



Field Guides Tour Report

France: Camargue & Pyrenees II 2018

Sep 5, 2018 to Sep 15, 2018
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One of our stops in the Pyrenees was the very lovely Barrage des Gloriettes, where we enjoyed a hike through some spectacular scenery. We also found some nice birds there, including a gorgeous male Yellowhammer. Photo by participant Linda Nuttall.

Considering I started out doing this trip in 2013 as a last-minute replacement, with no expectations of ever doing it again, it's hard to believe this was my 6th consecutive year of leading this tour! And it's been no great hardship coming here year after year; autumn in southern France is wonderful, and it's always a pleasure to come back. This year's trip was another excellent adventure, with all the extraordinary bird sightings, fine French cuisine, and finer French wines one expects to encounter here, and a great bunch of birding companions to share it with.

We hit the ground running this year, getting our first major target just minutes after we left the airport, when we located a group of at least 56 Little Bustards roaming the grassy verges of the airfield. By the time we got to our hotel near Arles a few hours later, we'd also tallied several Squacco Herons, a bunch of Mediterranean Gulls, a Water Rail, and the first of many flamingos. Not a bad start! Over the course of the next few days, we roamed the Camargue region and added loads of great birds to our lists. There were highlights aplenty, including excellent looks at both stork species, several Short-toed Snake-Eagles, one of which had a snake dangling from its bill, a trio of Collared Pratincoles hawking insects overhead, and 20+ shorebird species, including some rather scarce species: Ruff, Red-necked Phalarope, Eurasian Curlew, Spotted Redshank, and Bar-tailed Godwit among them.

Our visit to the Crau steppe was a bit more frustrating due to the limited access, which probably cost us a few species, but we still managed to find some great local specialties, including Iberian Gray Shrike (now split from Southern), a pair of Little Owls loafing atop a nearby barn, a striking Eurasian Hoopoe strolling through the stony plains along the Peau de Meau, and a trio of Greater Short-toed Larks doing the same. Nearby wooded areas also came through, with goodies such as Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Wryneck, Long-tailed Tit, and an unexpected Common Nightingale, a bird that is usually long gone before we arrive in France. Also unexpected were two different Bluethroats, both giving fine views just a year after we'd recorded this species for the first time ever on this tour!

A long day's drive brought us to our second venue, the magnificent Pyrenees Mountains along the border between France and Spain. Bird life was a little more limited here than in the Camargue region, but still exciting and full of great moments. Our four days in the region found us enjoying many views of the iconic Bearded Vulture (or Lammergeier), along with several Golden Eagles and gorgeous Red Kites. Black Woodpeckers were impressive as always, and took the top spot in bird of the trip voting after delighting the group with several memorable sightings. Alpine Accentors and Rufous-tailed

Rock-Thrushes made the beautiful walk into Spain that much more enjoyable, while a White-throated Dipper resting in the shade of an overhanging bank was a treat in the lovely Vallee D'Ossoue. A Citril Finch was a hard-earned prize in the magnificent Cirque de Gavarnie, and a lone male Yellowhammer was a nice find amidst the stunning scenery of the Barrage des Gloriettes.

Thanks to all of you for joining the ride with Marcelo and me this year. Nothing makes birding a greater pleasure than doing it with a fine bunch of fellow birders, and it was indeed a great pleasure this year. Good birding to all of you, and I hope to see you all in the field again 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, especially in the freshwater marsh along the Salin de Giraud road.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Seen only at the Salin de Giraud, where there were about 70 distant birds our first visit, then 120+ on the second visit, including some fairly close birds that offered up nice scope views.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – Small numbers at a couple of sites around the Camargue.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – The most numerous dabbling duck, with some big flocks at a couple of sites.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – We picked out a lone bird among a group of shovelers in a pond along the Etang de Vaccares. Like all the Mallards and shovelers, this bird was in eclipse plumage.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies).

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*) – Tough this trip, and we saw just one distant pair in the railway car field on our final, early morning visit to the Crau.

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – We flushed roadside birds a couple of times, once along the road in to the Crau, another time in farmland as we descended from the Ausseing forest on our final day.

Podicipedidae (Grebes).

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – A few birds at several sites in the Camargue included at least a couple of breeding plumaged adults.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Nice views of these handsome grebes, particularly those in the marsh at the Salin de Giraud.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos).

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – The iconic species of the Camargue, and as usual we saw plenty of these spectacular birds. Both Jack and Diane chose them as their favorite Camargue region birds.

Ciconiidae (Storks).

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*) – We saw 6, which is a pretty good total for this species on the tour. All 6 came on our first full day in the Camargue. We first spotted one sailing along above the road, and we raced to catch up with it before jumping out of the vans for some fantastic looks. A short while later, a huge number of birds flushed out of a distant wetland, and there were at least 5 Black Storks among them.

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – Our first was a distant bird at the Marais des Grenouillets, recognizable but hardly a satisfying sighting. We next encountered 3 birds feeding together in a roadside pond at Scamandre, and those looks were far better. Finally, we had great looks at another bird feeding along the stream in the stunning setting of the Vallee D'Ossoue.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags).

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Quite numerous in the Camargue, especially at the Etang de Vaccares, with a single bird seen flying along a river on our drive from the mountains to Toulouse.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns).

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Plenty of them daily in the Camargue, and several on our drive down from the mountains.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Never common, and we saw only 4 altogether, the best one showing well as it stalked prey in the tall reeds in the Mas D'Agon wetland.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Fairly numerous though outnumbered by the next species in most areas.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Abundant around the Camargue, with some especially impressive numbers at the Tour Carbonniere and a few other sites.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Plenty of them around the Camargue, with an especially big group of them hanging with the horses out in front of our hotel.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – We spotted 4 of these small pond-herons from the top of the Tour Carbonniere on our first day, then saw a few others elsewhere in the Camargue. Not a bad haul for a species that is often scarce here at this time of year.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) – Two singles, both juveniles, were seen flying past on consecutive days at Le Capeliere and Scamandre.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills).

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – There's never many of these about, and this year was no different. We saw 5 scattered over 3 days in the Camargue.

Pandionidae (Osprey).

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – One or two birds were seen on each visit to the Salin de Giraud, and it looked like the fishing there was good, as we saw a couple with nice large fish dinners.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

- BEARDED VULTURE** (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – It's unfortunate that this bird's name has been changed from the wonderful Lammergeier, but whatever you call it (and we generally called it Lammergeier), it is a great bird. We had numerous great looks at these in the Pyrenees, including 6 (4 adults and two dark juveniles) in the Vallee D'Ossoue. Mark picked this as his favorite bird in the mountains.
- EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD** (*Pernis apivorus*) – Other than one big kettle of 21 migrating birds circling over the road near the Peau de Meau, we had only just a handful of sightings scattered across the Camargue.
- EURASIAN GRIFFON** (*Gyps fulvus*) – These huge vultures are pretty common throughout the Pyrenees, where we saw good numbers daily.
- SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE** (*Circaetus gallicus*) – We saw this handsome eagle mainly in the Camargue, with 5 or 6 birds over 3 days there, including one member of a pair that had the tail end of a snake dangling from its beak. In the Pyrenees we saw just one, but it was a fantastic view of a lone bird soaring low overhead in excellent light at the Vallee D'Ossoue. That individual was Warren's choice as top bird on the mountain portion of the tour.
- BOOTED EAGLE** (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) – Just after the snake-eagle passed overhead in the Vallee D'Ossoue, Marcelo picked out our only Booted Eagle circling over the ridge alongside a couple of griffons. The white "headlights" along the leading edge of the wings helped clinch the ID of this bird.
- GOLDEN EAGLE** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – It was pretty easy to know when one of these powerful birds were around, as the marmots in the area would sound their shrill alarm calls whenever one appeared in the sky. It took us a little longer to spot them, but we ended up with some stellar views, particularly in the Vallee D'Ossoue
- EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER** (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Common around the Camargue region, where we saw them daily in small numbers, including some gorgeous, golden-headed females that showed especially well.
- EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK** (*Accipiter nisus*) – As usual, all of the 5 birds we saw in the Camargue were on the move, and seen primarily in fast flight as they whipped by overhead.
- RED KITE** (*Milvus milvus*) – That first bird flying over in fantastic light as we watched the pratincoles at Le Capeliere may have been the most memorable of our sightings, but we had several excellent encounters with these beauties, seeing them on 6 days of the tour, when we often get them on just one or two. Though it didn't get any first place votes, it had enough 2nd and 3rd place votes to put it in 2nd place for bird of the trip honors.
- COMMON BUZZARD** (*Buteo buteo*) – This is a common and often seen raptor, the European equivalent of the North American Red-tailed Hawk. They were seen daily around the Camargue, including one or two in the fields by the hotel, with just a few seen in the Pyrenees region, primarily in the farmland at the foot of the mountains.

Otididae (Bustards)

- LITTLE BUSTARD** (*Tetrax tetrax*) – Officially our first bird of the trip, as we headed straight out from the airport to scan the grassy verges of the runway where these birds like to hang out. A count tallied a minimum of 56 individuals, but there were likely a few more hunkered down in the tall grass out of sight. Mark picked this as his fave Camargue-region bird.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

- WATER RAIL** (*Rallus aquaticus*) – Water levels were higher than usual at some of the wetland sites, and it seemed this was good for Water Rails, which I've only heard once or twice previously on the tour. We recorded them on three different days this trip, with excellent sightings of one on our first afternoon, from on top of the tour Carbonniere. Warren gave this bird the nod for top bird of the Camargue, and it got a couple of other votes as well, including from Sue for whom it was her first ever rail sighting! Thanks to the votes, it came in at #3 in the bird of the trip voting.
- WESTERN SWAMPHEN** (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) – It took a side trip to Scamandre on our travel day to the mountains to pick up this bird, but we ended up with great views of one at the edge of a dense reed bed. Once lumped with several other species as Purple Swamphen, this "new" species is restricted to NW Africa and the Iberian peninsula.
- EURASIAN MOORHEN** (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – Only noted at a couple of sites in the Petite Camargue: the wetlands around the Tour de Carbonniere and at Scamandre.
- EURASIAN COOT** (*Fulica atra*) – Several thousand of these blanketed the surface of the Etang de Vaccares.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

- EURASIAN THICK-KNEE** (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) – This was not a good trip for this always tough species. Scanning with the scope, I picked out the head of a lone bird just sticking up out of the tall grass at quite a distance in the Crau region. It was very hard to see, and not everyone that looked through the scope managed to see it before it ducked out of sight and never popped back out.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

- BLACK-WINGED STILT** (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Close views of a couple at the Salin de Giraud followed-up our initial long-distance views of some at the Marais des Grenouilletts.
- PIED AVOCET** (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) – A few of these elegant waders were among the flamingos at Salin de Giraud and Fangassier.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

- NORTHERN LAPWING** (*Vanellus vanellus*) – Half a dozen were flying about in the distance as we scanned the wetlands from the top of the Tour de Carbonniere. The views were okay but the ones in a flooded field at Mejanas a few days later were far better.
- KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH)** (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – A few of these pale plovers, until recently considered conspecific with Snowy Plover of North America, were on various suitable mudflats in the Camargue, often in company with the next two species.
- COMMON RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Quite a few of these were still in breeding plumage, looking quite dapper.
- LITTLE RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius dubius*) – The longer legs, more tapered back end (due to longer wings) and yellow legs and eye ring helped to separate these from the similar Common Ringed Plovers they often kept company with.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

- EURASIAN CURLEW** (*Numenius arquata orientalis*) – Three of these long-billed shorebirds foraged along the edges of the pratincole pond at Le Capeliere on our second visit to the site.
- BAR-TAILED GODWIT** (*Limosa lapponica*) – Like all the birds at Marais des Grenouilletts, these birds were a long way off, but even at that distance, their distinctive upturned, bicolored bills helped to peg them as godwits. We counted roughly 10 of them here.
- RUFF** (*Calidris pugnax*) – A medium-sized shorebird flew low over the water at the Salin de Giraud, looking obviously different from everything else that was present, but it took some thought before we realized it was one of these. This is a rather scarce bird on this trip, and I'll admit it wasn't really

on my radar, but that distinctive U-shaped white rump patch helped resolve the question of its identity.

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*) – Good numbers at the Salin de Giraud on our first visit, with a few still showing a fair bit of rich rufous feathering in their bellies.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Shorter-legged and a bit smaller than the similarly-shaped Curlew Sandpiper. Having these two species together at Salin de Giraud gave us an excellent opportunity to compare them. In those birds that lacked any black on their bellies, the two features mentioned above were helpful, as was the longer, more down-curved bill of Curlew Sandpiper in comparison to the Dunlin's droopy-tipped bill.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – Quite a few of these were among the many other shorebirds at the Salin de Giraud.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – There was evidently some migrational movement of these birds during our time in the Camargue. After a few records over the first couple of days, we found upwards of 20 birds lounging along the edges of the mudflats on our second visit to Le Capeliere.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – Linda spotted our only phalarope swimming in the canal right alongside the road at the Salin de Giraud. It was an easy bird to miss, though, as at times it was so close to the near edge that it was completely hidden from the roadway.

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – There were plenty of these about, teetering just like our Spotted Sandpipers back home.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – Good scope views of one along the edge of the pond at Le Capeliere, followed by a few flyovers at Mas D'Agon and Scamandre. This species is very similar to our Solitary Sandpiper.

SPOTTED REDSHANK (*Tringa erythropus*) – A redshank feeding among the storks at Scamandre turned out to be this scarce migrant, the long slender bill and prominent white eye stripe helping to separate it from the more expected Common Redshank.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – Small numbers of these yellowlegs-like birds were at a few sites, including Le Capeliere and the flooded field at Mejanes.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – The same flooded field at Mas D'Agon that held the lapwings and greenshanks also hosted about 25 of these very mottled-looking sandpipers.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – Everyone missed one that I spotted flying past on our first visit to the Salin de Giraud, but we had better luck on the second attempt, getting good scope studies of one working the edge of one of the cells.

Glareolidae (Pratincoles and Coursers)

COLLARED PRATINCOLE (*Glareola pratincola*) – Though we knew a trio of these birds were about somewhere, we weren't exactly certain where they'd been seen, so I was more than a little pleased to spot them loafing on the far side of the pond at Le Capeliere. Initial views were acceptable, if not great, but when the birds suddenly took wing and began hawking for insects amongst a large swarm of swallows over our side of the pond, that all changed and we enjoyed spectacular views of these elegant birds.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – A few seen on both of our visits to the Salin de Giraud. On the second visit, we had some views in excellent light, and these birds showed a very rosy coloring much like Ross's Gull.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – The default small gull here. All seem to be in winter plumage already by this time.

LITTLE GULL (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) – Our return visit to the Salin de Giraud paid off when we found a couple of these tiny gulls among the many Black-headed Gulls. The small size and short bill helped to make these stand out reasonably well.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*) – As usually is the case, we saw these only on our first day near Aigues-Mortes. After scanning the etang for a while and noting smaller than usual numbers coming over, we finally pulled the plug and hit the road, then finding a group of 50 or more roosting on the ground next to one of the canals.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – The default large, white-headed gull here. Very common throughout the Camargue region.

LITTLE TERN (*Sternula albifrons*) – A couple were plunge-diving right in front of us at Aigues-Mortes as we waited for the Med Gulls to come by, and a couple more were at the Salin de Giraud the next day. Sue was especially taken with these dainty terns, and picked them in top place for the Camargue.

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – A couple of birds with the swarms of Sandwich Terns at Salin de Giraud were the only ones we saw.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – Our first flew across at eye level as we birded from atop the Tour de Carbonniere, and several others were seen at Salin de Giraud and along the Etang de Vaccares.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – A lone bird over the wetlands at the Tour de Carbonniere was the only one of these birds that we confirmed.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – One among the Sandwich Terns at Aigues-Mortes, and a bunch more at the end of the road at the Salin de Giraud.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – The most numerous tern at the Salin de Giraud, and overall.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Seen pretty much daily. Though wild populations occur in Europe, that's not what we saw; our birds were all feral populations. [I]

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – A common sight in the Camargue region, especially in the early mornings as they were on the move.

EUROPEAN TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia turtur*) – Generally scarce here at this time of year, and not a species we record often on this tour. During a roadside birding stop en route to the Salin de Giraud, I scoped a group of doves sitting in a bare tree and was surprised to find that 3 of them were this species. A couple of days later we spotted another teed up by a farm at Mejanes. Trending upwards or just an anomaly? Time will tell.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Also quite common around the Camargue, and regularly seen and heard just outside of our hotel.

Strigidae (Owls)

EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL (*Bubo bubo*) – We hiked a long way up one of the dirt tracks near Les Baux to try to track down a vigorously calling bird, but, though we got close, it was still just a bit too deep back in the forest. [*]

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) – On two occasions we tried to get out of the vans to put a scope on a bird we'd spotted on a distant barn, but each time, it ducked off the roof and disappeared inside as soon as we stepped out. Fortunately, while we were scanning the railway car field for grassland species, Linda happened to look behind us and noted a couple of Little Owls sitting atop the barn opposite us, and these birds seemed completely unperturbed by our presence and gave us all time for multiple scope views.

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*) – Not very vocal this trip, and we only heard one or two distant birds at Gedre on our owling night. [*]

Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)

EURASIAN NIGHTJAR (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) – As we waited for it to get dark enough for the eagle-owl to start calling, we were pleased to spot the distinctive silhouette of a nightjar flitting along over the trees. Generally most of these are gone from the region by this time, and we rarely record this bird on tour.

Apodidae (Swifts)

ALPINE SWIFT (*Apus melba*) – A couple of good-sized flocks wheeled about overhead in the brilliant blue sky as we birded in and around the Crau.

COMMON SWIFT (*Apus apus*) – One flew over as we birded the railway car field on our first visit to the Crau, another one or two were among the Alpine Swift flocks later the same day.

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOOPOE (*Upupa epops*) – Not a bird we get every year, so it was pleasing to not only see one this trip, but to get superb views of it as it fed on the ground along the Peau de Meau trail, eventually allowing us to get reasonably close after initially being quite flighty.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – After a few less than satisfactory encounters, we finally nailed some super scope views of these brilliant birds along a canal at Mejanes.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*) – All our encounters were with migrant flocks passing by overhead, but we did manage some pretty good looks at some of them.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – We had better luck with this species, seeing them pretty much daily in the Camargue region and getting some good scope views of a few, though in this bird's case, it actually looks more colorful and attractive in flight. Good thing we saw it in that state a few times, too!

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

EURASIAN WRYNECK (*Jynx torquilla*) – One dropped into the vegetation in front of the group as we waited for darkness to fall and eagle-owls to call, but the dwindling light and poor views meant that no one saw it well enough to count it. Luckily, the next morning, we heard a couple calling at a site near our hotel, and we ultimately pulled one in to a close shrub where it popped into the open a couple of times for excellent views. This bizarre woodpecker was Linda's pick for top bird of the Camargue region.

LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos minor*) – We got this small woodpecker at the same time and place as the Wryneck, and it showed beautifully as it hitched up the dead branches of a nearby tree. This was one of two lifers for me on the trip (both on the same morning!), and consequently, my fave bird of the trip.

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos medius*) – The views of this bird flying overhead left a lot to be desired, but adding it to our lists at the Mauvezin forest was pretty sweet. It gave us a rare clean sweep of all 6 of the possible woodpeckers on this tour! Most years we get only 3 or 4 species.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – While I finished up some business at our mountain hotel, Marcelo worked hard to get one of these going out back, to no avail, it seemed. But just as I was about to hop into my van to drive off, I heard one call, and we all piled back out to find it teed up in the top of a dead tree where it remained long enough for us to set up our scopes and cycle everyone through for a view.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – The runaway winner as bird of the trip, which was no great surprise. It is always high on people's target lists for this tour, and it's always a thrill to see this big boy. We had a couple of nice encounters with these, first getting a couple of great flyovers as we hiked up to the cirque, then again at the Le Lienz ski area, where in addition to some more views of them flying directly overhead, we also managed some long-distance scope views. Diane, Susan, Jack, Pat, and Linda all chose this magnificent beast as their favorite Pyrenean species.

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – We didn't get especially great looks at these, but we did have one fly past a couple of times, at the same place and time as the Wryneck and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. But they were good enough to count, as we could see it very much resembled a flicker and was pretty olive green on the back. Nothing else it could have been, really.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – The lack of vehicle access to the Crau steppe probably hurt us for this species. Though we did come across a pair during our walk on the Peau de Meau trail, we didn't see the identifying features that separate this species from the similar but more numerous Eurasian Kestrel. But we did hear one of the birds give the distinctive, parakeet-like call that is unique to this species, so there was no question that they were Lesser Kestrels.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – A common species, seen almost daily both in the Camargue and the Pyrenees.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – One bird showed very well as it flew over us as we hiked in the Crau, and we had a couple more good sightings the next day at a couple of different sites in the Camargue.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – Our only sighting was of one soaring in front of the cliffs at the Barrage des Gloriettes. It was tough to pick out against the rocks, but a Lammergeier flying alongside it was a lot easier to see, and helped lead folks to the right area of the rock face.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

SOUTHERN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – What was formerly the nominate subspecies of Southern Gray Shrike is about to be split off as a good species, Iberian Gray Shrike. We had good scope views of a distant bird at the railway car field in the Crau.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – A few sightings of these large, attractive jays in the mountains, though it took a while for everyone to get a clean look at them.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Common and seen daily in and around the Camargue region.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – The less numerous of the two choughs, this one was easily picked out by their raspier calls. We saw them first, and probably best, during our walk to Spain along the Port de Boucharo track.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrhocorax graculus*) – Also seen first along the Port de Boucharo track, but in much larger numbers, probably about 40 birds. This species is often seen in large flocks wheeling above the ridge tops alongside griffons and Lammergeiers.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Abundant in the Camargue region, including a large number of them in the farmland around the Mas de la Feniere.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Not as numerous as the jackdaws, but still quite common and seen daily in the Camargue. But whereas jackdaws were absent in the mountains, there were a few of these present there.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – The same species as our North American raven. These were found only in the mountains, where there seemed to be fewer than usual, but we still saw a handful over several days.

Alaudidae (Larks)

GREATER SHORT-TOED LARK (*Calandrella brachydactyla*) – Larks seemed to be in short supply this trip, and a trio of these we came across as we walked the Peau de Meau track were our only larks of the trip. There was some momentary confusion when we scoped these birds, as they were active and hard to follow, and we weren't certain if we were looking at larks or pipits, until we realized there was a Tawny Pipit mixed in with the larks, trying to confound us!

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Called Sand Martin on this side of the pond. Quite a few of these were seen over the first couple of days in the Camargue, but none from then on.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – Seen regularly in small numbers in the Pyrenees, but always seemed to be outnumbered by either of the next two species. For some, the best views probably came at La Mongie ("the ugliest town in France") as there were a bunch of them flying about and perching on the balcony railings of some of the apartments.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Big numbers almost daily, including a large push of migrants crossing over into Spain at the Port de Boucharo.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – In the Camargue region, we only saw these birds in the town of Salin de Giraud during our bathroom breaks. In the Pyrenees, they were quite numerous, right on up to the highest areas we reached.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (*Parus ater*) – Arguably the most numerous tit in the Pyrenees, and we regularly encountered these dapper little birds there.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – The eagle owl may not have cooperated at our site near Les Baux, but a pair of these perky little tits showed brilliantly for a nice consolation prize. We usually only get this species in the mountains, where we nearly missed it this trip, glimpsing just a single bird on our hike to the cirque.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*) – I've often struggled with this bird in the past, likely as it is often midday, hot, and sunny when we stop in at the best site for them. We had cooler, cloudier conditions this time, and that seems to have helped, as we came across a trio of these shortly after we stopped at the Mauvezin forest and all had excellent looks at them as they foraged next to the parking area.

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – Seen a few times both in the Camargue region and in the mountains. These little cuties are the birds that became famous for lifting the foil caps off of milk bottles in England to get at the cream.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – We had a bunch of these this trip, on both parts of the tour. Generally this is one of the more common tits; I equate them to our Black-capped Chickadees back home. But I've got to give the nod to this species as far as looks go. That is one handsome little bird.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – This is not always an easy species to find on this tour, but we did well with them this trip. First we had a trio of them on a very birdy early morning outing near the Mas de la Feniere, then another trio at our roadside lunch stop in the Vallee D'Ossoue. Finally, a bunch of them popped into a bare tree over our heads at that roadside rest stop on our way back to Toulouse.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – Early risers at our Gedre hotel got to see this species most mornings right outside the hotel. But for most folks the best look probably came at the parking area for the Gavarnie hike, where we had one teed up nicely in a tall conifer.

Certhiidae (Trecreepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – This treecreeper is the species of higher elevation conifer forests, and is the one we saw very well with a mixed flock of small birds next to the trail to the cirque. Another was at the Le Lienz ski area on our final day.

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – Though there are some subtle plumage differences between the two treecreeper, they are generally pretty hard to see, so we often use habitat preference and the very different vocalizations to help identify them. This one is generally at lower elevations, and in mixed or deciduous forest. This was our final new bird of the tour, as we finally nailed it at the Ausseing forest on our return drive to Toulouse.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – Our only one was a sneaky, furtive bird moving quickly through the boulders by the dam at Lac des Gloriettes.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – The dippers in this region often seem surprisingly shy, and it can be a real challenge to get the whole group a good view of one, but that was not our experience this year, I'm happy to say. We spotted our first, and best, along the river as we drove up the Vallee D'Ossoue, and by the time we'd hopped out of the vans, the bird had settled down under a rocky overhang on the river's edge, and we were able to scope it to our heart's content. Joann was certainly content with it, and chose it as her top bird of the mountains.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – Another species that seemed a little less numerous than usual. Still, we ran into a few in the mountains, particularly on the hike to the cirque where they were in several of the bird parties we came across.

FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – The smallest European bird, and the sister species to our Golden-crowned Kinglet. This gorgeous little bird showed well a bunch of times after our first one along the road at Mejanes. Pat and Joann were especially fond of these birds, putting them at the top of their list for the Camargue.

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – A very vocal and often heard species, though it can be tricky to see well. The unusually calm conditions probably helped us this trip, and we managed several decent views of these in the Camargue.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – This and the next species are very similar, and either can turn up just about anywhere on this tour. This leg color is a good place to start in telling them apart, with Willow Warbler having flesh-colored legs as opposed to the black legs of Chiffchaff. We saw just a few of these in the mountains, with especially good views of one that was bathing in the edge of the reservoir at the Barrage des Gloriettes.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Far outnumbered Willow Warbler this trip, and we saw a few most days of the tour. Most easily identified by their habit of constantly flicking their tails, which we saw them do often. They can also be quite vocal and we heard the distinctive "chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff" of a singing bird at least a couple of times.

Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers and Allies)

EURASIAN REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – The little clump of shrubs at the edge of the marsh at Mas D'Agon was alive with migrants, and this was perhaps the most numerous of the warblers there. We got some great looks, but unfortunately a couple of other interesting-looking warblers got away. I'm pretty sure that first one many of us saw was an Aquatic Warbler. If only it had stayed around a bit longer.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Missing in the fields around the hotel this trip, and we saw very few, but I think most folks got scope looks at one either at the Salin de Giraud or Mejanes.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – It was a fairly good trip for this distinctive warbler, and we had them daily in the mountains, though our first looks came during our optional early morning outing near the Mas de la Feniere. There, we saw a trio of them, two males and a female, hopping about in the same bare shrub that held both the wryneck and the nightingale.

GARDEN WARBLER (*Sylvia borin*) – Our lunch spot along a shady stretch of road near the Crau was alive with migrants, but this dull warbler eluded everyone but Mark, and we never saw another.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – Exceptional views of this attractive warbler were had at Mejanes, where a male hopped about in a roadside tree alongside a chiffchaff. We also had good views of them sitting on the barbed wire fence next to the road, not long after a couple of Spectacled Warblers did the same thing.

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*) – Never numerous on this trip, but we had a couple of sightings of lone birds, first at the rock slide in the Vallee D'Ossoue, then again in the boulders next to the Barrage des Gloriettes, though neither bird cooperated especially well, and I think a couple of people missed both of them.

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – Often a tough bird to see well, due in part to the usually windy conditions we have to contend with. This time around, however, the weather was calm and cool, and the birds performed beautifully, culminating with a couple of them perched on the fence wires just a few yards away for probably my best views ever.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa striata*) – Generally quite scarce on this trip, but it seemed to be a pretty good year for scarce migrants this go round. We had these on two consecutive days. First a couple of birds were in the trees lining the road where we ate our lunches after birding the Crau, though not everyone saw those ones. Next day we had a much more cooperative one at Mas D'Agon, at the site where there were also a load of migrant warblers about.

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – We had some nice looks at these lovely birds in the mountains, though it seemed there were fewer than usual around.

COMMON NIGHTINGALE (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) – When an unfamiliar brown bird popped up right where the wryneck had just been, I didn't recognize it immediately for a couple of reasons. First off, I'd never actually seen one before, secondly, it really wasn't on my radar as something we might see, as they have usually all moved south by the time we run this trip. I think the bird was missed by a couple folks, but those that saw it saw it well. Susan must have been in the latter group, as she chose it as her top bird of the first half of the tour.

BLUETHROAT (*Luscinia svecica*) – Another of the scarce migrants we picked up on the trip. We had seen bluethroat on this tour just once before, and that was last year in the mountains. So we weren't expecting to get it again, and especially didn't think we'd get it twice! Marcelo spotted the first one sitting atop a tall reed at Mas D'Agon, and it sat long enough for us all to scope it. The second one was noted running around on the mudflats behind a trio of storks at Scamandre, and again, a few of us had excellent scope views of this fine bird.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – Easily the most numerous migrant Passerine through most of the trip, though we inexplicably missed this species on our first full day in the Camargue.

COMMON REDSTART (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – A total of seven birds over three days in the Pyrenees was a pretty good showing for this species which is normally anything but common on this tour. Best of the bunch, and one of 4 seen in the Vallee D'Ossoue on one day was a gorgeous male, still mostly in breeding plumage.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Our first were seen hanging about the same set of barns as our Little Owls on our last morning before heading into the Pyrenees, but as usual, they were far more numerous in the mountains, where they are one of the most numerous migrant Passerines.

RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – Though these birds are already transitioning into their less colorful winter plumage by this time, they are still striking birds, with a beautiful, scaly pattern. We had our first below the trail as we hiked back from Spain, then found a couple more among the boulders at the rock slide in the Vallee D'Ossoue.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Few this year, but we had nice views of a couple in the agricultural area bordering the Peau de Meau track in the Crau, then a single bird amongst a group of stonechats in the Vallee D'Ossoue.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – A couple of small groups totaling about 10 birds were seen on our first visit to the Vallee D'Ossoue, including a couple of males that were still mostly in their breeding finery.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Seen almost every day in small numbers, but perhaps most numerous along the Peau de Meau track in the Crau. As usual, all of the birds in the Arles region were already in their duller winter plumage, but a few males in the mountains weren't as far along in their molt and looked pretty dapper in comparison.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Just a couple of sightings of rather skulky birds at both the Barrage des Gloriettes and Le Lienz.
MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – A couple of birds at Le Lienz were even more elusive than the blackbirds, and I suspect more folks missed them than saw them.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Numerous around the Camargue region, but absent in the mountains.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*) – We only ever see this species along the Port de Boucharo trail, and it can be hit or miss, but it was a definite hit this trip, and we had super looks at a couple of birds foraging in the rocks above the trail.

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – Also known as Hedge Sparrow (in the UK at least) but probably should be named Hedge Accentor, as an accentor is what it is. Reasonably common in the higher parts of the Pyrenees, especially so on the shrubby valley slopes at the Barrage des Gloriettes.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – Small numbers in the Camargue region, where often seen along the water's edge. Our best sightings were along the marsh edges at the Salin de Giraud.

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – This long-tailed bird shows a preference for clear, fast-flowing mountain streams, and we had a few of them along various rivers in the Pyrenees.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – One bird on our way to Arles on the first afternoon was our only one in the Camargue region. All the other sightings came in the mountains, where they were mostly seen along the roadsides in the towns of Gedre and Gavarnie.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – This large, pale pipit showed well on the Crau, where one was with the three short-toed larks, then again in the coastal scrub at Mejanes.

TREE PIPIT (*Anthus trivialis*) – An attractive pipit with very clear, well-defined streaks on the breast. We picked up our first as they foraged in the grassy lawn at the rest stop overlooking Carcassonne, then had a few more sightings in the Pyrenees.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – The common pipit in the mountains, the blurry streaking making them easily told apart from the less common Tree Pipit.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – A handsome male that foraged in the open near the shoreline of the reservoir at Gloriettes was surprisingly our only one of the trip. We also had brief glimpses of a bunting in the Vallee D'Ossoue, though that one appeared to be an Ortolan Bunting. Too bad it didn't stick around a bit longer. The Yellowhammer was Sue's favorite bird of the mountain portion of the tour.

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – Decent scope views of this rather nondescript bunting a couple of times on the first half of the tour.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Fewer than usual in the mountains this trip, though we still saw a few, including a couple of handsome, colorful males.

EURASIAN LINNET (*Linaria cannabina*) – Another species that was scarcer than usual this trip. Our only sighting came during our hike at the Port de Boucharo, where Marcelo spotted a handful of these feeding on thistles in the bottom of the valley below the trail.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – Seen a few times in the Camargue region, with some decent scope views of a few a couple of times. We also glimpsed a few birds at the start of the trail up to the cirque.

CITRIL FINCH (*Carduelis citrinella*) – It took some tromping around in the bowl of the Cirque de Gavarnie, but we finally tracked down a lone male, in the company of a couple of serins.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – Only recorded on the day of our hike to the cirque, with a total of 4 birds seen, including the couple with the Citril Finch.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*)

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*)

MAMMALS

COMMON PIPISTRELLE (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*)

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*) – One flushed ahead of us along the Peau de Meau trail and raced across the Crau.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Numerous in the Pyrenees, where they were introduced to feed the local Golden Eagle population.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*) – Seen by some at the Carcassonne overlook.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – Native to South America, but now widespread in the Camargue where we saw a number of them. [I]

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – An excellent trip for these lovely "goat-antelopes". We had fine scope views of at least 13 of them on our hike up to the cirque.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 161 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa