



Field Guides Tour Report

France: Camargue & Pyrenees II 2016

Sep 3, 2016 to Sep 13, 2016
Jay VanderGaast & Dave Stejskal

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A fine collection of mountain birds -- Lammergeier, Eurasian Griffon and multiple Yellow-billed Choughs -- circles over the Lac des Gloriettes. (photo by guide Dave Stejskal)

When I first co-led this tour in 2013, it was meant to be a one-off, and I had no idea that three years later I'd be leading my 4th tour here in as many years! But boy, am I glad I did. This has been such a fun tour to be a part of -- kind of a birding tour, disguised as a vacation -- and it's been a part of my schedule that I've looked forward to since that first trip. Now with the 2016 outing in the books, I'm as excited about this one as ever, and already looking forward to a return visit next year!

This year's trip featured some hot and sunny weather, pretty much throughout. Though expected in the Camargue region, it seemed even hotter than usual, and certainly drier, while the cooler temperatures expected in the mountains were also a few degrees above what I'd consider normal. In any case, it didn't suppress bird activity as much as I feared, and we wound up with some awesome bird sightings throughout the trip, with a few surprises that may have been a factor of the warm weather (lingering migrants, perhaps?).

The vast marshes, wetlands, and coastal mudflats of the Camargue region are a big draw for tourists and birds alike. The wonderful Greater Flamingo is certainly the most iconic of the region's birds, attracting the attention of even all those non-birding tourists, and we saw our fair share of these gorgeous, gangly birds, including a few large creches of ugly duckling youngsters. But our attention was equally drawn by many of the less-celebrated birds found here. Among the waterfowl, we were particularly pleased to see a large flotilla of Common Pochards on one pond. This is a species we rarely see on this tour. A lone Squacco Heron was a big hit at Mas D'Agon one morning, and 4 species of grebes was one more than we usually see, thanks to a long-staying stray Pied-billed Grebe near St-Martin-de-Crau! Shorebirds were in good supply, with about 20 species seen well, including a group of 4 Eurasian Dotterels hunkering down in a cultivated field, (thanks to that young Montagu's Harrier for those birds!), a trio of rarely seen (on this tour) Temminck's Stints at the lovely Tour de Carbonniere, and a handful of Bar-tailed Godwits among the many regularly seen species here. Mediterranean Gulls showed nicely at Aigues-Mortes, as did the local Slender-billed Gulls at Salin de Giraud, with a surprise Little Gull also a nice find there.

The dry, stony Crau steppe was another of our destinations in the region, and here we enjoyed super looks at a Short-toed Snake-Eagle on the ground, a noisy covey of Red-legged Partridges scurrying across a shrubby field, and a large group (24 at least) of Eurasian Thick-knees hunkered down in the same field. Tawny Pipits, Greater Short-toed Larks, and Lesser Kestrel were among the other good finds here, and not far way near St-Martin-de-Crau, we enjoyed the best views I've had yet of Little Bustards, thanks to my missing a turnoff on our way to the Crau! The many European Rollers we saw perched on the roadside wires were another enjoyable feature of the lowlands, as was the colorful flock of European Bee-eaters that flew close by that first afternoon near Montpellier airport, and the numerous Common Kingfishers we encountered. And let's not forget the super scope views we enjoyed of that massive Eurasian Eagle-Owl perched on a rocky ledge shortly after our delicious picnic dinner near Les Baux de Provence!

Moving to the Pyrenees, we saw a nearly complete shift in the bird species we encountered, with very few birds seen regularly in both regions. While we had very little of the inclement weather that would have produced a good fallout of migrants, we did witness one such occurrence when we were hit by a

big thunderstorm in the mid-afternoon on our first day there. The low clouds forced down a migrant flock of 27 White Storks, which then proceeded to circle over the valley near our hotel, trying to find a way across the mountains. Raptor numbers seemed down from other visits, but we still enjoyed many amazing views of Eurasian Griffons, with a few Lammergeiers also showing beautifully up at Lac des Gloriettes. A incredibly cooperative Tawny Owl was a huge hit one evening in Gedre, the first I've actually managed to see on this tour! Woodpeckers were excellent, and we enjoyed wonderful close encounters with the massive Black Woodpecker, while Great Spotted and Middle Spotted woodpeckers also performed admirably. Small bird flocks containing a mix of tits (Crested, Coal, Great, Eurasian Blue), Eurasian Nuthatch, and both Goldcrest and Firecrest were regularly encountered. And a highly sought-after Wallcreeper was a big find on our hike up to the magnificent Cirque de Gavarnie.

Now, it's a given that the birds are always a big draw on our tours, but I have got to give a shout out to the incredible food and wine that were also daily features of this trip. From the flaky, buttery croissants on the breakfast buffets each morning, to the mouth-watering array of delectable dishes that were laid out in front of us each evening, this was a true gourmand's tour as well. And you just couldn't go wrong with the wine choices that were available. Those Cotes-du-Rhone were especially memorable! It was also memorable to share all of these sightings, meals, and drinks with such a compatible group of fellow travelers. Dave and I had a great time with all of you, and look forward to another trip with you sometime soon. In the meantime, keep well, and remember -- "gentil" and "jolie" have two very different meanings! ;-)

A bientot,

-- Jay

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*) – Common in the Camargue, with good numbers on the marsh at Salin de Giraud and on the Etang de Vaccarres. Our only one after the Camargue was a lone bird on the Riviere Garonne on the drive back to Toulouse.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – About 25 birds at the Salin de Giraud, including a small group that swam nearby giving us excellent views.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – Three birds among a large raft of coots on a pond near Le Capeliere were the only ones for the tour.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – The default duck in the region. Big numbers in the Camargue, and a bunch on the Riviere Garonne as we crossed the bridge at Cazerres on our final day.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – A few eclipse-plumaged birds were found among the Mallards at several sites in the Camargue.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – A pair of eclipse/female plumaged birds were found on the pond at La Baisse de Raillon n Saint-Martin-de-Crau.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – About a dozen of these, all in eclipse plumage, were on a pond near Le Capeliere among a bunch of other ducks.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – We usually don't see this attractive diving duck on this tour, so it was surprising to see it twice this year. First we had a group of 40-45 birds, including many males in breeding plumage, on a pond near Le Capeliere, and a couple of days later we found another male in full dress on the pond at Le Baisse de Raillon.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*) – Kate spotted a covey of about half a dozen of these elusive birds near the road as we pulled up to the scrubby field on the edge of the Crau, and we all got some good views as they scuttled away across the stony steppe. Our second visit to the same site netted us another view of several, though they were much more distant on that occasion.

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – A group of 7 birds, mainly young of the year, were seen in a cultivated field in the Camargue.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – Seen at a few sites in the Camargue, but our best views were of some in breeding plumage on the pond at Baisse de Raillon.

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*) – One was scoped among the other waterfowl and grebes at Baisse de Raillon. This is a stray from North America, and is likely the only one of its kind in France. It was first recorded in the Saint-Martin-de-Crau region when it turned up on the nearby Etang-des-Aulnes in 2012. It remained there for some time before moving to another nearby pond before finally turning up at the Baisse de Raillon several days before we saw it there.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Seen daily in the Camargue, with excellent looks at them at several sites, including many still in breeding plumage, and at least one stripe-faced juvenile at Baisse de Raillon.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – Called Black-necked Grebe in the UK, the few birds we saw in the Camargue were all in winter plumage.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – The iconic symbol of the Camargue, these birds attract attention from birders and non-birders alike, as they are showy and hard to overlook as you drive through the region. We saw many daily in the Camargue, including some good numbers of the "ugly-duckling" youngsters, indicating that they had a reasonably good breeding season this year.

Ciconiidae (Storks)

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – A bird we flushed from a ditch near the Montpellier airport our first afternoon was looking like it would be our only stork of the trip at first. But when heavy thunderstorms chased us back to our hotel early on our first day in the Pyrenees, it also knocked down a large flock of 27 storks as they were attempting to cross the mountains into Spain. Wolfgang spotted them first as we were still parking the vans, and we all had wonderful views of them circling over the town as they searched in vain for thermals to carry them higher. Eventually many of them landed on one of the buildings in town before they finally wheeled off into the distance and managed to escape the valley, at least.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Small numbers at several coastal sites in the Camargue region and a couple of birds in the Pyrenees as we returned to our hotel from an outing to La Pic de Pibeste.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Lots daily in the Camargue, where they were often gathered in groups of half a dozen or more.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Much less numerous than the preceding species. We had a flock of 5 fly over near Le Capeliere, followed by a lone bird a few minutes later, then saw a single fly past at Mejanes.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Not numerous, but seen daily in small numbers throughout the Camargue.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Similarly spread throughout the Camargue in small numbers.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Numerous in the Camargue region wherever cattle were present. One bird at the Montpellier airport was quite interesting, showing a completely black bill, though the structure of the bird clearly showed it was a Cattle Egret and not a Little as we first thought.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Our usual site for this bird just barely came through when a lone bird flew across in front of us then perched atop a nearby tree; at least it gave us great looks! As Dave pointed out, this bird is closely related to the various pond-herons (Chinese, Madagascar, etc) of Asia and Africa.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – A couple of young birds flew over on our first day as we birded our way over to Arles, and at least 4 others, including a couple of adults, flushed out of some dense scrub along a canal at Mas D'Agon,

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – One was at Aigues-Mortes, and a couple of others at the Salin de Giraud.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

LAMMERGEIER (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – I think folks were starting to get a bit worried when our first two days in the Pyrenees went by without a sighting of this iconic mountain bird. Worries were cast aside, however, when the first of 3 birds put in an appearance at Lac des Gloriettes, while a couple more sightings at the Col du Tourmalet on the final day were just icing. A perennial frontrunner for bird of the trip, this bird took second place this year, though it was the top pick for both Kate and Merby.

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*) – Some years we run into big numbers of these birds as they flock together for the flight south to their wintering grounds in Africa. Though that wasn't the case this year, we did see a couple of small migrant groups in the Arles region, with a flock of 6 birds passing by quite low overhead in the Crau providing a particularly satisfying encounter.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – There was no shortage of these massive vultures in the mountains; we saw plenty of them daily throughout our stay in the Pyrenees, including some great scope views of perched birds.

SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE (*Circaetus gallicus*) – Just a couple this year in the Camargue region. Our first was especially good though-- a bird sitting on the ground near the big barn at the Peau de Meau in the Crau. Our only other sighting was a very distant bird we scoped as it sat in a bare tree at the productive field on the edge of the Crau.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Up to 4 birds were seen soaring among a group of griffons during our wonderful hike to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with another single bird a couple of days later at Le Lienz.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Quite a few in the Camargue region with most being adult females with their striking golden crowns. Our only really nice adult male was a lone bird that showed beautifully as it flew up the pass towards Spain at the Port de Boucharo.

NORTHERN HARRIER (EURASIAN) (*Circus cyaneus cyaneus*) – Not a common bird here at this time of year, and the adult male the folks in my vehicle saw as it flew directly over the roundabout at the old Roman aqueduct on the outskirts of Arles was, I think, my first on this tour. Note that these Eurasian birds may eventually be split off as Hen Harrier from our familiar North American birds.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*) – Our first was a striking, rusty-bellied juvenile sitting in a cultivated field on our first day in the Camargue. We had nice looks at it as it flew low over the field, and it led us to spotting our only dotterels of the tour, which was a nice bonus. Dave's vehicle saw a male near Mejanes a couple of days later, and a close female coursing low over the Crau steppe showed well for all, rounding out our sightings.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Few this year, and all our sightings were pretty fleeting as the birds streaked by overhead, a couple of times right over our vehicles in the Camargue.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – The dozen or so birds we saw on our way back to Toulouse (including a group of 7 or 8 over the highway) was by far the best count I've had for this showy species on this tour. The one that passed by low over our picnic lunch spot was especially cooperative and really impressed folks, netting it a couple of nods in the bird of the trip voting.

BLACK KITE (*Milvus migrans*) – Generally rare here at this time of year, so it was nice to get good views of a couple on our first day in the Camargue.

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – The default raptor, highly variable and occasionally confusing, but always the most common species of hawk. We saw them daily on the tour.

Otididae (Bustards)

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*) – I missed the turnoff I was looking for near St-Martin-de-Crau one morning, which turned out to be a good thing, as we spotted a lone bird (joined later by 2 others) in a large agricultural field as we were turning around to go back. A visit there a couple of days later in the afternoon got us even better views as we had the sun behind us. We also saw a flock of about 30 birds at the Crau one morning, making this the best tour I've had for this often difficult species, and the looks we had were easily my best.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – A few birds in appropriate habitat in the Camargue included a couple of juveniles making some odd calls at the Etang des Aulnes. Note that these birds have been split fairly recently from our familiar Common Gallinule in North America.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – A few big congregations of these were at Salin de Giraud and near Le Capeliere, with a fair number also at the Baisse de Raillon.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) – Another occasionally tricky to find species of the Crau steppe, but we got them pretty easily this year. We had fine scope views on both of our visits to the Crau, with about 5 birds the first time, and at least 24 of them on our early morning visit before leaving for the mountains.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Good numbers of these elegant waders were present at the Salin de Giraud.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avocetta*) – Also seen at the Salin de Giraud, with probably about 30 birds present this year, including a few very close to the road giving point-blank views.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A couple of birds on our first afternoon at the Tour de Carbonniere, then 4 or 5 the following day at the Marais du Grenouillet.

KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – The Old World equivalent of the Snowy Plover and fairly recently split off from that species. We saw good numbers of this pale plover at the Salin de Giraud.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Large numbers on the mudflats at Salin de Giraud, where they offered a good comparison with the similar Little Ringed Plovers that were also numerous there.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – A few at the Tour de Carbonniere mudflats the first afternoon, then many more at Salin de Giraud.

EURASIAN DOTTEREL (*Charadrius morinellus*) – Not a bird we always get to see on this tour, mainly because they can just be so hard to spot. We have the juvenile Montagu's Harrier to thank for these birds, as we would have driven right past that field had it not been sitting there! I only picked them up because I was watching the harrier through my bins as it flew away. There were only 4 birds in the group we saw, but one bird was still mainly in breeding plumage, which was very nice to see. This was Dave's favorite bird of the trip.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Not so common here, and we saw just one bird at Aigues-Mortes the first day, and a small number at Salin de Giraud the next.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – One at the Tour de Carbonniere took off before we'd all seen it in the scope. Our only other one flushed up out of the ditch along the Peau de Meau trail in the Crau, and showed its dark underwings nicely as it flew overhead calling. The dark underwings are one of the features that separate this species from the similar Wood Sandpiper. It is also darker and less obviously spotted above, and has a shorter white supercilium than does Wood Sandpiper.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – A handful of birds at the Salin de Giraud were the only ones for the trip.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – Up to 10 of these were on the mudflats at the Tour de Carbonniere.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – Just a couple of birds at the Salin de Giraud, but they showed very nicely both sitting and in flight, where their white rumps and the white trailing edge to their wings showed well.

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – Most of the best curlew areas in the Camargue were completely dry, so we had to settle for some long distance scope views of a couple of these at the Marais de Grenouillet.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*) – One bird amid the huge roost of terns at the Salin de Giraud, with another further along with another group of terns, then a group of three near Le Capeliere, all on the same day. I'd only had Black-tailed Godwit here before, so it was nice to see this species.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – Never very common here during this tour, so it was a nice surprise to find a couple on the mudflats at Salin de Giraud.

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*) – Fair numbers of these large peeps, many still with considerable rusty coloring below, were at the Salin de Giraud.

TEMMINCK'S STINT (*Calidris temminckii*) – These uncommon migrants were the main target on our side trip to the Tour de Carbonniere the first afternoon, and we managed to find three of these rather plain peeps despite the poor lighting. These were my first ones on this tour, and a France tick for me.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – About half a dozen of these were at the Salin de Giraud.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Most of the ones we saw were in one big flock with a smaller number of Curlew Sandpipers at the Salin de Giraud. Quite a few of the birds still showed the black belly spot that makes them so distinctive in breeding plumage.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – A lone bird was seen at the Tour de Carbonniere, than good numbers on the mud flats at the Salin de Giraud.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – The Salin de Giraud is a reliable spot for this local specialty, and we saw around 25 of them there. Their long bills, pale eyes, and rosy hues to their underparts helped to set them apart from the ubiquitous Black-headed Gulls.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – As I said above, this species was ubiquitous throughout the Camargue.

LITTLE GULL (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) – The small size and striking wing pattern of a first winter bird set it apart from the other gulls as it bounded over the water alongside the dike at the Salin de Giraud.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*) – For some reason, we only ever see this species around Aigues-Mortes on the tour route, and that was again the case this year. Easily recognizable by their almost completely white wings, they showed well in side by side comparison with Black-headed Gulls.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – The default large white-headed gull in the region. We saw plenty daily in the Camargue, and likely saw them in the mountains, too (a small group at the Gavarnie ski area) though we didn't get a good enough view to safely rule out Herring Gull, which is another possibility there.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – I'm not really sure why this species always turns up on the France rarities report, as it seems, from my limited experience, to be pretty regular down in the Camargue. We saw a couple each at the Etang des Aulnes and the Etang des Vaccarres.

BLACK TERN (EURASIAN) (*Chlidonias niger niger*) – About 20 among the numerous Common and Sandwich terns at the Salin de Giraud, all in winter plumage now.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – Some distant birds at the Marais de Grenouillets, and some closer ones at Mas D'Agon. Usually there are still a few birds in breeding plumage at this time of year (unlike the Black Tern), and that was the case with one of the birds at Mas D'Agon.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – Huge numbers at the Salin de Giraud, where they made up the better part of the massive tern roost on one section of mudflats.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – This larger species made up the remainder of the large tern roost, and we saw a few as well at Aigues-Mortes the first afternoon.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Throughout in towns and cities, mainly. [I]

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – These large pigeons were pretty numerous through the Camargue region, then present in smaller numbers in the Pyrenees.

EUROPEAN TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia turtur*) – Rather scarce on the tour, likely as most have already left the region for Africa. The bird we saw fly over at Mas D'Agon was my first for the tour.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Abundant throughout, including the lower regions of the mountains, such as outside our hotel at Luz Saint-Sauveur. This species spread naturally across Europe from the southeast and is now pretty common continent-wide.

Strigidae (Owls)

EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL (*Bubo bubo*) – After a pleasant picnic dinner at a scenic overlook in the hills at Les Baux de Provence, we got ourselves into place below the cliffs with still plenty of daylight left, and it wasn't long, still light in fact, when Kate picked out one of these massive owls perched on a ledge, staring alertly down at the group. Scope views ensued, as well as a serenade as it belted its low, hooting call out over the valley before changing perches and moving up to the cliff top, where it sat in profile and continued to call, with its tail half-cocked in an unforgettable pose. This was the earliest in the evening I had yet seen this species, and my best view ever.

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) – A predawn outing on our final day in the Camargue region paid off when we spotted a Little Owl perched on a fence post, silhouetted against the lightening sky. It flew off as we backed up for a look, but was quickly relocated roosting in a nearby hay shed. This bird has been less predictable since the roof of a favored old barn caved in a couple of years ago, so it was pleasing to find a new roost site.

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*) – Over the past three tours, I've had absolutely no luck in drawing this species out of the woods, though I've heard them calling regularly. So it was a very pleasant surprise to not only get a quick response, but to have the bird fly into the top of a tree right over our heads, where it sat while we enjoyed nice long looks. A lifer sighting for me, and my favorite bird of the trip.

Apodidae (Swifts)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*) – At least a couple of these huge swifts circled around amidst a large number of swallows as we made our descent from the Cirque de Gavarnie. Wolfgang was certainly impressed, as he chose the swifts as his overall favorite of the trip!

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Seen pretty much daily in the Camargue, though many of the sightings were fleeting, a brilliant flash of electric blue and burnt orange searing onto our retinas as the birds whizzed past. But by the time we left the region, we had all had several excellent views of these dazzling little kingfishers, and it was enough to propel this bird to the top, as it was voted the overall favorite bird of the trip in the voting, thanks mainly to Tom and Nola ranking it as their top pick.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*) – A large flock of 30 or so were encountered on our first afternoon near Montpellier airport. Though a bit distant at first, they eventually made some close passes just overhead. Whether that was due to my attempt at "squeaking" them in or just plain luck is a point that's up for debate, but it sure appeared that they responded to my squeaks! Either way, it was great to see them so well, as we never saw them again on the trip.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – Rollers sitting up on roadside power lines, dead tree limbs, etc, became a familiar sight in the Camargue, as did the brilliant display of blue wings as they flew away every time we pulled up next to one to try and take a picture. Still we can't complain about those looks, can we?

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos medius*) – Our final new bird of the trip was a most cooperative individual near Ausseing that eventually teed up in the same dead tree I've seen it in a couple of times before on previous tours. A nice way to finish, especially considering how hot, dry and essentially birdless it had been prior to the woodpecker's arrival!

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – Seen on three different days after we left the Camargue. Claudia spotted our first one during an impromptu birding / stretching session at a roadside rest west of Toulouse, but our best ones were a pair that showed nicely at the Le Lienz ski area on our way back to Toulouse on our final day.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – As if our scope views of this magnificent, large woodpecker during the walk down from the Cirque de Gavarnie weren't good enough, we were amazed to get even closer views of a pair, one of which perched on a nearby dead tree for a prolonged period, at Le Lienz on the final day.

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – The few folks that joined the pre-breakfast walk on our first morning at Arles were treated to good views of one that graced us with a couple of close fly-bys in good light. It turned out to be the only cooperative one of the tour, though folks in Dave's vehicle got a quick look at one that flushed from the roadside near Ausseing, making our final day a 4 woodpecker day. Not bad for this part of the world!

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – It takes a pretty decent look at these birds to safely claim this species over the more common Eurasian Kestrel, but kestrels on the whole seemed pretty uncooperative on the Crau, where we expect to find this bird. We eventually had so-so scope views of a male we were confident about, but it wasn't terribly satisfying. Luckily, as we drove the bumpy roads through the reserve, Dave spotted a much closer male perched on a rocky cairn, and the looks we got left no doubt of it being a Lesser Kestrel.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Very common and widespread, and one of just a handful of birds we recorded on every day of the trip.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – Scarce this year, with just a single, distant, soaring bird that we scoped during a roadside rest stop on our way up to the mountains.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius collurio*) – Most shrikes have moved on by the time we run this tour, so it's always a treat to find a late migrant hanging around. Dave spotted and scoped our lone one, an adult female, as we searched for warblers in the coastal scrub near Mejanes.

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – This form was for a long time treated as a subspecies of Northern (Great Gray) Shrike, but is now considered a good species. We had some fairly distant scope views of a bird teed atop a shrub at the edge of the Crau.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – Though we saw these large jays in flight numerous times during our drives, we never connected with a cooperative perched bird for the group.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Numerous throughout the Camargue region, as well as around our hotel in Toulouse. Note that these Eurasian birds are now considered a separate species from North America's Black-billed Magpie.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrhcorax pyrrhcorax*) – Our numerous views of Yellow-billed Choughs in the mountains were bookended by our only sightings of this, less common species. We had reasonable views of a pair at the Port de Boucharo to kick off our chough sightings, then fantastic looks at a lone bird that flew past at eye level at the Col du Tourmalet on our final day.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrhcorax graculus*) – Far outnumbers the previous species, and those big wheeling flocks we often saw distantly over the ridge tops were made up mostly (or exclusively) of this gregarious species. Fortunately we also had some great views of much closer birds, particularly at the Port de Boucharo.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Super abundant in the Camargue region, with huge flocks particularly in the agricultural regions around our hotel. In the mountains, however, there were none.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – Easy to overlook among the huge numbers of Corvids in the region around Arles, but by paying a little attention, we managed to find several of these during our time there.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Common both in the Camargue region and in the Pyrenees.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Our only ones were a pair that we saw at the Port de Boucharo, but only on the Spanish side of the border. I don't think they ever crossed into French air space, so it's doubtful whether you can count them on your France list or not!

Alaudidae (Larks)

GREATER SHORT-TOED LARK (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) – A group of 30+ birds on the Crau during our walk on the Peau de Meau trail were tricky to scope, as they moved stealthily among the many rocks and plants, but with a bit of persistence, I believe pretty much everyone had a scope view of some sort.

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*) – A pair of birds flashed their rusty underwings as they chased each other around in the coastal scrub at Mejanès.

SKY LARK (*Alauda arvensis*) – A couple of birds crept along the road in front of my van as we drove the bumpy road across the Crau, showing well for us, but not at all for the folks in Dave's vehicle, as they were focused on a perched male Lesser Kestrel next to the road.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Good numbers daily in the Camargue region, with a few also mixed in with the many Barn Swallows at the Port de Boucharo.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – A couple of birds were seen by some at our picnic dinner spot at Les Baux, then we all caught up with them in the Pyrenees, where we saw them in good numbers daily.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – We somehow managed to miss this abundant species during our walk to the cirque, probably just because we didn't look hard enough, as they were abundant everywhere else. Most memorable were the hundreds of birds streaming up the pass at the Port de Boucharo, where we watched them change over from hirondelles to golondrinas as they crossed the border into Spain.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – A couple of birds around the Tour de Carbonniere were our first, and only ones in the Camargue region, but we went on to see them daily in the Pyrenees. Particularly fun was seeing a huge number perched on one of the buildings at the ugly ski resort of La Mongie. Overall this species was far more numerous than usual on this tour.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (*Parus ater*) – The most numerous tit in the mixed Passerine flocks in the mountains, and we had many good views of them.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – Scarcer and a little less cooperative than usual, but we all managed to see a few among the more numerous Coal Tits in the mountains.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*) – More of a bird of deciduous forests than some of the other tits, and as usual, we saw them only in the foothills of the Pyrenees, with a pair at our picnic lunch spot on our final day, then another bird seen fleetingly at the forest block near Ausseing.

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – Wonderful views of a curious bird during our lunch stop at the Etang des Aulnes kicked off our numerous sightings of this delightful little bird, which was another regular component of the mixed tit flocks in the mountains.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – The most numerous and widespread tit, and we encountered this species daily, but for a couple of days in the Camargue.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – A trio of these were in a mixed Passerine flock at our roadside rest stop near Tarbes, but they weren't close, nor cooperative, and a couple of people probably missed them.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – It took until our final day to find them but then we had several nice views, starting off with some cooperative birds in a large mixed flock at Le Lienz.

Tichodromidae (Wallcreeper)

WALLCREEPER (*Tichodroma muraria*) – Claudia chose this as her favorite bird overall, and why not, it was she who spotted it creeping along on the large rock face across from where we sat and ate our lunches at the Cirque de Gavarnie. Luckily it stuck around long enough for me to rush around the building and get Tom and Merby on to it; sadly it didn't stick around long enough for Wolfgang to get back to see it. Usually this bird wins the bird of the trip voting when it is seen; this year, it had to settle for third place behind the kingfisher and the Lammergeier!

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – This is the treecreeper of higher elevations. Though Dave and Wolfgang saw one during the hike up to the cirque, the rest of us had to wait until we found a friendly one at Le Lienz on our final day.

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – And this one is generally found at lower elevations. We saw just one this year, but it showed very well as it crept up the trunk of a dense pine at the Carcassonne overlook during our picnic lunch.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – Heard both at Lac des Gloriettes and Le Lienz, but we couldn't coax one into view. [*]

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – It took a couple of tries but we finally were rewarded with wonderful views of a couple of these feeding along a rushing mountain stream in the Pyrenees. To my chagrin, the lunch spot I'd touted as being wonderful for dippers last year was completely free of water this time around.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – The kinglet that looks more like our Ruby-crowned. We had excellent studies of this species on the walk to the cirque, seeing them in the same flock as the next for some great comparisons.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – And this one more closely resembles our Golden-crowned Kinglet. We first saw them beautifully at the Carcassonne overlook, where a trio of them fed in the stone pines in the picnic area. Later we ran into them regularly with most mixed flocks in the mountains.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – Extremely vocal in the Camargue region, but also incredibly reclusive and hard to see. Most folks eventually had some kind of look, either at the very dry Le Capeliere, or in the dense reeds at Mas D'Agon.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – We only identified one lone individual of this species, and that was the one next to our "mystery" warbler at the boulder slide in the Vallee D'Ossoue.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Similar to Willow Warbler, but with dark legs, and a habit of flicking its tail downwards. We heard quite a few of these in the mountains, and also managed to see several.

Acrocephalidae (Reed-Warblers and Allies)

EURASIAN REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – Pretty darned good views of a curious pair of birds in the dense reed beds at Mas D'Agon.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Quite numerous in the Camargue, and seen daily there, with plenty of good views. Luckily this is the only cisticola here, as they are quite diverse and difficult to tell apart in Africa.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – Quite scarce this year, and we only saw a couple of birds well-- a male along the hike to the cirque, then a female or two around the parking lot at Lac des Gloriettes.

GARDEN WARBLER (*Sylvia borin*) – And the mystery warbler is... yes, apparently that strange, dull warbler we had at the rock fall in the Vallee d'Ossoue was none other than this nondescript species, made even less distinctive by its heavily worn plumage. We thought it was something more unusual, but at least it was new for just about everyone. I wonder if they forgot the "g" at the end of this bird's scientific name?

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – Often quite skulking and difficult to see, but we had some reasonable luck with these attractive warblers, getting nice views both at Mejanas, and Le Capeliere, where a striking male showed some interest.

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – This one was much more difficult at Mejanas, where only a few folks got a brief view of one that popped up briefly in the Salicornia scrub.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Quite numerous in the mountains, and we had excellent views of several, both adults and youngsters, at Gavarnie, Lac des Gloriettes, and at Le Lienz.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – In general one of the more common migrant Passerines at this time of year, though they were no where near as numerous as I've seen them here. Still, we saw a fair number in the Camargue region, and a few more up in the mountains.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – Not common at all, but we had good views of one along the entrance to the Etang des Aulnes picnic area as we headed in for lunch, and one or two others at the scrubby field with the thick-knees on the edge of the Crau.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Our only lowland ones were a handful of birds with the above species near the Crau on our final morning there, but we saw them regularly up in the Pyrenees, where they are a common migrant and generally pretty conspicuous. Again, though, I didn't find them to be as numerous as they often are.

RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – As we crossed the dam at Lac des Gloriettes, we noticed a bird perched on a white concrete "borne" or post, and were excited to see it was one of these uncommon migrants, which, to be quite honest, I thought we were going to miss.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Another usually common migrant that seemed to be much less numerous than usual. We saw a few birds in the Crau and a handful in the Vallee d'Ossoue, but there were none in the agricultural areas around our Arles hotel, where they are usually pretty common.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – Just a single bird, but that a fine-looking male, along the roadside in the Vallee d'Ossoue, just before the thunderstorm got us running for cover.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – These lovely birds were seen daily in the Camargue region, where we quickly learned to recognize them by their white rump or "white-arse" the apparent origin of the name. A few were passing through the mountains as well, and we had more nice views of several along the Port de Boucharo Trail, though on the French side only, I think.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Seen daily in the mountains, with the surrounds of our hotel seemingly the best place to see them.

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus philomelos*) – Only a few folks got to see one that perched briefly atop a tall pine tree at Le Lienz.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – Most of the thrushes at Le Lienz were this large species, separable from the similar Song Thrush by the white underwings and tail corners (quite visible in flight), and on the one we saw feeding on the ground, by the white tips to the wing coverts, and paler underparts without the buffy wash across the breast.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Abundant in the Camargue region, but happily absent during our time in the mountains.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*) – Tough this year, as we never found one really close to the trail at the Port de Boucharo, which is our only reliable site for them. We did eventually get one bird to perch up on a rock at fairly close range, but it didn't stick around as long as we would have liked.

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – One in the Cirque de Gavarnie, then quite a few around the parking lot at Lac des Gloriettes, where they were pretty confiding and easy to see.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – About a dozen birds in a variety of plumages showed nicely along the water's edge at the Salin de Giraud, with a few also in the freshly cut agricultural fields at Mejanès.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – This long-tailed species is often found along fast-flowing mountain streams, and there always seemed to be one or two around while we were searching for dippers.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – There seemed to be more of these around than usual, and we saw fair numbers both in the lowlands and the mountains.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – A couple of these stocky, pale pipits showed pretty well as they moved along with the Greater Short-toed Larks at the Peau de Meau trail.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – We heard these pipits daily in the lowlands, especially around our hotel, but we never did find one perched, so they remained nothing more than specks flying overhead. [∗]

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – This species shows quite blurry streaking as opposed to the crisp streaks on a Tree Pipit. As usual there were plenty of these high in the mountains; it's just too bad we couldn't find one of those crisply streaked birds among them.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – We saw this bunting on three different days in the mountains, but none of them played really nice. First we had a single bird that dropped in briefly at the rock slide as Dave was taking pictures of the mystery warbler, then a group of 5 birds showed momentarily at Lac des Gloriettes, and finally, a flock of 8+ birds flew up off the roadside near Ausseing. These last ones briefly raised hopes of Cirl Bunting, but the views we had of their white tail spots and and rusty rumps confirmed them as Yellowhammers.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – At least 25 birds, and probably way more, were found along the road down to the Salin de Giraud. There was lots of movement of these birds, but eventually a few settled down on power lines and dead trees allowing us a chance to admire them in the scopes.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Surprisingly absent on the hike to the cirque, and very few were around elsewhere in the mountains, until we got to Le Lienz and had a flock of a dozen or more feeding on the ground, where they stayed firmly in the shade.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – A bright male flew past us early on during the hike to the cirque, but it was only in view for a few seconds and only a handful of folks got on him before he dove into a dense stand of trees never to reappear.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – Seen daily in large numbers throughout our stay in the Camargue, but absent in the high Pyrenees, turning up again only on the drive back to Toulouse.

CITRIL FINCH (*Serinus citrinella*) – A very drab juvenile was an excellent find at the Gavarnie ski area, as I've only ever had it in the cirque prior to this one. We also did find one in the cirque itself, a slightly more colorful female this time, perched obligingly next to the one item that everyone could find immediately and without problem-- a metal object looking very much like Excalibur! As Dave said, it was probably the first time I've ever uttered the phrase "it's on the ground right next to the sword!" Very likely the last as well.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – Wolfgang found a lone bird as we were searching for Citril Finches in the cirque, then we had a small group of them feeding in a flowering tree at Lac des Gloriettes.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Another of the few species seen every day of the tour, though in the mountains they were pretty much only seen around our hotel in Luz Saint-Sauveur.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Though outnumbered by House Sparrow, this species was still fairly common in the Camargue region, probably more than we realized, as at some point, we likely just stopped paying much attention to sparrows.

MAMMALS

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) – A few in the lowlands, mainly around the big warehouses around the Baisse de Raillon, where we counted at least a dozen lounging in the late afternoon sunshine.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Though marmots lived in the Pyrenees during the Pleistocene, they apparently died out thereafter, and the marmots we saw were a result of reintroductions that began in 1948, apparently to boost the food supplies for Golden Eagles and bears, and to reduce predation pressures on Pyrenean Chamois. The marmots, at least, have done okay, as there were plenty of them around! [I]

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – Native to South America, but widely introduced around the world for fur farming purposes. Apparently the very first attempt to establish a nutria fur farm was in France in the 1880's. That wasn't successful, but later introductions sure were, and they are now a nuisance in many areas, including the Camargue, where we saw several. [I]

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Our nocturnal foray to find Tawny Owl also netted us a fox; it crossed the road in front of the van, then paused on the embankment for a nice view of us as we pulled up beside it, before wandering off into the forest.

ROE DEER (*Capreolus capreolus*) – A pair of these emerged from a corn field and began feeding in the adjacent short grass as we birded at the rest stop near Tarbes on our way to the mountains.

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – As usual, they were a long way off, feeding in a grassy swale on top of a ridge above the Cirque de Gavarnie, but we had good scope views of 3 or 4 of them, including an apparent mother and kid, from the hotel terrace. This species is separate from the Alpine Chamois and is restricted to the Pyrenees, the Cantabrian Mountains of Spain, and Italy's Apennine Range.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 158 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa