



Field Guides Tour Report

FRANCE: CAMARGUE & PYRENEES I 2017

Sep 2, 2017 to Sep 12, 2017

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For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, [please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.](#)



An early snowfall in the Pyrenees made for some very scenic backdrops. Photo by guide Marcelo Padua.

September is a lovely time to visit southern France. From the Camargue, where golden fields of ripening rice stretch to the horizons and white salt pans bake under cloudless blue skies, to the Pyrenees, where rumpled mountains scrape craggy fingers against the clouds and conifer forests mass darkly against the rock, the landscape provides a beautiful backdrop against which to look for the region's special birds. And there were plenty to search out!

We started with four days in the Camargue region, near the mouth of the Rhone River. Here, among salt pans, thick stands of reed and wind-tossed rice paddies, we connected with both migrants and resident breeders. Before we'd even left the airport, we found a flock of Little Bustards feeding quietly in tall grasses beyond the end of the runway, and a pair of Eurasian Thick-knees standing among the mud clumps in a recently plowed field. Near the walled city of Aigues-Mortes, frosty-winged Mediterranean Gulls flew over busy roadways and paddled in roadside ponds among the more numerous Black-headed and Yellow-legged gulls. Clouds of dusty pink Greater Flamingos massed in area waterways. Shorebirds snoozed or foraged in shallow lagoons, resting and refueling on their long journey from arctic breeding grounds to African wintering areas. European Bee-eaters flashed golden wings as they circled overhead. A little group of Spectacled Warblers popped repeatedly up on Salicornia bushes as they moved across a field, and a male Sardinian Warbler spent long minutes scrutinizing twigs near the top of a roadside Tamarisk bush. A Eurasian Hoopoe bounced along a railway track, then disappeared into a row of nearby trees in a flurry of black and white wings. Scores of subtly pink Slender-billed Gulls bathed vigorously in a seaside pond, then retired to a sand islet for a preen. On the stony Crau steppe, a hunting male Lesser Kestrel hovered and then pounced on some hapless insect. Scores of Eurasian Dotterel pattered among the pebbles. A trio of calling Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew past overhead, and a wary quartet later scuttled along a dirt track. A European Nightjar flew up from ground, its white wing and tail patches flashing in the spotlight beam. A Eurasian Eagle-Owl moved higher and higher on a warm limestone cliff as the light faded, providing a satisfying dessert to our hors-d'oeuvres "supper" -- and who will soon forget that spectacular full moon rising!

Then it was the long transfer to the high Pyrenees, trading the flat coast for spectacular jagged peaks and glacier-carved valleys, tumbling mountain streams, inquisitive flocks of sheep and a whole new suite of birds. We started with a hike up into the Cirque de Gavarnie on a gloriously sunny day. A White-throated Dipper bobbed on rocks in the midst of a tumbling mountain stream, then plunged into the torrent. Eurasian Griffons glided overhead. A jaunty Crested Tit dropped lower and lower in a trailside tree. Yellow-billed Choughs formed loose "bird tornadoes" above mountain peaks. After a long search, we finally found a male Citril Finch nibbling weed seeds among the boulders. Though the weather deteriorated significantly after our first day -- with lots of fog and snow and chilly winds -- we still managed to dig out some good sightings. Lammergeiers circled against the clouds and one strikingly peachy individual sat on a ledge against an equally peachy cliff. A dapper male Yellowhammer shuffled along the edge of a sheep pen. A massive Black Woodpecker flew over a stand of dark pines, shouting challenges. Noisy pairs of Red-billed Choughs prodded grassy slopes with their curving beaks. An Alpine Accentor crept down a stony hillside, occasionally singing a whispered fragment of song. An immature Montagu's Harrier scudded along a mountain hillside as the fog lifted, heading for the pass, and a single Black Stork glided past against the clouds, going the same way. Whinchats and European Stonechats hunted from dead flower spikes. After a few ghostly flyovers, a Tawny Owl settled onto a branch along the edge of the forest behind our hotel. A Firecrest flared its orange crown as it flitted through a dark conifer tree. A gaggle of Red Kites hung over a cow pasture, moving back and forth with effortless flicks of their long wings and tails.

Marcelo and I greatly enjoyed sharing some adventures -- and some fabulous wining and dining -- with you. Thanks for coping with all of the unexpected twists and turns of our tour: the steppe reserve closed due to the clutter left after a massive rave, the highland reserve closed due to the fire

hazard created by strong winds, the thick fog that swaddled the mountain peaks on multiple days. We hope to see you all again in the field, somewhere, some day! -- Megan

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*) – Abundant in some parts of the Camargue, with dozens floating on the scummy waters of one of the lagoons at Salin de Giraud, and others on the Etang de Vaccares.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Lovely looks at birds both in flight and sitting on the water at Salin de Giraud. The bright beaks of the adults quickly separated them from the less colorful youngsters.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Easily the most common duck in the Camargue, with dozens seen winging over the western edge of the Etang de Vaccares as we searched for Spectacled Warblers.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – A few floated on a pond near La Capeliere one afternoon.

RED-CRESTED POCHARD (*Netta rufina*) – A little group floated and preened on the Etang de Charnier, providing a bit of a challenge for those trying to find them among the coots and swans. They were in their chocolate brown eclipse (or female/young) plumage, but at least one sported the bright red bill of an adult male.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – We heard one calling gruffly from an overgrown field near Raphele-les-Arles on a pre-breakfast outing, but the only bird we saw was a dead male along the highway on our drive back to Toulouse on the last day of the tour. [*]

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – A group of 20 or so foraged actively on one of the lagoons edging the salt pans at the Salin de Giraud, disappearing regularly under the water's surface. Eventually, they appeared to be full, allowing us to get better scope views. Most appeared to be in their drabber winter plumage already, though a few were still in full breeding finery.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Regular in the wetlands across the Camargue, with particularly nice views of one right beside the vans on the Etang de Vaccares, just across from the little pond where we finally found our Whiskered Terns.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – Pale pink clouds of these long-legged birds dotted most of the ponds and lakes across the Camargue -- often joined by pale gray clouds of youngsters, which appeared gratifyingly common this year. The combination of deep rose and black on their underwings in flight was simply gorgeous!

Ciconiidae (Storks)

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*) – One soared high against the ragged clouds at the Port de Boucharo (aka the Col des Tentés), heading for the pass as the fog lifted. It made a few circles, showing nicely its white body and long bill and legs, before disappearing off into Spain.

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

NORTHERN GANNET (*Morus bassanus*) – A few chocolate brown youngsters flapping far offshore at Salin de Giraud were a surprise -- it seems early for them to be making an appearance. We watched several make plunging dives after prey.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Regular in the Camargue, including many standing spread-winged on posts and pilings, drying out.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Daily in the Camargue (often standing hunched in the shallows), with others scattered in roadside ponds en route to and from the mountains.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Two, including a gingery youngster, leapt from a marshy spot beside the road down to Salin de Giraud as we pulled into a roadside rest area. We spotted another hunting along a roadside ditch en route to Mejanes, but it too fled when we stopped for a closer look.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Scattered individuals in the Camargue, typically lurking along the edges of larger bodies of water. This species is slowly expanding into western Europe.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Common in the Camargue, including numbers hunting in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud. This species strongly resembles North America's Snowy Egret, but with a blue-gray face rather than a yellow one, and with a different arrangement of breeding plumes.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Common throughout the tour, typically lounging around the feet of livestock in various pastures and paddocks (particularly those beautiful horses near our hotel).

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Small numbers in the Camargue, with our best views coming along the long straight road near the Etang de Charnier, where one flew in and landed among the reeds, giving us a great chance for scope studies. Most of the other members of this genus are known as "pond-herons".

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – A youngster froze along the back edge of a little pond in the woodlands near our hotel in Raphele-les-Arles, providing an early morning pre-breakfast challenge for eyeballs that hadn't had much coffee yet.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – Several small groups flew past while we searched for Spectacled Warblers, and others while we explored the area near Mas d'Agon. We also found several probing through a flooded field (in the company of some scattered Northern Lapwings and lots of fat and happy cows) at the latter location.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Small numbers around Salin de Giraud, including one carrying a sizable fish in from the ocean, and another making a diving attempt after prey in a channel near the beach.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

LAMMERGEIER (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – Seen nicely on most days in the mountains, including spectacular views of one on a cliff in the Vallee d'Ossoue -- so close that we could even see its beard! Their pointy-winged, long-tailed flight profile was distinctive, and easy to pick out from the more massive, proportionately shorter-tailed griffons.

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) – An adult soared above the ridge line at the Pic du Pibeste late one afternoon, then settled into a shrub right at the top of the hill -- great spotting, Pam! With the scopes (and maybe a smidgen of imagination), we could even see its distinctive yellow facial skin.

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*) – Our best views came in the Port de Boucharo, where a quartet flapped through on the far side of the valley as we headed back to the parking lot. We spotted another high over the Cirque de Gavarnie, gaining height to head south.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – Good numbers in the Pyrenees, including some big kettles circling above the snow-dusted ridges in the Vallee d'Ossoue. The birds gliding past practically at eye level in the pass at the Port de Boucharo were particularly impressive -- they're huge!

SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE (*Circus gallicus*) – One perched in a treetop across a stony field near the Crau was decidedly unimpressive (thanks to the distance), but another bird hunting over the Crau itself improved our views as it soared over our heads. Our best looks, though, came on our drive back to Ausseing, when we spotted one pouncing on something in a field right beside the road.

BOOTED EAGLE (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) – Our first was a soaring bird that sailed past us through the gap at the Port de Boucharo as we headed back from our walk to Spain. Fortunately, for those who missed that one, we had far better looks at another being chased around by a couple of Carrion Crows over a ball field in Mazeres on our way back to Toulouse.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Singles seen on most of our days in the mountains, typically gliding high overhead, though one coursed low enough that we could see its golden nape against the dark backdrop of trees. The marmots certainly shrieked every time they spotted one!

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Seen mostly in the lowlands, where they coursed low over marshes and fields. Compared to the Northern Harrier, this is a brute -- bulky and broad-winged, and missing the telltale white rump patch of the Northern Harrier.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*) – A youngster swept along the barren ground of the Gavarnie-Gedre ski resort on a chilly, windy morning, headed inexorably toward the pass at the Port de Boucharo. Unlike the previous species, this one is slim-winged and buoyant in flight, and shows a distinct white rump patch. The lovely rusty underparts showed it was a hatch-year bird.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Singles on about half the days of the tour, including one diving into bushes near Mejanès, one flap-flap-gliding over the Crau steppe, and two tussling in the skies over the Cirque de Gavarnie.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – Our first, seen by a few over the motorway on our drive to the mountains, proved frustrating for most. Fortunately, we had others on our drive back to Toulouse, including super views of a group hunting over a cow pasture near Cieutat, where they coursed gracefully back and forth over the field.

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – Seen nearly every day of the trip, both perched and in flight -- though we missed them on our rainy/snowy/foggy days in the mountains.

Otididae (Bustards)

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*) – Wow! Finding a close group stalking through the tall grasses on a quiet corner of the Montpellier airport was definitely an unexpected bonus! We got great looks as they fed and preened, seemingly unfazed by both us and the regularly landing planes.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WESTERN SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) – One striding along the edge of a reed bed in the Etang de Charnier gave us great opportunity for study. This species has recently been split from the former "Purple Swamphen" complex.

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – A couple of youngsters picked their way along the edge of a little pond near Aigues-Mortes, several brightly-plumaged adults poked in the mud at the Tour de Carbonnière, and another chugged along the back side of a pond near La Capelière.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Scores. Hundreds. THOUSANDS. Masses of these birds, which overwinter by the thousand in the Etang de Vaccarès, floated on the surface of just about every body of water we passed.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (*Burhinus oedipnemos*) – Two rested in a recently plowed field near the Montpellier airport -- great spotting, Tom! Though their streaky brown plumage blended in nicely with the bits of dried grass and clods of dirt that surrounded them, those big yellow eyes gave them away. As you might expect from the size of those eyes, this is a largely nocturnal species.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Another common species in the pans at Salin de Giraud, with lots of brownish youngsters scattered among the blacker adults.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) – Plenty of these elegant shorebirds in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, including some demonstrating the unique way they sweep their curvy bills through the water as they forage.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – We heard the distinctive whistles of this species from overhead while birding among the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, but couldn't pick the birds out of the blue sky. [!]

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A few sprinkled around the fringes of the marsh at the Tour de Carbonnière gave us great opportunity for study. The body feathers of the closest bird showed the telltale pale edges of a youngster. We saw others -- a bit further away -- snoozing or scurrying around in a soggy cattle pasture near Mas d'Agon.

KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – For much of our day on the pans at Salin de Giraud, we just couldn't find these little guys. Then we hit the motherlode -- a busy gang of many dozens, pattering around on a mudflat that just about perfectly matched their color. Their dark legs and bills, lack of a complete collar, and paler plumage helped to distinguish them from the next two species. This was recently split from the Snowy Plover of the Americas.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Small numbers on several of the pans at Salin de Giraud, including a few in close proximity to the next species. Their dark brown upperparts, stocky shape, and bright orange legs (and matching bill bases) helped to quickly ID them.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – Reasonably common in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, including a few wary ones close to the road, with a handful of others on a mudflat in the Etang de Charnier. With patience, I think most got a good look at the distinctive yellow eye ring on one or more birds -- and their spindly yellow legs were certainly easy to spot.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

WHIMBREL (EUROPEAN) (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*) – A small group flew past as we birded on the salt pans at Salin de Giraud. The subspecies here is *phaeopus*; one of the key differences from the North American subspecies is the white stripe that runs up the back -- something we could see quite clearly as they flew straight away from us towards the ocean.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Some great spotting by Amy netted us a couple of these small shorebirds mixed in with a big mob of resting terns. One of them still showed the black belly of its breeding plumage.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – Widely scattered across some of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, looking small compared to just about everything else out there. We saw a variety of plumages, from crisp, rusty youngsters to adults still in near full breeding regalia to birds in full non-breeding plumage.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – One shot out of the marshes across a channel from where we stood, zigzagged over the waving reeds (its long beak visible against the sky), circled back around and dropped down nearly where it started -- good spotting, Amy!

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Singles at scattered locations across the Camargue, including some bobbing along the edges of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud. This species looks much like a winter-plumaged Spotted Sandpiper -- to which it is closely related.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – One snoozed not far from our first adult Common Moorhen at the Tour de Carbonniere on the first afternoon of the tour, and another foraged actively on a mud spit in front of a host of swans at the Etang de Chantier. This species looks much like North America's Solitary Sandpiper -- even to the blackish underwings.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – A single bird foraged at Etang de Chantier, periodically wading out into water nearly up to its belly.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – A couple of birds dropped in to a mud spit at Etang de Chantier, sharing space with some resting Little Ringed Plovers.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – After searching and searching, we finally found a couple of youngsters among a flock of Black-headed Gulls feeding at the feet of some Greater Flamingoes. And then we hit the motherlode, when at least 100 birds flew in together to bathe in a freshwater pond near the beach at Salin de Giraud. They then retired to a nearby sandbar for a good preen, allowing great scope studies. Wow, they were pink!

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Abundant around the Camargue, with hundreds (thousands?) seen daily there. Their raucous calls were a regular part of the lowland soundtrack.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyophaga melanocephalus*) – A highlight of our afternoon visit to Aigues-Mortes, with nice views of both flying and swimming birds. The all-white primaries of adult birds are distinctive.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – Another common and widespread species, seen in big numbers every day around the Camargue. Although this species was split from the former Herring Gull complex, molecular studies have shown it's actually more closely related to the Lesser Black-backed Gull.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – Regular in small numbers around the Camargue, and seen on most days there. Those hunting over the channels and salt pans at the Salin de Giraud (and resting among the big tern roost there) allowed especially nice studies.

BLACK TERN (EURASIAN) (*Chlidonias niger niger*) – A couple of these small terns bathed among the larger terns and gulls in a pond near the beach at Salin de Giraud, and others preened on a bit of dead wood in a pond near La Capeliere.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – A few, larger and paler than the previous species, flew back and forth over the small pond near La Capeliere.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – Very common in the tern roost at Salin de Giraud, with scores huddling among the larger Sandwich Terns. The dark carpal bar on the youngsters was easy to spot.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Like the previous species, found by the hundred in roosts in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, with a scattering of others around Aigues-Mortes.

Pteroclididae (Sandgrouse)

PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE (*Pterocles alchata*) – WOW! We were already pleased when three calling birds flew over us as we birded the stony Crau steppe one morning, but a chance encounter with an on-the-ground quartet made for a super followup. They picked their way through the vegetation (surprisingly difficult to find, initially), then scuttled out onto a nearby track, watching our vans warily the whole time. When we climbed out for a better look, they melted into the scanty weeds and disappeared.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Daily, typically in multi-colored flocks around various towns and farm buildings.

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – Common in the lowlands, but missing entirely from the higher mountains. These are easily the largest of the largest of the tour's pigeons.

EUROPEAN TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia turtur*) – One shot out of the woods at Ausseing as we stood by the vans, winging quickly off over the trees. The dark underwing of this rapidly declining species is distinctive.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Another common lowland species, sprinkled on telephone wires or making soaring display flights. Those in Marcelo's van also spotted one while descending from Gavarnie one afternoon; the species is far less common in the highlands.

Strigidae (Owls)

EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL (*Bubo bubo*) – Yahoo! Following our picnic hors d'oeuvre supper near Les Baux -- complete with cheeses, pate, crudites, sausage, salmon, wine and more -- we retired to the cliffs for a good scan for this massive owl, known to the French as the "Grand Duke". And, thanks to some super spotting by Robin, we found him! He called for long minutes, moving higher and higher up the cliff until he was perched right at the top, and continued to serenade us as the fat full moon rose over the valley. Wow, what a night!

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*) – A very responsive bird in the back garden of our Gedre hotel provided a nice after dinner treat one evening. It made several passes back and forth along the edge of the woods before settling into a tree for a good look around.

Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)

EURASIAN NIGHTJAR (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) – One flew up from the ground in front of us as we scanned the cliffs near Les Baux, fluttering in the light of our spotlights for a half minute or so before disappearing off over the olive trees.

Apodidae (Swifts)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*) – A dozen or so of these huge swifts -- they have nearly a two-foot wingspan -- rocketed back and forth over the cliffs near Les Baux, keeping everyone entertained while Marcelo and I set out dinner.

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOOPOE (*Upupa epops*) – Two on the train tracks at Mejanes were a great start to our visit there -- though they proved rather less cooperative for the folks in Megan's van than they did for those in Marcelo's! I think everybody saw the second bird fly past, its rounded black and white wings flashing.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – One along a stream near Mas d'Agon was rather jumpy, sitting only a few seconds on a branch before zipping off downstream; it made repeated appearances, but never for long enough to get it in the scopes. We saw another glittering pair in flight over the Etang de Chantier.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*) – A big, swirling mob of them circled overhead at Mejanes, their golden wings flashing against the blue sky. We saw (and heard) others over the Crau steppe, again flying high.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – Daily in the Camargue, often sitting stolidly on roadside wires as traffic hurtled past below them. We watched a few hunting over farm fields, their turquoise wings flashing as they flapped after insect prey.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos medius*) – The last new bird of the trip -- a very responsive bird that shot in overhead at Ausseing. Finding him among the greenery was slightly harder, though eventually, he moved down onto a trunk where he was easier to see.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – Nice studies of one in a dead tree in a little woodland near our hotel in Raphèle-les-Arles; while he hammered (and shouted challenges), we could clearly see the dark "bridle" on his face and his scarlet vent.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – Our first was a calling bird that sailed past overhead as we made our way along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie; unfortunately, despite our best efforts, we weren't able to call it back. Fortunately (for those who missed the first one), Marcelo spotted another swoop into some tall pines in the Vallée d'Ossoue, and that one proved much more accommodating. After a squirt of playback, it suddenly appeared, calling as it made a big circle over the valley. That's a big woodpecker!

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – Another woodpecker seen on our pre-breakfast visit to a wooded area near our hotel in Raphèle-les-Arles. Though it too made several passes, this one was rather more skittish than the Great Spotted, landing for only a few brief seconds before bounding off somewhere else -- repeatedly.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – Fine studies of a blue-faced male munching a dragonfly on a rock pile in the Crau steppe. Once it was airborne again, we could see its white underwings before it headed off across the stony ground towards a distant sheep shed. This species was notable by its absence, perhaps influenced by the multi-day (illegal) rave that had decimated the vegetation in the area earlier in the summer.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Seen NEARLY every day. We managed to miss them on one day in the mountains -- and we probably just didn't look hard enough through the fog and rain that day! The ones battling the wind to stream through the Port de Boucharo when the fog lifted were impressive, and we had fine views of a big female on a power pylon on the road down to the Salin de Giraud.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – Super views of one hunting over the little town of Gedre, seen as we gathered at the vans one morning. When it got down against the hillside vegetation, we could really see its coloring nicely.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius collurio*) – A barred youngster hunted from a prickly shrub growing on one of the rock piles in the Crau steppe, making repeated sorties up into the wind after prey.

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – Two flashed across the road in front of our vans as we left the Crau steppe, looking a bit like short-tailed mockingbirds. Thanks to Amy's spotting, we got scope views of one sitting high in a dead tree across the field, keeping an eye on nearby Eurasian Jackdaws.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – We heard the querulous calls of a few in the lowlands, but it wasn't until we reached the highlands that we actually laid eyes on them. Then we saw them practically everywhere, with especially nice views of one bouncing around under the bob/luge run the backyard at our hotel in Gedre, and another sitting on a telephone wire on a back road above town. The big white rump patch at the top of their black tail is certainly eye-catching!

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Abundant in the lowlands, but missing completely in the mountains.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – Seen daily in the highlands, with especially nice studies of a calling pair poking through the wet grasses at the Port de Boucharo. That long, curved, red beak is distinctive.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) – This species gathered in far bigger groups than the previous one did; we found them in big, spiraling groups over the ridges at the Cirque de Gavarnie, the Vallée d'Ossoue, and the Port de Boucharo. Some in the Vallée d'Ossoue gave us our best looks at their bright yellow beaks as they cartwheeled across a grassy hillside.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Another species that was abundant in the lowlands, but missing completely from the highlands. The regulars around our Arles hotel were particularly scope-able as they trundled around in the horse pastures.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Seen in small, noisy groups every day of the tour.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Small numbers daily in the highlands, including a trio playing in the gales at the Port de Boucharo, and others croaking their way along the Vallee d'Ossoue.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Good numbers in the lowlands, including hundreds swirling low over the marshes at the Tour de Carbonniere, trying to find something to eat in the strong winds. We saw another big group over Scamandre.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – Our first were a few flying around the cliffs at Les Baux one afternoon, but our best views came in the mountains, where they proved very common -- particularly the ones that rocketed back and forth through the boulder field in the Cirque de Gavarnie.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Nearly every day, often in good numbers. The subspecies found in Europe (*rustica*) is much paler bellied than the American subspecies is.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – Common throughout, particularly in the mountains. Their white rumps made them easy to pick out of the swallow crowds.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (*Parus ater*) – A bird singing from the top of a pine tree along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie proved very cooperative, giving us great views as he poured his song into the gloriously sunny morning. We saw others rummaging through the pines further up the track, in the back garden of our Gedre hotel, and in the foggy forest of Le Lienz.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – Great studies of a couple of birds along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, particularly of the one that descended lower and lower until it disappeared down into the stream bed as it searched for tasty morsels.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*) – The scolding pair we found in the woods near Mauvezin were among the our last day highlights. The bib on this "chickadee" is so tiny that it's really more of a mustache than a bib!

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – Seen on scattered days in both the lowlands and the highlands, always as part of a bigger mixed flock of tits. One sitting just over our heads along the road at Le Lienz (right near the ski jump) was seen particularly well.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – The most widespread of the tits we saw on this tour, recorded on multiple days in both the lowlands and the highlands. The adult and youngster hanging upside down from pine cones at our lunch spot near Carcassonne gave us especially nice views.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – A gang of these cuties swarmed past as we birded a wooded area before breakfast one morning near Raphèle-les-Arles, and others did the same along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – We heard more of these than we saw, but a couple of birds in the hotel garden at Gedre one morning rewarded those who stepped out between rain showers. At one point, one of the birds was foraging on a tree stump about 6 inches off the ground right beside the parking lot!

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – A confiding bird in pines along the path to the Cirque de Gavarnie, seen as we wound our way downwards after a lovely day, was one of the few new birds we spotted on our descent.

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – We heard one calling from the parking lot in Les Alpilles, but -- due since the area beyond was closed due to fire concerns -- couldn't follow it into the woods. Fortunately, we found another in the big pines around our Carcassonne picnic area. This species is generally found at lower elevations than the previous species.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – Those who ventured out on a late day excursion back up to the dam at Lac des Gloriettes on a final try for Wallcreeper had a very cooperative singing bird as a consolation prize. Formerly considered to be part of the Winter Wren complex, the birds in Europe and Asia were recently given species status.

Cinclididae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – Fabulous views of these endearing birds on most days in the highlands, starting with a bouncy youngster in the stream right near where we parked at the start of our hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. We even got to watch a few doing their "bottom-crawling" as they moved from rock to rock.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – Nice studies of several of these little "kinglets" with a mixed flock along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie. This one looks a lot like North America's Ruby-crowned Kinglet, but sports a yellow stripe on the top of its head.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – And we caught up with the Goldcrest's cousin in the foggy forest at Le Lienz, where a couple flipped into some massive nearby pines to check us out.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – One working its way around us (and a stone channel) along the road to Salin de Giraud showed itself in brief flashes as it moved from spot to spot -- though we certainly all heard it repeatedly!

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – One of the more common migrant warblers in the lowlands, though we only saw a handful on most days. Most were strikingly yellow youngsters; adults are drabber.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Nice views of one working its way through a birch tree along the river at the start of the hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with others mingling with various tit flocks along the way. Though similar to the previous species, this one tends to be buffier (rather than yellow), with black (rather than pale) legs and an incessantly pumping tail.

Acrocephalidae (Reed-Warblers and Allies)

MELODIOUS WARBLER (*Hippolais polyglotta*) – One showed briefly for some in a berrying bush near Pragnères, trying its best to swallow a too-large berry -- and appearing to gag in the process! The long yellow bill of this species is distinctive.

EURASIAN REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – A little family group flicked through reeds edging the "kingfisher stream" near Mas d'Agon, eventually working their way up into a small willow along the driveway we were standing in.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Especially nice views of a busy gang of them in the horse pastures near our Arles hotel; they popped up and down out of the grass, occasionally sitting on fence wires or rummaging in the open areas at the bottom of the roadside ditch. We saw others bouncing over the bull field at Mejanès.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – Our first was a brown-capped female seen by some as she twitched through the bushes in the company of our Long-tailed Tit flock. A similarly skulking male was spotted by a few in the parking lot at Les Alpilles (where we birded under the watchful eye of the boules-playing firefighters). Fortunately, we found a handful of far more confiding birds raiding some berrying bushes near Pragnères one wet morning in the mountains.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – Wow! This can be a tough species to get a good look at outside of the breeding season; they tend to crawl through the very thickest bushes they can find. Fortunately, we found a most obliging male rummaging through a roadside bush near the Etang de Vaccarès; he spent long minutes preening and foraging in plain view!

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*) – One flicked through long grass and a pile of broken branches at the base of a little tree near the quarry in the Vallée d'Ossoue. Unfortunately, the wealth of nearby Whinchats and European Stonechats made it something of a challenge to pick out!

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – A couple proved most obliging, flitting in for a closer look at us as we birded along the road at Mejanès. With patience, everybody got multiple scope views when they perched up in the Salicornia bushes, allowing all to see their distinctive eye rings and rusty, short-primaried wings.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa striata*) – One hunted in the pines near our Carcassonne picnic spot, conveniently close to a bunch of European Pied Flycatchers for nice comparison, and we saw another flycatching along the river near Pragnères. This species is declining all over Europe.

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Plenty of these chirpy little chappies in the highlands, including some singing birds along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, a few with the berry bush raiders near Pragnères and one near the ski jump at Le Lienz.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – Small numbers in both the lowlands and the highlands, with especially nice studies of a busy flock of migrants in the pine trees near our Carcassonne picnic spot. We even spotted one male still sporting a few black feathers in a berrying bush near Pragnères; most males have lost all traces of their breeding plumage by the time of our tours.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – Arg! This one proved singularly uncooperative, with only a few of us getting on a rusty-bellied bird in the Vallée d'Ossoue before it dropped down off the rock it was perched on and disappeared.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Very, very common in the highlands, where they perched, rusty tails quivering, on rocks all over the place. We also saw a few singles in the lowlands -- one on a barn roof near our Arles hotel, and others on the Crau steppe.

RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – One popped up on a rocky ridge near the parking lot at the Lac des Gloriettes shortly after we arrived there, showing us its barred belly.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Scattered migrants, particularly in the highlands, where little groups of them hunted from the dead spikes of this summer's lilies.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – Scattered birds, principally in the highlands, but also near the Crau steppe. The dark faces of the adults quickly separated them from the more common Whinchats, and the lack of a bright eyebrow helped to separate the youngsters.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Common throughout, with great looks at many on the stony Crau steppe, and lots of others in the mountains. Their white rump and tail were certainly eye-catching.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Small numbers daily in the highlands, including one scrounging under the picnic table in the back garden of our Gedre hotel.

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus philomelos*) – Unfortunately brief views of one in the forest at Le Lienz; it started out perched atop a rock at the edge of the forest, but quickly melted into the underbrush when we stopped. Thirty seconds later, it flew past in a flash of rusty wings, never to be seen again.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – A group of ten or twelve twitched around in a grassy clearing near the campground on the way up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, then lifted into the trees and away up the valley, heading for the pass as the afternoon waned. We saw another perched atop a tall pine (in terrible light) in the Vallée d'Ossoue early on our last morning.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Widespread in the lowlands, but missing completely in the highlands. Surprisingly, this species is in steep decline all over Europe, with a loss of some 30% of its population in the past few decades.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*) – Lovely views of a confiding bird along the path at the Port de Boucharo. Its plumage colors were a perfect match for the rocks it was perched on!

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – Very common in the highlands this year, with multiples seen well daily. The busy group poking around the edges of the parking lot at the Lac des Gloriettes were particularly approachable.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – Small numbers around the Camargue, particularly at the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, where they waggled along the edges of the water and hid from the wind in the vegetation.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Our first two, bopping along the edge of the little stream through Gavarnie, showed their yellow vents and very long tails to perfection. This is the longest-tailed of the wagtails we see on this tour.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – Scattered birds throughout the tour, including one on the muddy shore of the marsh near the Tour de Carbonnière, and a few along the shoreline at Lac des Gloriettes.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – Fine looks at many on the Crau steppe, where they chased each other around over the rough ground. Those investigating the edges of the road while we walked out for a better look at the dotterel were particularly obliging. This was the plainest -- and palest -- of the pipits we saw on the tour, with virtually no streaking on the front or back.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – Two dropped in to a big dead tree along the road to Ausseing on our last afternoon, giving us a great chance to study them in the scopes.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – Very, very common in the highest highlands, with dozens flitting along the edges of the road up to the Port de Boucharo and others striding around in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – A brightly colored male shuffled through the weeds in a corner of the little paddock in the parking lot at the Lac de Gloriettes one foggy morning.

CIRL BUNTING (*Emberiza cirulus*) – Sadly, only a couple of us got a brief glimpse of two flicking along the roadside as we turned off the main road onto the side road into Ausseing. Their rusty backs and white outer tail feathers were clearly visible as they flitted along the hedgerow, but they'd disappeared completely by the time we'd parked and climbed out.

ROCK BUNTING (*Emberiza cia*) – One skulked in a bush right beside the road through the Vallee d'Ossoue late one afternoon, showing itself in fits and starts before winging off to a more distant tree above the quarry.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – A little group of four perched up on a scraggly bush in a stony field near the Crau steppe, peering around in the early morning light. This declining species looks a bit like a heavy-bodied, heavy-billed female House Finch.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Common in the highlands, with satisfying studies of a busy gang rummaging through the grass near the bob/luge shed behind our hotel each morning. Their loud "dink!" calls were a regular part of the highland soundtrack.

RED CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*) – A group of seven or so flew past, calling, while we birded near Les Baux one afternoon, landed in a nearby tree, then bounded off again; these were undoubtedly migrants.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – Scattered birds in the lowlands, including a couple of adults with a gaggle of just-fledged youngsters near a stone channel en-route to the Salin de Giraud. Their bold yellow wing stripes make them easy to identify in flight.

EURASIAN LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina*) – A few who happened to be outside the souvenir shop on the Col du Tourmalet at the right moment got brief glimpses of one perched for a few moments on a little boulder along a ridge downslope before two passing walkers scared it away.

CITRIL FINCH (*Serinus citrinella*) – It took a while -- and a long ramble around the boulder field of the Cirque de Gavarnie, but we finally all got good looks at a little male as he alternated between sitting on various rocks and nibbling weed seeds down in the grass.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – Regular in the highlands, including a few close ones seen as we searched for Citril Finches in the boulder field at the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Daily, often in sizable groups.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – A few birds, scattered along a telephone wire attached to a barn down the road from our Arles hotel were the only ones we spotted during the tour.

MAMMALS

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) – Two in a field beyond a roadside hedge near the Crau steppe stayed put when we stopped the vans for a better look.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Quite common in the highlands. Our first sported quite a mustache of long grass that it was gathering to insulate its winter nest. We saw plenty of others, including a couple of half-grown youngsters galloping awkwardly along the roadside in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*) – A few seen in the forests of the highlands, including one scampering through pines along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie and another investigating branches right over the river near Pragneres.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – One paddled across a channel near the Tour de Carbonniere on our first afternoon. This South American species was brought to southern France by fur ranchers; some later escaped or were released when the fur farms failed. [I]

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Our first streaked across fields near our Arles hotel before breakfast one morning, apparently heading for home, and we saw another peeping out of reeds near Mejanas. But our best views came in the Vallee d'Ossoue, where Susan spotted one watching us from a big boulder up the hill.

ROE DEER (*Capreolus capreolus*) – One scurried across the road in front of our vehicles near Ausseing, then trotted along, trying to find a good place to plunge into the woods.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 151 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa