

FRANCE: CAMARGUE & PYRENEES

Sep 2, 2011 to Sep 12, 2011
Megan Crewe & Jesse Fagan



The stony Crau steppe is the ancient delta of the Durance River, which was diverted some 10,000 years ago into the Rhone much further north. The piles of stones are the work of Allied POWs under orders from the Vichy government, which feared the possibility of Allied troop gliders landing in the area. We had a Little Owl sitting on that shed! (Photo by guide Jesse Fagan)

The south of France offers a wonderful backdrop against which to enjoy a multitude of European birds. We started in the Camargue, with its golden fields of ripening rice, vast salt pans, waving stands of reeds, ancient farms and wide-open skies - and visited the wide, stony Crau steppe and the pale limestone cliffs of Les Alpilles for a change of pace. After four days, we moved to the Pyrenees, where slate-roofed stone buildings huddled under brooding mountains, and forests of arrow-straight spruce trees yielded to springy tundra grasses and a few lingering alpine flowers. And everywhere, there were birds to enjoy.

A huge "Grand Duc" (the French name for the fabulous Eurasian Eagle-Owl) sat atop a limestone cliff with a gorgeous orange sky behind him, hooting challenges to the darkening valley below. An Alpine Accentor sat on a matching tawny boulder. Dozens of snowy-plumaged Mediterranean Gulls flapped past at Aigues-Mortes. Rock Buntings scrabbled along a gritty quarry edge.

A half-dozen Collared Pratincoles, normally long since departed by the time of our tour, quartered the marshy edge of a lagoon. A Common Cuckoo sat on a utility wire. A tiny jewel-bright Common Kingfisher plunged repeatedly into a roadside pond, flashing its stunning colors.

A pair of Bearded Reedlings flitted through the filmy tops of a roadside reedbed. Clouds of dusky pink Greater Flamingoes drifted across briny salt pans. Thousands of shorebirds -- Little Ringed Plovers and Curlew Sandpipers, Little Stints and Ruffs, Spotted Redshanks and Common Snipe, Pied Avocets and Common Greenshanks, and a dozen more species -- swarmed over salt pans and lagoon edges, napping and preening and probing the muddy substrate for tidbits.

Eurasian Bee-eaters sat like brilliant beads along the string of a utility wire, while European Rollers hunting on flashing wings over ripening fields.

Raptors put on a particularly good show. A Red Kite circled over our heads on a country road, and a Short-toed Eagle hung in the wind right beside us -- thanks to the plunging glacial valley we were birding in. Peach-colored Lammergeiers patrolled ridge tops and rested on tiger-striped cliffs, and a youngster practiced its bone-dropping on a nearby hillside. Eurasian Griffons soared on huge broad wings, and Golden Eagles tangled above craggy ridges. A river of literally hundreds of Eurasian Honey-Buzzards streamed past as they moved from one thermal to the next over a busy highway. Lesser Kestrels hunted dragonflies from myriad stone piles, and two Peregrine Falcons turned a massive flock of starlings into a twisting black ribbon, skywriting unreadable messages as they tried to escape.

And, of course, the food and wine, particularly in Provence, were among the highlights of the week! Thanks to all of you for joining our adventure; you certainly helped to make the trip a lot of fun. Jesse and I hope to travel with each of you again somewhere, someday!

-- Megan

We have more information about this itinerary and future departures on our web page for [France: Camargue & Pyrenees](#).

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*) – A half dozen or so floated in one of the channels edging the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, and others did the same at Scamandre.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Many families, bright-plumaged parents with duller youngsters in tow, floated in the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Hundreds and hundreds massed on Étang des Vaccarès, with smaller numbers in other waterways in the Camargue.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – A few, still in eclipse plumage, floated among the Mallards on the Étang des Vaccarès.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Good numbers among the shorebirds on Étang des Vaccarès, with smaller numbers along Digue à la Mer. This is sometimes split as a separate species: the Eurasian or Common Teal.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – Two pairs floated on the little channel along the causeway at Scamandre.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*) – Thanks to some great spotting by Jesse, we had one distant bird perched up on a post in the field where we saw our first shrikes.

COMMON QUAIL (*Coturnix coturnix*) – We flushed one from the edge of the track through the Crau steppe, and quickly lost sight of it when it dropped down behind a tiny nearby bush. Though we quickly marshalled our forces and headed out to the spot we'd last seen it, we couldn't refind it -- until Sid nearly stepped on it as we turned to head back to the van! Sadly, it rocketed off again, and dropped behind another bush much further away. But at least we all had good flight views.

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – A male, flashing some spectacularly red facial wattles, foraged in some tall grass along the side of a creek near Digue à la Mer, seen as we walked out to the Spectacled Warbler spot.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – Dozens floated and dove in a sheltered area along the edge of Étang des Vaccarès, giving us great opportunity for scope studies. This is the smallest of Europe's grebes.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – One among the flamingoes on our first afternoon gave us very nice looks, particularly when it floated right past us; we also saw a big raft of them a bit further away on the other side of the road.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – A little group, already in drab winter plumage, floated near some fishing weirs on the Étang des Vaccarès. Large numbers of this species overwinter in the Camargue.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)



Greater Flamingos in the Camargue, photographed by guide Megan Crewe

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – Hundreds and hundreds, seen in vast pink-dusted flocks scattered across the lagoons and salt pans of the Camargue. There were distressingly few gray youngsters among the adults, which indicates it may have been another poor breeding season -- not surprising, given the abysmal water levels!

Ciconiidae (Storks)

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – A dozen or so strode among a horde of Yellow-legged Gulls and Eurasian Jackdaws in a grassy field near Saint-Martin-de-Crau, and a family group of four rested in the field outside our Arles hotel one morning.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Especially nice views of a bunch sitting on posts in the lagoons near Aigues-Mortes, with flybys seen on other days around the Camargue.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Single birds seen in scattered locations throughout the Camargue, typically hunched along the edge of a reedy waterway, waiting for lunch to pass by.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Single birds on three different days, all in flight, and all for far too short a time!

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Small numbers along Digue à la Mer, with others at Scamandre and Mas d'Agon. This is a relatively recent arrival to western Europe, and is still less common than the other egrets there.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Particularly common around Aigues-Mortes, where they hunted in the shallows of the roadside ponds. Like North America's Snowy Egrets, adults of this species have black legs and yellow feet.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Abundant in the fields around the Camargue, particularly anywhere they were cutting the hayfields.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Nearly non-existent this year, with only a single sighting -- of one flushing off the pond ahead of us and disappearing over the trees as we walked the trails at Scamandre.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – A youngster flapped past while we birded near Étang des Vaccarès, and a few others did the same at Scamandre.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – Dozens preened along the edge of one of the big lakes visible from Digue à la Mer, not far from where we started our walk out toward the lighthouse.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*) – Our first were a flock of a half dozen descending over our hors-d'oeuvres picnic near Les Baux, and we had an even larger group of migrants kettling in a thermal near Scamandre the next day. But the biggest spectacle came on our drive to the mountains -- when hundreds streamed overhead while we watched from a restroom parking lot.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – Our best views came near Bagnères, where we found one wheeling around right over the road. We had others near the ancient church where we stopped for our Common Cuckoo, and one more distant bird near the Étang des Vaccarès in the Camargue.

LAMMERGEIER (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – Great views of several in the Pyrenees, including a youngster repeatedly dropping bones in the Vallée d'Ossoue, three handsome adults soaring effortlessly along the mountain ridges and a partly-peach immature bird flapping back and forth in front of the steep cliffs at Lac des Gloriettes. This species was voted "Favorite Bird of the Trip" by a considerable margin!

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) – Some great spotting by Jesse gave us flight views of an adult -- which sadly glided straight away while some were still "indisposed" -- at the rest stop near Pic du Pibeste. This species is in serious decline across southern Europe.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – Daily in the mountains, often high over the ridges but occasionally -- like the ones that glided past as we scanned for Wallcreepers at Lac des Gloriettes -- close enough to see that distinctive neck ruff.

SHORT-TOED EAGLE (*Circus gallicus*) – Splendid views of one coursing back and forth through the Port de Boucharo -- sometimes hanging in the wind at eye level right in front of us. We saw another high above the Cirque de Gavarnie, and a third hunting in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Daily in the Camargue, typically rocking on uptilted wings low over the rice fields -- though we did see one coursing above the trees edging the Crau steppe.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – One flapped over the edge of the Crau steppe, a second dove into the bushes as we negotiated a hairpin turn near Ausseing and a third headed south along the ridges at the Cirque de Gavarnie.

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – One of the most common raptors of the tour, seen nearly every day. As we saw, they come in an exceptional variety of color morphs.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Two adults interacted along the ridges above the Cirque de Gavarnie, and three youngsters tangled over the Vallée d'Ossoue. We also had close views of a stealth bird that streaked in to pounce on something on the ground not far from the quarry -- with the still sleepy marmots not shrieking until it was nearly on the ground.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – Common in the Crau, where we often found them hunting in little groups. The party playing among the treetops right near the start of the steppe was particularly cooperative, giving us great looks at their distinctively pale underwings.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Missed only on the first afternoon of the tour. One hunting near the gap at the Port de Boucharo gave us particularly nice chance for study -- as did another perched on a rock ledge (until we tried to get it in the scope!) in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – One repeatedly dive-bombed a hapless Eurasian Kestrel out in front of our Arles hotel, seen on our final pre-breakfast walk there.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – Two hawked dragonflies over the marshes near Étang des Vaccarès.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Two hunted starlings over one of the big lakes at Scamandre and another circled overhead while we searched for Eurasian Nuthatch near Ausseing.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*) – We heard the squealing call of this species several times from the reeds around a tiny puddle in Scamandre, but never saw so much as a reed twitch. [*]

PURPLE SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) – Those in Jesse's van saw one flush off the side of the causeway as we headed toward Scamandre, and a few folks saw it fly again when we turned around to see if we could get a better view.

COMMON MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – A couple of brown youngsters picked along the near side of a roadside pond near Aigues-Mortes, while a brighter adult chugged along the back edge; others worked the reedy edges of ponds at Scamandre.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – A handful paddled in the watery ditch along the causeway near Scamandre.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (*Burhinus oediconemus*) – A group of eight or so flapped across the road in front of our vans and settled into the dry vegetation out toward the military installation near the Crau -- looking pretty much like more plants!

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – Twice, a big group flashed into view above the reeds along the causeway at Scamandre and flew along for a ways before dropping back down out of view. The broad rounded wings and black and white underparts of these big plovers are distinctive.

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – A little group flew past while we birded along the dry lagoons of Digue à la Mer.

SNOWY PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – Lots of these small, relatively drab plovers scurried across the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, often in the company of the following two species. This has recently been split from North America's Snowy Plover, and is now known as the Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus*.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Quite common in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, often conveniently close to the next species.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – Superb studies of several birds hunting right beside the road at the



Port de Boucharo in the Pyrenees, photographed by guide Megan Crewe

Salin de Giraud. The slimmer build, longer wings, drabber legs and yellowish eye ring of this species help to distinguish it from the stockier Common Ringed Plover.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Scores and scores strode around the salt pans of Salin de Giraud on their fantastically long pink legs. Most were brownish youngsters, though we did spot at least one snazzy white-headed adult.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) – Dozens of these dapper shorebirds snoozed in one of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, including two serving as convenient bookends around our first Black Tern.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Regular in the Camargue, where we saw them teetering along the edge of many waterways.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – A couple hunted the muddy edge of one of the big lakes at Scamandre, showing their white rumps and dark underwings briefly as they moved from place to place -- great spotting, Diane!

SPOTTED REDSHANK (*Tringa erythropus*) – Scores hunted along the edge of the Étang des Vaccarès, showing their distinctively long bills -- and trademark red legs!

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – We found one among the Spotted Redshanks along the edge of Étang des Vaccarès, and a handful of others from the blind at Scamandre.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – Small numbers mingled with the other shorebirds at Scamandre and along the edges of the Étang des Vaccarès, picked out by their noticeable white eyebrows.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – A single bird wandered among the far more numerous Spotted Redshanks along the edge of Étang des Vaccarès.

RED KNOT (*Calidris canutus*) – Two youngsters foraged in one of the dry lagoons along Digue à la Mer.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – A youngster mooched around with a couple of Red Knots in one of the nearly dry lagoons along Digue à la Mer.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – Scores scurried over the mudflats of Salin de Giraud, and a handful of others poked along the few wet spots on Digue à la Mer.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Hundreds, most still showing the black bellies and reddish backs of their breeding plumage, rested in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud.

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*) – Good numbers of rusty adults -- and a few buffy youngsters -- mingled with the Dunlin and Little Stints in the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

RUFF (*Philomachus pugnax*) – A good-sized group, showing the distinctively "rucked-up" back feathers which help to identify them, hunted the shallows of a pond (and snoozed among the bushes) at Scamandre, while others rummaged along the edge of Étang des Vaccarès.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – A surprising number foraged on the mudflats edging the Étang des Vaccarès, probing deeply with their long bills.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – A group of four turned circles among some drowned bushes in one of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, and two paddled among a big flock of shorebirds later in the day.

Glareolidae (Pratincoles and Coursers)

COLLARED PRATINCOLE (*Glareola pratincola*) – A half dozen or so quartered the marsh at the edge of Étang des Vaccarès, looking like giant swallows. This was a first sighting for a Field Guides France tour!

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)



Whinchat, photographed by guide Jesse Fagan

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Common around the Camargue, including hundreds paddling in the salty waters of Salin de Giraud.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*) – Dozens, looking rather ratty-winged with molt, flapped overhead as we birded near Aigues-Mortes. The all-pale upperwings and underwings of this species are distinctive.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – Abundant in the Camargue, with scores trundling around the agricultural fields on our first wet morning, and hundreds snoozing in the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

LITTLE TERN (*Sternula albifrons*) – A single bird flew past while we enjoyed the shorebirds at Salin de Giraud. This is Europe's smallest tern, closely related to North America's Least Tern.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – Two of these big terns -- the largest tern species in the world -- rested in one of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

BLACK TERN (*Chlidonias niger*) – A couple rested on a sand bar at Salin de Giraud, and others flew back and forth over the reeds at the Étang des Vacarrès.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – Small numbers, some still showing traces of their darker breeding plumage, flashed back and forth over roadside ponds near Mas d'Agon.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – A few flew over the salt pans around Aigues-Mortes. This species breeds along the Mediterranean, but heads south of the Sahara Desert for the winter.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Common on the salt pans of Salin de Giraud.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Regular around the Camargue, particularly in agricultural areas; these were all feral birds, as the wide variety of color morphs in each flock proved.

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – Lots of these huge pigeons throughout, often in flight -- where their big white wing patches were particularly obvious.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Abundant in the lowlands, typically sitting on roadside wires or television antennas; a pair of birds atop a conifer near our first bee-eaters gave us good chance for scope studies.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

COMMON CUCKOO (*Cuculus canorus*) – One sitting on a utility wire near the very old church outside Bagnères showed nicely in the scope; this species is typically long gone by the time of our tour.

Strigidae (Owls)

EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL (*Bubo bubo*) – Wow!! What a great finale to our lovely hors d'oeuvre picnic! We had a male calling (and calling and calling) from a clifftop perch well across the valley. Then he glided -- looking impressively large -- across the valley to a closer cliff, where he sat silhouetted against the orange sky. Then he moved again to an even closer cliff, where he called again, looking like an immense prairie-chicken with ears up and tail cocked and body nearly horizontal with effort. Superb!

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) – One sat atop a ruined shed on the Crau steppe, looking rather tiny even in the scope.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Great views of one in a bush at the edge of a roadside pond near Aigues-Mortes on our first afternoon. It made a few splashing attempts to catch a meal, returning again and again to the same branches. We saw another at Scamandre.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*) – We had fine scope views of dozens as they sat along a roadside wire like



One of the three Short-toed Eagles we saw, photographed by guide Megan Crewe

jeweled beads on a string on our journey south to Salin de Giraud -- where we also enjoyed that fabulous "Christmas tree" full of bee-eater ornaments!

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – Regular in the lowlands, typically sitting on roadside wires, waiting for the perfect mouthful to fly past. Their turquoise wings are really quite gorgeous in flight -- as we saw numerous times.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos medius*) – Super views of one in a tree right behind our hotel; nice spotting Irene! It made several passes back and forth over the building before settling in for a bout of foraging along some thin upper branches.



Enjoying the view -- and lunch -- at a rest stop between the Camargue and the Pyrenees. That's the ancient walled city of Carcassonne in the distance. (Photo by guide Jesse Fagan)

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – A few folks saw one flash past while we tried to get a look at our first Eurasian Nuthatch. The bright red vent of this species is distinctive.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – We heard one call several times from the pine forest far upslope at Le Lienz, but just couldn't entice it in for a view. [*]

GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – Nice scope studies of a rather bedraggled looking bird (molting heavily) in a dead tree behind our hotel in the mountains on the last morning of the tour.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius collurio*) – A coarsely barred youngster sat atop a scruffy bush in a field near the Crau steppe. This summer visitor heads to tropical Africa for the winter.

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – One hunting from several bushes in a field near the Crau showed well in the scopes, and one sitting on a yellow sign in the Crau itself was even closer. This species was split from the Northern Shrike, which is found throughout much of the Holarctic.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – One sitting on the bobsled/luge run our final morning gave us particularly nice views -- as did one ripping some fluffy morsel apart on a branch up the hill behind our hotel.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Especially common in the lowlands, where we often saw parties of a half dozen or more foraging along the side of the road. This species was recently split from the similar Black-billed Magpie of North America, which differs in voice, plumage and social behavior.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – Our best views came in the Vallée d'Ossoue, where a trio lurked on a ledge with a pair of Lammergeiers, perhaps awaiting their turn at a carcass. Two of them later moved even closer,

letting us better study their long curved red beaks.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) – Very common in the mountains, with big flocks swirling over the ridge tops in several places, and parties of noisy birds patrolling the grassy slopes at Port de Boucharo.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Abundant in the lowlands, particularly around our hotel -- where dozens rummaged in agricultural fields among a myriad gulls, and scores more winged past each morning, heading out from their nearby roost site.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – Numbers flapped over our Camargue hotel with the jackdaws, calling raucously.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Regular throughout, seen on most days of the tour -- including a feisty pair that attacked the Golden Eagle as it dropped to the ground near the quarry in the Vallée d'Ossoue and a big flock rowing over Gèdre as we returned from one afternoon's outing.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Small numbers in the highlands, including several pairs of birds tumbling together over the ridges; often heard before seen.

Panuridae (Bearded Reedling)

BEARDED REEDLING (*Panurus biarmicus*) – A handsome pair perched up on some reed heads along the edge of Scamandre; great spotting Ruth! This was another first for a Field Guides France tour.

Alaudidae (Larks)

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*) – Small numbers in the Crau, including a few that FINALLY stayed still long enough for us to get them in the scopes, not far from where we found our Common Quail. The underwing of this species is a distinctive peachy color.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – A single bird sat among the Barn Swallows on a wire near our first bee-eaters, looking tiny and very brown.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – Abundant ("aerial plankton") in the highlands, with especially nice looks at a pair provisioning a late nest full of youngsters in La Mongie.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Very common throughout, including literally thousands flying over -- very high -- on their way south on our first damp morning in the Camargue.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – Also regular in the highlands, where their bright white rumps helped to quickly separate them from the Eurasian Crag-Martins.

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

COAL TIT (*Parus ater*) – Fine views of a busy group wrestling with beech mast in a tree right over the track up the Cirque de Gavarnie. The white nape patch of this species is diagnostic.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – Pairs moved with several tit flocks on the hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, showing very nicely as they investigated nearby pine trees.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – Easily the most common tit of the trip, seen on most days -- including a flighty pair with a couple of yellow-faced youngsters near the visitor's center at Scamandre and others with the mixed flocks on the way to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – Brief views of one in the garden in Cazères, followed by great views of another on our hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. This is easily the most colorful of the tits we saw -- and would apparently be even more so if we could see in ultraviolet!

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – As usual, we heard far more of this skulking species than we saw. That said, I think everybody did finally lay eyes on at least one -- either as it worked its way through some tamarisk bushes across a pond at Scamandre, or when it flew (looking plump and rusty) from one side of the water to the other.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – Great views of a busy mob in a garden in the middle of Cazères -- and our noisy admiration of them from the shopping center parking lot led to our being invited in for a look around!

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – Our first was a rather shy bird near Ausseing -- soon chased off by the noisy band of school children with whom we shared our trail. Fortunately, we found others in the forest of Le Lienz (while searching for Black Woodpecker) and in the forest near Mauvezin.

Certhiidae (Creepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – Single birds mingled with the tit flocks on the hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie and in Le Lienz. This species is typically found at higher elevations than the next, and tends to favor conifer forests.

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – One crept up several nearby trunks along a track near Ausseing, singing occasionally. This species strongly resembles the previous, though it tends to have dingier underparts. Vocally, however, they are quite different, and they are also found in deciduous forests at lower elevations.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – Fairly common in the highlands, with especially nice views of a group of four alternately flinging themselves into a swift little mountain stream and chasing each other around on its stony edges early one morning.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – A few of these drabber-faced "kinglets" mixed with the next species on the walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – Great views of a fired-up bird in the abbey gardens near Mauvezin, flashing his deep orange crest as he shouted at a rival. We saw others on the hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf-Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – This normally abundant species was amazingly scarce this year, with only a few seen -- including one very yellow youngster flitting through red-berried elder bushes in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – A handful seen on the walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, typically foraging in the bushes along the stream. This species often flicks its tail downwards, a great behavioral field mark.

Acrocephalidae (Reed-Warblers and Allies)

SEDGE WARBLER (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*) – One in the little trees around the blind at Scamandre showed very well for some and not at all for others; great spotting, Sid! This stripey-headed species is usually long gone from the Camargue by the time of our tour.

EURASIAN REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – Superb views of many at Scamandre, where they hunted along the edges of the reedbeds and up into the surrounding tamarisk bushes.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Great scope studies on several occasions: our first perched up beside the road north of Salin de Giraud, and another in a dead tree near the start of the track out through the Peau de Meau.

Sylviidae (Old World Warblers)

BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – Fairly common in the fruiting elderberry bushes along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with about equal numbers of black-headed males and brown-headed females.

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*) – A single migrant flicked among the big stick piles beside one of the canals through the Crau, periodically launching itself after passing Northern Wheatears.

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – A male and his coterie of youngsters (and female, presumably) twitched through Salicornia scrub along the Digue a la Mer, periodically perching up for a good look around.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – At least two moved through bushes on the other side of a little canal at the Marais de Grenouillet, flitting out into the open periodically for a good look around -- and seen reasonably well from our perch on the observation tower.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – Regular, with small numbers of migrants -- all in their sober brown-and-white non-breeding plumage -- seen hunting from trees and bushes throughout the tour.

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Fairly common in the highlands, particularly in the fruit-laden elderberry bushes along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. There were a fair number of spotty-breasted youngsters seen this year.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Scores of these little insectivores bounced from stone to boulder to grassy slope all throughout the mountains, quivering their distinctive rusty tails as they landed.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – A female sat briefly on some dead sticks near the base of a small tree in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Common both on the stony Crau steppe and in the mountains, where their flashing white rumps and tails helped us to quickly identify them.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Quite a common migrant in the lowlands this year, including dozens seen hunting from bush tops at the far end of our drive through the Crau steppe.

STONECHAT (EUROPEAN) (*Saxicola torquatus rubicola*) – A single male hunted from fence wires and dead seed heads in a field near Saint-Martin-de-Crau, seen as we hunted for Little Bustards. This is normally a common migrant through the south of France.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

RUFUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – One, sporting the barred belly of its non-breeding plumage, sat for long minutes atop a big boulder in the Vallée d'Ossoue before flitting off for a round of bug-hunting among a nearby rock pile.

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Great views for the folks in my van when we returned from the field one day and found a male sitting in the middle of the driveway. We had scope views of somewhat more distant birds foraging and chasing each other around on a steep hillside along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – A group of these big spotty thrushes trotted around in a grassy meadow near the path up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, searching for tidbits.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Hard to believe this species is in steep decline over much of Europe; we certainly saw some gigantic flocks -- including a huge ribbon of them skywriting over Scamandre as they tried to evade two hunting Peregrine Falcons.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*) – One handsome bird -- his colors remarkably close to those of the surrounding slate cliffs -- sat on a big orange boulder just down the hill from the trail at Port de Boucharo, after flying in from across the valley.

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – Great views daily in the mountains, including one sitting quietly in a bush right beside the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – Common on the salt pans of Salin de Giraud and along Digue à la Mer. We also saw several small parties migrating through the pass at Port de Boucharo.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Especially nice views of one wagging along the edge of the little stream near Mauran, seen as we transferred from Arles to the mountains. This is the longest-tailed of the wagtails we see on the tour.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – Small numbers throughout, including a couple on the roof of the rescue helicopter building in Gavarnie, and others on the roof of the Cistercian abbey near Mauvezin.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – Quite a few of these very pale, mostly unstreaked pipits in the Crau -- though they never sat long enough to get them in the scopes.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – Sadly, our only sightings this year were of bounding dots flying over, calling as they went. [*]

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – Dozens and dozens strode around pastures and grassy slopes in the mountains, often chasing each other around with a flurry of white-edged tails.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – Two, including one bright yellow male, made a brief appearance near the rockfall in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

ROCK BUNTING (*Emberiza cia*) – At least a half dozen chased around in the Vallée d'Ossoue, causing our our scheduled comfort break to take about twice as long as expected. These handsome birds can be surprisingly tough to find -- though I imagine that's hard to believe this year!

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – Regular in the Camargue, generally sitting on wires along the roadsides. As someone said while we studied them in the scopes, these look surprisingly like heavyset female House Finches.

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Common in the highlands, with stunning views of a little group feeding in the grass near the cafe at Le Lienz -- under one of the many chairlifts.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – A handful flitted in the weedy field (and surrounding trees) near where we parked to look at our first European Bee-eaters; these were surprisingly thin on the ground this year.

EURASIAN LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina*) – Several small parties bounded past us in the mountains, with a handful along the roadside and one near the border between France and Spain (at Port de Boucharo) providing the best chance for study.

CITRIL FINCH (*Serinus citrinella*) – We had to work hard for a view of these little mountain specialists! We clambered through the boulder field in the Cirque de Gavarnie for a while before finally coming across a few perched up on big stones.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – Very common in the Cirque de Gavarnie, with many streaky yellow birds perched up on smaller rocks in the boulder field -- complicating our search for Citril Finches somewhat!

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – Small numbers along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with our best looks coming at a drab female or youngster nibbling fruits in some low vegetation. The plaintive down-slurred whistle of this species was a regular part of the walk's soundtrack.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Very common in the Camargue, particularly around our hotel.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – One on a wire across a pasture near our hotel stayed put while small parties of House Sparrows came and went. The brown cap and black "ear muff" of the male is distinctive.

MAMMALS

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) – One scampered across the road in front of the first van as we drove towards the Crau on our second (pre-breakfast) visit there.

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*) – One rocketed away across the Crau, occasionally bounding high enough over the vegetation that we could see it; it never raised its ears the whole time it was in view.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Scores of these well-padded critters -- including some sprawled like sunbathers on warm rocks -- in the Pyrenees, where they were introduced centuries ago to provide a food source for the region's shepherds.

EDIBLE DORMOUSE (*Glis glis*) – One caught nibbling walnuts in a tree near our mountain hotel (we heard the bits and pieces it was dropping as they bounced through the leaves) was a highlight of an otherwise quiet night outing.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – One paddled across a channel at Scamandre, seen by most of the group.

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – A little group browsed on a green hillside high above the Cirque de Gavarnie; this is the emblematic species of the Pyrenees National Park.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 154 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa