

FRANCE: CAMARGUE & PYRENEES

September 4, 2010 to September 14, 2010

Guided by
Megan Crewe & Jesse Fagan

Early autumn is a lovely time to visit the south of France. And our two-centered tour, which travels from the flat coastal stretches of the Camargue (plus the low limestone hills around Les Baux and the stony Crau steppe) to the rugged mountain peaks, thick pine forests and broad glacial valleys of the Pyrenees, gives us ample opportunity to enjoy the very best of it. The combination of stunning scenery, good food (I still have cravings for those warm croissants at breakfast) and a satisfying mix of birds makes for a pleasant long week -- particularly when the weather is as fine as it was this year, with warm, sunny days in the lowlands and cooler, mostly flawless days in the mountains. Thankfully, what rain we did have was largely confined to shutter-banging, window-rattling thunderstorms the middle of the night!

We had lots of birds to look at, and to look for. A Wallcreeper picked its way across a rock face, causing a panicked disruption of our picnic lunch -- and providing a source of much bemusement for the nearby "regular" tourists. Two Bonelli's Eagles materialized out of the blue skies over the limestone hills of La Caume and angled in to land on their massive stick nest. A couple of Slender-billed Gulls, looking subtly pink and rather long-nosed, paddled among a mass of other gulls. A Water Rail stopped for long seconds in plain view in the middle of a reedy channel. A suitably spotty immature Great Spotted Cuckoo chased caterpillars across the stony ground of the Crau steppe. A huge Black Woodpecker swooped through the forest of Le Lienz and perched on a conveniently close trunk. A peachy adult Lammergeier glided over our heads as we walked a (nearly) ridgetop trail. A little group of Citril Finches bounded across a field of massive boulders, dropping down to preen and rest atop several of them. White-throated Dippers threw themselves into mountain streams. Lesser Kestrels boiled over the barren Crau steppe. A Eurasian Hoopoe watched us from a roadside wire, and another flew past in a whirr of orange and black and white. For the first time in several years, we saw masses of birds on the salt pans of the Camargue, driven down to earth by the ferocity of those overnight storms. A flock of European Bee-eaters sat along a wire like beads on a string, while the faint calls of others drifted down from migrants passing by high overhead. Blackcaps gobbled elderberries in mountain passes. A family group of Spectacled Warblers bounced through low saltbush vegetation. And a couple of mammals also made the highlight list: a tiny, furry-tailed Edible Dormouse nibbled a walnut high in a tree behind our Gedre hotel, peering down at us from its dark branch, and a sinewy Short-tailed Weasel made a circuit around us through a rockfall, nimbly catching not one but TWO mice in the crevices.

Thanks to all of you for sharing the adventure with us; we greatly enjoyed your company, and your spotting skills and easy camaraderie added much to the tour. We look forward to seeing you in the field again, somewhere, some day! -- Megan

List total: 160 bird taxa and 8 mammal taxa

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

Triplist file: fra10-mec

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*)

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*)

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*)

After watching our first trio hightailing it across the stony Crau steppe, we had much better looks at the group rummaging under the olive trees near our hors-d'oeuvres picnic spot.

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*)

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Hundreds and hundreds floated on the churning surface of the Etang de Vaccares one afternoon, foreshadowing the numbers which will overwinter in the area.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*)

Clouds of these gangly birds stood (often with their heads buried beneath the water surface) in ponds, canals and salt pans throughout the Camargue -- or flashed their stunning rose-pink, scarlet and black wings in flight.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*)

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*)

One flew past and dropped into the reedy edge of one of the ponds as we birded along the road near Mas d'Agon. Once it landed, it was little more than a snake neck and a long dagger-like bill!

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*)

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*)

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*)

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*)

Seen especially well in the ponds near Mas d'Agon, where several lurked along the edges looking streaky and brown -- until they flew, when they were suddenly transformed to mostly brilliant white.

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

Ciconiidae (Storks)

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*)

Best seen from the tower near Mas d'Agon, where we watched two groups of three -- probably two pairs with their youngsters -- soar past. We had other flyover birds at Scamandre.

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*)

Ann spotted our first -- a group of six soaring overhead -- during our walk around the Peau de Meau. We saw others standing in fields (often with horses or cattle) across the Camargue.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*)

Four birds glided past as we enjoyed our hors-d'oeuvres before looking for the eagle-owl, but our best views came atop the Col du Tourmalet, when a trio sailed past right overhead. This species actually eats bee larvae, rather than honey.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*)

One soaring high over the tame Black Kites being flown at the "Donjon des Aigles" allowed great comparison between the two species; we saw others over the Col du Tourmalet while we searched for Alpine Accentor.

BLACK KITE (*Milvus migrans*)

LAMMERGEIER (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Two different adults were highlights of our walk in the Port de Boucharo -- the first a rather pale bird drifting along the ridgeline, and the second a more peachy bird over the parking lot.

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*)

Two adults and a chocolate brown youngster rested on a huge stick nest near the Pic du Pibeste, while a couple of other adults circled in the sky nearby.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*)

SHORT-TOED EAGLE (*Circaetus gallicus*)

Superb views of one perched on an electricity pylon near St. Martin de Crau on our first morning's excursion. The thick neck and head of this species are mostly feathers; there are plenty, to help shield the bird from snake strikes -- which is useful, since snakes are its main prey. We saw others in flight in various places throughout the tour, including one over the Port de Boucharo.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*)

Common around the Camargue, including a golden-headed youngster which glided low over a field right beside the road as we exited from the Crau steppe back into the green farm fields around its edges.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*)

At least two -- including a lovely adult male and a gingery-bellied youngster -- rocked low over the stony Crau steppe.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*)

EURASIAN BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*)

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

BONELLI'S EAGLE (*Aquila fasciata*)

Two adults made a late day fly-by over the ridge at La Caume, then swung in for a landing on a big stick nest on the cliff face. This is a rare species in Europe, with only roughly 600 pairs still found there.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*)

Dozens and dozens -- including one swirling kettle of at least ten birds -- hunted over the Crau steppe, where they breed. The pale, black-tipped underwing -- and the all-blue face of the male -- are distinctive.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*)

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*)

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*)

It's not often that you get a Water Rail to stand out in the open for as long as that one did! It called for several minutes, then slipped furtively along the edge of the channel before finally stepping out into view.

PURPLE SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*)

COMMON MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*)

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*)

A trio floated on the water behind some Mute Swans near Mas d'Agon, and scores of others floated offshore at Mesjanes. This species lacks the white undertail coverts of the American Coot, and has a much bigger white shield.

Otididae (Bustards)

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*)

A big flock of winter-plumaged birds nibbled the greenery in an overgrown field near St. Martin de Crau.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (*Burhinus oedicephalus*)

After missing them completely on our first visit to the Crau steppe, we got luckier on our pre-breakfast outing, when more than 20 slowly materialized on the stony ground -- picked out by the angle of the rising sun. When they're resting, they look remarkably like boulders!

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*)

SNOWY PLOVER (*Charadrius alexandrinus*)

A few, distinguished from the region's other small plovers by their all-dark bills, dark legs and incomplete breast bands, pattered around the salt pans of the Camargue, searching for tidbits. The subspecies found in Europe (alexandrinus) shows a rusty nape in breeding plumage.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*)

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*)

Particularly good studies of several along the edges of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, where they were often in conveniently close proximity to Common Ringed and Snowy plovers.

EURASIAN DOTTEREL (*Charadrius morinellus*)

A trio of birds lifted off from the distant stretches of the Crau steppe and made a large circuit around its exterior before dropping back into the vegetation -- out of view.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*)

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*)

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*)

SPOTTED REDSHANK (*Tringa erythropus*)

Fine views of a number of busy birds, including several still sporting significant remnants of their striking breeding plumage, foraging along in the reedy mudflats near the entrance to La Capeliere.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*)

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*)

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*)

One hobbled along the mudflats near the start of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, nursing a bad leg.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*)

One probed on mudflats right beside the road along the edge of the Etang de Vaccares; this species typically migrates down the western coast of Europe and Africa, and is not particularly common in the Camargue.

RED KNOT (*Calidris canutus*)

One, far from the western edge of the continent, where it more typically migrates, foraged among the hordes of Dunlin and Curlew Sandpipers in the salt pans around Salin de Giraud.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*)

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*)

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*)

Quite common on the mudflats at Salin de Giraud, with many buffy-throated youngsters sprinkled among the still black-bellied adults.

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*)

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*)

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*)

A couple paddled among the gulls at Salin de Giraud, picking tidbits from the water surface; these are rare visitors to the Camargue, and were probably forced down by the storm.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*)

WOW!! Splendid looks at several feeding right near the track out to the lighthouse, right beside lots of Black-headed Gulls for easy comparison.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*)

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*)

Fine views of dozens bathing in a canal near Aigues-Mortes, with others scattered like thrown confetti in the air over the marshes there. The one swimming next to the Black-headed Gull (allowing easy comparison of size, structure and coloring) was particularly cooperative.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*)

LITTLE TERN (*Sternula albifrons*)

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*)

Two made a brief appearance above the marshes at Scamandre.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*)

A couple of these big terns (largest in the world) flapped over the windy coast south of Salin de Giraud -- having a far easier time of it than the nearby Little Terns!

BLACK TERN (*Chlidonias niger*)

A big flock of these marsh terns -- probably several hundred in all -- rose and fell over the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, after being flushed by some unseen "scary thing". We had closer looks at others patrolling a roadside marsh near Mas d'Agon.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*)

Good numbers winged back and forth across the road near Mas d'Agon, traveling from pond to pond. Most were still in breeding plumage, though a few had already changed into their paler winter garb.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*)

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*)

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*)

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*)

These huge pigeons were common and widespread throughout, including numbers around our Arles hotel each morning and a quartet (perhaps migrants) in the rockfall at the Vallee d'Ossoue.

EUROPEAN TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia turtur*)

One, showing well its distinctively rusty-edged wing feathers, perched in a bare tree near the Peau de Meau. This species is in serious decline across much of Europe.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO (*Clamator glandarius*)

Super views of a youngster catching caterpillars in the dry Crau steppe. This species breeds in southern France, but is usually long gone by the time of our tour.

Strigidae (Owls)

EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL (*Bubo bubo*)

It waited until nearly too late to make an appearance, but one finally did materialize on a cliff face near Les Baux. Good thing we had the spotlight with which to illuminate it!

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*)

Our early morning outing to the Peau de Meau netted us scope views of one of these small owls, as it did its best to avoid a gang of magpies that harassed it from hidey hole to hidey hole on a tumbledown shed.

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*)

We all heard these calling -- and calling and calling -- from the darkened woodland up the hill from our Gedre hotel, but only a lucky few happened to see one coast from tree to tree one night.

Apodidae (Swifts)

COMMON SWIFT (*Apus apus*)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*)

Two winged over the fields around our Arles hotel on our first pre-breakfast walk, and a scattering of others hunted over the warm limestone hills where we searched for eagle-owls. These huge swifts have a wingspan which approaches two feet!

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*)

A jewel-bright male hunting the edges of the Lac de Gave gave us great looks from just about every conceivable angle.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (Merops apiaster)

Fabulous looks at these handsome insect hawkers near the Crau steppe -- where we found dozens decorating the roadside wires like beads on a string. We also heard (and saw) many "prooping" flocks migrating overhead in the lowlands.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (Coracias garrulus)

Regular on roadside wires throughout the lowlands, but especially common in the Crau, where numbers hunted over the stony ground, flashing their turquoise wings; those piles of stones seemed to be particularly valued stakeout spots!

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOOPOE (Upupa epops)

WOW! Not one, but two of these exotic-looking birds. Jesse spotted the first as we walked along a dirt track near the Peau de Meau, trying to get closer to a Corn Bunting -- it flitted up from its perch on a dead snag to sit on a roadside wire. We had another flap across the road in front of our vans on the Crau steppe, showing us those distinctively patterned black and white wings.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

EURASIAN WRYNECK (Jynx torquilla)

A migrating bird on the edge of the Crau steppe -- first in a bush right beside the vans, then flying across the road into a more distant clump of little trees -- was a nice finale to our day there.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (Dendrocopos major)

BLACK WOODPECKER (Dryocopus martius)

A good example of persistence paying off: it took two visits -- and some fine spotting by Jesse -- but we all finally had super scope studies of one handsome bird in the pine forest below the Col du Tourmalet.

GREEN WOODPECKER (Picus viridis)

Max and Mary were the only ones who met Jesse and me for a pre-breakfast walk after that oh-so-stormy night -- and so were the only ones who got scope views of this handsome woodpecker when it perched in a tree near our Arles hotel.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (Lanius collurio)

A youngster hunted from a bush in a farm field near Ausseing, returning again and again to the same out-in-the-open perches.

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (Lanius meridionalis)

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (Garrulus glandarius)

Especially nice studies of several on our walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (Pica pica)

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax)

Those in the Port de Boucharo provided our best views as they sailed past on the winds through the gap or poked and prodded their way along the grassy slopes. The broader, floppy "hand" of this species -- and its distinctively downcurved red bill -- help to separate it from the next species.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (Pyrrhocorax graculus)

Far more common than the previous species, with flocks of hundreds seen milling around peaks and along ridgelines -- and rummaging on the grassy slopes -- in the Pyrenees.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (Corvus monedula)

Hundreds rowed past our Arles hotel each morning, calling their distinctive short ringing barks, and we got good looks at numbers in the fields there.

ROOK (Corvus frugilegus)

Smaller numbers of these big corvids -- which are supposedly only in the area for the winter -- mingled with the jackdaws over our Arles hotel each morning. It would be interesting to know if these birds actually breed here, which seems likely, given the tour's timing.

CARRION CROW (Corvus corone)

COMMON RAVEN (Corvus corax)

Alaudidae (Larks)

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*)

SKY LARK (*Alauda arvensis*)

One scuttled along the road in front of the vans as we headed out to the lighthouse, giving us great opportunity for study; it was very reluctant to launch itself into the wind!

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*)

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*)

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*)

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*)

Regular in the highlands, including many quartering the air with a smaller number of Eurasian Crag-Martins over our picnic spot in the Vallee d'Ossoue. The white rump patch of this species is distinctive.

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*)

Especially good views of one -- sporting its tiny moustache of a bib -- mingling with the Coal Tits and Great Tits in some trees across the road from our Gedre hotel.

COAL TIT (*Parus ater*)

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*)

Quite common this year, with a pair in the lovely pine forest near La Caume providing a particularly nice view; we saw others on the hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*)

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*)

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*)

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*)

A couple of birds in the hillside forests of Le Lienz proved particularly accommodating, patrolling nearby tree trunks and branches in their quest for tidbits.

Tichodromidae (Wallcreeper)

WALLCREEPER (*Tichodroma muraria*)

One of these crimson-winged sprites spent nearly 10 minutes flitting across the rock face near our picnic spot in the Cirque de Gavarnie, searching for tidbits. This one ranked first in the "bird of the trip" countdown on our last evening.

Certhiidae (Creepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*)

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*)

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

A male, singing his heart out from a fallen tree near the road in the forest of Le Lienz, gave us a near point-blank view.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*)

Regular on the second half of the tour, with especially nice views of two chasing each other around at the foot of the dam at the Lac de Gave, and of one throwing itself into the stream in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*)

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*)

Great looks at a handful above the parking lot at La Capeliere (with a few Great Tits) with others in the forests of Le Lienz and Mauvezin.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf-Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)

Easily the most common warbler of the tour, seen on most days -- including some very yellow youngsters in the little trees along the track through the pastures around our Arles hotel.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*)

Acrocephalidae (Reed-Warblers and Allies)

MELODIOUS WARBLER (*Hippolais polyglotta*)

It's not often that a dead bird makes it onto the list of "favorite birds of the trip", but the newly-deceased bird Mary found on our walk in the Port de Boucharo did just that.

EURASIAN REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*)

Fabulous views of several, glowing like honey in the sunshine, in the tamarisks at Scamandre.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*)

Sylviidae (Old World Warblers)

BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*)

Lots -- primarily brown-headed females and youngsters -- in the elderberry bushes along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with a few others around the Lac de Gave.

GARDEN WARBLER (*Sylvia borin*)

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*)

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*)

A little family group bounced around a Salicornia patch near Mesjanes, periodically perching atop a bush for a good look around.

* SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*)

We heard one churring (and singing scratchily) from the scrubby hillsides near where we searched for eagle-owls, but never laid eyes on it.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa striata*)

A couple -- looking rather more streaked (or smudged) than spotted -- hunted from roadside trees on our approach to the Peau de Meau.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*)

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*)

Regular in the highlands, with especially nice studies of these little cuties in the elderberry bushes along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)

Zillions (a bit of an exaggeration, but not much of one) hunted from boulders and cow pats all throughout the highlands, quivering those distinctive red tails every time they moved.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*)

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*)

Hordes, flashing the distinctive white rumps and tails that give them their name ("wheatear" is a corruption of the Saxon words for "white-ass"), bounced across the stony ground of the Crau steppe, and many others did the same in the highlands of the Pyrenees.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*)

One, perched up atop a bush not far from our first Corn Bunting, showed especially well. We saw other migrants at the Port de Boucharo and the Vallee d'Ossoue.

STONECHAT (EUROPEAN) (*Saxicola torquatus rubicola*)

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

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

One sat for long minutes on a sentinel post downhill from the road through the Port de Boucharo, and others flashed from boulder to boulder in the rockfall zone of the Vallee d'Ossoue. The finely barred winter (and female) plumage of this species is quite handsome.

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*)

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

Big flocks in the lowlands, including some sitting on the electricity pylons and wires outside of St. Martin de Crau. This species is declining sharply across much of Europe.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*)

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*)

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*)

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*)

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*)

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*)

Seen particularly well on the first morning of the tour, when we scoped one sitting in a tree (and another on a wire) near our hotel.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*)

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows, and Allies)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*)

A little group -- including a still-stunning yellow male -- near the rock fall in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*)

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*)

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*)

EURASIAN LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina*)

CITRIL FINCH (*Serinus citrinella*)

It took some time -- and a bit of scrambling and hill climbing -- but we finally caught up with a handful in the boulder field at the Cirque de Gavarnie.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*)

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*)

A gang of youngsters gorged on seeds in a weedy patch along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*)

Mammals

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*)

Two rested on the stony ground near the sheep shed at Peau de Meau, proving surprisingly adept at camouflage. Those enormous black-tipped ears gave them away though.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*)

Lots of these big marmots -- already well-fattened for the coming winter -- sprawled on rock outcrops and waddled across grassy hillsides throughout the Pyrenees. This species was introduced to the mountains centuries ago from the Alps, to provide a food source for the region's shepherds.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*)

EDIBLE DORMOUSE (*Glis glis*)

One chomping on a walnut in the tree behind our hotel showed well in the spotlight -- and was at least a small consolation for missing the Tawny Owl!

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*)

SHORT-TAILED WEASEL (STOAT) (*Mustela erminea*)

WOW! It's not often you get such fabulous views of these fierce little predators! One did a big circuit around where we stood near the Vallee d'Ossoue rockfall, repeatedly popping out for a look at us as we squeaked. It then proceeded to catch a mouse -- and returned minutes later to catch a second one!

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*)

A handful fed on grassy hillsides high above the Cirque de Gavarnie. This is the animal whose stylized head is used on boundary markers as the emblem of the park.