



Field Guides Tour Report

France: Camargue & Pyrenees II 2017

Sep 6, 2017 to Sep 16, 2017
Jay VanderGaast & Cory Gregory

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We were treated to many fine sights on this tour. Among the best were the view we had of a large flock of Sandwich and Common Terns at Salin de Giraud, with one Greater Flamingo standing out as an accent. Photo by participant Bill Byers.

"A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thousands of birds beside me singing in the Wilderness." Omar Khayyam almost had it right; this slightly paraphrased line from the Rubaiyat pretty much sums up the southern France tour. Well, maybe the singing is a bit of a stretch, but otherwise, it's pretty accurate. As always, we enjoyed some of the finest wines on the planet, the most delectable breads, croissants, etc., imaginable, and loads of fantastic birds on this year's tour. It's little wonder why this trip has been so popular year after year.

While the wine and breads are pretty consistent, turning up unfailingly at the same locations, in the same quality and quantity, the same cannot be said for the birds. Though always wonderful, the variability in species and numbers from year to year is unpredictable, which, of course, is what makes birding so enjoyable. If every species was as reliable as those scrumptious croissants on the breakfast buffet, where would be the fun in that? This year was interesting in that many species we normally count on were absent or present in much smaller numbers than we normally see. This was especially noticeable among the shorebirds, where such regularly seen species as Kentish Plover, Dunlin, and Curlew Sandpiper were missed completely, while among other groups, bee-eaters were noticeably absent, while species like European Honey-Buzzard, European Roller, Zitting Cisticola, and Whinchat were seen in much smaller numbers than usual. On the other hand, it was probably the best trip I've had for rarities, with scarce species like European Golden-plover, Red Phalarope, Elegant Tern(!), Eleonora's Falcon, and Bluethroat all making their way onto our lists. Four out of those five species (all but the falcon) were seen for the first time ever on this tour!

Rarities aside, there were plenty of great moments daily courtesy of the species we expect to see. Things started off strong before we even got to the Camargue, with a group of 57 Little Bustards in a stubble field near the Montpellier airport. Once we got to the Camargue region, highlights included the daily views of beautiful Greater Flamingos, nice looks at both Black and White storks, a smashing Short-toed Snake-Eagle soaring right overhead, a lone female Montagu's Harrier gliding low over a stubble field, and a bunch of Eurasian Thick-knees in a flooded field near the Crau. A lone Slender-billed Gull with a quartet of Little Gulls was a nice find, as was a close flock of 50 Eurasian Dotterels at the Peau de Meau. An unusually bold Cetti's Warbler and a group of 4 Eurasian Reed-Warblers showed amazingly well within minutes of each other, and Spectacled Warbler was also surprisingly cooperative for a change.

Arriving in the Pyrenees, we began to make the acquaintance of a whole new suite of birds. Lammergeiers were a big hit, and we had some awesome views of these stunning birds. An adult Egyptian Vulture wasn't quite as close, but also gave memorable views as it flew over in excellent light. We saw more Black Woodpeckers, and more easily, than I've seen them on any previous trip, and one female, in particular, put on a super show. Flocks of choughs, both Red-billed and Yellow-billed were seen well, plenty of Eurasian Jays showed themselves daily, and a good selection of tits- Long-tailed, Coal, Eurasian Blue, Great, and ultimately, a lone Crested- were enjoyed by all. We also had good views of both treecreepers, noting the incredibly long hindclaw on the Eurasian Treecreeper, and both kinglets (Goldcrest and Firecrest) and finally nailed down good views of White-throated Dipper. A friendly Alpine Accentor charmed all of us as it fed a few feet away, a couple of striking Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrushes allowed long scope views, and a lone male Citril Finch rewarded our exhaustive search through the stunning scenery of the Cirque de Gavarnie.

All in all, this was a fun tour, made all the more so by a great, compatible group of participants. Cory and I thank you all for joining us on this trip, and we'd love to see you on another one someday soon!

--Jay

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

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

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*) – Numerous in the Camargue, with large enough numbers (~185 birds) at one site along the Etang des Vaccares to trip the filters on Ebird!

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – At least 15 of these striking ducks were seen on our first visit to the Salin de Giraud, with at least one giving us a good close fly-by look.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – We picked out a lone drake from among the many eclipse-plumaged Mallards on the Etang de Vaccares.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – The default dabbler in the Camargue, where we saw them daily, with all of them being in eclipse plumage.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – Close to a dozen were found on a single pond near Le Capeliere, as we drove along the Etang de Vaccares on our first day in the Camargue.

COMMON POCHARD (*Aythya ferina*) – I'm not sure if this species is migrating earlier than usual or not, but this was the third consecutive year we've found pochards during the tour after only 2 records in the previous 15 tours! This year we had a lone drake on a pond near Le Capeliere.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*) – Some folks in the trailing van saw a covey of 5 birds flush up from just in front of my van on our first visit to the Crau, but everyone in my van was looking at a distant raptor off to the side and missed them completely. Luckily we managed to find a couple more on our final morning in the region, and those birds gave decent scope views as they popped their heads out of the grass and called periodically.

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – Two records of single birds, a handsome male sitting out in the sun on our way to Salin de Giraud on the first morning, and a female a couple of days later at Mejanes. Judging by the lack of a white ring on the male's neck, I believe he, at least, belonged to the 'colchicus' group of subspecies, which is native to SW Asia. [I]

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – A couple of these small grebes were scoped on the large marsh at Mas D'Agon.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – A pair of distant birds on our first afternoon near Aigues-Mortes were our first, but were bettered by some fine views of several much closer birds at the Salin de Giraud.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – A few in non-breeding plumage on one of the shallow lagoons at the Salin de Giraud.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – The iconic bird of the Camargue region, and a fittingly common one at that. We had plenty of great views, though there seemed to be far fewer young birds around this year than last.

Ciconiidae (Storks)

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*) – The reward for those that opted to come on a late afternoon walk our first day was a trio of these striking storks soaring directly over our hotel just as we gathered outside. Luckily for those that took the time off, we had great looks at another a couple of days later at Mas D'Agon.

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – We saw a total of about 52 of these storks, with the first 34 of them coming in a single distant flock at Mas D'Agon just before our Black Stork there. The following day gave us the remainder, with 8 birds in one flock over the highway near Montpellier, and another 10 standing in a stubble field a little further along the road.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Quite numerous at a number of sites in the Camargue.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Likewise numerous in the Camargue, with good numbers seen daily.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Much scarcer than the preceding species, and it took some careful searching to come up with a couple. We finally spotted one flying across at Mas D'Agon, followed a short while after by another. The second bird was especially pleasing, as, while we followed it in our binoculars, and just as it was about to disappear from sight, another bird appeared flying in the opposite direction-- the Black Stork!

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Decent numbers in the Camargue, with a single bird seen by some to the west of Toulouse on our way back from the Pyrenees.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Also quite numerous around the Camargue region.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Some large numbers around some of the flooded fields in the Camargue. One bird with a black bill really stood out. It was certainly a juvenile, but begs the question, why was it the only one?

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Scarce this year, and we had just two flyby views, one each at the Etang des Aulnes near the Crau, and another at Mas D'Agon.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – These seem to be a bigger deal here in Europe than they are in North America, but it still is nice to see them here. We had several sightings in the Camargue.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

LAMMERGEIER (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – We started off with pretty nice scope views of one roosting on a ledge in the Vallee D'Ossoue on our first day in the Pyrenees, but it was likely our final encounter with a bird soaring low across the hillside that led to it being voted bird of the trip. Three first place votes from Kevin, Ellen, and Bill (not to mention Cory) clinched it for this bird, which will sadly be known as Bearded Vulture after the latest rounds of taxonomic revisions.

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) – I've had a pretty poor track record with this one at the Pic du Pibeste, having never seen it there, though the first group usually sees one on their stopover a few days earlier. So I was pretty happy when Cory called out that an adult had appeared above the ridge line with the dozens of griffons already there. This, and possibly a second adult, gave us great views as they soared overhead in excellent late afternoon light.

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*) – It wasn't looking good for this species, as we failed to see any at all in the Camargue region, where they are often quite numerous during migration at this time of year. Luckily we did find a couple once we got to the Pyrenees, first a quick flyby during our hike to the cirque, then a lone bird the next day kettling overhead with a bunch of griffons and a Lammergeier.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – Large numbers daily in the mountains, but the most interesting sighting came as we headed for Toulouse. During a bathroom stop at La Mongie, Bill noted a large number of vultures landing on a nearby hillside. We checked it out and found about 150 griffons fighting over a recently deceased cow. It was fascinating watching their behavior as they squabbled over access to the best feeding spots. When we left, there were about 180 birds on the ground, with more streaming in constantly.

SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE (*Circaetus gallicus*) – We had a couple of these, but that first bird circling over the road near Mejanès in perfect light was outstanding!

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Judging from the shrill alarm whistles we heard regularly, the marmots were seeing a lot more of these than we were, but we still had a couple of good sightings in the Vallee D'Ossoue.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Seen regularly in the Camargue, including several adult females with gorgeous, glowing golden caps and forewings.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*) – The ringtail harriers, especially in female and juvenile plumage, are notoriously difficult to identify, so there was some debate as to whether the one we were watching was a Montagu's or a Hen Harrier. We were leaning towards Montagu's, as the wings looked quite narrow, and Cory's pictures confirmed it-- only 4 long primary tips were showing on the wings. The broader-winged Hen Harrier shows five.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Sparrowhawk migration seemed to be well underway in the Camargue, where we saw these birds in decent numbers, including about a dozen our first day there. Several gave us good close flyby views.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – Several excellent views of these beauties on our travel days to and from the mountains. The one directly over our picnic lunch site on our way to Toulouse was especially memorable.

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – Common it is, and we saw several of these variably plumaged birds on all but one day of the trip.

Otididae (Bustards)

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*) – This was officially our first bird of the trip as a group. As soon as we loaded everything in the vans, we drove to a nearby agricultural field where Cory and I had found a group of these birds, and we were thrilled to find they were still there. We counted at least 57 of them, though there were likely a few hidden amidst the stubble that we were unable to see.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WESTERN SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) – Charlotte picked out the first of 4 of these large gallinules feeding along the edge of the marsh at Mas D'Agon. Formerly known as Purple Swamphen, which was split into 6 species a couple of years back, so even if you've seen swamphens before somewhere else, this was likely a lifer for many of you.

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – A juvenile on the edge of the lagoon near Aigues-Mortes and a couple more at Salin de Giraud were our only ones.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Especially numerous on the Etang de Vaccares, where we estimated (probably underestimated) there were about 750 of them present.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) – We first heard the wailing calls of these birds during a stop near the Crau, then started seeing them flying across the fields in the distance. We soon worked out that they were heading for a flooded field that was already full of egrets, gulls, and Corvids, and we eventually managed to track them down for some excellent scope views.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – A couple of family groups, totaling about 10-12 birds, were at the Salin de Giraud.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avocetta*) – An estimated 80 of these, mainly in a single large flock, were also at the Salin de Giraud. On our second visit we saw just a couple of birds, but they were in a ditch right alongside the road, so we had pretty awesome views.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – Not often seen on this tour, so a flock of about 100 of them, many still in breeding plumage, at the Salin de Giraud was a nice find. Most of them flew right through, but a single bird landed on the mud flat near the tern roost, where it was constantly harassed by Common Terns until it finally gave up and moved off.

EUROPEAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria*) – An even rarer find was a lone bird dozing on the mudflats at Salin de Giraud. I believe this was a first ever record for our France tours.

- NORTHERN LAPWING** (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A lone bird in poor light at the Tour Carbonniere was bettered by a quartet of these broad-winged plovers that winged by overhead at Mejanes.
- COMMON RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – About 50 of these plovers, many still in breeding dress, showed nicely on our first visit to the Salin de Giraud.
- LITTLE RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius dubius*) – There were fewer of these plovers at the Salin, but we had some good comparative views with the preceding species. A couple of birds were still in breeding plumage and showed the distinctive yellow eye ring.
- EURASIAN DOTTEREL** (*Charadrius morinellus*) – Never an easy bird to find, though our tour runs right during the peak of their migration through southern France. We got lucky on one of our visits to the Crau when a flock of about 50 of these elegant birds flew in as we were heading out of the area, landing near to the road and giving us incredible close looks. The only downside was the unsightly bits of toilet paper clinging to every bit of vegetation, leftovers from an illegal rave at the Peau de Meau several days earlier.
- Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)*
- EURASIAN CURLEW** (*Numenius arquata*) – A couple of birds on the shore of the Etang de Vaccares offered up some great scope views.
- BAR-TAILED GODWIT** (*Limosa lapponica*) – We may have missed a few of the more regularly encountered shorebirds on this tour (i.e. Wood Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Kentish Plover), we did pretty well with some of the more rarely seen species, including this one. We saw these godwits on both of our visits to the Salin de Giraud, with a total of about 7 birds seen.
- RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres*) – We were already getting back in the van when Kevin mentioned he thought he'd just seen one of these birds. So, we all piled back out and took a look, and sure enough, he'd found one in non-breeding plumage feeding quietly among the rocks. The one we saw on our return visit to the Salin a couple of days later was likely the same bird.
- LITTLE STINT** (*Calidris minuta*) – *Calidris* sandpipers were pretty scarce this trip, and we saw only 3, all 3 of which were Little Stints. The ones we saw on our first visit to the Salin de Giraud were quite distant and unsatisfying, but on our return visit we had excellent close studies of a well-marked juvenile.
- COMMON SNIPE** (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Our only record was of a group of 5 birds that flew up from a marshy field just as we were about to turn into the Mas D'Agon road.
- RED-NECKED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – This is the most likely phalarope to be seen on this tour, but it is still rarely recorded on our tour. A local birder told us about it, but it's unlikely we would have missed it, as it was swimming around in a small pond almost right next to the road. Dary was unable to choose between the two phalarope species, and gave the bird of the trip nod to the phalaropes in general.
- RED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – A much rarer bird in southern France, this one was a first-ever record for our tours. The same birder who'd told us about the Red-necked Phalarope also alerted us to this one, albeit a couple of hours later. We had already driven past this bird on our way out of the Salin de Giraud, so we would have missed it without his taking the time to stop and tell us. In winter plumage (as both our phalaropes were), this species has a much more uniform, solid gray back and a thicker bill than does Red-necked.
- COMMON SANDPIPER** (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Aptly named, as they were pretty common in the Camargue region.
- GREEN SANDPIPER** (*Tringa ochropus*) – Singles on three consecutive days in the Camargue. All were flybys, but the broadly barred tail and dark underwings help set this apart from the similar Wood Sandpiper.
- COMMON GREENSHANK** (*Tringa nebularia*) – Three birds on the shores of the Etang de Vaccares on our first visit there were all we could muster up.
- COMMON REDSHANK** (*Tringa totanus*) – A trio of these birds at Salin de Giraud were a bit distant, but those new Swarovski scopes allowed us some great views nonetheless!
- Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)*
- SLENDER-BILLED GULL** (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – The earlier group's report of 100+ of these local gulls at the Salin de Giraud had us pretty confident we would find some, but we very nearly dipped! It was only by carefully scanning through every group of gulls on our way out that we finally picked up a the distinctive profile of this bird. Even so, it was far enough out, and very actively swimming among a large number of Black-headed Gulls that it took some time before everyone was satisfied they'd seen the right bird.
- BLACK-HEADED GULL** (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – The common small gull in the Camargue region.
- LITTLE GULL** (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) – Our search for Slender-billed Gulls initially netted us 4 of these diminutive birds among the hordes of Black-headed Gulls. It's possible that if Cory hadn't picked out one of these birds pretty quickly that we might have missed out on the Slender-billed altogether.
- MEDITERRANEAN GULL** (*Ichthyaeus melanocephalus*) – Quite numerous on our first afternoon in the Aigues-Mortes area, which is usually the only place we see this local species. So, I was more than a little surprised when we spotted one flying overhead during an afternoon walk around our hotel the next day.
- YELLOW-LEGGED GULL** (*Larus michahellis*) – The default white-headed gull in the region.
- LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL** (*Larus fuscus*) – It can be tricky to pick out this species, especially as the locally occurring race, *graellsii*, isn't one of the darker-backed forms and they look very much like Yellow-legged Gulls. What made it stand out was that it looked consistently darker-backed than the surrounding Yellow-legged Gulls no matter which angle it was viewed from. This bird was in the same flooded field as the thick-knees near the Crau.
- CASPIAN TERN** (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – Up to 4 or 5 of these large terns were around the Etang de Vaccares.
- BLACK TERN (EURASIAN)** (*Chlidonias niger niger*) – A handful of winter-plumaged birds were among the large numbers of Common and Sandwich terns at the roost at Salin de Giraud.
- WHISKERED TERN** (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – The distant small terns we saw at the same pond as the pochard were this species, as Cory discovered when he took a careful look at his photos after returning home, though we didn't make a positive identification in the field. The terns we glimpsed at Mas D'Agon may also have been this species.
- COMMON TERN** (*Sterna hirundo*) – Huge numbers (we estimated 2500) at the tern roost at Salin de Giraud.
- SANDWICH TERN** (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – The second most common tern at Salin de Giraud, though there were only 200-300 of these.
- ELEGANT TERN** (*Thalasseus elegans*) – An extremely rare bird anywhere in Europe, and this one was a completely unexpected find in the big tern roost. At first we thought it might be Lesser Crested Tern, but close analyses of the pictures show that the bill is a bit droopy, and yellower towards the tip, and the back color matches that of the adjacent Sandwich Terns, all features that favor this species instead. Charlotte chose this as her favorite bird of the trip, and she also deserves the credit for picking this one out of the huge tern flocks. Nice work Charlotte!

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*)

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – Seen daily in the Camargue, sometimes in big flocks. Just a couple of birds were in the mountains, however.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – A fairly recent invader across western Europe from the southeast, this dove is now quite common in southern France, but more so in the Camargue region than in the Pyrenees.

Strigidae (Owls)

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) – Cory spotted one at great distance on our final early morning on the Crau. It was discernible through the scopes, but just barely.

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*) – Not atypically with this owl, it kept well out of viewing range, and seemed pretty uninterested in playback, though it was intermittently vocal on a couple of nights. [*]

Apodidae (Swifts)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*) – Swifts are usually pretty scarce by the time we do this tour, so it was great to see these birds a couple of times, and well. First we had three or four near the Montpellier airport as we searched for bustards, then a couple of days later, an estimated 65+ went over as we birded a site near the Crau. With many flying quite low in good light, we couldn't have asked for better looks at them.

COMMON SWIFT (*Apus apus*) – Not as numerous as the Alpine Swifts, but we had this large, dark swift on three days. First we saw a couple near the Montpellier airport our first afternoon, then one flew by quite low on the Crau steppe, and finally there were a couple of birds seen our morning at Mejanès.

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOOPOE (*Upupa epops*) – So frustrating! Just after we'd loaded up the vans at the hotel one morning, I glanced to my left and noticed this bird sitting on a power line. Before I could really alert anyone to its presence, it flew off low over the fields, and only Cory and Charlotte were able to spot it before it vanished behind a grove of trees.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Even more elusive than usual, and those strong mistral winds didn't help, but we did ultimately get some good scope views of a perched bird at Mas D'Agon. A brilliant bird that usually places well in the list of trip favorites; this year was no exception, as Phil chose it as his top pick, moving it into second spot behind the Lammergeier.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – Though we saw rollers daily in the Camargue, it seemed to me they were less numerous than in most years. Our best views probably came on that first afternoon, when we scoped a perched bird near the Little Bustard site.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – This impressive woodpecker seemed to be everywhere in the mountains this year. We saw them multiple times flying over; on past trips, I'd only seen them after using playback. One bird gave a couple of nice long flyby views as we ate our lunch near the cafe at the Cirque de Gavarnie, but the best sighting was of a cooperative female that we scoped and watched for a long time in the Vallee D'Ossoue. Ruth's pick for top bird of the trip, and the 3rd overall favorite, just being edged out by the kingfisher.

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – Recorded nearly every day of the trip, but overall quite an elusive bird to see well. We had a couple of good encounters, with a distant scoped bird during an optional afternoon walk near our Arles hotel, and another one that sat briefly in the open as we commenced our walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – The Crau steppe is the place to see this local bird, though it can be tough to get definitive views as the birds are often distant, heat shimmer is usually a problem, and there are generally lots of Eurasian Kestrels around, too. The cool, cloudy day helped us here; though the birds we found were still quite distant, without the heat shimmer, we were able to get good views through the scope at a couple of males.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Very common and seen daily (except for one day) on the trip.

ELEONORA'S FALCON (*Falco eleonora*) – With plenty of recent records being posted on France's rarities sites, I was on high alert for this rare species. Still, I was pretty surprised when I looked up at a falcon that was flying over as we drove north from the Salin de Giraud and noticed the contrasting dark wing linings. Luckily we were at a spot where we could easily pull over, and Cory managed to snap a few identifying pictures of the bird as it flew over across the fields. This was Jeff's choice for bird of the trip, and it was mine, too as it was just my second sighting ever of this species (the first being years earlier in Madagascar).

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – Seen especially well at the Salin de Giraud, shortly before the Eleonora's Falcon. Three birds passed by that day, with one essentially hanging over the road for a good long time as it flew into the strong headwinds, giving us a wonderful chance to really study it. Beautiful!

Laniidae (Shrikes)

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – A fairly scarce and local species in the region, but we had a distant pair at a regular site for them, then another on the Crau near the Peau de Meau.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – Numerous and conspicuous in the mountains this trip, with plenty seen daily, including the regular posse of them right in behind our hotel each morning.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – A regular sight in good numbers in the Camargue region.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – Doesn't seem quite as gregarious as Yellow-billed Chough, though we did have a decent-sized flock of 28 birds in the Vallee D'Ossoue one day. Best, though were the pair of birds walking on the slope above the trail at the Port de Boucharo.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) – Our first and best encounter with this highly gregarious species was with a close flock of about 185 birds on the slopes below the Gavarnie/Gedre ski area. Most of our subsequent sightings were of flocks kettling high above the ridge lines.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Abundant in the Camargue region, where we saw many hundreds daily.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – Surprisingly scarce on the tour route, but we managed to pick out a lone bird mixed in with many jackdaws, crows, and gulls in a flooded field near the Crau. After we'd scoped the bird on the ground, it eventually flew up and came right past us, its distinctive bill shape easily discernible in flight, too.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Numerous throughout the trip, though outnumbered by jackdaws in the Camargue region.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Just a few pairs at scattered sites in the Pyrenees. It appeared to me that these birds were a bit smaller than the ravens I'm used to seeing back home.

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (*Alauda arvensis*) – Larks can be tough at this time of year, as they usually aren't singing and rarely sit out in the open for decent viewing. Still we managed to get some pretty good looks at a quartet of these larks on the Crau one morning, then had excellent looks at a calling bird as it flew overhead at Mejanès the next day.

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*) – Several birds at Mejanès (shortly after we had the skylark there) were pretty reluctant to land where we could see them, but they did give us a few good close flight views, with one or two showing the distinctive rusty underwings. A couple of them were singing as well, which also helped nail down their identification. Someone also spotted one walking down a side road at the Salin de Giraud, giving us our best view yet.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Numerous in the Camargue, though generally outnumbered by Barn Swallow.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – Good numbers seen most days in the Pyrenees.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Seen in large numbers daily in the Camargue, but strangely absent from the mountains this year.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – A few around the town of Giraud during our rest stop there, then seen regularly in the Pyrenees, including over a hundred birds one foggy morning in the Vallée D'Ossoue.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (*Pariparus ater*) – The most numerous tit in the mountains, seemingly present in every mixed flock of small Passerines.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – After missing this one on the hike to the cirque, it was down to Le Lienz on our last morning for us to find this attractive little bird. Things didn't start out too well there, and we were on our way out when we finally connected with a decent mixed flock and managed to track down just a single Crested Tit. It was all we needed though, and it sure was cooperative!

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – First seen in Les Alpilles where a trio gave us excellent views at our picnic dinner spot. Later we encountered this pretty tit regularly in the Pyrenees.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – I see this as the European equivalent to our Black-capped Chickadee, a common backyard bird that occurs in a variety of habitats. We had quite a few meetings with these lovely birds, particularly in the mountains where we ran into them daily.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – These birds present a pretty distinctive shape in flight; as Cory suggested, they look like flying lollipops! We had a group of about 13 birds during a rest stop en route to the mountains, though a few folks had left their binoculars in the van (against advice from the guides ;-)) and didn't get great looks. Luckily, we had them twice more on our final day, with a trio in a large mixed flock at Le Lienz, then three more birds back where we'd had our first encounter.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – One showed up next to the parking lot just before we began our hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and a couple more showed well at Le Lienz on our final day.

Certhiidae (Treetreepers)

EURASIAN TREETREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – We generally find this one at higher elevations than the next species, which can help in sorting them out. Their songs are also quite different, and, as we saw on that super close bird along the track to the cirque, the long hindclaw of this species is really quite noticeable.

SHORT-TOED TREETREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – Our only one was in a little grove of conifers at our lunch stop overlooking the walled city of Carcassonne.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – A couple of birds in a forest patch near Mauvezin were not at all cooperative and were seen by just a few folks. Now split from the Winter Wren of North America.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – They were a bit flighty, but eventually we wound up with pretty good looks at a couple along the river near Gedre. On an optional walk in town one afternoon, several of us had more good views of a more cooperative bird.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – Incredibly close views of about half a dozen right next to the trail during our hike up to the cirque.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – Usually we see Goldcrests both in the Camargue region and the mountains, and this species only once we get to the Pyrenees, but this year things were reversed. We saw several of these early on, starting with a pair along the canal during an afternoon walk near our Arles hotel, then a couple more in Les Alpilles the next day. In the mountains, we saw very few of these, though there were one or two with Goldcrests at Le Lienz.

Cettiidae (Bush-Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – Though a commonly heard songster, this skulker can be tough to see, but we really lucked out this year when a bird responded well and hopped right out into the open, where it remained for several seconds, tail cocked and fanned broadly. This was easily my most satisfying view of this species. I think the rain and cool weather probably stirred this one up a bit.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – A trio of brightly colored ones at our picnic lunch stop in the Camargue on our first full day were our only ones in that region, though we saw quite a few later in the mountains.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – The duller plumage, dark legs, and tail wagging habit help separate these from the similar Willow Warblers. We also got to hear several singing their distinctive songs in the mountains, where they were fairly common and recorded daily.

Acrocephalidae (Reed-Warblers and Allies)

EURASIAN REED-WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – Just after the bold Cetti's Warbler showed off at Etang des Aulnes, we also found a quartet of these warblers feeding low in some trailside shrubs and showing surprisingly well.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Usually quite common around our Arles hotel, but they were missing there this year, and we didn't catch up with these birds until our final day in the Camargue, when we saw several at Mejanes.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – We had a few, mainly females, in the mountains, but there was none that was seen cleanly by the group as a whole.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – A few birds around the Camargue on our first outing there. A few of us got great looks at a handsome male that popped up spontaneously during one stop along the Etang des Vaccares.

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*) – Our final new birds of the trip, and rather unexpected. We found this one with a flurry of other birds (tits, warblers, etc) as we took a break at a roadside rest area on our way back to Toulouse. The bird was pretty cooperative, too, and gave some excellent views.

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – I've always found these warblers to be quite flighty and difficult to get clear views of, so it was pleasing this trip to not only find them easily, but to have them perch up often enough, and long enough, that we eventually got everyone good scope views of them!

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Numerous and quite confiding in the mountains, where we saw these charming birds daily.

BLUETHROAT (*Luscinia svecica*) – This one was a big surprise. We were just starting out on our hike to the cirque, when I noticed this bird fly up out of the grass and across to a lone tree on the edge of the field. Though my initial thought was that it was a female Bluethroat, I really wanted to be sure as we've never had one on this tour before. Luckily, Jeff managed to refind the bird as it sat and preened in the tree, and we got decent scope views, and a few pictures, of this rarity.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – Arguably the most numerous migrant Passerine encountered in the Camargue region, with a few birds also in the mountains. One day I'd love to see this species in breeding plumage.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – Generally not very common on this trip, so that gorgeous male we found at our picnic lunch spot our first day in the Camargue was a real treat. We also had a couple of other females, at Mas D'Agon and in the Vallee D'Ossoue.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Though we had a few in the lowlands, it wasn't until we got to the Pyrenees that we discovered how common this species is in southern France. They are by far the most numerous Passerine in the high mountain meadow areas.

RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – A couple of these beautifully-patterned birds showed wonderfully at the big rock slide in the Vallee D'Ossoue. The first colorful bird appeared to be a male that had not quite completed the molt into non-breeding plumage.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola solitarius*) – I'd not seen this species before on the tour, and given our poor views, you might still say that, but the distant bird on the rocks as we waited for eagle-owls in the Alpilles was obviously a rock-thrush, and this is the species that occurs there, so...

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Like the cisticola, this species was curiously absent from around our Arles hotel, and we only managed to find a single one on our final morning near the Crau, when we usually see loads in the region. We fared somewhat better in the mountains, where we ran into a few more.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – A couple of birds seen on a couple of days in the Vallee D'Ossoue included at least one lovely male that was still mostly in breeding plumage.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – A few birds out on the Crau, then many more in the mountains, including a few dapper males in breeding plumage.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Seen daily in the Pyrenees, but lacking in the Camargue region.

SONG THRUSH (*Turdus philomelos*) – Seems the scarcest of the three regularly occurring thrushes, but we had excellent looks at a couple of birds feeding below some large oak trees among a bunch of blackbirds right next to the parking area for the hike to the cirque.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – A couple of big flyover groups of thrushes were mainly, or perhaps exclusively, this species, easily told by the white wing linings. We also did manage to get a couple of scope views of distant birds in the Vallee D'Ossoue.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Big numbers in the Camargue region, but pretty much absent in the mountains.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*) – The weather for our walk into Spain wasn't particularly pleasant, with some low-hanging fog and cold winds blowing, but the possibility of seeing this species drew us out onto the trail nonetheless. And we hit pay dirt pretty quickly, as we spied this bird feeding just next to the trail before we'd gone more than a couple of hundred yards from the parking lot! We went on to see several more, but that first one was definitely the most cooperative. It obviously won over Sandy's heart, too, as she chose it as her favorite bird of the trip.

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – Also an accentor, but as it is a common bird in England, of course it needs a one-word name (like Swallow, Wren, Dabchick, etc). These were pretty common at a few sites in the mountains, especially around the car park at Barrage des Gloriettes, where we found several birds chowing down on the remains of a baguette someone had left out on the rocks.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – There weren't many around this year, and we struggled a bit for this species, though we had a couple of flyovers at Salin de Giraud, and ultimately managed decent views of several on the recently mown fields at Mejanes.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – The longest-tailed of the wagtails, these ones were pretty easy to find along any and all mountain streams.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – A couple were in the parking lot at the hotel in Montpellier, and a few elsewhere in the Camargue region, but these are much more common in the mountains, where we saw quite a few. As in other years, there always seemed to be 3 or 4 hanging around on the

street just up from our hotel in Gedre.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – A largish, rather pale sandy pipit, this species was found first out on the Crau, then seen again among a bunch of wagtails at Mejanes.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – Aside from a quartet of these that flew over one morning at Mas de la Feniere, we saw just one bird. Cory pointed out a close bird on the ground as we walked around the Barrage des Gloriettes. The clean, well-defined streaks on the breast helped to set this apart from the ubiquitous Water Pipits.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – Pretty much everywhere in the high mountain grasslands. Generally rather dingy-looking with rather blurry streaking, unlike the cleanly marked Tree Pipits.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – A gorgeous male in breeding plumage was spotted among the boulders at the big rock slide in the Vallee D'Ossoue, then a couple more males the next morning as we started out on the walk up to the cirque. Most years we only see these birds in their duller, winter plumage, so seeing them in bright breeding colors was a real treat.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – Scarce this trip, and we managed just two sightings, both of single birds, at a scrubby field on our way out to the Crau.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Numerous and seen daily in the mountains, including a few fine males in breeding plumage.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – We didn't do as well on this species as usual, and though we had a few encounters in the Camargue, we never had really good views of these as a group. A pair in the lower stretches of the hike up to the cirque were no more cooperative, sadly.

EURASIAN LINNET (*Carduelis cannabina*) – Good close views of about 20 at the Gavarnie/Gedre ski area in the dense fog on our first attempt to head up to the Port de Boucharo.

CITRIL FINCH (*Serinus citrinella*) – We worked hard for this one in the Cirque de Gavarnie, and ultimately managed to locate a lone male for some good scope views.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – There were a fair number of these around this year, including a flock of about 25 birds feeding at an illegal dump site along the road into the Vallee D'Ossoue, in company with a bunch of other birds (Dunnocks, blackbirds, E. Robins, etc). There were also quite a few seen at Le Lienz on our final morning.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Seen in good numbers throughout.

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Though there were some around in the Camargue, it seemed to me we weren't encountering this species as regularly as we have on most tours in past years.

MAMMALS

COMMON PIPISTRELLE (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) – These were the small bats roosting behind the sign at the Le Capeliere visitor center. I'm not sure about the bats that were seen late one afternoon at Gedre, but they may also have been this species.

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*) – One speedy one was seen out on the Crau one morning.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Numerous in the Pyrenees, where they were introduced by hunters to provide an alternate food source for Golden Eagles, which were apparently mainly feeding on chamois prior to the marmot's arrival here. [I]

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*) – Quite a few of these attractive squirrels were seen in the Pyrenees, especially on the hike up to the cirque.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – These overgrown muskrats were seen a couple of times in the Camargue, probably best at the Tour Carbonniere on our first day. Introduced here from South America for the fur trade, presumably. [I]

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – I think Sandy and I (and the marmots!) were the only ones to see this animal at the rock slide in the Vallee D'Ossoue.

STOAT (SHORT-TAILED WEASEL) (*Mustela erminea*) – One was seen vanishing among the rocks during the hike around the Barrage des Gloriettes, but some vigorous squeaking got the better of its curiosity and the weasel popped back out a couple of times for a look at us.

WILD BOAR (*Sus scrofa*) – It's not often we see this animal, and a look like we had was pretty much unprecedented. We had this one in sight for several minutes as it trotted daintily across the Crau early one morning.

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – It looked like we were going to miss this species despite much scanning of the hillsides at the Cirque de Gavarnie, but a final sweep after we had already begun our descent finally netted us scope views of 7 animals, including a couple of young kids.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 152 bird taxa and 9 mammal taxa