



Field Guides Tour Report

FRANCE: CAMARGUE & PYRENEES 2018

Sep 1, 2018 to Sep 11, 2018
Megan Edwards Crewe & Ned Brinkley

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Greater Flamingoes are probably the flagship species of the Camargue. Photo by guide Ned Brinkley.

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

We started with four days in the Camargue region, near the mouth of the Rhone River. Here, among salt pans, thick stands of reed and fields of rice, we connected with many migrants and a handful of resident breeders. Clouds of dusty pink Greater Flamingos massed in area waterways. Hundreds of shorebirds snoozed or foraged in shallow lagoons, resting and refueling on their long journey from Arctic breeding grounds to African wintering areas. Busy flocks of European Bee-eaters flashed golden wings as they chased insects overhead -- or sat, like bright necklace beads, along utility wires. A Lesser Kestrel hunted from a metal post. Frosty-winged Mediterranean Gulls flew over a busy roadway in a near-constant stream. Little Bustards lurked along the edge of a busy airport. Tawny Pipits strode along a dried lagoon, flashing white tail edges as they shifted locations. A White-winged Tern flashed its distinctive pale rump among more evenly-colored Black Terns. A Garganey snoozed among a flotilla of Green-winged (Eurasian) Teal. Jewel-bright Common Kingfishers gleamed along a narrow stream. A Southern Gray Shrike (soon to be an IBERIAN Gray Shrike) perched atop a series of prickly bushes, while a young Red-backed Shrike demolished some hapless prey nearby. A pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers peered around from spiky dead sticks while Long-tailed and Eurasian Blue tits swarmed through treetops below them. A Spectacled Warbler foraged in fleshy Salicornia bushes. And even though the Eurasian Eagle-Owl eluded us (darn it), we still enjoyed a delightful picnic supper in an olive grove near the cliffs of Les Baux.

Then it was the long transfer to the high Pyrenees, trading the flatlands along the coast for spectacular jagged peaks and glacier-carved valleys, tumbling mountain streams, inquisitive flocks of sheep and a whole new suite of birds. White-throated Dippers bobbed on rocks in the midst of a tumbling mountain stream, sharing space with long-tailed Gray Wagtails. Two strikingly peachy adult Lammergeiers sat on a ledge against an equally peachy cliff, tearing hunks from some unseen carcass. A Black Woodpecker made multiple passes, calling challenges. Eurasian Griffons glided overhead on massive outstretched wings. Jaunty Crested Tits perched on treetops, replaced by equally jaunty Coal Tits. Yellow-billed Choughs formed loose "bird tornadoes" above mountain peaks. A pair of Egyptian Vultures glided above a jagged peak, and another spiraled with a White Stork over a cloud-draped valley. A Ring Ouzel gobbled berries from a knee-high bush. Flocks of Citril Finches bounded through a boulder field, occasionally lining up on some of the shed-sized rocks. Water Pipits strode through pastures while Northern Wheatears flashed semaphores from foot-high stones. Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrushes stood sentinel on rocky outcrops. Eurasian Jays posed on a backyard luge run. Two Pyrenean Chamois munched on a flower-strewn hillside. And we enjoyed some spectacular vistas from various vantage points. What a gorgeous part of the world!

Ned and I enjoyed sharing some adventures -- and some fabulous wining and dining -- with you all. We hope to see you in the field again, somewhere, some day! -- Megan

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

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

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*) – Common in the Camargue (including several ponds containing two score or more) with a few others seen on the drive back from the mountains to Toulouse. A few of the birds were dove-gray youngsters.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Regular in larger bodies of water around the Camargue, including a flock of 35 snoozing or preening on a muddy islet in one of the ponds at Salin de Giraud.

GARGANEY (*Spatula querquedula*) – A handful among the Eurasian Teal in a pond near the entrance to La Capeliere, including a beautifully patterned female sleeping among a knot of teal and a male who flashed his distinctive wings as he dropped in from the sky.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – A few dozen on the Camargue, all in eclipse plumage; some of the males were just beginning to show traces of their breeding plumage again. Their enormous bills make these easy to pick out from the more common Mallards.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Common and widespread across the Camargue.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – A few dozen snoozed among the larger Northern Shovelers on a pond near the entrance to La Capeliere; their small size -- and the small butterscotch-colored patch of feathers under their tails -- helped to quickly separate them from the other ducks.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*) – A covey of 8 or so burst from vegetation near the old railway car on a rough field near the Crau steppe and flew low over the bushes and away -- flushed by those who had ventured into the scrub for a pit stop. Unfortunately, we couldn't relocate them!

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – A few males seen standing on road edges or in fields during various drives on the second half of the tour.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – Small numbers daily in the Camargue, including a quintet floating and diving on a channel edging the salt pans at Salin de Giraud and a pair among the coots on the Etang de Charnier (the big lake we birded near in the Petite Camargue on our transfer day).

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – A few sprinkled among the multitudes of coots on various etangs, with a couple of others on some of the deeper waters around the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

EARED GREBE (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – As usual, this was the least common of the tour's grebes, with only a few seen among the coots on the Etang des Vaccares. Small numbers are resident in the Camargue, but their numbers increase in the winter with migrants from further north.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – Abundant in the Camargue, with only a few gangly gray youngsters spotted among the multitudes of varyingly-pink adults. This species is considerably paler in plumage than is the (formerly conspecific) American Flamingo.

Ciconiidae (Storks)

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*) – Two circled over the marshes and flooded fields of Mas d'Agon, flashing their white bellies as they spiraled, and we saw another in flight as we made our way to the Crau steppe for our first visit. This species nests in large tracts of undisturbed, swampy, pine forest -- a habitat that is declining all across northern and eastern Europe.

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – A distant flying bird near La Capeliere in the Camargue (above our pond full of sleeping ducks) and a high-flyer above the Vallee d'Ossoue which made several passes back and forth under the cloud layer, joined up with a passing Egyptian Vulture for a few spins and finally made a break for the Port de Boucharo.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Dozens and dozens festooned posts and snags around the Camargue, and others flew past along the coast.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Regular daily in the Camargue, plus a migrating trio headed south over the Crau steppe early one morning.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Also daily around the Camargue, though in far smaller numbers than the previous species. At least a couple of our sightings were of gingery youngsters.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Regular -- though not particularly numerous -- throughout the Camargue. This is an eastern European species that has expanded into the western half of the continent only in the past 30 years or so.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Very common in the Camargue, with scores seen feeding together in some of the salt pans near Salin de Giraud, and others clustered together in roost trees (like the ones near the Tour de Carbonniere on our first afternoon).

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Abundant throughout the Camargue region, including a few hitching rides on some of the region's famous white horses.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Especially nice looks at a handful near the Tour Carbonniere on our first afternoon; the ones standing on fence posts gave us particularly good opportunities for scope studies, and a few in flight showed well why their cousins (the Indian Pond-Heron) are colloquially known as "Magic Birds" in India, "magically" changing from brown to white as they flew.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – A couple of birds burst from some tamarisk bushes near La Capeliere and flew around a bit before disappearing back into cover.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – A few dozen flew past at various spots around the Camargue, including a wavering line of six over the Etang de Charnier in the Petite Camargue.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – A few sprinkled on dead snags and muddy islets around the Camargue, and a couple of others flying over -- both with and without fish.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

BEARDED VULTURE (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – Our first were a pair of adults munching something on a rocky ledge on a tiger-striped wall of the Vallee d'Ossoue -- great spotting, Betsy! We saw others gliding along the ridges at the Cirque de Gavarnie, and a pair of dark brown youngsters tracking back and forth along a sheer cliff face at the Lac des Gloriettes. This one easily won the "Favorite Bird of the Tour" competition.

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) – Ned spotted us a couple of adults soaring over the Pic du Pibeste shortly after our arrival there, and we found another adult gliding down the Vallee d'Ossoue.

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*) – Small numbers on scattered days throughout the tour, including a few lifting off from a woodlot near our first bee-eaters, a few gliding over our picnic spot near Les Baux, a couple soaring through the gap at the Port de Boucharo and a few spiraling along the ridge line at the Cirque de Gavarnie, headed for Spain. Though this species was named for its supposed predilection for honey, we now know they're really after bee larvae.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – Common in the skies over the Pyrenees, with a stunning 65 (!) seen in several slow-turning kettles during our hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. We had superb on-the-ground views of five perched on boulders along the road up to the Port de Boucharo.

SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE (*Circaetus gallicus*) – Most common in the lowlands, where they were seen daily, with a scattered few in the mountains. We found it particularly impressive how well they could hang in one spot, even in quite strong winds -- still enough we could keep them in the scopes without moving them!

BOOTED EAGLE (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) – One soared over the distant modern town of Carcassonne as we birded the highway rest area. The long, narrow, two-toned wings of the light morph of this species are strongly reminiscent of those of Swainson's Hawks.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – A few got a brief glimpse of one soaring along the ridges in the Vallee d'Ossoue, but our best looks came in the Cirque de Gavarnie, where an adult and at least one youngster played in the updraft along the peaks. We saw another youngster with the griffons on our way down.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Common around the Camargue, where most of the birds we saw were this year's youngsters; we also saw a couple of older females, but no adult males. The golden heads of the youngsters (and females) were striking, even from a distance.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*) – A young bird -- readily identifiable as such thanks to its rusty underparts -- circled over the stony Crau steppe on our first visit. Nice spotting Betsy!

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – Another common and widespread species, seen on most days of the tour. The starlings helped us to find a few, boxing up in big balls of birds just above the flap-flap-gliding hawks.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*) – A huge youngster with a VERY full crop powered past us as we enjoyed our picnic supper in an olive grove near Les Baux.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – Our first soared over the ski slopes at FD de l'Ayre et du Lisey, showing nicely the patterning on its wings and its mobile red tail and putting a nice cap on an otherwise quiet afternoon. We had another, closer bird over the wide-open hillsides around the Col du Tourmalet.

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – Another common species, seen on many days -- including some perched on fence posts along the highways as we traveled from Arles to Gedre. As we saw, they come in a bewildering multitude of color morphs.

Otididae (Bustards)

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*) – Eight foraged in a quiet(er) corner of the Montpellier airport, showing nicely in the recently cut grass. One even strolled out onto a taxiway, letting us see virtually every bit of it. This species is in steep decline across much of its former range.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*) – At least two -- and possibly three -- called from the dense reeds along the boardwalk at Tour Carbonniere, and one made a couple of quick appearances, scuttling along the edge of a channel and then flying across it to the other side.

WESTERN SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) – Two of these big marsh-dwellers paraded around on a soggy mudflat in the Petite Camargue, seen by those who ventured out into the rain to the back of the van to huddle under the raised back door.

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – Very common across the Camargue, where the breeding season seems to have gone very well; we saw a lot of drab, brown youngsters! This species was recently split from the American species now known as Common Gallinule.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Thousands and thousands and THOUSANDS floated in vast rafts on the Etang des Vaccares, with smaller numbers on just about every body of water we passed in the Camargue. It's probably no surprise to read that this is a major wintering area for the species.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Plenty of these elegant shorebirds strode around the salt pans near Salin de Giraud on their long pink legs. We saw a few others feeding on the back edge of a pond near La Capeliere, and others in the distant pond at the Marais de Grenouillet.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avocetta*) – Abundant in the Camargue, particularly near Salin de Giraud, where they scythed the waters in dozens of salt pans. Females have longer, more strongly-curved bill than males do.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – A single winter-plumaged bird walked along the edge of a ditch at Fangassier, and we saw a huge flock of more than 80 -- in a mix of plumages ranging from full breeding to full winter -- along the edge of another pond further along the same road.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A handful stood in one of the flooded fields near Mas d'Agon (surprisingly camouflaged), and others flew over a pond near the entrance to La Capeliere, showing their distinctive rounded black-and-white underwings.

KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – Dozens of these little plovers -- palest of the three small species seen on the tour -- pattered over the mudflats in some of the salt pans near Salin de Giraud and others did the same around the ponds at Fangassier. This is the only small species on the tour which lacks a black neck ring.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Probably the most common of the tour's small plovers, with scores huddled on the mudflats in the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud and on other ponds around the Etang de Vaccarres. This is the species that looks most like the New World's Semipalmated Plover.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – Far less common than the other two small plovers on the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud, with others at Fangassier and along the edge of the Etang de Charnier in the Petite Camargue. The attenuated, long-winged appearance of this species -- in combination with their paler legs and dark bill -- helped to distinguish them from the other species, even at considerable distances. We also saw several close enough that we could clearly make out the distinctive yellow eye rings of the adults.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*) – Hordes in the salt pans near Salin de Giraud, including many still sporting traces of their snazzy breeding plumage. This species is named for the curlew-like curve of their beaks.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Regular on the salt pans near Salin de Giraud, though in much smaller numbers than the previous species; most of them seemed to be huddled together in roosting flocks, where their black bellies allowed them to be easily picked out from the other shorebirds.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – Hundreds scuttled across the salt pans near Salin de Giraud and probed the muddy edges of various ponds and lakes in the Camargue. This is the common small "peep" across much of Europe.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Two rocketed out of the tall reeds in the Petite Camargue when we explored the causeway between the etangs right before the rain hit. This species was formerly considered conspecific with the Wilson's Snipe, but was split based on morphological differences; for one thing, it's ONE outer feather on each side of the tail that makes the "winnowing" noise of this species, rather than two.

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Regular across the Camargue, where they teetered along the edges of ponds and lagoons, though never in big numbers. This species is closely related to (and looks a lot like the winter plumage of) America's Spotted Sandpiper.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – Two chased each other around a field near the entrance to La Capeliere, flashing their white rumps and dark underwings as they dipped down into narrow channels and then leapt back up into view -- distracting us repeatedly from our search for the elusive pratincoles (which also have white rumps and black wings). We found another in the Petite Camargue.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – We heard them calling on several occasions (sounding rather like Greater Yellowlegs), but our only sighting came in the Petite Camargue on our transfer day, when we found one standing on a muddy little islet along the causeway beside the Etang de Charnier.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – Another species seen on a mudflat edging the Etang de Charnier -- two looking a bit smaller and more delicate than a nearby Common Greenshank. They sprang into flight as we watched, showing their white rumps as they flew.

Glareolidae (Pratincoles and Coursers).

COLLARED PRATINCOLE (*Glareola pratincola*) – One flew past as we drove along the edge of the Etang des Vaccarres, seen by a few folks on the left side of my van. Ned spotted it (or another) as we birded the pond north of La Capeliere, and a few folks got on it before it disappeared over the surrounding trees.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers).

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – It took some time and patience, but we eventually found a few of these distinctive gulls among a big roost of Black-headed Gulls -- and then found a bunch more bathing in a pond right near the beach south of Salin de Giraud. Several of them were still strikingly pink underneath.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Very, very common throughout the Camargue. All had already lost their distinctive "black" (really chocolate brown) head feathers, and showed only a small dark ear spot.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyophaga melanocephalus*) – More widely spread than usual. We had the regular mobs around Aigues-Mortes, where we watched numerous snowy-white birds in flight over the salt pans. We saw others kettling over the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud and the north end of the Etang des Vaccarres, where they're less expected.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – These were the very common large gulls around the Camargue. Though they were recently split from the Herring Gull complex, they're actually more closely related to the Lesser Black-backed Gull. The wary birds in the horse pastures around our Raphele hotel gave us our best views.

LITTLE TERN (*Sternula albifrons*) – Some near Aigues-Mortes, including a handful of brown-backed youngsters paddling among the bathing Black-headed Gulls on a roadside pond. We had others hunting with Black Terns over a lagoon south of Salin de Giraud, which allowed us to see just how small they really are. This species is closely related to the very similar Least Tern.

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – Our first hunted over a dry field near the town of Le Sambuc, seen as we reconvened after a pit stop in town, and we found a few others on an islet in one of the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud on our second visit there. This species hunts insects rather than fish.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – A few of these -- the largest of the world's terns -- each day in the Camargue, including some hunting over the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud and a couple on the Petite Camargue on our transfer day.

BLACK TERN (EURASIAN) (*Chlidonias niger niger*) – Common over the lagoons south of Salin de Giraud, with a few sprinkled among the roosting terns on some of the islets there. The uniformly gray upperparts of this species in winter plumage help to distinguish them from the next species.

WHITE-WINGED TERN (*Chlidonias leucopterus*) – At least one (and possibly two) of these uncommon vagrants mingled with the previous species over the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud. The whitish rump of this species, plus its paler head and the lack of a dark breast patch, help to distinguish it from the more-common Black Tern.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – Small numbers daily around the Camargue, all in winter plumage. The overall paleness of this marsh (i.e. freshwater) tern helps to separate it from the previous two species.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – A few along the coast and in the salt pans on the day we birded the south of Salin de Giraud, including some snoozing among the Sandwich Terns in one of the big roosts, and those in Ned's van saw another four in the Petite Camargue.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Hundreds and hundreds hunting and resting on and over the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud, with others elsewhere in the Camargue. This was by far the tour's most numerous tern.

Pteroclididae (Sandgrouse).

PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE (*Pterocles alchata*) – Ned and Dale were the only two who happened to be looking in the right direction when a small group of these declining birds dropped into the dry vegetation on a scrubby private hunting reserve near the Crau steppe.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves).

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Regular throughout, particularly around cities and towns. All the birds we saw were feral, in big flocks of mixed colors.

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – Another common and widespread species, often seen in flight, where their wide white wing and nape patches were very apparent. We saw plenty of perched birds too; their enormous size is always surprising!

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Regular in the lowlands, but missing from the mountains. This species only reached Europe early in the past century, but has now spread widely across the continent.

Strigidae (Owls)

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) – One sat on one of the bars across a sheep shed window on the Crau steppe, looking distinctly rotund. This was the owl associated with the Greek goddess Athena.

Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)

EURASIAN NIGHTJAR (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) – At least two flew back and forth over the olive grove near the cliffs where we searched for Eurasian Eagle-Owl, calling as they went. Typically, they're gone by the time of our tour.

Apodidae (Swifts)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*) – A handful of high birds zooming over our picnic supper spot near Les Baux dwarfed a nearby Common Swift; they have a wingspan of nearly two feet! We saw others around our Raphele hotel on a pre-breakfast walk the following morning. This species breeds in mountains across Europe and Asia, migrating far to the south (European birds go as far as southern Africa) for the winter.

COMMON SWIFT (*Apus apus*) – A scattering in various places in the lowlands, though never more than two or three at once. Most of this species has departed for points south by the time of our tour.

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOOPOE (*Upupa epops*) – One flew over the road as we left the Crau steppe on our first visit, disappearing into a dense poplar tree as we screeched to a halt. Unfortunately, I think only Suzi (who was in the front seat that day) and I got on it.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – A trio of noisy birds flashed along a little stream at Mas d'Agon, occasionally perching briefly in the open in a waterside willow before moving back out of view. We had nice looks at several in flight as they flew past where we were standing on the bridge - going well out of their way to avoid us.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*) – Quite common in the lowlands, with especially nice views of a group hunting from a utility wire along the road to the Salin de Giraud our first morning; those golden underwings are sure striking in flight. This species puts paid to the idea that all European birds are boring brown things.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – Also regular in the lowlands, typically in pairs perched within a few score yards of each other along roadside wires. Some of the young birds were decidedly drab.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos minor*) – Two territorial birds spun around us along a wooded stretch of road south of Raphele, perching repeatedly in a leafless treetop and allowing nice scope views.

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos medius*) – A noisy pair -- and a tag-along youngster -- shouted challenges near Mauvezin, flying back and forth along the edge of a field tucked into the forest. They played a bit hard to get until half the ladies disappeared off into the bushes; then one popped right out where we could see it.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – A brief flyby along a track south of Raphele before breakfast one morning, with another calling (and seen perched briefly in a tall spruce) in the forest de l'Ayre et du Lisey on our last morning.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – Yahoo! Our first encounter was less than satisfying -- one bounded across the highway in front of Ned's van and only a few people caught a glimpse. Fortunately, a duo at the FD de l'Ayre et du Lisey proved more cooperative. Though we only saw them in flight, their size still made it pretty thrilling -- and they're hard to confuse with much else!

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – Another species seen in the wooded area south of Raphele before breakfast one morning. It made several bounding flights past us (showing nicely its mostly-uniform olive plumage and yellowish rump) and perched several times where some or all got a view -- some even in the scopes.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – Our first hunted over the Montpellier airport, allowing nice comparison to a nearby Eurasian Kestrel; this one was a bit of a surprise, as it was the first your guides have ever seen there. We had great looks at another in more typical surroundings on our second visit to the Crau steppe. It hunted from a post near the north entrance gate, letting us study it both in flight and at rest.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Common throughout, with dozens seen hovering over farm fields, marshes, mountainsides and steppe throughout.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – Scattered birds hunting dragonflies over marshes around the Camargue, including a pair zipping back and forth over the Mas d'Agon.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius collurio*) – A youngster in a prickly bush near the start of the Crau steppe was munching away on some prey item as we studied it on our pre-breakfast visit -- nice spotting, Barry!

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – Our first was a very distant bird perched atop a bush far out on a stony field near the Crau steppe. Fortunately, we had MUCH closer views of another hunting near the north gate on our pre-breakfast visit the following morning. The taxonomy of this species is changing; the subspecies found in southern France and the Iberian peninsula (*meridionalis*) was reclassified in August 2018 as the Iberian Gray Shrike, while the remaining subspecies of the former Southern Gray Shrike have been transferred to the Great Gray Shrike.

Oriolidae (Old World Orioles)

EURASIAN GOLDEN ORIOLE (*Oriolus oriolus*) – At least one bird made several quick passes over the road in a wooded area south of Raphele one morning, calling as it went. Unfortunately, it always landed just out of view!

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – Especially nice views of a pair in the back yard of our Gedre hotel, showing nicely as they perched on the luge run and inspected one of the apple trees one morning. We saw others near our Raphele hotel and along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. Jays in Europe are far shyer and warier than are jays in America.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Abundant in the lowlands, often striding around right alongside busy roads. We had a regular, noisy family group in the horse pastures around our Raphele hotel most mornings. This species was recently split from North America's Black-billed Magpie, based on morphological, vocal and behavioral differences. Some former subspecies of Eurasian Magpie were given species status in August 2018, so if you've seen them elsewhere (i.e. north Africa, Arabia, the Himalayas, parts of northern Asia) it's worth checking to see if you got some armchair ticks!

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – Small numbers daily in the highlands, with especially nice studies of several gabbling pairs in the Port de Boucharo. The long curved red beaks of this species are distinctive, as are their broad floppy wingtips. In general, this species travels in smaller groups than the next.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) – Common in the highlands, including a boiling mass of 100 or more birds swirling over the ridges at the Cirque de Gavarnie. We had nice close views of a trio playing in the wind at the Port de Boucharo, with others daily in the mountains. This species, also known as Alpine Chough, is restricted to the higher mountain areas.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Abundant in the lowlands, including big flocks foraging in the horse pastures around our hotel each morning; we had nice looks at their pale eyes and frosty napes there.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – A few seen milling around some roadside trees as we drove back from the Crau steppe one afternoon. The featherless whitish base to their beaks is distinctive.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Common throughout, including some among the Eurasian Jackdaws in the horse pastures around our hotel most mornings.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Small numbers in the mountains, including a few gliding along over the Port de Boucharo, and a pair circling higher and higher in the Cirque de Gavarnie, apparently headed for Spain.

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (*Alauda arvensis*) – Nice looks at a half dozen or so along the road at Fangassier, showing their stocky shape and variously-erected crests; in flight their plain gray underwings and white outer tail feathers were clearly visible.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Daily in the lowlands, particularly around water. In Europe, this one is known as Sand Martin.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – Small numbers on several days in the highlands -- though far fewer than in most years. We had particularly nice views of a flock hunting low over the trees as we descended from the Cirque de Gavarnie, where we could clearly see their all-dark plumage and (occasionally) the flash of the small squares of white in their tails.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Probably the most common of the tour's hirundines, though -- quite inexplicably -- missing entirely from the mountains. We saw big migrant flocks over the Camargue.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – Another species in much smaller numbers than usual. We saw a few in the lowlands -- generally in mixed flocks with other swallows -- with more in the mountains. The white rump of this species makes them easy to pick out from the other hirundines.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (*Parus ater*) – Especially nice views of a pair with a mixed flock along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie -- at the first spot where we stopped for breath on our way up. They look a lot like North America's chickadees, though with a thumbprint of white on the back of the head.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – Great views of two in the same spot as the previous species on the Cirque de Gavarnie hike, with others along a flatter stretch further along. We heard others in the FD de l'Ayre et du Lisey. The sharp crest of this species is diagnostic among Europe's tits.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*) – A little family group twitching through low bushes and higher tree branches in the forest near Mauvezin gave us our last new birds of the trip -- nice spotting, Pat! The bib on this one is so small it barely qualifies as a bib; more like a mustache.

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – These small, colorful tits were seen well on several days: a few with the big Long-tailed Tit flock along a forested roadside south of Raphele, another handful with the mixed flock at the Carcassonne rest area, and others along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – Another reasonably widespread species, seen in both the lowlands and the mountains. We regularly get this one -- largest of Europe's tits -- around both hotels.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – A big flock of these little birds moved through the sunlit canopy of some trees along a wooded stretch of road south of Raphele before breakfast one morning, calling constantly to each other.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – We heard these on several days without seeing them, but finally caught up with some in the mountains -- one in the walnut trees outside our Gedre hotel for some, and a trio twitching through the airy forest of FD de l'Ayre et du Lisey for the rest.

Certhiidae (Trecreeper)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – One put on a nice show along the Cirque de Gavarnie track, seen as we made our way back down. Our fellow travelers were certainly bemused by our antics as we tried to get a better look! The bird was strikingly white-bellied (particularly compared to the next species), and sang nicely for us -- which was useful, since voice is the best way of telling the two species apart.

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – A couple of birds at the Carcassonne rest area showed nicely as they worked their way up several pine trunks. This species is longer-billed and darker-flanked than the previous -- and its song is completely different.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – A very showy bird showed nicely near the old avalanche scar along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, calling regularly as it flitted through the bushes. This species was split from the former Winter Wren complex.

Cinclidae (Dippers).

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – A couple of these endearing birds bounced across the rocks of the Gavarnie River as the gang waited for everyone to use the restrooms one morning -- and for me to return from the shop with snacks for our hike!

Regulidae (Kinglets).

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – Great views of a couple with a mixed flock along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, including one that really flashed his crown stripe at us as he foraged low on a pine branch. This species has a much less patterned face than the next.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – More widespread than the previous species on our tour route. We found our first with a mixed flock in the pines at the Carcassonne rest area, then had others in the mixed forest at FD de l'Ayre and du Lisey. The stripey face pattern of this species is reminiscent of that of the closely-related Golden-crowned Kinglet.

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies).

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – As usual, we heard far more of these skulkers than we saw, but we had outstanding views of one atypically showy bird near the kingfisher spot at Mas d'Agon. It chortled from open branches in several trees with its long tail cocked up over its back, making it look like a giant wren.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers).

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – Scattered birds, including some lemon-yellow youngsters. Our first were flicking through low hedges and shrubs in a patch of woodland south of Raphele during one pre-breakfast outing, and we found others along the edge of the Etang des Vaccares and near our Gedre hotel.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Seen on most days in the highlands, including a few confiding birds on the way to the Cirque de Gavarnie. This species is similarly-plumaged to the previous one, but has a darker face, dark (rather than pale) legs and feet, a shorter primary projection and the habit of regularly dipping its tail.

Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers and Allies).

EURASIAN REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – Fleeting flight views for some -- and slightly longer perched views for others -- of a honey-colored bird that circled around us along the road in Mas d'Agon, slipping through the reeds and occasionally peering out at us.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies).

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Especially nice views of several in the pastures near our Raphele hotel, including one that sat for long minutes in a stand of tall grass, allowing good scope studies. We had others bouncing over the Salicornia scrub around the salt pans at Salin de Giraud.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers).

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – Scattered birds in both the lowlands and the highlands, including a male along a wooded track south of Raphele before breakfast one morning, several birds gobbling fruits in Red-berried Elders along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie (in the same bushes as our Eurasian Wren), and a female sharing a bush with the next species at Lac des Gloriettes.

GARDEN WARBLER (*Sylvia borin*) – One, looking very plain-faced, shared a bush with a Willow Warbler and a female Blackcap on a sunny hillside at Lac des Gloriettes. Carolyn and Dale spotted another on their walk near Gedre one afternoon.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – We heard the scratchy song of this scrub-country species on several days -- including from bushes on the darkening hillsides around Les Baux while we waited for the eagle-owl to make its appearance -- but it took until our last afternoon in the Camargue to actually spot one. A pair flicked through some dense bushes near the observation tower at the Marais de Grenouillet, occasionally stopping on open branches for a look around.

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*) – We heard one calling from the bushes near where we found our first Eurasian Green Woodpecker, but never spotted it. [*]

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – We found what must have been the easiest Spectacled Warbler in FGI history -- a female that kept appearing in the open as she foraged, always carrying her mouthfuls out of sight. Perhaps she had a late nest (or fledgelings) somewhere nearby.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers).

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa striata*) – Single birds on a couple of days: one in conveniently close comparison to a nearby European Pied Flycatcher near the bridge at Mas d'Agon, and a second along the road where we had our picnic lunch after visiting the Crau. Their underparts look rather more streaked than spotted, if we're honest!

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – A few scattered along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, including one very spotty youngster near the old avalanche scar. We had nice looks at a full adult on the luge run behind our Gedre hotel.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – A reasonably common migrant in both the lowlands and the highlands, including a few in the juniper hedge near our Raphele hotel, some with the mixed flock at the Carcassonne rest area, and others along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. The bold white wing patches of this species are eye-catchingly obvious.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – A couple of males bounced from hedge to lawn and back again at the edge of our Gedre hotel's garden. Those in my van saw another male perched atop a roadside bush on our way to the Lac des Gloriettes.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Common in the highlands, where they perched with quivering tails on rocks and boulders. Like the previous species, this one is named for the rusty edges to its tail; 'staart' is the Dutch word for tail.

RUFOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – A couple of winter-plumaged birds stood sentinel on some rocky outcroppings along the track through the Port de Boucharo, and another did the same at the rockfall in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – A handful of migrants in the lowlands, with other migrants on low bushes along the switchbacks on our way up to the Port de Boucharo. The bold white supercilium of this species separates it quickly from the next species.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – A few among the Whinchats in a stony field near the Crau steppe, with others near the rockfall in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Regular in both lowlands and highlands, including some chasing each other (and various prey items) around on the Crau steppe and others hunting from small rocks in the highlands. The name 'wheatear' is thought to be a corruption of the old Saxon for 'white ass'!

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies).

RING OUZEL (*Turdus torquatus*) – As seems to be the case with this species, when we see one, we see more than one! This year (our first sightings in more than a decade), we had a couple of birds fly past as we walked up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and a foraging bird twitching through a low berrying bush beside the Lac des Gloriettes. The British folk name for this species is "Vicar Thrush", for that clerical-collar-like ring around their necks.

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Scattered birds in the highlands, including a few bouncing around under the luge run behind our hotel on a couple of mornings.

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – A half dozen or so distant birds flitted across the tops of some of the taller trees in the FD de l'Ayre and du Lisey on our quiet afternoon visit, drawing our attention with the flash of their wings. With focus, we could see their spotty bellies through the scopes.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Abundant in the lowlands, with skywriting flocks over the Camargue and scores perched on wires and dead branches in various spots amid the farm fields.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – Great views of several in the mountains, including a gaggle of five scratching around in the parking lot at the Lac des Gloriettes, and one having a quiet preen on a pile of downed branches along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – Regular in the lowlands, including a flock bounding through the skies over the horse pastures around our hotel one morning and dozens wagging along the road (and the edges of nearby lagoons) through the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud, and at Fangassier. This is the shortest-tailed of the wagtails we see on the tour.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Super views of a few in the stream at Gavarnie, sharing rocks with some White-bellied Dippers with a dozen or more others chasing each other around on the shore of the Lac des Gloriettes. We had small numbers in many of the mountain streams. This is the longest-tailed of the tour's wagtails.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – A few around the sheep pens on the road up to the Port de Boucharo -- and preening on low bushes along the winding switchbacks where we found our first Yellowhammers -- with others on the roofs and parking lots of Gavarnie and Gedre.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – Super views of a little group striding across a dried-out mudflat at Fangassier; we saw others chasing each other around over the stony Crau steppe. Their plain, unstreaked breasts help to separate them from the other pipits seen on this tour.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – A migrant preening its breast in a tree right outside our Raphele hotel gave us great opportunity to study it closely -- though the coffee was calling loudly!

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – Relatively common in a few places in highlands, with dozens striding along the road up to the Port de Boucharo and others in the Vallee d'Ossoue and around the Lac des Gloriettes. There were far fewer than we see most years though.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – A handful of birds -- including a bright yellow adult male -- foraged and preened among some low bushes on the road up to the Port de Boucharo, and another few rummaged on a grassy lawn with a horde of Common Chaffinches near the horse shelter in the FD de l'Ayre et du Lisey.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – A few birds sat atop a hedgerow along the road to the Crau steppe on day, and a much bigger group -- several score -- festooned a dead tree near the area's northern gate the following morning. This species resembles a stocky, extra-large female House Finch.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Common in the mountains, with especially nice views of dozens bouncing across the grassy lawns around the buildings at FD de l'Ayre et du Lisey. We had others along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie and around our Gedre hotel.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – We heard the somewhat mournful, slurred whistles of this species several times along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and spotted a female perched -- for a few too-short seconds -- atop a spruce tree not far from the path. Some people got a scope view, some people saw her in their binoculars, and an unfortunate few never found the right tree!

EURASIAN LINNET (*Linaria cannabina*) – We heard the tinkling calls of some in the Port de Boucharo, but couldn't find them among the vast landscape. [*]

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – Lovely long scope views of a couple nibbling thistle seeds in a field near where we parked for our hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

CITRIL FINCH (*Carduelis citrinella*) – We had to scramble right up into the boulder field in the Cirque de Gavarnie, but we eventually got fine views of males, females and youngsters perched on some of the shed-sized rocks.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – All-too-brief views of a flock of a dozen or so bounding through the boulder field at the Cirque de Gavarnie. This species is larger and more heavily streaked than the previous (as some in the group saw before the birds fled).

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Nearly every day, though we managed to miss them one day in the mountains -- we must not have been paying enough attention while in Gedre!

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Seen on a few scattered days, including a little group foraging among the horses' hooves in a pasture near our Raphele hotel.

MAMMALS

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Common in the highlands, where their whistled calls echoed off the mountainsides. We saw a variety of sizes, from fat, waddling adults to leaner, faster youngsters. This species was introduced to the Pyrenees from the Alps to give shepherds something to eat besides their sheep.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*) – Scattered individuals, including one splayed-legged on a telephone pole (and scuttling rapidly upwards) as we drove back from the Crau steppe following our pre-breakfast outing there.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – Daily in the Camargue, typically as they paddled across open waterways. This species was imported from South America for the fur trade; when their popularity waned, they were dumped into the local ecosystem, with predictably disastrous results.

WILD BOAR (*Sus scrofa*) – A group of four foraged in the mud along one of the channels at Salin de Giraud.

ROE DEER (*Capreolus capreolus*) – A couple of half-grown youngsters foraged at the edge of a farm field, seen as we headed back to Toulouse on our final afternoon.

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – Two foraging just above the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie were a major highlight of our hike back down; this was by far the best looks I've ever had at this species with a tour group. And we made some French tourists happy too when we pointed them out!

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 159 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa