



Field Guides Tour Report

France: Camargue & Pyrenees 2019

Aug 31, 2019 to Sep 10, 2019

Megan Edwards Crewe & Marcelo Padua

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



It's always a thrill to get a below-eye-level look at a raptor like a Red Kite! Photo by guide Marcelo Padua.

September is a lovely time to visit southern France. From the Camargue, where golden fields of ripening rice stretched to the horizons and reed beds thrashed before strong winds, to the Pyrenees, where rumpled mountains scraped craggy fingers against blue skies and conifer forests massed darkly against the rocks, the landscape provided a beautiful backdrop against which to look for the region's special birds. And there were plenty to search out! Our weather in the lowlands was hot and dry -- and rather windy for a couple of days -- and the vegetation around the Camargue was parched and crispy after months with no rain. The fine, settled weather may have impacted somewhat the number of migrants we saw (no need for them to stop!), but it also allowed us to enjoy our superb Provençal dinners al fresco, under the dense cover of well-cropped trees in our hotel's courtyard. The lovely weather continued in the mountains, with cloudless skies and comfortable temperatures (mostly -- though some of those mornings were chilly) making birding pleasant. Again though, the settled weather seemed to impact migration, with little movement seen during our stay.

We started our tour with four days in the Camargue region, near the mouth of the Rhone River. Here, among salt pans, reeds and wind-tossed rice fields, we connected with many of region's lingering (or resident) breeders and smaller numbers of migrants. Clouds of dusty pink Greater Flamingos massed in brackish lagoons. Busy flocks of European Bee-eaters flashed golden wings as they chased insects overhead -- or sat strung along telephone wires like tastefully bright beads. Eurasian Hoopoes flew past in a flurry of black and white wings. Lesser Kestrels hovered low over the stony Crau steppe or perched on scattered piles of rocks, while a little group of Red-legged Partridges scurried away from us. Frosty-winged Mediterranean Gulls trickled past a roadside pond. Two Eurasian Thick-knees crept across a scruffy field, keeping a huge watchful yellow eye (or two) on us. A pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers clung to slender canopy branches, peering around. Flock after loose flock of European Honey-Buzzards, in an array of color morphs, drifted over, headed south. Crested Larks trotted along the roadside, topknots blowing in the wind. Little Ringed Plovers huddled along the edge of a salt pan, close enough we could see their yellow eye rings. A trio of Slender-billed Gulls took splashing baths in a windy lagoon. Jewel-bright Common Kingfishers flashed past, and little parties of Long-tailed Tits swarmed through wilting Tamarisk trees.

Then it was the long transfer to the high Pyrenees, trading the flat coast for spectacular jagged peaks and glacier-carved valleys, tumbling mountain streams, and a whole new suite of birds. A White-throated Dipper bobbed on rocks in the midst of a tumbling mountain stream, then plunged into the torrent. Three strikingly peachy Bearded Vultures (aka Lammergeiers) snoozed on a ledge against an equally peachy cliff, occasionally waking enough to preen a feather or two back into place. An Alpine Accentor picked its way across a nearby scree slope, nibbling seeds. After a few ghostly flyovers, a Tawny Owl perched on a thick branch in a tree across the road from our hotel, shouting challenges -- and soon joined by its mate. Massive Eurasian Griffons glided overhead. Jaunty Crested Tits called from thick pine trees. Yellow-billed Choughs poked and prodded on grassy hillsides or formed loose "bird tornadoes" above mountain peaks. A couple of Short-toed Snake-Eagles (one adult, one youngster) patrolled the Vallee d'Ossoue, where the adult caught a slender, 2-foot long snake and proceeded to devour it on the wing -- at one point even peeling several coils of the still-struggling snake off its beak. A male Eurasian Bullfinch perched for long minutes mere feet off the ground and only a few yards from us. Citril Finches attacked thistle seeds in the boulder-strewn Cirque de Gavarnie. A couple of stripey-faced Rock Buntings crept through a scrawny bush. And how about those lamb chops cooked on the 18th-century hearth of our Gedre hotel?!

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

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

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

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl).

- MUTE SWAN** (*Cygnus olor*) – Very common on the lagoon beside the salt pans south of Salin de Giraud, floating serenely among the thick yellow-green pond scum that their nutrient-rich droppings undoubtedly helped to proliferate. There were at least 50 birds there!
- BLACK SWAN** (*Cygnus atratus*) – One with the Mute Swans on a lagoon near the Salin de Giraud was undoubtedly an escape; the nearest wild birds are in Australia! It was a handsome creature none-the-less.
- COMMON SHELDUCK** (*Tadorna tadorna*) – A couple of close youngsters mooched along the muddy edges of a couple of salt pans Salin de Giraud (looking a bit bedraggled) and we saw 20 or so more distant birds foraging along the back edge one of the pans as we neared the beach.
- NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Spatula clypeata*) – A few floated among the hordes of Mallards on a pond near our lunch spot in the salt pans, easily distinguished by the big beaks. Though some were surprised to see them in their eclipse plumage so late in the summer, this isn't unusual. Most ducks are in their finest breeding plumage in the winter -- because that's when they're vying for mates!
- GADWALL** (*Mareca strepera*) – A dozen or so floated beyond our first Little and Great Crested Grebes, on a channel near our lunch spot at Salin de Giraud. When they stretched their wings, we could see the black and white speculum patches that help to distinguish them from the similarly-plumaged female Mallards.
- MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Ubiquitous on channels, ponds and etangs throughout the Camargue. Their white tails can be a good field mark for this common species when they're in eclipse plumage -- as nearly all of our birds were.
- GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN)** (*Anas crecca crecca*) – These small ducks were scattered among their larger cousins on several of the waterways in the Camargue. Males of the subspecies found in Europe differ from those of North America in having white tips to their scapulars, which makes a horizontal line along their sides when they're swimming, as opposed to the vertical white "pencil" on the breast of North America's males. Of course, all of our birds were in eclipse plumage, so we didn't actually see that field mark!
- RED-CRESTED POCHARD** (*Netta rufina*) – A trio of youngsters floated, snoozing, on the shallow waters of the pond near the Tour Carbonniere on our first afternoon. Their dark brown caps are distinctive.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies).

- RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE** (*Alectoris rufa*) – A busy group high-stepped their way across the stony Crau steppe on our early morning pre-breakfast visit there. This species is a favorite of hunters in France.

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos).

- GREATER FLAMINGO** (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – Hundreds and thousands, sprinkled in dusty pink clouds across the etangs and salt pans of the Camargue. From a distance, those feeding in deeper water looked rather like pale pink swans! We saw a satisfying number of gray youngsters this year, so it looks like they've had a reasonably good breeding season locally.

Podicipedidae (Grebes).

- LITTLE GREBE** (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – A group of four disappeared repeatedly under the pond scum on the surface of one of the lagoons near the salt pans at Salin de Giraud, often popping back up some distance from where they started. We saw another, closer bird diving in a channel along the causeway near Scamandre.
- GREAT CRESTED GREBE** (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Common on the waterways around Salin de Giraud, with others along the shores of the Etang des Vaccares, including several birds with nearly-grown but still stripey-faced youngsters in tow. We saw a few with their distinctive "ears" (in reality, tufts of feathers on both sides of their heads) clearly visible.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves).

- ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) – Very common in the lowlands, with smaller numbers in a few places in the highlands -- including a flock that seemed particularly fond of sitting in the middle of the road on the outskirts of Gavarnie. Interestingly, the latter all had the "wild type" plumage, while the lowland flocks were a myriad of colors.
- COMMON WOOD-PIGEON** (*Columba palumbus*) – Abundant in the lowlands and foothills, but missing entirely from the mountains. Their flashy white wing patches helped to quickly distinguish them from the other doves and pigeons -- as did their huge size!
- EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Common in the lowlands, where their rather bored-sounding, three-note call ("United, united") were a regular part of the tour soundtrack.

Otididae (Bustards).

- LITTLE BUSTARD** (*Tetrax tetrax*) – Arg! The flock at the Montpellier airport was waaaaaaay down at the far end of the airfield, making them little more than wavy blobs -- though blobs with white bellies, longish necks and small heads -- as they wandered in the grass near the runway.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots).

- WATER RAIL** (*Rallus aquaticus*) – We heard the "squealing pig" calls of this rather shy species from the tall rushes along the boardwalk at the Tour Carbonniere our first afternoon, but couldn't entice it out for a look. [*]
- EURASIAN MOORHEN** (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – Regular around the Camargue, often chugging their way across ponds and canals. We saw a good number of plain, brown youngsters this year.
- EURASIAN COOT** (*Fulica atra*) – Thousands floated on the Etang des Vaccares, the vanguard of the vast flocks that will overwinter there. Though similar to the American Coot, this one has an all-white shield, and lacks any white patches under the tail.
- WESTERN SWAMPHEN** (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) – A few folks in Marcelo's van got a quick look at one that peeked out from the edges of the reeds near our lunch spot at the Salin de Giraud, and Mike and Linda saw it fly off down the channel.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees).

- EURASIAN THICK-KNEE** (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) – Two stood in a dry, stony field near the main Crau steppe, showing nicely in the scopes. These wide-eyed birds are largely nocturnal, typically resting quietly somewhere during the day.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets).

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – Very common in the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, where they strode along the edges of watery pans on long pink legs, with a scattering of others elsewhere in the Camargue. We saw plenty of brown-backed youngster among the blacker-backed adults.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avocetta*) – Another common species on the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, where we watched some hunting with their distinctive bill-scything motion.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings).

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A trio pattered on the mud among a host of egrets near the Tour Carbonniere on our first afternoon, and we saw others on the refuge pond at Salin de Giraud. Most of the birds we spotted were on the ground, though we did see a few in flight, flashing their distinctively round black and white underwings, over the marshes near Mas d'Agon.

KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – A few sprinkled along the edges of some of the ponds at Fangassier, with another on a muddy strip at Scamandre. This is the smallest and palest of the plovers we see on this tour, and is the only small plover with an all-black bill and dark legs.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – Seen in small numbers on the salt pans of Salin de Giraud, with a few others at Scamandre. Their rather stout orange legs and fairly heavy breast band help to separate this species from the tour's other small plovers.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – Best seen at Fangassier, where a handful battled to stay upright on the windswept sand along the track. Several were close enough to clearly see their distinctive yellow eye rings. We had another on a muddy spit at Scamandre. This species is subtly longer-winged than the previous, with slimmer, paler legs.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*) – Two foraged in a lagoon near the end of the road at Salin de Giraud, discovered when we stopped to scan for Slender-billed Gulls. They flew off shortly after we arrived, showing a lack of white in the wings and tail -- and thus eliminating Black-tailed Godwits. We forgot to write this one in on our checklists!

RUFF (*Calidris pugnax*) – Ten or so foraged along the edge of a pond at the Salin de Giraud, seen from our windy perch on a dike edging the road. Their habit of rucking up their back feathers is a good ID feature.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – Amazingly, we saw only a trio of this normally common species -- though the very distant cloud of shorebirds we saw writhing like smoke far away over salt pans near the horizon undoubtedly contained a few more! This is a sister species to the "peeps" of North America.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – A handful winnowed down to earth in a wet spot near the road down to Salin de Giraud, seen by those in Megan's van while we watched our first European Honey-Buzzards flap into the distance; unfortunately those in Marcelo's van were facing the wrong direction!

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Another surprisingly scarce bird this year, though we did find a few teetering along the edge of a lagoon at Fangassier, and saw a few more in stiff-winged flight elsewhere in the Camargue. This species is closely related to the Spotted Sandpiper of the Americas.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – Heidi spotted our first, foraging along the edge of the Etang des Vaccares, and we had even better views of a half dozen others in one of the ponds at La Capeliere. This one's closest relative is North America's Solitary Sandpiper, and it shares that species' prominent eye ring, white rump patch and blackish underwings.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – A handful in the salt pans and lagoons at Salin de Giraud, including one in nice comparison to a gang of Common Redshanks.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – Probably the most regularly-seen of our shorebirds this year, with a couple near the Tour Carbonniere on our first afternoon, another group busily feeding in one of the lagoons at Salin de Giraud, and still more on the tiny mud strip at Scamandre.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – A half dozen or so pottered around the edges of one of the lagoons at Salin de Giraud, feeding energetically. Their long red legs are distinctive -- as is the white wedge at the trailing edge of their wing, showed by one when it flew.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers).

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – It took some hard looking, but we eventually found at least three of these elegant gulls bathing in a puddle near the parking lot at the end of the road through the salt pans at Salin de Giraud. The longer, pinkish-orange bill of this species, and its lack of dark "ear spots", help to separate it from the slightly smaller Black-headed Gull.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Common and widespread throughout the Camargue. All of the birds we saw were already in their non-breeding plumage, with not a black head to be seen anywhere!

LITTLE GULL (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) – Two of these small gulls flew in and landed on the muddy edge of a salt pan as we drove through the Salin de Giraud; they're so small that initially, I thought they were going to be terns! The adult still showed most of the dark hood of its breeding plumage.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*) – Far more common than normal, with small numbers seen most days around the Camargue -- and dozens, scores, hundreds? seen around Aigues-Mortes our first afternoon. The all-white primaries of the adults are distinctive.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – Another abundant species across the Camargue, including hundreds padding around in the horse pastures near our hotel each morning. This species was split from the Herring Gull a few years ago -- though DNA analysis shows that it's actually more closely related to the Lesser Black-backed Gull.

LITTLE TERN (*Sternula albifrons*) – Quite common at Salin de Giraud, with some flying back and forth along the edges of the lagoons and others resting among their larger cousins on various muddy islets. We saw a few others over the marshes near Scamandre.

GULL-BILLED TERN (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – A few of these big, pale terns hunted over some fields along the road down to Salin de Giraud, and we found a couple of others over the marshes near Scamandre. The stubby, black beak of this species is diagnostic.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – One of these big terns (largest in the world) coursed along the edge of the Etang des Vaccares, keeping pace with our vehicles. That big, blood-red bill is hard to miss!

BLACK TERN (EURASIAN) (*Chlidonias niger niger*) – A small group of these marsh terns hunted over the far edge of a roadside pond near the Etang des Vaccares, showing their uniformly gray upperparts and dark "football helmet" head markings.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – Very few of these migrants this year, with only a bird or two seen on each of our visits to the area around Mas d'Agon. This marsh tern is seldom found away from fresh water.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – A few around Salin de Giraud, with others over the Etang des Vaccares. The subspecies found in Europe is "hirundo" -- the same as the one found in North and South America.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Abundant around Salin de Giraud, with a handful around Aigues-Mortes as well. The pale plumage and pale-tipped black bill of this species help to separate it from the other terns found on this tour.

Ciconiidae (Storks)

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – We had a distant, whirling tornado of birds spiraling over the flat rice fields of the Camargue, and a single close bird in flight just above the treetops as we headed to the second blind at La Capeliere. As evidenced by our first sizable flock, this species migrates through southern France in considerable numbers.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Daily around the Camargue, often standing spread-eagled on a dead snag or piling along the water's edge, drying off.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Daily in the Camargue, including several small flying squadrons and plenty more hunting along the edges of lagoons and salt pans or standing hunched on the shores.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Far scarcer than the previous species, with most seen in brief flight -- until Carol spotted us one standing with the bulls at a farm near Mas d'Agon. Youngsters are quite gingery compared to the purpler adults.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Small numbers daily in the Camargue, quickly identified by their dagger-like yellow bills. Unlike North America's birds, the bills of those in Europe (subspecies "alba") go black in the breeding season.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Very common in the Camargue, with dozens seen daily, hunting in just about every wet spot we passed. This is a sister species to the Snowy Egret, sharing even the latter's "golden slippers".

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – Another common and widespread species in the lowlands, including dozens in the pastures around our hotel, and a few standing tall on horses and cows around the Camargue.

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Another great spot by Carol netted us our best look at one of these small brown herons (really a pond-heron) -- standing on a pole at the edge of a pasture near Mas d'Agon. We saw others in flight around the Camargue, flashing surprisingly white wings and looking more like egrets than herons.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – Best seen at La Capeliere, where a half dozen or so probed the muddy shallows of one of the ponds. We saw others near Mas d'Agon, including some in flight.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – At least three birds flapped over the Etang des Vaccares, one carrying a fairly sizable fish.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

BEARDED VULTURE (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – Our experiences with these distinctive vultures just got better and better and better. We started with a distant pair over the ridges at the Cirque de Gavarnie, had both adult and youngster coursing over the Peau de Meau and the Lac des Gloriettes, but our best views came in the Vallee d'Ossoue, where we found a trio of adults snoozing on a ledge on a cliff -- close enough we could even see their distinctive "beards" when they periodically raised their heads.

EGYPTIAN VULTURE (*Neophron percnopterus*) – An adult rested on the traditional nesting ledge at the Pic de Pibeste, occasionally flashing its yellow face as it preened. With its back turned, it mostly resembled a bit of old carpet tossed among the branches!

EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis apivorus*) – Splendid views of small migrant flocks on most days in the lowlands, often right over our heads. This species comes in a number of color morphs, and we saw plenty of variety.

EURASIAN GRIFFON (*Gyps fulvus*) – Daily in the highlands, sometimes in impressive numbers, like when the squadron of parasailers disturbed them off the ridge tops overlooking the Cirque de Gavarnie and sometimes impressively close, like when a clown car's worth of birds streamed by one after another right over our heads at the Lac des Gloriettes. And who will soon forget the one with its head buried right up to its neck ruff in the back end of a dead cow in the Port de Boucharo?!

SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE (*Circaetus gallicus*) – A distant bird circled over Aigues-Mortes, and others spiraled over Mas d'Agon and Scamandre. But our best views came in the Vallee d'Ossoue, where an adult and a pale-headed youngster interacted on several days, and coursed back and forth over the hillsides, hunting. We even saw the adult drop down and pick up a very slim, 2-foot long snake -- which it ate in flight!

BOOTED EAGLE (*Hieraetus pennatus*) – Brief views of a dark-morph bird flapping over the parking lot at Pic de Pibeste. Unfortunately, it headed south before we got much of a look.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Small numbers on several days in the mountains, including high above the ridges of the Vallee d'Ossoue and (for some) at the Col du Tourmalet, with particularly fine views of a youngster at Lac des Gloriettes -- being chased back and forth by some very annoyed choughs -- and its parents.

EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER (*Circus aeruginosus*) – Small numbers in the lowlands, typically coursing low over marshy areas -- like the ones we saw at the Tour Carbonniere and Mas d'Agon. Most were chocolate-brown youngsters, but at least one was a nearly full-adult male, showing his distinctive multicolored upperwings.

MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*) – Our first was a youngster, which showed its white rump and gingery underparts as it flapped hard into the stiff wind at Mesjanas. Some of the group saw another along the road as we headed back to the hotel from the Peau de Meau on our first visit there.

EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK (*Accipiter nisus*) – We saw the typical flap-flap-glide flight of this Accipiter on several days, with our best views probably coming at the Port de Boucharo, where one tangled repeatedly with a Eurasian Kestrel as it worked its way south towards the pass.

RED KITE (*Milvus milvus*) – Our first soared past as we birded along the back edge of the Montpellier airport on our first hot afternoon. We saw another flapping past over the Vallee d'Ossoue (following the same line as a couple of Bearded Vultures) and looked DOWN on one gliding past us at the Col du Tourmalet.

BLACK KITE (*Milvus migrans*) – One circled with our first flock of European Honey-Buzzards as we headed down to the Salin de Giraud on our first morning in the Camargue. This species is shorter-tailed and more uniformly colored than the previous -- and most have already gone south by the time of our tour.

COMMON BUZZARD (*Buteo buteo*) – Regular throughout, though in smaller numbers than most years. We had especially nice views of one over the Montpellier airport, and of a quartet interacting over the gas station we made a pit stop at on our drive to the mountains. Like the European Honey-Buzzard, this species comes in a number of color morphs.

Strigidae (Owls)

LITTLE OWL (*Athene noctua*) – All-too-distant views of one sitting atop a pile of rocks on the Crau steppe early on our last morning in the Camargue. Its big-headed look helped separate it from the omnipresent kestrels hunting from nearby piles.

TAWNY OWL (*Strix aluco*) – Wow! Fantastic views of one in the garden of our Gedre hotel. After giving us quite the serenade, it flew across the road to another tree, and was soon joined by its mate for an even more impressive duet. Yip, yip, yip!

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

EURASIAN HOPOE (*Upupa epops*) – Our first went past in a flurry of black and white wings at the Montpellier airport, and we spotted others flying past while we birded before breakfast at our Camargue hotel and at the Peau de Meau, where one dropped down onto the ground nearby -- and disappeared.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Seen most days in the Camargue, typically in flight -- including one that nearby collided with some of us on the bridge near Mas d'Agon, and another chirping like an insect along a canal near Scamandre. The jewel-like tones of their plumage were particularly apparent on the one that flew past while we birded near our lunch spot at Salin de Giraud.

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

EUROPEAN BEE-EATER (*Merops apiaster*) – Our best views came on the morning we visited the woodlot near our Camargue hotel, when we found a big flock sitting on wires and swirling over the road on our drive back. We saw more in flight over the pastures near our Camargue hotel and heard the distinctive "proop proop" calls of many others drifting down from clear blue skies on several days -- with the birds themselves invisible in the stratosphere.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

EUROPEAN ROLLER (*Coracias garrulus*) – Daily in the lowlands, including a half dozen or more hunting from signs (and the ground) at the Montpellier airport and others sprinkled on utility wires all across the Camargue.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocoptes medius*) – It took some patience and persistence, but most of us got there in the end! We initially found a couple of flighty birds in the forest near Mauvezin castle, but didn't get much of a look at either. Fortunately, we found another in a nearby picnic area that proved more cooperative, and most got a look as it peered around from a dead snag or hitched up branches high in the canopy of a big oak. The fine brown streaking on its underparts and the pink (rather than red) vent help to separate it from the generally more common Great Spotted Woodpecker -- which we missed this year.

LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dryobates minor*) – A noisy pair swirled through trees along the road near "Tom's wood", giving us repeated nice views in the scopes. This is France's smallest woodpecker.

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – Arg! One made several passes through the forest near our "Tom's wood", but never landed in view; we certainly heard it though! We heard others calling near our Camargue hotel and from the woods near the Peau de Meau, and some folks in my van saw one make an ill-advised flight across the motorway on our way back to Toulouse -- and just BARELY make it over the top of a passing 18-wheeler!

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – Some of us heard the ringing calls of one drifting down from the spruce forest along the path to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and we all saw one -- all too briefly -- as it swooped past along the road at Le Lienz. Unfortunately, it never showed again.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – Lovely views of several males on the stony Crau steppe, showing their distinctive all-blue heads and the blue covert panels in their upperwings. This social breeder is particularly common near their purpose-built breeding wall at the Peau de Meau.

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – Common throughout, including several hovering over the Montpellier airport and others playing in the wind at the Port de Boucharo. The one apparently chasing the Short-toed Snake-Eagle away in the Vallee d'Ossoue seemed particularly bold.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – One seen high over the pastures near our Camargue hotel on our first pre-breakfast walk there.

PEREGRINE FALCON (*Falco peregrinus*) – One circling over our heads at the Salin de Giraud had the nearby shorebirds on high alert. We saw another stirring up the kestrels near the sheep shed on the Peau de Meau, where it perched briefly on a pile of rocks.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius collurio*) – A fairly distant youngster in a scrubby field near the Crau steppe showed the distinctive dark eye mask and rusty upperparts of this species.

IBERIAN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – One very active bird outside a sheep shed on the Crau steppe hunted from the shed's roof, the stone wall around the animal enclosure, a nearby well, a ruined hut nearby, and the ground, all the while chasing insects. This species was split from Northern Shrike some years ago, but the whole "Gray Shrike" complex is a mess, with more work needed to tease apart the various species.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – Recorded on half the days of the tour, with especially good studies of a sleepy one sunning on a rock near the Hotel de Cirque while we ate our picnic lunch before heading up into the cirque itself. This species is a typically a lot more shy and wary than are North America's jays.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Common in the lowlands, including a few chasing around the big distribution center buildings near the Montpellier airport and others rummaging along roadsides and field edges in the Camargue. Based on morphological, behavioral and genetic differences, this species was split from North America's Black-billed Magpie about a decade ago.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – Small numbers in the mountains, with some fine views of a few pairs in the Port de Boucharo, and others in the Vallee d'Ossoue. This species has a longer bill and a broader "hand" than does the next, and is typically found in much smaller groups.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) – Dozens. Scores. Hundreds! Big flocks played in the winds over the ridges in the Cirque de Gavarnie, the Port de Boucharo and the Lac des Gloriettes, spinning together in ever-moving kettles. We got some up-close and personal looks at a

handful rummaging in the grass below the track at the Port de Boucharo, showing nicely their stout pale bills.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Very common in the lowlands, with scores foraging in the pastures near our Camargue hotel and others checking out the stony Crau steppe.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – Best seen on our morning at the Peau de Meau, when we found a big mixed flock of this and the previous species milling around on the ground along the little canal near the parking lot. Scope views (and some patience) showed the distinctive white base to the bill of these larger (and larger-beaked) corvids.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – Regular throughout, including a few wheeling over the pastures on the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and scattered birds in the farm fields around the Camargue.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Two flew past -- croaking loudly -- while we ate our lunch just down the hill from the Port de Boucharo, and we saw others over the Lac des Gloriettes and the Col du Tourmalet. This is a high elevation species in most of France.

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (*Alauda arvensis*) – A pair scuttled along the edge of one of the dry lagoons at Fangassier, and others flitted across the stony ground on the Crau steppe, giving their occasional rich, rolling calls. This species has a smaller crest than the next, and shows white outer tail feathers and a white trailing edge to the wing in flight.

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*) – Two seen scurrying along the edge of the track at Fangassier -- being blown around by the wind -- with others on the Crau steppe on each of our visits there. This species has a longer crest than does the previous one, with peachy outer tail feathers and a peachy (rather than gray) underwing in flight.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Regular in the lowlands, including good numbers wheeling over our heads at the Tour Carbonniere on the first afternoon. The subspecies "riparia" is Holarctic -- found in both Europe and North America.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – We found our first coursing back and forth in front of the limestone cliffs near Les Baux, where we searched in vain for Eurasian Eagle-Owl. But we had better views daily in the mountains, with plenty coursing right over our heads on the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie and some reach-out-and-touch them birds along the top of the dam at Lac des Gloriettes -- including some endearing, recently-fledged youngsters balanced on a narrow ledge a bit further down the dam face.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Common throughout, including dozens fluttering at ankle height over the Crau steppe on a windy morning. We did somehow manage to miss them one day -- probably not paying enough attention! The subspecies in Europe -- rustica -- is much paler underneath than are American birds.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – Our first were a handful winging over Le Sambuc, seen on our way back to the vehicles from our pit stop there. We saw many more in the mountains, often in mixed flocks with Eurasian Crag-Martins. Their bold white rump patches make them easy to identify, even from a considerable distance.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (*Pariparus ater*) – One sang loudly from the top of a spruce on the walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, and a couple of others flicked through lower branches in an even bigger spruce in the forest of Le Lienz. We saw others flitting through the trees near where we found the big Mistle Thrush flock in the Vallee d'Ossoue. This species is resident, breeding mainly in conifer woods.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – Fine close views of a pair along the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie, with another confiding pair in the forest at Le Lienz. This is the only tit in Europe with a fully-developed crest; it reminded us a bit of the Bridled Titmouse.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*) – We ALMOST missed this one -- having given up and climbed back into the vans to continue our journey back to Toulouse. Fortunately, Jan looked out the window and spotted a silent bird working its way along a branch right over the parking lot -- nice job, Jan! With some patience, we all got super views of it as it rummaged through nearby branches. This species has a distinctively small bib.

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – Best seen on the walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, where we found small noisy groups flitting through the trailside spruces. We heard others in the Vallee d'Ossoue, and saw another busy flock in the forest at Le Lienz.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – One investigated a big cherry tree along the trail out to the observation blind at La Capeliere, showing the thick black stripe on its yellow belly nicely as it did so. We saw others at our picnic lunch spot under the trees at the Etang des Aulnes, and still more at the Carcassonne rest stop. Surprisingly, we didn't see a single one in the mountains.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – Multiple fine views of these handsome little birds, including a showy gang along the boardwalk trail at the Tour Carbonniere, another noisy group along the road on our pre-breakfast outing to "Tom's wood" and more on the walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. Its namesake tail makes up more than half the length of the bird!

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – It took far longer than it should have to get a look at this species! We caught our first glimpse of one in the parking lot at the Pic de Pibeste -- though it morphed into a Common Chiffchaff before everyone got a look. Another pair in the forest near Mauvezin castle gave us quite the runaround before some of the group finally saw one or the other crawling along a trunk or branch -- though never for long before it twitched away to somewhere else.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – One hitched its way up several pine trunks at the rest area where we had our picnic overlooking Carcassonne, showing nicely, and we had good looks at another investigating oaks near the parking area in the forest near Mauvezin castle. This is the lower-elevation treecreeper in Europe.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – We very nearly missed this one! Fortunately, Hank spotted one creeping through the undergrowth by the parking area in the forest near Mauvezin castle after we heard one singing there. With some persistence, we all got great views as it worked its way closer and closer. This is the only wren species in all of Europe and Asia!

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – One in the little stream running through Gavarnie entertained us -- repeatedly flinging itself into the rushing waters and then popping back up onto boulders -- as we waited for everyone to use the public restrooms there. We found another sitting

quietly beside the waterfall at the far end of the Lac des Gloriettes as we scanned for Wallcreepers from the dam.

Regulidae (Kinglets).

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – A trio swirled through a treetop along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie (right near the start of that long, straight, level stretch), calling incessantly, and some of us saw others in the big mixed tit flock we found at Le Lienz. The bold eye ring of this species quickly separates it from the next. This is the smallest European bird.

COMMON FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – Our first was a cooperative bird (which was a bit surprising, considering the howling gale!) in the conifers at our picnic spot near Carcassonne, and we had even closer views of others along the road in the forest of Le Lienz. The striped face and bright bronzy nape patch of this species help to separate it from the previous.

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies).

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – As usual, we heard FAR more of these than we saw. Our only views came on a very windy day near Mas d'Agon, when one worked its way along the madly-thrashing reed beds on both sides of the road and flashed back and forth across the road a few times -- giving us little more than a quick impression of a rather round, rusty-brown little bird.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers).

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – Our first was a bright yellow youngster in one of the scruffy bushes along the road at Mesjanes -- made a bit challenging by the thrashing of the vegetation due to the winds. We found a couple of others in the low bushes along the trail at the Lac des Gloriettes, some of the very few migrant warblers we spotted on this tour.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Among the most common of the tour's warblers, seen daily in the mountains -- including one flitting through the trees at the edge of the parking lot at Pic du Pibeste and others with the tit flocks on the Cirque de Gavarnie hike. Their habit of regularly dipping their tails is distinctive.

Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers and Allies).

EURASIAN REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – A sneaky pair crept in to the reeds right above a little footbridge where I'd deposited the speaker and proceeded to examine it closely from virtually every angle -- giving us the chance to study them repeatedly.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies).

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Best seen on a pre-breakfast outing from our Camargue hotel, when we found a nicely cooperative bird perched up (several times) in a nearby pasture and watched several others in their bounding display flights. We saw others clinging to the flower heads in a windswept reed bed at Mesjanes.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers).

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – Another surprisingly scarce species this year, with a single male along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie -- great spotting Heidi -- and another in the Red-berried Elder bushes at the foot of the rockfall in the Vallee d'Ossoue.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – A churring male showed nicely along the boardwalk at Tour Carbonniere on our first afternoon, sitting still long enough that we could get him in the scopes. We heard others from the surrounding hillsides and olive groves as dusk descended during our search for the eagle-owl.

GREATER WHITETHROAT (*Sylvia communis*) – Brief glimpses of one repeatedly flicking away ahead of us as we walked back along the canal at the Peau de Meau; it sat up briefly a few times before diving back into the thickest bits of the bramble bushes.

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – It took a couple of visits, but we finally got everybody a look at either a female or an immature male at Mesjanes; it perched up on a whole series of scruffy *Salicornia* shrubs, giving us the chance to study it in the scopes.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers).

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER (*Muscicapa striata*) – A couple in the wooded stretch at La Capeliere swirled through the midstory in the company of several European Pied Flycatchers, allowing nice comparisons -- though making it much more challenging to figure out which species was where. Despite its name, it's really more streaked than spotted, particularly on the underparts.

EUROPEAN ROBIN (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Scattered sightings, mostly in the highlands, with particularly good looks at several along the edges of the parking lot at the Lac des Gloriettes. We saw others well on the hike up to the Cirque de Gavarnie, including a few spotty youngsters.

EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – Seen or heard on many days, typically hunting from the midstory of trees along field edges. The big white patch in the wings helps to separate it from the Spotted Flycatcher, particularly as none of the birds are in their black-and-white plumage at this time of year.

BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Abundant in the highlands, where we saw dozens demonstrating their distinctive quivering-tailed landings on rocks and boulders everywhere. Most were rather plain females and youngsters, but we did spot a few adult males, with their more patterned plumage.

RUFOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH (*Monticola saxatilis*) – A couple of subtly barred birds bounced through the rockfall in the Vallee d'Ossoue, snatching fruits from the Red-berried Elder bushes or sitting for long minutes atop some of the biggest boulders. At this time of year, males and females look alike.

WHINCHAT (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Especially nice views of a couple along the fence encircling the Montpellier airport, with others in the horse pastures near our Camargue hotel and in the Vallee d'Ossoue. The broad pale eyebrow on this species helps to distinguish it from the next.

EUROPEAN STONECHAT (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – Little groups seen hunting from mullein stalks and juniper bushes on each visit to the Vallee d'Ossoue. The dark faces and bold white half-collars of adult birds and young males -- and the lack of an obvious eyebrow on all -- help to separate them from the previous species.

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Regular throughout, particularly in the highlands. Our first was a little female scurrying about on the road at the Montpellier airport, and we saw a number of others flashing their distinctive white rumps and tails on the Crau steppe. But they were most common in the mountains, where we saw good numbers daily, hunting from stone and small bushes.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies).

MISTLE THRUSH (*Turdus viscivorus*) – A busy flock of 8 or 10 flicked around on a hillside near the Bearded Vulture's cliff in the Vallee d'Ossoue, bouncing through the trees or dropping to the ground and then flying back up. We saw a few others briefly on the ground near the dusty road up the hill in the forest of Le Lienz.

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*) – Seen on most days in the mountains, typically alone, and often in flight across the road in front of us. Though they feed on the ground, we rarely saw them in the open for long.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Very common in the lowlands, including some big flocks twisting across the skies over the Salin de Giraud, and hundreds lined up on utility wires. Believe it or not, this species has been in moderate decline across much of Europe since the 1980s, and has now hit the "red data list" (i.e. threatened status) in several European countries.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

ALPINE ACCENTOR (*Prunella collaris*) – Yahoo! After MUCH searching, we were rewarded at our very last stop in the mountains, when we found one nearly at arm's length on a rocky hillside at the Col de Tourmalet. It foraged quietly on the scree slope, giving us great opportunity to study the fine details of its plumage in the scopes.

DUNNOCK (*Prunella modularis*) – Our best views came in the parking lot at Lac des Gloriettes, where wing-flicking pairs bounced around under the cars, looking for tasty morsels. We saw others on our walk up to the Cirque de Gavarnie and in the forest of Le Lienz.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – One danced along the edge of the stream in Gavarnie, a bonus in the dipper search, and others waggled their way along the edges of the reservoir at Lac des Gloriettes. This is the longest-tailed of Europe's wagtails.

WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL (*Motacilla flava*) – Regular in the Camargue, with some seen on most days -- including a flock of 40 or so sheltering on a recently harvested field on our drive to Fangassier and others flicking along the edge of the lagoons at Salin de Giraud. This is the shortest-tailed of the wagtails we see on this tour.

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba*) – Another surprisingly scarce bird this year, with a single bird wagging its way under the tables of an outdoor cafe in Gedre (seen only by those in the first van) and another sitting atop a wall along the road down from the Col du Tourmalet.

TAWNY PIPIT (*Anthus campestris*) – It took some patience, but we finally connected nicely with a few of these rather plain pipits on the stony Crau steppe. This is the least-marked of the tour's pipits.

WATER PIPIT (*Anthus spinoletta*) – Plenty of these highland pipits daily in the mountains, striding around on the grassy slopes, bathing in the puddles along the roadsides and flying past in bounding, chipping flocks, their long white outer tail feathers flashing as they went.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON CHAFFINCH (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Most common in the highlands, with a few scattered birds in the lowlands and foothills as well -- including one atop a pine tree on an otherwise quiet late afternoon before our picnic supper near Les Baux. Their loud "SPINK" calls were a regular part of the mountain soundtrack.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – Superb views of a wonderfully cooperative raspberry-colored male low in the beech grove along the track up to the Cirque de Gavarnie. We saw a female/youngster in flight at our first stop in Le Lienz, while we looked down from the ski jump.

EURASIAN LINNET (*Linaria cannabina*) – A little group foraged at the head of the valley at the Port de Boucharo, feeding on the abundant thistle seeds there. Males aren't very pink this time of year.

RED CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*) – Two yellowish females or youngsters (or one of each) perched briefly atop a spruce in the forest at Le Lienz, seen as we headed back to the cars after searching unsuccessfully for our first Eurasian Wren.

EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH (*Carduelis carduelis*) – Common in the lowlands, with especially nice views of a red-faced adult and its brown-faced youngster along the fence around the Montpellier airport. We saw some sizable groups near our Camargue hotel too.

CITRIL FINCH (*Carduelis citrinella*) – Lovely views of this highland finch in the bowl of the Cirque de Gavarnie, nibbling thistle seeds among the scattered boulders.

EUROPEAN SERIN (*Serinus serinus*) – Also seen in the bowl of the Cirque de Gavarnie, either foraging among the boulders or flying past in tinkling, bounding flight. The streaking on this species helps to distinguish it from the similarly sized (and similarly colored) Citril Finch.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – We found a big group of these rather plain buntings on a wire near the road down to Salin de Giraud on our first morning in the Camargue -- though the strong winds made studying them in the scopes a bit of a challenge! Their streaky plumage looks rather like that of a female House Finch. This bird is in steep decline throughout much of Europe.

ROCK BUNTING (*Emberiza cia*) – We struck pay dirt on our second visit to the Vallee d'Ossoue, when Marcelo spotted a couple in little trees near the quarry. It took a bit of "bunting wrangling", but we all got good looks in the end. That stripey black and gray face is distinctive.

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – Lovely looks at a male striding across the grassy slopes near the rockfall in the Vallee d'Ossoue, with another handsome male seen on the far side of the Lac des Gloriettes. This species is resident over most of France.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Common throughout, with some big flocks encountered around the rice fields in the Camargue.

MAMMALS

EUROPEAN BROWN HARE (*Lepus europaeus*) – One rested in the shade of one of the scrawny bushes on the Peau de Meau on our first visit, betrayed by its long ears.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – Common in the higher mountains, particularly in the Vallee d'Ossoue and the Port de Boucharo/Col des Tentes -- including a quartet sprawled on rocks near our quarry picnic spot in the former. They're good sentinels, regularly calling loudly and alerting us to passing eagles.

EUROPEAN RED SQUIRREL (*Sciurus vulgaris*) – Those in Marcelo's van saw one in the forest at Le Lienz, when we stopped to check out the big mixed flock.

EUROPEAN SNOW VOLE (*Chionomys nivalis*) – One of these small rodents scurried along the edge of the path at the Port de Boucharo, disappearing repeatedly under the fallen rocks. Regularly found above the tree line, it is primarily a solitary animal. Its pale pelage and long tail helped Marcelo to identify it.

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – A few on the ponds around the Tour Carbonniere, including a small youngster foraging along the edge near the boardwalk. This species was introduced to Europe for the fur trade, and masses of them were released into the wild when that industry collapsed -- with detrimental effects to the local flora.

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – A herd of a dozen or so grazed on a hillside high above the Cirque de Gavarnie, seen from several different vantage points.

Herps

COMMON WALL LIZARD (*Podarcis muralis*) – We saw plenty of these little lizards along the track at the Port de Boucharo. I had mistakenly identified them as Erhard's Wall Lizards, which are found further east on the continent.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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