



Field Guides Tour Report

FRANCE: CAMARGUE & PYRENEES 2016

Aug 27, 2016 to Sep 6, 2016
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Flocks of Greater Flamingos float like pink clouds on the lagoons of the Camargue, and when they take flight -- wow, what color! Photo by guide Tom Johnson.

Birding in France in the fall has been a staple of my schedule for nearly two decades now, and I can't think of a more enjoyable way to spend a week-plus. The combination of gourmet food, fine wines, spectacular scenery, and plenty of birds yields a trip to remember. And while the diversity may seem low to those more used to the frenetic activity of the American tropics, it gives us the chance to really savor every encounter.

We started our tour in the vast, watery wonderland of the Camargue, a mosaic of rice paddies and salt pans, marshy meadows, weedy pastures, and enormous lakes. Species tied to the water were among the highlights here. Shorebirds by the hundreds pattered across flooded salt pans and muddy wetlands: Common Ringed, Little Ringed, and Kentish plovers foraged side-by-side, allowing easy comparison, Curlew Sandpipers still bearing traces of their gorgeous breeding plumage poked and prodded among the drabber Little Stints, a trio of uncommon Temminck's Stints crept among a busy gang of Wood Sandpipers, and snappy Pied Avocets and long-legged Black-winged Stilts strode among the omnipresent pink clouds of Greater Flamingoes. We found not one, but TWO, quartets of Eurasian Spoonbills (uncommon here) scything their way across roadside ponds. At Salin de Giraud, where mountains of sea salt stood piled against the horizon, we found a massive flock of some 3000 terns -- five species in all -- plus a double handful of nose-y Slender-billed Gulls and single aptly-named Little Gull; the liftoff of that giant flock when a hunting Peregrine Falcon streaked past was pretty darned impressive!

But it wasn't all waterbirds. A morning at Mèjanès yielded great, close views of a couple of Spectacled Warblers as they rummaged along the edge of a dried-up ditch. A young Woodchat Shrike, usually long gone by the time of our tour, hunted from a woodpile. A handsome male Blue Rock-Thrush sang brief phrases from his perch atop a roadside cliff. A couple of visits to the stony Crau steppe -- once the mouth of the mighty Durance River -- yielded nice views of a preening male Lesser Kestrel, a couple of rusty-bellied, immature Montagu's Harriers hunting low over the stone piles, a well-camouflaged quartet of immature Eurasian Dotterel, sparring Tawny Pipits, ubiquitous Northern Wheatears, and scuttling pairs of Crested, Greater Short-toed, and Sky larks.

Our weather in the lowlands was hot and dry, and the earth around the Camargue seemed parched and crispy. The rasps of the region's famous cicadas echoed from dusty hillsides when we climbed into Les Alpilles, and the scents of sage and thyme and fennel and rosemary drifted up every time we stepped off road or path. The fine, settled weather may have impacted somewhat the number of migrants we saw (no need for them to stop!), but it also allowed us to enjoy our superb Provençal dinners al fresco, under the dense cover of well-cropped trees in our hotel's courtyard. And it gave us a fine

evening for our picnic hors-d'oeuvres supper in an olive grove near Les Baux: wine and cheese, pate and sausages, olives, smoked salmon, a host of chopped vegetables, pears and grapes, zucchini spread and crackers, followed (after a fair bit of looking and listening) by a thrilling encounter with a pair of mighty "Grand Ducs" -- the massive Eurasian Eagle-Owl.

Then it was off to the mountains of the High Pyrenees, trading the white-stuccoed buildings with their red tiled roofs for stone houses and barns with slate roofs, and flat, waving fields of grain for brooding mountains cloaked in dense forests of spruce and fir. This is the scenic part of the tour: sweeping vistas of vast glacial bowls (like the huge Cirque de Gavarnie, where Europe's highest waterfall is dwarfed by the surrounding cliffs), jewel-toned lakes reflecting blue, blue skies and craggy mountain peaks (like the reservoir mirroring its surroundings at Lac des Gloriettes), and broad glacial valleys stretching off into the distance, bracketed by jagged ridges. This is the land of raptors. Two rare Egyptian Vultures circled around the pointed Pic du Pibeste. A young Lammergeier -- probably a chick two summers ago -- sailed past, so close that we could see its distinctive "beard". Ponderous flocks of Eurasian Griffons -- massive birds with wingspans approaching 9 feet -- cruised the ridge tops, sharing airspace with whirling swarms of Yellow-billed Choughs. Eurasian Kestrels hovered over grassy hillsides, hunting for prey.

The scenic hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie brought many new species our way, including a big Black Woodpecker bounding back and forth over the forest, a busy mixed tit flock in one of the flats, and a little gang of Citril Finches flitting through the grasses (and on some of the larger boulders) in the Cirque itself. Our stroll into Spain through the Port de Boucharo yielded a point-blank trio of Alpine Accentors (one practically at our boot tips), good views of both species of chough, a watchful pair of Ortolan Buntings, a stripe-bellied Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, and the closest Pyrenean Chamois I've ever encountered. An afternoon in the sleepy forest of Le Lienz added hunting Spotted Flycatchers, an arm's length Crested Tit, a bevy of orange-sherbet Eurasian Bullfinches gobbling similarly colored fruits, and plenty of tiny Goldcrests. The garden of our Gèdre hotel proved the perfect place to enjoy a pair of duetting Tawny Owls, which glided overhead before landing side-by-side on a branch. A couple of White-bellied Dippers splashed in the swiftly tumbling stream just outside town. Two visits to the glorious Lac des Gloriettes gave us an agile Eurasian Wryneck, a noisy Eurasian Wren, and a pack of Dunnocks along the edge of the parking lot, and a host of Song Thrushes and European Serins along the roadway. Just no Wallcreeper, darn it!

We were still finding new birds as we worked our way back to Toulouse on our last afternoon. A picnic lunch spot just outside Bagnères de Bigorre netted us great flight views of a soaring Booted Eagle (which made multiple passes overhead) and a close Red Kite -- as well as a noisy pair of Eurasian Nuthatches. And the lovely deciduous forest around Mauvezin turned up a trio of inquisitive Marsh Tits and a single, territorial Middle Spotted Woodpecker.

Thanks so much for joining Tom and me for the ride; the fun group dynamics definitely added a nice dimension to the tour! We hope to see you all again soon on another adventure.

-- 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)

GRAYLAG GOOSE (*Anser anser*) – A couple of birds snoozed on a mudflat across the water at Marais de Grenouillet. Eventually, they woke up and raised their heads, allowing us to see their distinctively orange beaks with the scopes.

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*) – Scores floated on the channels edging Salin de Giraud, and we saw a handful of grayish cygnets at Marais de Grenouillet.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – A few families foraged on the flooded salt pans at Salin de Giraud, the bright parents clearly distinguishable from their drabber offspring.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – A trio flew past while we birded at Mejanes.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Almost ridiculously abundant on Etang des Vaccares, where they were dotted among the equally common flamingos.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – A few scattered among the Mallards on Etang des Vaccares, with another at Salin de Giraud.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – A good-sized group of these small ducks floated on the much-diminished lake at Marais de Grenouillet, and others paddled back and forth in front of the Eurasian Curlew on the pond near La Capelière.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*) – A high-stepping group of a half dozen or so trotted across the road as we edged our way out onto the Crau steppe on our pre-breakfast visit one morning. They milled around for a bit in the sparse grasses, but eventually sprinted for the horizon.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Reasonably common on the bigger waterways of the Camargue, including several groups of a half dozen or more snoozing on one of the channels at Salin de Giraud, and others hunting on Etang des Vaccares.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – A few dozen dotted the surface of Etang des Vaccares, including some still sporting traces of their snazzy breeding plumage.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – Pink clouds of these fabulous, long-legged birds drifted across the Camargue, striding across salt pans, or foraged -- headless -- in the deeper waters. And when they took flight, well, those flashing rose and black wings drew attention and exclamations virtually every time! This is the Camargue's signature bird.

Ciconiidae (Storks)

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*) – A loose flock of 11 gliding birds passed over as we birded near Mas d'Agon, and lowering clouds convinced a half dozen of them to drop into a nearby field, where we could study them in the scopes. We saw another 6 or so spiraling up out of another field as the

clouds cleared away later in the morning.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Dozens dried their feathers on posts and fishing weirs across the Camargue, and others flew past as we birded the salt pans of Salin de Giraud. Many of the birds we saw were youngsters, which showed a dusky chest and belly, quite unlike the "white football" belly patch of North America's youngsters.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Scattered individuals and small groups sprinkled in wetlands across the Camargue; we also heard one -- undoubtedly a migrant -- croaking from the darkness in Gèdre as it flew past while we waited for the Tawny Owls to make an appearance.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Surprisingly few this year: one flew low over a rice field (soon obscured by a nearby reed bed) while we birded at Méjanes, and a few folks spotted a second as it dropped down into a marsh along the road near Mas d'Agon.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Small numbers scattered around the Camargue. This species is slowly increasing in numbers across Europe, having "invaded" from the east.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – This species, on the other hand, was very common, with dozens seen in many places around the Camargue.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – And this one was the most common egret of all, with big flocks hovering attentively around the feet of livestock herds or following after tractors all around the Camargue. The tight flocks winging low over the Crau steppe, seen in the slanting early morning light on our pre-breakfast visit there, were particularly evocative.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Another species in surprisingly short supply this year. Fortunately, some great spotting by Pete netted us close flight views of one as it flapped past near the Etang des Vaccares, its white wings contrasting noticeably with its brown body.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – A few very distant birds foraged among the ducks snoozing on the shores of the Marais de Grenouillet, but our best views came on a little pond just north of La Capelière, where a few mingled with the egrets, Eurasian Curlews, and Eurasian Spoonbills.

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – A group of four flew in as we walked back from the Tour de Carbonniere -- three just flew around, but the fourth landed and gave a nice demonstration of its distinctive, bill-sweeping feeding method. We saw another quartet (perhaps the same ones?) on a couple of days foraging on a pond near La Capeliere.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – A few -- some perched, others flying -- around various wetlands in the Camargue.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

LAMMERGEIER (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – Our first were a couple of adults soaring high over the ridges at the Cirque de Gavarnie. But that sighting was put in the shade a few days later at Lac des Gloriettes, when Alice spotted one gliding towards us over the hillside. That youngster (probably a 2-3 year-old) passed us so low and closely that we could even see the dangling tuft of feathers that cover its nostrils -- the "beard" of its scientific name (*barbatus*).

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) – A couple of adults soaring with the Eurasian Griffons over Pic du Pibeste were a highlight of our stop en-route to the Pyrenees -- thanks to a great tag-team spotting effort by Alice and Tom! This species is declining precipitously across southern Europe.

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*) – A trio of distant migrants tracking along a ridge line at La Caume on a hot afternoon were less than satisfying for most. Fortunately, we had a much closer youngster that pitched into the trees near the cafe at the Cirque de Gavarnie, giving us all a good look before it launched itself skyward again. And Tom's quick camera action gave us the chance to review the finer points of its identification at leisure.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – Daily in the Pyrenees, typically in flight (where they looked huge and rectangular), but occasionally perched (like the pair sitting on the ground at the Lac de Gloriettes). A group of 17 coasting along the cliffs above the Col du Tourmalet was our biggest gathering.

SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE (*Circaetus gallicus*) – Small numbers in both the highlands and the lowlands. Sharon spotted our first, kiting over a patch of scrubby ground near Salin de Giraud, and we had another being mobbed by a raven over the Port de Boucharo.

BOOTED EAGLE (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) – We didn't see one until the very last day -- and then we found them in two different locations! The first sailed past our picnic spot near Bagnères de Bigorre several times, and the second soared over a sultry farm field near Ausseing. Both were pale morph birds.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – An adult glided over as we worked our way down from the Cirque de Gavarnie, then joined a second adult circling above one of the nearby craggy ridges. The long tail and relatively small head of this dark raptor make for a distinctive flight profile.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Small numbers -- far fewer than normal -- floated over the rice fields and marshlands of the coast. Most wore the dark, chocolate-brown, neat-edged plumage of youngsters, but we saw at least one tawny-shouldered adult female, and an older immature male starting to molt into his adult plumage.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*) – A few individuals seen in the lowlands, including one coursing back and forth over rice fields along the road to Salin de Giraud, and a couple of others hunting low over the Crau steppe. All showed the distinctively rusty undersides of immature birds. The smaller size, narrower "hand", and white rump patch quickly separate this species from the previous one.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Scattered migrants flap-flap-glided their way over the lowlands.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – Our first, cruising over the trees along the highway as we headed towards the Pyrenees, proved frustratingly elusive. Fortunately, we had much better looks on our final day: first, one circled over the peaks at the Col du Tourmalet, its white wing patches and reddish tail showing nicely against the pale blue morning sky. Then, we had reach-out-and-touch-it views of another as it sailed back and forth past our picnic lunch spot -- perhaps eyeing up all those chicken breasts!

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – Easily the most common and widespread of the tour's raptors, seen on most days. A trio interacting above the medieval castle of Mauvezin were particularly entertaining; the local pair circled and called, while an apparent interloper did great looping dives below them before flying off towards the mountains.

Otididae (Bustards)

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*) – A few birds scattered among the taller vegetation edging the runways at the Montpellier airport were an unexpected highlight of our first afternoon. They were a bit wobbly in the heat haze, but we could clearly see their shape and color as they rested in

the narrow bits of shade or arranged their well-camouflaged feathers.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*) – One took a vigorous splashing bath (and afterwards had a good preen onshore) on the back side of a pond near La Capelière in the Camargue -- showing us pretty much all sides in the process!

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – Especially nice looks at an adult with two nearly grown youngsters near the Tour Carbonnière. This species has been recently split from the New World's very similar Common Gallinule.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Hundreds and hundreds floated on the surface of Etang des Vaccares -- and just about every small body of water in its immediate vicinity. This species overwinters in huge numbers in the area.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Abundant in the Camargue, where scores strode on long, pink legs across salt pans and roadside puddles.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avocetta*) – Hundreds of these elegant shorebirds on the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, including several big flocks that wheeled under the approach of a Peregrine Falcon.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – We heard the distinctive whistling call of this species on the flats at Salin de Giraud (when that Peregrine made its raking pass and stirred up all the birds), and a few saw a distant quintet flying far across the pans, their black "armpits" visible as they flapped.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – At least two lurked among the smaller shorebirds at the Tour de Carbonnière our first afternoon, and we saw others in flight over the marshes near Mas d'Agon. The tufted crest of this big shorebird gives it a distinctive shape -- as do its rounded black and white wings.

KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – Probably the least common of the tour's small plovers -- and certainly the palest! We had good scope studies of a small group in one of the pans at Salin de Giraud. The AOU (American Ornithologists' Union) split this species from North America's Snowy Plover in 2012.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – A few among the more common Little Ringed Plovers at Tour de Carbonnière gave us good opportunities to compare the two; this is the larger and stockier of the two, with orange legs and a bigger bill. We saw others, in much bigger numbers, on the salt pans of Salin de Giraud.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – Especially common at the Tour de Carbonnière, with others at Salin de Giraud -- including a few wonderfully close to the road, which allowed great study. The narrow yellow eye-ring is diagnostic, and their pale legs and attenuated body shape help to distinguish them from the previous species.

EURASIAN DOTTEREL (*Charadrius morinellus*) – A group of four smartly-patterned youngsters rested and preened among the bristly, dried vegetation of the Crau steppe -- super spotting, Dave! Those who returned to the Crau the next morning for our pre-breakfast visit saw a distant group of 20 or so flying low over the stone piles.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – A few scattered birds in the Camargue, typically teetering along the edge of a pond or salt pan. This species looks a lot like a winter-plumaged Spotted Sandpiper (e.g. no spots), but with a longer tail and a shorter bill.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – Also found in small numbers in the Camargue, including one near the Tour de Carbonnière our first afternoon, a few at the Marais de Grenouillet, and one over a field near Mas d'Agon. The all-dark underwing of this species is distinctive.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – We heard the mellow "tu tu tu" call of this species (very reminiscent of the call of a Greater Yellowlegs) on the morning that we birded near Mèjanes. [*]

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – A gang of 30 so foraged in the shallow waters near the Tour de Carbonnière, showing their distinctive white rump patches whenever they made brief flights across the wetland.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – A small group foraged among the far more numerous Curlew Sandpipers and Pied Avocets on the salt pans of the Salin de Giraud. The big white wedge on the trailing edge of their wings in flight is distinctive.

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – Dave spotted our first, way out on the far side of the water at Marais de Grenouillet -- its very long bill distinguishable, even at that great distance. Fortunately for those who like their lifers in the same zip code, we found a couple of much closer birds on the edge of a pond near La Capelière the next day.

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*) – Probably the most common of the shorebirds at Salin de Giraud, with scores -- including some still showing significant traces of their colorful breeding plumage -- foraging in the salt pans.

TEMMINCK'S STINT (*Calidris temminckii*) – At least three of these small shorebirds rummaged on the muddy edges of the pond near the Tour de Carbonnière.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Some, still showing the black bellies and rusty backs of their breeding plumage, foraged among the more numerous Curlew Sandpipers on the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – Easily the most common small shorebird of the tour, with dozens trotting over the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – A trio preened along the back edge of a little pond near La Capelière on the Camargue, showing their distinctively striped backs nicely. The AOU split this species from North America's Wilson's Snipe back in 2002.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – You look and look and look, scanning through all those Black-headed Gulls and suddenly, there one is -- pink and nose-y and oh-so-different. We eventually found a half dozen or more on Salin de Giraud's salt pans, including some very close to the road.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Thousands and thousands seen all across the Camargue, including dozens paddling in the flooded pastures near our hotel.

LITTLE GULL (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) – One of these (appropriately) small gulls floated on one of the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, dwarfed by the surrounding Black-headed Gulls.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*) – Very common around Le Grau du Roi, where dozens flew past on flashing white wings (heavy with molt) and hundreds gathered to rest on the baking salt flats. As we headed towards the ancient walled city of Aigues-Mortes, we saw

another big group plunge-bathing in the roadside canal.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – This was the very common large gull of the tour, seen in the hundreds across the Camargue.

Though recently split from the Herring Gull, this species is actually more closely related to the Lesser Black-backed Gull!

LITTLE TERN (*Sternula albifrons*) – A few of these smaller terns, which are closely related to the Least Terns of the Americas, were sprinkled among the massive tern flock we found in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud. They weren't much bigger than the nearby Little Stints!

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – A handful at scattered locations around the Camargue, with our best views probably coming near Mas d'Agon, where a couple hunted over roadside fields and marshes.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – A few of these big terns flew past as we birded in various places in the Camargue, but our best on-the-ground views came at Salin de Giraud, when one landed on a salt pan beyond the Little Gull. For a short while, we had the world's biggest tern and one of its smallest gulls in view in the scope at the same time!

BLACK TERN (EURASIAN) (*Chlidonias niger niger*) – We found hundreds sprinkled among the massive mixed tern flock at Salin de Giraud, looking smaller and darker than the nearby Common and Sandwich terns.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – A few coursed back and forth over a marshy section of ground along the road near Mas d'Agon. This is a true "marsh tern", seldom found near salt water.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – Dave found our first, at Le Grau du Roi, but we found far greater numbers on the salt pans at Salin de Giraud -- where upwards of 2000 rested more or less peacefully until a passing Peregrine Falcon put them all up.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Not quite as common as the previous species, but still well-represented among the mixed tern flock at Salin de Giraud.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Feral pigeons, seen daily -- particularly around towns and cities. The little gang we spotted on our way into Gavarnie one morning all had "wild type" plumage rather than the more typical fancy colors.

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – Seen every day but one -- and we clearly weren't paying enough attention that day! The ones a mile up over the Cirque de Gavarnie were on their way over the mountains to their wintering quarters in Spain -- though they have to face a barrage of hunters to get there. The white wing markings on these huge pigeons are distinctive and eye-catching.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Common in the lowlands, but not seen in the highlands (where they're rare) this year. Believe it or not, this species only made it to most of Europe less than a century ago!

Strigidae (Owls)

EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL (*Bubo bubo*) – Our evening excursion to a lovely stretch of limestone cliffs outside Les Baux -- following a scrumptious picnic supper in a nearby olive grove -- turned up trumps, when we found not one but TWO of these big owls, known locally as "Le Grand Duc". They glided along together, then separated and landed one on either side of the ridge, where they proceeded to duet until darkness fell.

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) – Two different birds hunted from the rock piles on the Crau steppe, heads swiveling as they searched for prey. Like Burrowing Owls, this species does most of its hunting on or near the ground.

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*) – After hearing the tremulous calls of this widespread species echoing from the hillsides around our Gedre hotel for several nights (and early mornings), we finally connected with a pair in the back garden of our hotel on our final night there. They ghosted in over the trees, then sat side by side on a branch, calling.

Apodidae (Swifts)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*) – Several noisy parties of these huge swifts mingled with the migrating sparrows over the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. The wingspan of this species approaches two feet!

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOOPOE (*Upupa epops*) – Our first was a flyby, flapping past over the Crau steppe as we were climbing out of our vehicles. Fortunately for those trapped in the back rows, we spotted another one foraging on the ground in the garden of the house at the end of the driveway into Mas de la Fenière.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Seen on scattered days around the Camargue, with particularly super views of a couple on a little stream along the road near Mas d'Agon. They flew back and forth along the river, occasionally weaving right among us as we stood on the bridge -- what spectacular colors!

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*) – Regular in flight over the lowlands -- sometimes so high that we couldn't even see them, just hear their distinctive "prooping" calls drifting down from the blue skies. Fortunately, some were considerably lower, including a little gang over some fields near the Crau steppe.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – Also common in the lowlands, particularly along the road down to the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, where they were dotted along the wires at regular intervals. We watched a number of them hunting over the stony Crau steppe, their gorgeous turquoise wings flashing when they flew.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

EURASIAN WRYNECK (*Jynx torquilla*) – One near the parking lot at Lac de Gloriettes was a highlight of our first visit there -- what an unusual woodpecker this is! It flitted across the rocks at the base of the cliff, often posing in plain sight. In Europe's medieval lore, witches rode wrynecks, not brooms!

LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos minor*) – Based on its small size and plain (rather than pink or red) underparts, the spotted woodpecker we saw before breakfast one morning, when we visited a nearby wooded area, was this species.

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos medius*) – One over a picnic area near Mauvezin was the last new species of the trip, and it cooperated wonderfully, perching in the open on several nearby trees for long minutes. The unbridled face, pinkish underside and streaked flanks of this species help to separate it from the other spotted woodpeckers.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – One made several noisy passes back and forth over the forest as we worked our way along the trail down from the Cirque de Gavarnie.

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – One in the same group of trees that held our Lesser Spotted Woodpecker proved rather elusive, with most of the group not getting much of a look. Those in Megan's van had slightly better views of one that flushed up off the side of the road and flew across a nearby field as we drove towards the Crau steppe on our first visit -- though, unfortunately, it landed out of sight.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – Small numbers (seemingly fewer than normal) on the Crau steppe, with particularly nice scope studies of a preening male on a stone pile near the track on our second visit. His all-blue head -- and that distinctive blue band in the wing -- were nicely visible in that lovely, slanting, early morning light.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – One of our everyday birds, with many seen well -- including several hunting low over the hillsides along the track in the Port de Boucharo.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – A few in Tom's van saw one rocket past over the road as we birded our way from the airport towards our hotel on the tour's first afternoon.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – A big, dark youngster hunting over the salt pans at Salin de Giraud definitely sowed panic in the ranks of gulls, terns and shorebirds trying to rest and refuel there. We had another over the marshes near Mas d'Agon the following day.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – Our first was a very distant bird on a bush in a stony field near the Crau steppe. Those who made a second, pre-breakfast visit to the Crau on our last day in the lowlands had much closer looks at another sitting atop a bush in the steppe itself.

WOODCHAT SHRIKE (*Lanius senator*) – A lingering youngster hunted from a pile of fence boards and barbed wire in a field near Mas d'Agon. That white "pocket handkerchief" on its wing is distinctive.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – Small numbers on scattered days -- typically flying across the road in front of our vehicles. Fortunately, we had much nicer views of one sitting atop a pole in the back garden of our mountain hotel one morning. This species is much more shy and retiring than are our North American jays.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Magpies, on the other hand, were abundant and obvious throughout the lowlands, even trundling along the sides of major roads as they search for tasty morsels.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – A handful foraged in the rough turf along the track to the Port de Boucharo, far outnumbered by the next species. The long, decurved bill of this species is distinctive.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) – Common in the highlands, where swirling flocks played in the winds over most of the ridges we saw. Our best views, though, came at the Port de Boucharo, when a couple of them landed within yards of us in the parking lot. Their stubby, pale beaks could be seen from a surprising distance.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Another common lowland species, including hundreds flying over our hotel each morning, headed out to the fields for the day, and scores rummaging for breakfast in flooded fields. Their short, sharp calls sound almost woodpecker-like to American ears.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – We saw 8 or 10 fly over our Camargue hotel one morning, but our best views came later that same day, when we found a big mixed flock of corvids feasting in a flooded field. This big crow has a distinctively pale, unfeathered base to its bill, which we could clearly see in the scopes.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Another every day bird, though typically in smaller numbers than those of the previous two species.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Rather uncommon this year, with only a few individuals seen in the mountains, including one escorting a Short-toed Snake-Eagle over the Port de Boucharo and a couple investigating an empty paddock on the Col du Tourmalet.

Alaudidae (Larks)

GREATER SHORT-TOED LARK (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) – A few on the Crau steppe; they're smaller, slimmer, and generally paler than the next two species.

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*) – Our best views came on the Crau steppe, where we watched several pairs scuttling among the dried vegetation; the long, pointy crest on its head is diagnostic. We also saw one in flight near Mèjanès, allowing brief views of its peachy underwings.

SKY LARK (*Alauda arvensis*) – A few wary birds flushed as we walked on the Crau steppe, dropping back down to the ground after flying a few meters farther away. This is a fairly robust lark, with gray (rather than peach) underwings, a white trailing edge to the upperwing, and only a small, rather rounded, crest.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Small numbers over some of the wetlands in the Camargue, generally outnumbered by the more common Barn Swallows. In the Old World, this one is known as the Sand Martin.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – Our first swung back and forth along a cliff in Les Baux, occasionally perching on a nearly vertical "ledge". We saw many others in the highlands, including big swarms around some apparent breeding caverns at Lac de Gloriettes and the Cirque de Gavarnie.

BARN SWALLOW (WHITE-BELLIED) (*Hirundo rustica rustica*) – Abundant throughout, including many clearly migrating, like those streaming through the gap at the Port de Boucharo. The subspecies found in Europe -- *rustica* -- is much paler bellied than are North American birds.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – Another widespread species, with especially satisfying studies of hundreds clinging to the sides of a house in La Mongie.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (*Pariparus ater*) – Several busy pairs with the mixed tit flocks we found on our way up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with others in the forest of Le Lienz. This is the European tit that looks most like our North American chickadees.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – A couple flicked through the spruces along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, but our best views came at Le Lienz, where another pair foraged practically at arm's length, just past where all the logs were piled along the road.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*) – A noisy trio in the woods near Mauvezin were among our last new birds of the trip. This one has a tiny bib -- hardly more than a little mustache!

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – The most widespread of the tits on this year's tour, seen nearly every day in a variety of habitats. The huge mob (20+ birds) working along the road up to the Lac des Gloriettes was particularly cooperative, giving us many fine looks.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – Also widespread, seen in both the lowlands and the highlands. A gang feeding on elderberries along an overgrown track near Arles before breakfast one morning showed especially well.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – Small groups seen on several days, with our best looks coming near Ausseing on our way back to Toulouse, when we found a calling flock working through some roadside trees. Those long tails are distinctive; they're more than half the total length of the bird!

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – After hearing one calling from the forest at Le Lienz, we finally laid eyes on a couple over our picnic spot in Bagnères de Bigorre.

Certhiidae (Trecreepers)

EURASIAN TRECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – A couple with a mixed tit flock near the big log pile in Le Lienz spent long minutes creeping up tree trunks near the road, giving us good opportunities to study them. This is found at higher elevations (and higher latitudes) than the next species.

SHORT-TOED TRECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – Wonderful studies of one that flew in to a pine tree over our heads at the Carcassonne picnic area. It proceeded to hang upside down from the bottom of a pine cone for long minutes -- apparently having a snooze! We heard others in the woods around Mauvezin.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – One foraging near the parking lot at Lac des Gloriettes proved quite confiding, occasionally perching for long seconds right out in the open. This species was split from North America's Winter Wren relatively recently.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – An adult and a youngster bounced along the rocks in the Gave de Pau, just north of the town of Gèdre, one morning. Those white eyelids are certainly eye-catching!

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – A few of these tiny "kinglets" accompanied each of the tit flocks we found en route to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and we spied others with the tit flocks at Le Lienz. This is plainer-faced than the next species.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – Our first was a pair in a hot deciduous forest near Ausseing; the male gave us quite an eyeful of his brilliant reddish crest! We found others with one of the mixed tit flocks we watched en route to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – As usual, we heard far more of these skulking warblers than we saw -- a loud, waterthrush-like song, always from dense cover within sight of some body of water. Some of the group did get a look (some well, most not) at one in some thick brambles across a watery ditch at the Peau de Meau, on the Crau steppe.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – Small numbers on scattered days, typically yellow juveniles. One flashing out repeatedly from an elderberry bush along an overgrown track near our Arles hotel gave us pretty good looks, as did another seen on our walk down from the parking lot at Lac des Gloriettes.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Also seen in small numbers in the highlands, particularly on our walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. Though similar to the previous species, this one is buffier (rather than yellow) with dark, rather than pale, legs. It often dips its tail, rather like a phoebe might.

Acrocephalidae (Reed-Warblers and Allies)

EURASIAN REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – One honey-gold bird flicked through a tamarisk tree along the edge of a little stream near Mas d'Agon, distracting us from our search for kingfishers.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Plenty of good looks at these tiny passerines in the lowlands, including some sitting on fence wires around the paddocks near our Arles hotel, and many in bouncing display flights over saltbush flats and rice fields.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – Daily in the highlands, though the big migration push apparently hadn't started yet. A handful in some berrying trees near the picnic area in Mauvezin (where we found our Middle Spotted Woodpecker) gave us particularly nice views.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – We heard the scratchy song of this skulker every day in the Camargue, but failed to get a single look!

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – This species, on the other hand, proved marvelously cooperative; we had superb studies of a pair foraging on the ground just across the fence at Méjanes.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa striata*) – Two hunted from stubby branches and little pine saplings in the understory of the pine-hemlock forest at Le Lienz. This species lacks the big white wing panel of the European Pied Flycatcher -- though it should really be called STREAKED Flycatcher, rather than Spotted!

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Regular in the highlands, including more than a few spotty youngsters. We decided those colonials must have been reeeeeeally homesick, to name our big brute after this little cutie!

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – Small numbers on most days of the trip. All were in somber brown-and-white plumage; the snappy black-and-white plumage of breeding males is shed for the nonbreeding season.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Abundant in the highlands, where they seemed to bounce, tails quivering, onto nearly every rock pile in sight! Most were the rather uniformly pale gray (with the exception of that quivering rusty tail) of this year's youngsters, but we did see a few

boldly-patterned adult males.

RUFOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – One perched on a broken slate ledge along the Port de Boucharo track, and a second flicked along the edge of the quarry in the Vallée d'Ossoue.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola solitarius*) – Our first was a half a mile away, flitting along the tops of the ridges we were scrutinizing in our search for Eurasian Eagle-Owls. Fortunately, we found another, much closer, bird on a cliff near Les Baux.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Small numbers, all in the lowlands this year. Our first was hunting from the electric fence wires around the paddocks near our hotel, but our best views came near Mas d'Agon, where we found another one hunting from the top of a nearby fence.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – Scattered individuals, including one right beside the vans on a huge chain-link fence near Ausseing, and another hunting from tall weeds on the Crau steppe.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Common throughout the tour, particularly on the Crau steppe, and in the highlands. The name "wheatear" is apparently a corruption of the Saxon name "white-ass" -- and it wasn't hard to see how it might have earned that name!

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – A few in the highlands, typically flashing across the road in front of our vehicles.

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus philomelos*) – Dozens bounced around in the road in the half-light as we drove towards Lac de Gloriettes on our second (predawn) visit there. Eventually, we found one that stayed put in the headlights while we crept ever closer, giving us all good views.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – A couple of big flocks flew over as we started our hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and some of us had brief views of one perched in a spruce tree over the trail just about where it started to get steep.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Common in the lowlands, including a huge murmuration of them skywriting over a field we passed on our way to the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*) – Wow! These well-camouflaged birds foraged practically at our feet along the track in the Port de Boucharo. As we returned from Spain, one of them was singing a soft subsong as it hopped along the broken slate ledges.

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – Our first was a rather skulking individual in a brush pile near the river in Gèdre, seen by those who went out for a late afternoon ramble in town one day. Fortunately, we had MUCH better looks at a handful of others bouncing around in the parking lot at Lac des Gloriettes.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – Common in the Camargue, with especially nice studies of them on the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, where we had them in nice side-by-side comparison with White Wagtails. This species is longer-tailed, and always shows all-yellow underparts.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Regular in the highlands, including dozens wagging along the edges of the river in Gèdre, and others hunting the shores of the Lac des Gloriettes. This is the longest-tailed of the tour's wagtails.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – And this is the shortest-tailed! It's also the most widespread, found in both lowlands and highlands. Those sitting on the roofs of buildings near our Gèdre hotel gave us good chance for scope studies.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – Small numbers of these pale, mostly unstreaked pipits on the Crau steppe.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – Scattered individuals, with our best looks coming near our picnic lunch spot in the Vallée d'Ossoue, where Tom spotted one perched in a nearby little tree. The fine dark streaking on the upper chest of this species, its browner plumage, plainer face, and habit of perching in trees (and other vegetation) help to separate it from the next species.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – Restricted to the highlands, where it was surprisingly uncommon this year. We had a handful on the drive up to the Port de Boucharo (and a few along the track we walked there), with others on the grassy slopes of the Col du Tourmalet. This pipit is bigger than the last, with a colder gray plumage color, messier, less-defined streaking on the underparts, and a habit of walking around on the ground.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – A couple of birds flushed off the side of the road in front of Megan's van as we drove up the Col du Tourmalet. Unfortunately, they were only seen by a few, and -- though we stopped and scanned the surrounding area -- we couldn't relocate them.

ROCK BUNTING (*Emberiza cia*) – One perched for a while in a tree along the road up to the Lac des Gloriettes. Initially, we couldn't see much more than its striped face, but eventually, it shifted a bit more into the open -- at least until a passing car flushed it off up the hill.

ORTOLAN BUNTING (*Emberiza hortulana*) – Two rummaging in the grass just down the hill from the track at Port de Boucharo were a nice surprise, seen as we returned from Spain. Though protected by law, tens of thousands of Ortolans are illegally killed in France each year, destined for the plate.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – We saw surprisingly few of this normally-common species this year -- just a handful (most badly backlit) on roadside wires, seen on the drive down to Salin de Giraud.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Regular in the highlands, with especially nice studies of a few mooching around the boulders in the open bowl of the Cirque de Gavarnie and others around the parking lot at Lac des Gloriettes.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – Tom's tracking down of a strange little squeak from the forest at Le Lienz led to some fabulous views of a tree full of these colorful birds, munching berries in a fruiting Mountain Ash (Rowan) tree.

RED CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*) – A female (or young male) perched briefly at the top of a conifer along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, seen by some as we worked our way back down after our day in the mountains.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – Another normally-common bird in surprisingly short supply this year. We had a little flock in flight over the rice fields at Méjanas, and Lois spotted some near Mas de la Fenièrre as we gathered for a pre-breakfast walk on our first morning, and that was about it!

EURASIAN LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina*) – Super studies of small groups flitting along the roadside en route to the Port de Boucharo, with others foraging in the grasses on the Col du Tourmalet.

CITRIL FINCH (*Serinus citrinella*) – Those who climbed up into the giant bowl of the Cirque de Gavarnie were rewarded with scope views of several, seen as they foraged among the seeding thistle heads or perched on the huge boulders. Though most were rather drab females or youngsters, some of us did see one or more bright yellow males.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – Many had quick views of some en route to the Cirque de Gavarnie, but we had far better looks at a big group of them flitting through the birches along the track down from the Lac des Gloriettes. It took some time -- and a bit of patience -- but we all eventually had nice scope studies of them.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Common in the lowlands, but largely absent in the mountains.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – A trio in a little roadside tree at Mèjanès (conveniently right behind the vans) sat still long enough for everyone to get a good look.

MAMMALS

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) – A few folks saw one flash across the road in front of the vans as we left the Crau steppe after our pre-breakfast outing there.

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*) – A few of these wary creatures on the Crau steppe -- typically running away at high speed! Their black ear tips are often the thing that give them away; we birders see them and think "flying bird!".

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Common in open areas in the highlands, where we heard (high-pitched whistles) even more than we saw. This species, which was introduced to the Pyrenees from the Alps, is an excellent raptor spotter.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*) – One scurried around in the garden near the end of the driveway at Mas de la Fenièrre, not far from the foraging Eurasian Hoopoe. Tom and Lois spotted another in the forest at Le Lienz, while the rest of us were admiring a point-blank Crested Tit.

EDIBLE DORMOUSE (*Glis glis*) – Unfortunately, we only got brief views -- and only some of us got even that much -- of one scuttling off through the branches of a walnut tree behind our hotel in Gèdre. We certainly all heard it squeaking though, and the sound of its teeth rasping on the walnut's shell.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – Those in Tom's van saw one cross the road near the Etang des Vaccares one afternoon, and some of the group spotted another scurry across the road at Mas d'Agon. This species was introduced to France from South America in the late 1800s in a failed attempt to establish Nutria fur farms.

STOAT (SHORT-TAILED WEASEL) (*Mustela erminea*) – One, carrying a vole nearly half its size, bounced through the rocks at the bottom of a hill at the Col du Tourmalet. Even though it already had a meal, it dropped it and checked us out when we started squeaking at it. One vole, apparently, is never enough!

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – A herd of a dozen or so grazed their way across a meadow high above the Cirque de Gavarnie. Our best views, though, came in the Port de Bouchard, where a single wary animal suddenly appeared among the sheep; it worked its way rapidly across the valley, and disappeared into the rocky gullies on the other side.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 161 bird taxa and 8 mammal taxa