



Field Guides Tour Report

France: Camargue & Pyrenees II 2019

Sep 4, 2019 to Sep 14, 2019

Jay VanderGaast

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



Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush was one of the target birds we sought in the Pyrenees. We caught a glimpse of one on the Port de Boucharo trail, but had great looks at several others in the Vallee D'Ossoue, including this beauty that posed for guide Jay VanderGaast.

Six years ago, when I co-led my first France trip with Megan, I thought it was just going to be a one-off situation. But this was my 7th France tour in as many years, and I've got to say, it hasn't gotten any less enjoyable to lead this one. In fact, this year may have been one of the most enjoyable ones, thanks in part to a stellar, small group that all got along well and made for a truly pleasurable 10 days of travel. Of course, all the great French cuisine, delectable croissants, deliciously drinkable wines, etc didn't hurt either. Oh, and there were the birds, too, of course! They weren't too bad either.

While running this tour in reverse, starting in the mountains and finishing in the Camargue, wasn't my preference, in retrospect it worked out pretty well. We saw most of the species we expected, and the one cold, rainy day hit us in the Camargue region, where it was less of an issue than the same weather would have been in the mountains. And it certainly didn't hurt to overlap with Megan and Marcelo in the mountains, leading the first FG group. In fact, it helped us out with a couple of species, especially Egyptian Vulture; I finally know where that partially hidden roost is located!

The fine weather in the Pyrenees meant that we didn't encounter any big fallouts of migrants pushed down by the weather, but it certainly made for some wonderful birding conditions, and there were still a few migrants to be found. Among these, a beautiful juvenile Montagu's Harrier in the Vallee D'Ossoue was notable, as was my first ever Ortolan Bunting, found on a spontaneous exploration of a ravine we usually never enter. But residents and local breeders made up the bulk of the most memorable sightings here: Bearded Vultures riding the thermals with large numbers of hulking Eurasian Griffons; Short-toed Snake-Eagles hanging over the boulder-strewn hillsides of the Vallee D'Ossoue, one plunging to the ground and coming up with a snake in its beak; a pair of Red-backed Shrikes pouncing into the grass again and again to provide grasshoppers for their impatient fledglings; an Alpine Accentor landing on the track less than 10 feet from our position, allowing us to study every detail of its lovely plumage. All fun, memorable encounters, though by no means the only ones during our time here.

Continuing into the Camargue region, more rewards awaited us. While our first day there was very nearly a washout (though we did score point-blank looks at a pair of Red-legged Partridge!), we made up for it over the next few days, scoring most of the prime targets this region holds for us. A rare cool, calm morning free of heat shimmer allowed us exceptional studies of Lesser Kestrel, Iberian Gray Shrike, and Eurasian Thick-knee on the stony Crau steppe. Our delightful picnic dinner in the shadow of Les Baux-de-Provence was capped off beautifully by the appearance of a fierce-looking Eurasian Eagle Owl, hooting loudly from his perch on a rocky ledge overlooking the valley below. And the main birding area of the Camargue came

through with plenty of excellent waterbirds. Among these, a totally unexpected trio of Great White Pelicans were the biggest surprise of the trip, though a nearby flock of about 75 Eurasian Spoonbills were a close second. A Red-necked Phalarope spinning circles in one of the salt pans was one of the shorebird highlights, as were a group of Ruffs that superbly illustrated the size difference between males and females. In the tern and gull department, a vagrant Elegant Tern (my 2nd on this tour!) was the most unexpected, but a lone Slender-billed Gull was arguably the better find, given that I'd inadvertently photographed one on our first visit, only discovered upon our return to the hotel! Both Black and White Storks came through for us at nearly the last possible moment at Mas D'Agon. And a trio of skulking warblers all showed beautifully that same day, with Sardinian and Spectacled cavorting in the open at Mejanes, and the usually reticent Cetti's Warbler posing for scope views at Mas D'Agon. Crazy!

Thanks to all of you for helping to make this such a fun trip. Heck, thanks for making it run at all, as it looked pretty dicey there for a while. I'm sure glad it did go, as I had a truly great time showing you all around this little corner of France. Let's do it again sometime!

--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*) – Despite the disdain some people show for this species as an introduced bird in North America, they really are lovely birds, and they do belong in the Camargue, where we saw them in large numbers.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Numbers of these handsome ducks vary from year to year, and there weren't many around this trip, though we saw up to 5 birds a couple of days around the Camargue.

GARGANEY (*Spatula querquedula*) – Rarely seen on the tour, so a pair at the Marais de Romeu was a good find. We only saw them in flight, but had good views of the wing pattern with the white wing stripes and the lack of a colorful speculum.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – Present in good numbers, with a count of 57 birds at just one site on the Etang de Vaccarres.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – The default dabbling duck in the region, with good numbers throughout the Camargue, and a bunch seen on the Garonne River on our way to the mountains.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Just a handful of these were seen at a couple of sites in the Camargue.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE (*Alectoris rufa*) – Our rainy first morning in the Arles region could have been a complete washout, but we cruised around the edges of the Crau, looking for new access points, and though we failed to enter the Crau proper, at one point we came across a pair of these feeding on a quiet back road. After getting good views, we rolled towards them, and surprisingly they just calmly walked away, and we had the best looks I've ever had as we pulled up right alongside them and watched at point blank range! This made the 8 birds we saw later at the Peau de Meau completely unnecessary!

Phoenicopteridae (Flamingos)

GREATER FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) – The marquee bird of the Camargue, and as usual, we saw too many to count there.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

LITTLE GREBE (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – Small numbers scattered around the Camargue, with most birds already in non-breeding plumage, though a few still showed some breeding colors.

GREAT CRESTED GREBE (*Podiceps cristatus*) – Also seen in small numbers around the Camargue, including a couple of pairs still feeding stripe-headed youngsters. [N]

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – The usual feral birds around some towns and cities, including at the start of the track to the Cirque de Gavarnie.

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – Though our first were seen flying over at the parking area for the hike to the cirque, we saw more, and had far better views of these large pigeons in the Camargue region, where we had them daily.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Seen in small numbers daily around the Camargue region.

Otididae (Bustards)

LITTLE BUSTARD (*Tetrax tetrax*) – Our first was a single bird in a stubble field near St-Martin-de-Crau, but it took off quickly, and we mostly just saw it in flight. We had somewhat improved views of 8 birds with a bunch of thick-knees near Raphèle-des-Arles during our failed attempt to find sandgrouse. But our best looks came at tour's end, at the Montpellier airport. At first it looked like the birds were absent, but then one strolled up onto the tarmac from a hidden slope, followed by another, and another, until we were getting excellent scope looks at 9 of them. My guess is there were still a few more out of sight behind the hill, as we've had upwards of 50 birds here at times.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

WATER RAIL (*Rallus aquaticus*) – We were watching shorebirds in the marsh at the Salin de Giraud when several of these skulking birds began calling from the tall vegetation, where they seemed determined to stay out of sight. But eventually Linda B. spotted one coming out into the open, followed by a second bird, and we all had pretty decent views before they ducked back out of sight.

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus chloropus*) – We had these birds in low numbers around the Camargue until we got to La Tour Carbonniere on our final day, and tallied at least 20 of them from our viewing point atop the tower.

EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra*) – Numerous at several sites in the Camargue, particularly on the Etang des Vaccarres, where there were flocks of several hundred birds.

WESTERN SWAMPHEN (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) – On our way to Montpellier on our final day, we stopped in at Scamandre, mainly to try and find this species, though in the heat of the day, it didn't seem like we were going to have much luck. But just before we left, we did spot one bird foraging at

the edge of the reeds, followed by another as we got back in the van to depart.

Burhinidae (Thick-knees)

EURASIAN THICK-KNEE (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) – This species can be tricky, and some years we really struggle with them, or miss them altogether. This was not one of those years, and we had good luck with them, seeing them daily in the Arles region, with a high count of 20+ one morning at the "railway car field". The cool, cloudy weather probably helped us here, as not only were the birds more active than usual, but there was also no heat haze to hamper our scope views.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – A couple of the pans at Salin de Giraud had a bunch of these, with about 30 birds in total, including some drab youngsters.

PIED AVOCET (*Recurvirostra avocetta*) – About 100+ of these elegant birds were present in one of the pans at the Salin de Giraud on our first visit there, including a couple that were right next to the road allowing incredible close views. On our second visit, there were only about a dozen birds. Though we usually do get this species here, on some trips they are completely absent.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – A pretty scarce migrant on this tour, but David spotted a lone bird in transitional plumage on the mudflats during our first visit to the Salin de Giraud. Though we just saw the one, there were probably others around, as I'm pretty sure I heard another going over, both on that visit and the next.

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – Though we tend to get these on pretty much every trip, the numbers are usually considerably lower than they were this time around. On our first day in the Camargue, we found a total of 52 birds scattered across 3 adjacent fields near Sambuc, then a few days later, found a minimum of 100 of them in a wet pasture at Mas D'Agon.

KENTISH PLOVER (KENTISH) (*Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*) – Until a few years ago, this was considered conspecific with the Snowy Plover of North America, and the two birds are quite similar. These were around in reasonable numbers at the Salin de Giraud, and we saw from 15-25 of them on each of our visits.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – The most numerous of the 3 small plovers at the Salin de Giraud, with up to 50 of them scattered around the salt pans. These are the ones that look almost identical to our Semipalmated Plovers.

LITTLE RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius dubius*) – Just a handful of these were at the Salin de Giraud, and unlike the Common Ringed Plovers, these were mainly well into their winter plumages, most showing a lot of yellowish-buff in their faces.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – These impressively long-billed birds are often missed on the tour, but Linda M. made sure that didn't happen by picking out a couple foraging among the swarms of coots, ducks, and gulls on the shores of the Etang de Vaccarres.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*) – Godwits are overall pretty scarce on this tour, but I've had a pretty good run with this species, with this being my 4th consecutive year finding them (after none at all my first 4 trips!). We had just a single bird this time, found at the final salt pan we scanned before leaving the Salin de Giraud on our final visit there!

RUFF (*Calidris pugnax*) – Though I've seen Ruffs many times, I don't think I've ever really got to appreciate the considerable size difference between males and females until this tour. We had a great scope study of a small group on the marshy side of the road at the Salin de Giraud, with both sexes side by side, which really showed us how much larger the males are than the females.

CURLEW SANDPIPER (*Calidris ferruginea*) – Small numbers of these large peeps (5-10 birds) were mixed among the flocks of other shorebirds at the Salin de Giraud.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Up to 20 of these were present on our second visit to the Salin de Giraud (just 2 birds on our first visit), with many still showing the black belly patches of their breeding plumage, making them pretty easy to pick out.

LITTLE STINT (*Calidris minuta*) – The default small peep here, pretty nondescript at this time of year, but easily told by small size and short, straight bill. Roughly 10+ birds were noted on the salt pans on both of our visits.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – Our final new bird of the tour, as we picked out half a dozen feeding in the marsh from our vantage point atop the Tour de Carbonniere.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – A rather scarce migrant here, and more often missed than seen on this tour. We found one spinning in dizzying circles in the back of one of the shallow salt pans on our first visit to the Salin de Giraud. Shortly after this, a local birder told us of another he'd found further up the road. We didn't find his bird, but I seem to recall this same gentleman alerting us to both this species and a Red Phalarope several years ago here!

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – We rarely see many, so the name isn't especially apt here, though small numbers were found at scattered sites throughout the Camargue.

GREEN SANDPIPER (*Tringa ochropus*) – Very much like our Solitary Sandpiper. This bird was tricky this trip, and we had just 3 singles at 3 different sites. The first was a leader-only bird at the Marais de Romieu, and the other 2 were only slightly better. We had one at Scamandre that was alongside a Common Sandpiper, but it did its best to stay out of sight, and I think only David and I saw it. Our final one was a long distance bird I scoped from the top of the Tour Carbonniere, not an especially memorable sighting.

COMMON GREENSHANK (*Tringa nebularia*) – Very much like our Greater Yellowlegs. Only a few were seen, and none especially well, as they seemed to fly off whenever we were about to scope them. Probably the best ones were the distant ones scoped from atop the Tour Carbonniere on our final day.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*) – More of a grass-piper than a sandpiper, and the flooded fields around Mas D'Agon are often one of the best places for this bird, and that was the case again this year, as we had our only ones there this trip. We only picked out 5 birds, and had good scope views of a couple, though there may well have been more hiding in the slightly too tall grass.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*) – This shorebird is not a given on the tour, and we are usually lucky to spot just one or two. It was thus a pretty good trip for them, as we had several on each of our visits to the Salin de Giraud, with decent looks at them both on the ground and in flight, when the large white wedge at the back edge of their wings makes them pretty easily identifiable.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Chroicocephalus genei*) – A rather funny/embarrassing occurrence involved this species on our first visit to the Salin de Giraud. We had just come across a large mixed tern/gull flock and were beginning to scan through it when it began to rain very hard. I had just spotted a bird I was sure was a Little Gull, so I took a quick digiscope picture and then ducked back into the van to avoid getting soaked. With the

rain setting in, we decided to call it a day, and headed back to the hotel. Later that evening, as I looked at my Little Gull pics, I noticed I had inadvertently also photographed one of these distinctive gulls that we had somehow failed to notice! Luckily, we managed to pick up a lone bird on our second visit, or this would have been less funny and more embarrassing!

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – The default smaller gull here, with hundreds seen on many days in the Camargue. I think Linda M. found their calls to be especially enjoyable to listen to. :-)

LITTLE GULL (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) – Yes, it was indeed a Little Gull I'd photographed in the tern roost before the rain chased us off. The clean white primary tips indicating this was a winter-plumaged adult. It was the only one we ended up seeing.

MEDITERRANEAN GULL (*Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus*) – As usual, there were plenty of these flying over and roosting on the canal at Aigues-Mortes as we passed through on our way to Arles, and on our way back. But unusually we also had these gulls a couple of other times, with one flying over near Raphèle-les-Arles one morning, and another one roosting on one of the salt pans among some Black-headed Gulls at the Salin de Giraud. The thick red bill with the obvious black ring really made it stand out from the other gulls, and I especially enjoyed this view.

YELLOW-LEGGED GULL (*Larus michahellis*) – The default large, white-headed gull of the region, seen daily around the Camargue region.

LITTLE TERN (*Sternula albifrons*) – We saw these tiny terns on both visits to the salt pans, with a single bird foraging on the first visit, and three roosting on a sand bar on the second.

CASPIAN TERN (*Hydroprogne caspia*) – I have never been able to understand why these birds always show up on France's rare bird reports, as they certainly are regulars in this region. We rarely see many, but there are always a few birds present around the Etang des Vaccarres in particular, and we saw 4 or 5 there this trip.

WHISKERED TERN (*Chlidonias hybrida*) – We finally managed to track down a few of these marsh terns on the touristy side of the Etang des Vaccarres on our final day, though sadly none of them were in breeding plumage.

COMMON TERN (*Sterna hirundo*) – We estimated about 300 of these at the tern roost at the salt pans, though the numbers could have been higher.

SANDWICH TERN (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Arguably the most numerous of the terns on the tern roost at Salin de Giraud, though numbers seemed to be just a bit higher than with the Common Terns.

ELEGANT TERN (*Thalasseus elegans*) – A vagrant from western North America, one of these terns was reported at the salt pans a couple of days before we visited, then was refound a day after our first visit. When we went there the second time, we met up with a bunch of birders from various parts of Europe, all looking for the tern, and we all found it in one of the two large tern roosts. Despite its obvious red-orange bill, it was still difficult to pick out from the dense flock of Sandwich Terns, as it was often turned away, or had its bill down as it preened. Eventually though, we all did manage to pick it out through the scope. Surprisingly, this wasn't a new bird for me on this tour, as Cory and I had one in the same locale a couple of years ago! Wonder if it was the same individual?

Ciconiidae (Storks)

BLACK STORK (*Ciconia nigra*) – We came pretty close to missing out on storks altogether, until our visit to Mas D'Agon on the final morning. There we were happy to spot first a White Stork, then a short while later this species, and at one point we had both the Black Stork and a White Stork circling around overhead together!

WHITE STORK (*Ciconia ciconia*) – Just a couple of birds at Mas D'Agon, with excellent views of them circling overhead.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – Good numbers at several sites in the Camargue.

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

GREAT WHITE PELICAN (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) – Probably the most surprising find of the trip. While birding at the Marais de Romieu, Linda M. was trying to find a vantage point for some spoonbills that had landed behind the vegetation when she turned to me and asked if there were any pelicans here. I replied no and that she had probably just seen some Mute Swans through the vegetation, when suddenly three pelicans swam out into view, and I had to eat my words! With three vagrant possibilities, we needed to get a good view, and the pelicans obliged, their pink facial skin pegging them as this species. I believe these were the first pelicans of any sort to be recorded on this tour!

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – Seen daily in the Camargue, though our first bird was seen on our first day, en route to the Pyrenees.

PURPLE HERON (*Ardea purpurea*) – Though we always seem to get this species, we never get many, and such was the case again this year. We saw a total of 4 birds, with best views of a couple at Mas D'Agon, which is one of the best spots for them. We also saw one among Gray Herons at the Salin de Giraud, and another at Mejanès.

GREAT EGRET (*Ardea alba*) – Seen in small numbers throughout the Camargue.

LITTLE EGRET (*Egretta garzetta*) – Somewhat more numerous than the preceding species in the Camargue, and we saw them daily, with a high count of 50+ at Mas D'Agon.

CATTLE EGRET (*Bubulcus ibis*) – If we missed these on any day in the Camargue region, we could always count on that gang of them hanging out with the horses next to our hotel!

SQUACCO HERON (*Ardeola ralloides*) – Another of those birds that we always seem to get, but we never see many of, as I believe the majority of them have already left France by this time. On any case, we had just two birds, both at Mas D'Agon, and both giving us a nice look at them.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

GLOSSY IBIS (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – All our records came on our final day, as we tallied first a flock of 9 birds flying over at Mejanès, then an impressive 64 (minimum) in the flooded fields at Mas D'Agon, a number that tripped the filters in Ebird!

EURASIAN SPOONBILL (*Platalea leucorodia*) – Rarely recorded on this tour, and a first for me here. While birding at Marais de Romieu, something flushed up a bunch of birds in the back part of the marsh, and we got a good, but brief look at about a half a dozen of these before they dropped back behind the trees. Determined to get a better view, Linda M. walked up the road to try to see them through a break in the trees, and successfully relocated the birds roosting in the marsh, only there were far more than we'd realized. Though it was difficult to do an exact count, we estimated there to be about 75 of them roosting, though I suppose there could have been more hidden behind the trees. This was all well and good, but then we found another flock of 14 birds feeding in the marsh at La Tour Carbonnière, and we had even better views of those ones.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

OSPREY (*Pandion haliaetus*) – A lone bird devouring a recently caught fish in one of the salt pans at the Salin de Giraud, was our only one of the trip.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

- BEARDED VULTURE** (*Gypaetus barbatus*) – No one will ever convince me that this is a better name for this species than Lammergeier, which will always be my preference. This is one of the key target species in the Pyrenees, and we saw several as usual, with a total of 7 birds, first seen along the track to the cirque. Although we did see them well a couple of times, we never really had that amazing close view we always hope for.
- EGYPTIAN VULTURE** (*Neophron percnopterus*) – I've had rather poor luck with this species on tour, so I was hopeful that the fact that we were going to overlap at the Pic du Pibeste with Megan and Marcelo's group would turn things around, and it did. We were a bit behind the first group, and by the time we pulled into the rest area, their group already had the vultures in the scope, so all we had to do was stroll up and take a look!
- EUROPEAN HONEY-BUZZARD** (*Pernis apivorus*) – It seems like a lot of these had moved through southern France just before our arrival, as the first group mentioned seeing 50+ per day in the Camargue region. We weren't quite so fortunate, and this was one of my poorest showings for this species on the tour, with just a single bird in the Vallee D'Ossoue, one flying over at the salt pans, and a trip that went overhead along the stretch of road with all the migrant Passerines near Le Crau.
- EURASIAN GRIFFON** (*Gyps fulvus*) – Abundant in the Pyrenees, with good numbers seen daily. We had especially good views at the Port de Boucharo, where a bunch of them was gathered in the valley below, tearing apart the carcass of a sheep. These impressive birds were David's favorite of the tour.
- SHORT-TOED SNAKE-EAGLE** (*Circaetus gallicus*) – We could not have asked for better encounters with this magnificent large raptor, as we had multiple sightings, and especially good views in the Vallee D'Ossoue, where an adult and a subadult (or two) were pretty much constantly hovering over the valley in search of food. Best of all, at one point we watched the adult hover in place for quite a while before plunging down, briefly landing on a rocky outcrop, then flying up with a half-swallowed snake protruding from its beak! This experience obviously impressed Theo, who chose this as his top bird of the trip.
- BOOTED EAGLE** (*Hieraetus pennatus*) – During a stop at a rest area west of Toulouse, Linda M. looked up and spotted a lovely light morph bird not far overhead giving an exceptional view. Too bad no-one else was outside for this, though Theo did show up in time to see the bird as a dark speck high in the clouds.
- GOLDEN EAGLE** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – We had just a couple of sightings this trip, with one pair causing the marmots to shriek loudly at the Vallee D'Ossoue rock fall, and another bird passing high overhead at the Barrage des Gloriettes.
- EURASIAN MARSH-HARRIER** (*Circus aeruginosus*) – It seemed to me these common birds were less noticeable in the Camargue than in most years, and we only had three individuals up until our final day, when we tallied 7 of them at several different sites.
- MONTAGU'S HARRIER** (*Circus pygargus*) – Never an easy bird to find, and with limited access to the Crau, our chances are even lower than usual, so I felt we were extremely lucky to spot a gorgeous cinnamon-colored juvenile patrolling along the base of the cliffs in the Vallee D'Ossoue. The bird even landed for a bit on a grassy slope, where we were able to get scope views of it, though it was pretty distant. We did have another brief sighting of one, another juvenile, along the road near Sambuc, though that bird got away pretty quickly.
- EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK** (*Accipiter nisus*) – We had a handful of these scattered throughout the tour, usually seen rocketing by overhead. But there were a couple of memorable sightings in the Vallee D'Ossoue, first, with a large female circling over the valley, giving excellent looks, and then with an apparent juvenile that stopped on a family of shrikes, and seemingly flew off with one of the juveniles.
- RED KITE** (*Milvus milvus*) – Theo picked out the first of these beautiful kites at a roadside rest area on our way to the Pyrenees, and we enjoyed excellent looks at it made several passes by just over the trees. As it turned out, our only other sighting also came at this same rest area on our way back down from the mountains.
- COMMON BUZZARD** (*Buteo buteo*) – Sort of the European equivalent of our Red-tailed Hawk, equally variable and occurring pretty much everywhere. We missed this species on only one day in the mountains, though they were more numerous in the Camargue region.

Strigidae (Owls)

- EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL** (*Bubo bubo*) – With the first group having not even heard this bird near Les Baux, my expectations were suitably low, so I was more than a little pleased when we started to hear a bird hooting from the rocky cliffs at dusk. And even more pleased when we spotted the bird perched on a ledge almost immediately. Despite the diminishing light, the owl was still pretty impressive, with the ear tufts obvious, and the exposed white throat showing very well as it continued to call. The owl was a real hit with the ladies, and both Lindas picked it as their overall favorite bird.
- TAWNY OWL** (*Strix aluco*) – My experience with this species at Gedre has been pretty tepid--though I'd heard them every trip, I'd only managed to see one on one of 6 tours. So, I'll admit I wasn't very enthusiastic about heading out that first night when Megan proposed we give it a try. So I was pretty surprised when shortly after they headed out, Megan came rushing back in to say they had a response. We hurried out, and before long, the owl flew across the road in front of the hotel, and we were able to locate it in a tall tree, and enjoyed long scope views as it continued to call to a mate, which eventually joined it. Many thanks to Megan and Marcelo for doing all the hard work on this one!

Upupidae (Hoopoes)

- EURASIAN HOOPOE** (*Upupa epops*) – David and Linda saw some on the grounds of their Toulouse hotel before the tour started, but the only sighting on the tour was along the Peau de Meau trail, where only Linda M. was able to get on a bird flying away on the other side of a hedgerow from where we were walking.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

- COMMON KINGFISHER** (*Alcedo atthis*) – For me the most memorable thing about the kingfishers this year was the look on the faces of that young German couple at Mas D'Agon when we told them we had one in the scope. The young man said he'd always dreamed of seeing one, and he was absolutely thrilled that he was finally able to see this tiny gem!

Meropidae (Bee-eaters)

- EUROPEAN BEE-EATER** (*Merops apiaster*) – I was using playback for something along the road to the canal, and the recording had bee-eaters calling in the background, so it took some time before I realized that there were real live bee-eaters calling overhead as well! We saw about 10 birds at that point, then that evening we had even nicer looks at about a dozen circling over our picnic dinner spot in an olive grove below Les Baux.

Coraciidae (Rollers)

- EUROPEAN ROLLER** (*Coracias garrulus*) – There seemed to be far fewer of these than I'm used to seeing in the Camargue, though we did manage a few good views of the few we did see.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

- MIDDLE SPOTTED WOODPECKER** (*Dendrocoptes medius*) – Woodpeckers overall were not terribly friendly, and this species was particularly cantankerous. We found them twice, at the forest near Ausseing on our way to the mountains, then again near Mauvezin on our way back down, but

neither time did they really cooperate, staying in view only for the blink of an eye before vanishing back into the trees.

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos major*) – Our only really good woodpecker luck came on one of our pre-breakfast outings to a little wooded patch not far from our Arles region hotel. There we finally connected with good looks at 3 different species, including our only record of this handsome bird, which gave us excellent scope studies and comparisons with the next bird.

LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dryobates minor*) – Super scope looks at a pair at our pre-breakfast spot in the Camargue region; I got my lifer looks last year at this very same spot!

EURASIAN GREEN WOODPECKER (*Picus viridis*) – The third of the cooperative woodpeckers at our early morning spot. We'd actually had fairly decent flybys at our Gedre hotel one morning, but greatly improved on that view with a wonderful scope study of a bird that posed for several minutes on a dead tree.

BLACK WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus martius*) – One of the cranky woodpeckers, and our views were limited to flybys. We got lucky on our way down from Gavarnie when we spotted one flying across the valley overhead without us having used any playback. It was in sight for a decently long interval, and the view was not too bad all things considered. We did make an attempt to improve on this during a stop en route to the Col du Tourmalet, and it was partially successful, as we did have a brief look at a close bird flying past, but I wonder if the tree cutting there is disturbing the birds enough to make them even flightier than usual.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras).

LESSER KESTREL (*Falco naumanni*) – Heat haze on the Crau is usually one of the biggest hindrances in trying to nail down identifiable views of this small kestrel, so we were truly lucky to have such a lovely, cool morning there after the rains of the previous day. I think it was the first time I'd been out there where there was no heat disturbance at all, so our scope views of a male sitting atop a stone cairn were atypically awesome!

EURASIAN KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*) – By far the more numerous and widespread of the two kestrels, and one of the few species we saw regularly both in the Pyrenees and the Camargue.

EURASIAN HOBBY (*Falco subbuteo*) – Just a handful of sightings in the Camargue region, with our best coming at the Salin de Giraud, where 4 birds passed by in succession, a couple showing quite nicely, though none were in sight for long.

Laniidae (Shrikes).

RED-BACKED SHRIKE (*Lanius collurio*) – Though I knew this species supposedly breeds in shrubby clearings in the Pyrenees, I had never seen them in the mountains prior to this tour. We first tracked these down during a rest stop in the Vallee D'Ossoue, when some unfamiliar begging calls led me to locate an adult feeding grasshoppers to a recently fledged youngster. On our return to the site a couple of days later, we managed to relocate the birds, this time seeing both adults and 2 fledglings. At one point we were enjoying the sight of the 2 youngsters perched on either side of one of the adults, when a sudden commotion broke out, and all the birds disappeared. A few seconds later, a juvenile sparrowhawk emerged from the bush with what looked like one of the juvenile shrikes clutched in its talons, though we hoped it was just a bunch of feathers from a close call. [N]

IBERIAN GRAY SHRIKE (*Lanius meridionalis*) – This taxon is restricted to Spain, Portugal, and southern France, and was just elevated to a full species last year. It has been increasingly difficult to find, but we got lucky this year, finding one perched on a crumbling building on the Crau. Again, the lack of heat disturbance allowed us excellent scope views of the bird, which in normal viewing conditions here would have looked pretty blurry!

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies).

EURASIAN JAY (*Garrulus glandarius*) – Someone asked if these birds ever sat on an open perch where they could be seen; from our experiences it certainly didn't seem like it! We saw these regularly throughout the tour, though they were more common in the mountains.

EURASIAN MAGPIE (*Pica pica*) – Away from the mountains, these were common and widespread.

RED-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) – We had these daily in small numbers in the Pyrenees, with a couple of nice studies of birds foraging on the grassy slopes.

YELLOW-BILLED CHOUGH (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) – The more numerous of the two choughs, with several fairly large flocks seen soaring over ridge tops with griffons and lammergeiers.

EURASIAN JACKDAW (*Corvus monedula*) – Abundant around the Camargue region, and seen daily in big numbers.

ROOK (*Corvus frugilegus*) – Rooks don't seem to be that numerous in this region of France, though they may be somewhat overlooked in the large flocks of jackdaws and Carrion Crows that frequent the Arles region. So I was a bit surprised to see at least 8 (and likely more) in a flock of Corvids that flew past at the reservoir on the outskirts of St-Martin-de-Crau.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone*) – The only species which we saw every single day of the tour, though they were far more numerous in the Camargue than in the mountains.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – We had just two sightings of ravens, both times of a pair of birds. We first saw a pair foraging near the roadside in the Gavarnie ski area on the way up to the Port de Boucharo, then had another pair soaring over the ridge at the Barrage des Gloriettes.

Alaudidae (Larks).

EURASIAN SKYLARK (*Alauda arvensis*) – Larks were a bit thin on the ground this trip, but we did manage to get a single one of these. It flushed from just ahead of us along the Peau de Meau trail, and we could clearly make out the bright white trailing edge to the wing, a feature that sets it apart from other similar larks. The only other lark here to show a white trailing edge is the much different Calandra Lark.

CRESTED LARK (*Galerida cristata*) – We had a couple of different pairs of these, but neither one was especially cooperative. One of the birds at the warbler spot at Mejanes showed marginally better than the others, and was at least countable, if not a satisfying view.

Hirundinidae (Swallows).

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – Only seen in the Camargue, where there were plenty going through, including an estimated 250+ one morning over the salt pans.

EURASIAN CRAG-MARTIN (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) – Plenty in the mountains, with the best views coming at the Barrage des Gloriettes, where a bunch of them were flying around just below us as we crossed the dam, as well as perching on the dam itself, giving us some of the best views I've had of this species. Our only sighting after we left the Pyrenees was of a single bird flying around at the Les Baux overlook.

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – The most widely seen swallow, with records most days both in the mountains and the Camargue.

COMMON HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon urbicum*) – Seen in good numbers in the Pyrenees, with quite a few flying up and over the pass at the Port de Boucharo, though we failed to get them on our Spain lists.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice).

COAL TIT (*Pariparus ater*) – The most numerous tit seen on the hike up to the cirque, and we heard even more than we saw.

CRESTED TIT (*Lophophanes cristatus*) – We sometimes struggle with this elegant little tit, but this trip we got excellent views quite easily, seeing a couple of different pairs along the Cirque de Gavarnie hike.

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris*) – We have limited opportunities to find this bird on the tour, as it seems to only occur in areas we drive through on route to/from the mountains. So it's just as well as a couple of them popped out almost immediately during a roadside stop in some forest on our way from Gedre to Arles.

EURASIAN BLUE TIT (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) – There were never many around, but we did get several nice looks at these pretty birds in and around the Pyrenees.

GREAT TIT (*Parus major*) – Relatively few, though we had sightings both in the Pyrenees and near the Crau. Probably our best was a bird along the river near the start of the Cirque de Gavarnie track.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – We did well with these birds, seeing them on 3 different days, with exceptional views of at least 6 on our first day's stop at a roadside rest area that has become my go-to spot for these birds.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (*Sitta europaea*) – Our first ones gave us one of our best views, and it was one of the first official birds of the trip, seen during our first birding stop at the Ausseing forest.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – A pair along the Cirque de Gavarnie track showed nicely; even if we didn't see the subtle features that separate this from the next species, the combination of the distinctive song and the habitat and elevation allowed us to clinch the identification.

SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER (*Certhia brachydactyla*) – Generally at lower elevations, and more in deciduous forest, than the preceding species. Our only records came on our first day, at the Ausseing forest, and again at Pic du Pibeste, where they were pretty elusive and only gave us a few brief glimpses.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – I'm not sure everyone got a look at this sneaky little bird alongside the trail as we came back down from the cirque.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

WHITE-THROATED DIPPER (*Cinclus cinclus*) – Seen in three different sites in the mountains, with especially good ones on our very first attempt, at the Chaos de Coumely. I find these dippers a little less approachable than our American Dipper, so getting a good look isn't always as straightforward as it should be.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – We saw relatively few of the kinglets this trip, but had some superb studies of both this and Firecrest in the same mixed flock on the Cirque de Gavarnie track.

COMMON FIRECREST (*Regulus ignicapilla*) – I think the Goldcrests were a bit more cooperative, but still we had some pretty nice looks at these delightful, and very active birds.

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies)

CETTI'S WARBLER (*Cettia cetti*) – These birds sing often, and are heard regularly, in the Camargue, but seeing them is not always an easy task, though it was pretty easy in the end this year. After hearing them (and trying for them) regularly over several days, we made another attempt at Mas D'Agon and were surprised that a bird popped out into a bare tree, fully in the open, where it remained long enough to get scope views! With its short wings, short bill, and broad, cocked tail, it had a very different appearance to the similarly colored Eurasian Reed Warbler we saw there a short while later.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

WILLOW WARBLER (*Phylloscopus trochilus*) – Though this species and chiffchaff separated out by location/elevation this year, with Willow only at lower elevations and chiffchaff only in the mountains, this isn't always the case, so it's not something to rely on. The combination of leg color (pale in this species) plumage coloration (yellow in this species, buffy in chiffchaff) and behavior (chiffchaff habitually pumps its tail downward) can all be used to sort them out. We had a few of this species in the Camargue.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF (*Phylloscopus collybita*) – Seen in small numbers in the mountains, though judging by the number of times we heard the distinctive call notes during our hike up to the cirque, there were far more of these around than we were seeing.

Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers and Allies)

EURASIAN REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) – Skulking, but we did get good looks at one nonetheless at Mas D'Agon. Overall it was more tawny brown in color, and more elongated, with a longer bill and tail, and without the cocked tail posture of the similar Cetti's Warbler, one of which was nearby, and which popped out onto a fencepost at one point!

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (*Cisticola juncidis*) – Cisticolas as a group are one of the most maddeningly difficult groups of birds to identify, but luckily, here, there is just this one species. There weren't many about, but we picked up a couple in the scrub alongside the marsh at the Salin de Giraud as well as at Mas D'Agon, though they never stayed in view for long.

Sylviidae (Sylviid Warblers)

EURASIAN BLACKCAP (*Sylvia atricapilla*) – We kicked off the tour with pretty good looks at first a female, then a male, at a roadside rest area en route to Gedre, and that just about did it for the tour, though there were single males seen by a couple of folks both at the Cirque de Gavarnie and the next day at the Barrage des Gloriettes.

SARDINIAN WARBLER (*Sylvia melanocephala*) – We scored some fantastic looks at a trio of these attractive warblers in the Salicornia scrub at Mejanes, with the birds coming in close, and actually sitting out on the barbed wire fence nearby at one point!

SPECTACLED WARBLER (*Sylvia conspicillata*) – At the same site as the Sardinian Warblers, though a little more reticent and difficult to see. Still, we persisted, and were eventually rewarded, with reasonable views of these skulkers.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

- SPOTTED FLYCATCHER** (*Muscicapa striata*) – Generally a pretty scarce migrant here, and we rarely get more than one or two. Our only one was a cooperative bird perched out on a bare tree at our multi-woodpecker site near the hotel on our pre-breakfast outing.
- EUROPEAN ROBIN** (*Erithacus rubecula*) – Pretty common in the mountains, where we saw them daily, with especially great looks of some confiding ones along the Cirque de Gavarnie track.
- EUROPEAN PIED FLYCATCHER** (*Ficedula hypoleuca*) – Widespread and common, though seemingly absent from the higher areas of the mountains. One day I'd love to see one of these in breeding plumage.
- COMMON REDSTART** (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) – Generally outnumbered by the much more common Black Redstart, but we had a decent number of these this year, with 5 birds in total. Best of the bunch was our first, a lovely male at the Vallee D'Ossoue rock slide. Our others were scattered around the Camargue region, including a couple of males flycatching at Mas D'Agon.
- BLACK REDSTART** (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) – Quite numerous in the higher parts of the Pyrenees, including a few males that were still quite handsome despite their rather worn plumage. Much less common in the lowlands, though we did have a group of 4 foraging over a ditch next to the parking area at the Mas de la Feniere.
- RUFIOUS-TAILED ROCK-THRUSH** (*Monticola saxatilis*) – One of our target birds along the Port de Boucharo trail, and though we had one, it was only briefly seen before it plunged out of site behind the slope and disappeared for good. Lucky for us, two or three of these were also hanging around the rock slide in the Vallee D'Ossoue, where they spent long minutes perched atop the huge boulders surveying their surroundings while we ogled them through the scope.
- BLUE ROCK-THRUSH** (*Monticola solitarius*) – As we waited for the light to fade enough to bring out the eagle-owl, I noticed one of these flitting about the ridge top, and managed to get it in the scope. Though it was distant, and the light was pretty low, it was clearly a blue-gray male, and a nice addition to our lists, as we rarely see this on the tour.
- WHINCHAT** (*Saxicola rubetra*) – Few this year, with a single each in the Vallee D'Ossoue and Lac des Gloriettes, and a handful in the Crau, though at least we got some good looks at them.
- EUROPEAN STONECHAT** (*Saxicola rubicola rubicola*) – A single bird at Lac des Gloriettes eluded at least a couple of folks, but we fared better with a small party of them perched out on scrubby low junipers on a grassy slope in the Vallee D'Ossoue that same afternoon.
- NORTHERN WHEATEAR** (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) – Mainly in the mountains, where we saw them in small numbers daily, including at least a couple of males that were still quite handsome in vestiges of their breeding plumage. We also had a few birds along the track at the Peau de Meau.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

- EURASIAN BLACKBIRD** (*Turdus merula*) – Small numbers in the mountains, where they seem exceptionally shy and difficult to see well.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

- EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Loads daily in the Camargue region, where they are native at least.

Prunellidae (Accentors)

- ALPINE ACCENTOR** (*Prunella collaris*) – Despite a pretty cold and windy walk up the Port de Boucharo track, we were extremely lucky with this key species there. I first heard them then spotted them, well below us in the ravine, but a bit of playback eventually brought them up the slope, in quite dramatic fashion. A couple of birds had appeared not far below us where they were playing hide and seek among the rocks, when suddenly, a third bird flew up and nearly landed on me, alighting on the path instead, about 10 feet away, where it sat for a long while as we enjoyed its company.
- DUNNOCK** (*Prunella modularis*) – This species should probably be renamed Hedge Accentor for the sake of consistency, but I doubt the British would ever go for that. These were fairly common in the mountains, particularly at Lac des Gloriettes, where they were all over the place in the low scrub. We tallied 20+ of them at that site, though that was a pretty conservative estimate.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

- GRAY WAGTAIL** (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Regularly seen along rushing streams in the Pyrenees, with our best views coming at the river at the back end of the reservoir at Lac des Gloriettes.
- WESTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL** (*Motacilla flava*) – Fairly common around the Camargue, where our biggest event was a group of 15-20 birds feeding on the road edges at Mas D'Agon.
- WHITE WAGTAIL** (*Motacilla alba*) – Quite a few in the mountains, mainly seen along the road in the town of Gavarnie, and we also had one group of 10+ mixed in with an equal number of yellow wagtails at our first bustard sighting spot near St-Martin-de-Crau.
- TAWNY PIPIT** (*Anthus campestris*) – Just a couple of birds out along the Peau de Meau trail, but we managed to get decent scope views.
- WATER PIPIT** (*Anthus spinoletta*) – One of the more common and conspicuous birds in the higher parts of the mountains.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

- COMMON CHAFFINCH** (*Fringilla coelebs*) – Small numbers scattered around the mountains, with the largest number seen in the Cirque de Gavarnie, including a super close male foraging on the ground a few feet away. Away from the mountains, we had just a single bird near dusk at our picnic spot near Les Baux.
- EURASIAN BULLFINCH** (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – Somewhat more obvious than usual (though that isn't saying much), and we enjoyed lovely looks at a couple of birds (though the male was less cooperative) along the Gavarnie track, then another pair as we headed down the road below the Barrage des Gloriettes.
- EURASIAN LINNET** (*Linaria cannabina*) – As we searched for the accentors in the ravine below the Port de Boucharo track, we managed to scope a male feeding in the low thistles for some rather unmemorable views. Sadly, that was to be our only one on the tour.
- EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH** (*Carduelis carduelis*) – We didn't have many, but those views of some close birds feeding in a thistle-infested pasture as we got back to the van after our Cirque de Gavarnie hike were fantastic.
- CITRIL FINCH** (*Carduelis citrinella*) – Megan and Marcelo reported that there were good numbers of these in the Cirque de Gavarnie, which meant, of course, that we were going to struggle finding any at all! But we stationed ourselves at the spot I've had my best luck with them, and after a few false alarms that turned out to be serins, we finally had a small bird fly over that gave a different call than the serins, and when it landed on a huge boulder nearby, we were able to confirm that it was a lovely male of this somewhat difficult to locate species.
- EUROPEAN SERIN** (*Serinus serinus*) – A few birds scattered at various spots in the mountains, with our first ones in the Cirque de Gavarnie making our job of finding Citril Finch just a little bit trickier!

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

CORN BUNTING (*Emberiza calandra*) – A small flock of these were on roadside power lines and flitting about the fields where we stopped to see our first lapwings near Le Sambuc. At least one, and possibly two of these birds showed unusually large white patches in their wings, likely due to partial leucism.

ROCK BUNTING (*Emberiza cia*) – We lucked into one of these as we headed back to the vehicle after enjoying our first looks at the Red-backed Shrike family. The bird flew in and ducked out of sight initially, but eventually popped up to where we could all get super looks. It ended up being our only one of the tour.

YELLOWHAMMER (*Emberiza citrinella*) – A few in the Pyrenees, including a couple of lovely, yellow-headed males.,

ORTOLAN BUNTING (*Emberiza hortulana*) – On a whim, we decided to walk up a little ravine in the Vallee D'Ossoue to see the what was there, and there we stumbled onto this bird, which gave us good scope views before disappearing. This was a long-awaited lifer for me, and thus my top bird of the trip!

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows).

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – A few birds were seen, but oddly we failed to find any of their cousins, the Eurasian Tree Sparrow, though it was mostly from lack of trying.

MAMMALS

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) – We saw just one at the Baisse de Raillon in St-Martin-de-Crau.

ALPINE MARMOT (*Marmota marmota*) – It'd be pretty hard to miss these animals in the high Pyrenees at this time of year!

NUTRIA (*Myocastor coypus*) – A few of these were in various marshy areas around the Camargue.

PYRENEAN CHAMOIS (ISARD) (*Rupicapra pyrenaica*) – We usually only see these high on the ridges above the Cirque de Gavarnie, where a scope is definitely necessary, so it was a real treat to also get incredible looks at one feeding on a grassy slope near the valley floor as we walked up towards the cirque. Easily the closest one I've ever seen.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 156 bird taxa and 4 mammal taxa