue hotel, and they were almost ridiculously common in the highlands, where they stood on nearly every rock, boulder or fruiting shrub we passed. This species quivers its rusty tail when it lands, a behavior which can help to identify it even at great distance or in poor light.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*)

Two -- one male, one female -- foraged among the red elderberry bushes in the Vallée d'Ossoue. What a little stunner the male is!

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*)

A handful hunted from the pasture fences near our Camargue hotel most mornings, and we saw others in the highlands. The bold supercilium of this species is striking -- and helps to quickly separate it from the following species.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola*)

A small group decorated the fence wires around the horse pastures near our Camargue hotel on several mornings, and others hunted from elder bushes and boulders in the passes of the Pyrenees. This species lacks the strong supercilium of the previous species.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*)

Dozens on the Crau steppe, with scores more in the mountains; the birds flashing around the base of the rockfall in the Vallée d'Ossoue showed especially well.

Aegithalidae

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*)

At least 40 in a tit flock near the old abbey showed well as they foraged in some streamside trees, with the sound of their high-pitched calls nearly constant.

Paridae

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*)

At least two pairs -- showing well their tiny bibs (more like a pencil moustache) mingled with the giant tit flock we found near the abbey on our final afternoon.

COAL TIT (*Periparus ater*)

Most days in the mountains, with particularly nice views of several rummaging through -- and singing from the top of -- some big conifers along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. The white "thumbprint" on the nape of this species is diagnostic.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*)

A twitchy pair near the start of the hill up to the Cirque de Gavarnie danced through the trees around the path, periodically popping out into the open for a good look around. The pointed crest of this species is unique among Europe's tits.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*)

A couple poked through a row of poplars near our Camargue hotel one morning, but they proved more common (and far easier to see) in the mountains -- including several with mixed flocks along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and others at Le Lienz and in the woods near Mauvezin.

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)

Our first was an inquisitive bird carefully checking twig ends for tasty morsels near the parking lot at Etang des Aulnes. We had another pair along the river near Mauran, and others among the tit flocks we found in various places in the mountains.

Sittidae

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*)

Seen on most days in the mountains, with especially nice views of one "doing the nuthatch thing" on a series of tree trunks and branches at Le Lienz.

Certhiidae

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*)

One near the start of the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie showed wonderfully well as it investigated a little willow grove right beside the track, calling regularly. This species is generally found at higher elevations than the next, though there is a sizable overlap zone.

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*)

One at our picnic spot outside Carcassonne showed wonderfully well as it investigated the nooks and crannies on a nearby tree trunk. This species is closely related to North America's Brown Creeper, which it strongly resembles.

Laniidae

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*)

A couple seen perched up on distant bushes, in and around the Crau steppe, with one somewhat closer bird on a fence post behind the Eurasian Thick-knees. This species was recently split from the Northern Shrike; it typically shows a buffy-pink belly and breast, and a more restricted white patch on the wing.

Corvidae

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*)

Four noisy birds distracted us briefly from our eagle-owl search when they flapped through some nearby pines. We had better views daily in the mountains, including some investigating the apple crop on the trees behind our Gèdre hotel.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*)

Ubiquitous in the lowlands, though missing completely from higher elevations. This species has been split from North America's Black-billed Magpie on the basis of morphological, vocal and behavioral differences.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*)

Regular in the mountains, though nowhere near as common as the next species. Our best views probably came at the Col du Tourmalet, where a raucous group flew past as we paused near the start of the track up to the observatory.

YELLOW-BILLED (ALPINE) CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*)

Very common in the Pyrenees, with good studies of several groups foraging in the grassy pass of the Port de Boucharo and milling hordes swirling over the ridges in the Vallée d'Ossoue and the Lac des Gloriettes. In flight, this species shows a narrower "hand" and longer tail than the Red-billed Chough does.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*)

Very common in the lowlands, with super looks at many foraging in the fields around our Camargue hotel each morning during the pre-breakfast walks.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*)

Large numbers flapped over our Camargue hotel each morning, heading east. This is the third year in a row we've seen these roosting birds as they've headed out for the day; according to the books, they're only in the area during the depths of winter!

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*)

Regular throughout, including a noisy mob cawing in the pastures near the start of the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

A bold bird harried a Golden Eagle above the Cirque de Gavarnie, and others flapped over the Port de Boucharo and Lac des Gloriettes.

Sturnidae

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

Most days, though missing from the highest elevations. Though it's hard for most Americans to believe, this species is undergoing enormous population declines in its native areas.

Passeridae

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)

Abundant in the Camargue's agricultural areas (including big flocks seen daily near our hotel), with smaller numbers in the towns in the mountains.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*)

Small numbers mingled with the House Sparrows near our Camargue hotel.

Fringillidae

CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*)

Daily in the highlands, particularly in and around the ubiquitous red elderberry bushes.

RED CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*)

A sherbet-colored male sat atop a conifer along the path to the Cirque de Gavarnie, seen as we descended. We spotted another trio -- drabber females or youngsters this time -- in the pine forest along the road to Le Lienz.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*)

Common throughout, including a regular flock near our Camargue hotel most mornings, and a handful in the fields near the start of the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. The yellow wing-stripe that this species shows in flight is a useful field mark.

EURASIAN LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina*)

A big flock massed on hillsides along the side of the road down from the Port de Boucharo, feeding on weed seeds along the hillsides. The whitish rump of this species is easily seen -- and distinctive -- in flight.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*)

Fine views of several in the grassy bowl of the Cirque de Gavarnie, including some initially distracting us during our search for Citril Finches. We found others in the Port de Boucharo.

CITRIL FINCH (*Serinus citrinella*)

After some searching in the grassy, rock-strewn center of the Cirque de Gavarnie, we found an active group -- including a couple of strikingly yellow males -- feeding on dried wildflower heads and perching atop the massive boulders.

* EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*)

We heard the minor-key whistle of this species regularly on our climb up to the Cirque, but failed (despite repeated attempts) to lay eyes on a single one.

Emberizidae

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*)

We had great looks at a few streaky youngsters (showing their distinctive rusty rumps and white tail corners) along the road up to the Lac des Gloriettes, but our best view came in a field near Ausseing, where we found a still-yellow adult nibbling weed seeds.

ROCK BUNTING (*Emberiza cia*)

Peter and Fay were the lucky ones who found a small family group foraging along the rocky slope near the start of the road up to the Lac des Gloriettes, while waiting for the rest of us to come back down.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*)

One atop a pasture fence on our drive into the Crau steppe proved extraordinarily cooperative, sitting for long minutes while we studied it in the scopes. Like many species found in Europe's agricultural areas, the Corn Bunting has undergone a huge population decline in the past 50 years.

MAMMALS

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*)

One crept on its belly across the stony ground of the Crau steppe, betrayed only by the waving black tips of its long ears -- which were originally mistaken for a bird!

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*)

Many sprawling on rocky outcroppings or waddling through the grass (and proving to be wonderful raptor-spotters) in the Pyrenees. This species is not native to the south of France; it was brought from the Alps to provide a reliable source of food for the area's shepherds.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*)

Seen on many days of the tour, including a couple in the trees around the patio area of our Camargue hotel. This species is being outcompeted by larger (imported) Eastern Gray Squirrels over some of its former range.

NORWAY (BROWN) RAT (*Rattus norvegicus*)

One, looking decidedly arthritic, shuffled across the road near the Etang des Aulnes, while we searched for a calling Cetti's Warbler.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*)

Very common in the waterways around Scamandre, with dozens of others flattened along the roadways there. We saw some paddling across the salt pans at Aigues-Mortes, and one at the tour's final stop near Cazerres.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*)

One trotted across the darkening field beyond the olive grove where we searched for eagle-owls near Les Baux, and another slunk along the back edge of the hotel property in Gèdre, seen while we listened for Tawny Owls. Those in Jesse's van spotted another along a wet canal near Scamandre.

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*)

Progressively closer views of small herds on our day in the Cirque de Gavarnie, culminating with a group of six foraging in an avalanche clearing late in the afternoon.