

ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO FRANCE – WALLCREEPER AT LEISURE
Mountains & Marshes

13 – 18 January 2009



Leader: Nigel Jones

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A Personal Diary

Tuesday 13 January

The group arrives punctually at London Gatwick and our Easyjet flight leaves on time, flying over a cloudy channel and south towards our destination, the south of France. From the left-hand side of the plane the Alps appear as white-capped jagged peaks and the Matterhorn shows well. As we approach our landing Mount Ventoux can also be seen to have a good dressing of snow. Formalities at Marseille are swift and the transport, a nearly-new Citroen Jumper, is soon collected.

The weather is fine but cool at 6C, but we seem to have missed the really cold snap where large amounts of snow were deposited over southern France, even in Marseille. There are still remnants of drifts by the roadside. We pass our first flocks of Common Starlings, as well as Collared Doves and Common Buzzards. In just over an hour we reach Les Baux in Les Alpilles and make a quick stop. There are Black Redstarts, Blackcaps and Serins but on scanning the cliffs no sign of the target bird of the tour. We try another site, which is more sheltered and Rod and Roger spot a bird flying over the group showing off black and crimson wings – our first sighting of the Wallcreeper! We cannot relocate it but at least we know there is one around.

We arrive at Beaucaire and the Hotel Robinson at 5.30pm, and we meet for drinks by the roaring log fire at 7pm. Dinner tonight is a pork ensemble, followed by cheese and salad, and then a fine rhubarb tart and custard. The free wine flows as we discuss our plans for tomorrow! Confidence is high that a Wallcreeper will show.

Wednesday 14 January

We meet for breakfast at 8am and are all ready to depart by 9am. It does not take us long to reach Les Alpilles and we are soon at Les Baux. We walk along the cliffs, scanning upwards for a sign of the *Trichodrome échelette*, as it searches for insects in crevices of the limestone cliffs. There are chattering Sardinian Warblers, chacking Blackcaps and tail-pumping Black Redstarts. High on the top we pick out an Alpine Accentor as it looks out south towards the floodplains of the Camargue. Bridget gives the shout we have been waiting for as she spots a bird clinging to the cliff – yes, it is a Wallcreeper and we all watch as the bird flits around the cliff, showing off its grey back, long curved black bill and flashing those crimson and black wings. Then not one, but two birds appear, and a chase ensues as one is driven off the feeding territory. We watch for half an hour as the remaining bird flits and feeds – a great start to the tour.

We walk through the streets of Les Baux and up to the limestone pavement on the top. Here we find a flock of seven Alpine Accentors feeding amongst the gravel and the short grass, giving us excellent close views – the cameras click as the birds take very little notice of us. There are also some fine Black Redstarts, a confiding pair of Sardinian Warblers and a few Serins. A stop for warming hot chocolate is welcome.

We return to yesterday's site to see if the other Wallcreeper is still there – sure enough David soon spots it and we are watching our third one of the day.

We move towards our lunch stop, only to realise that the bread is not with us! However, the spread of couscous, cheese, saucisson, pickles, olives and much more can all be eaten without bread – especially as the wine washes it down very well! A Crested Tit calls but does not show itself.

Refreshed and fortified we visit an Eagle Owl site to see if we can spot a roosting bird. There is no sign and the only compensation is a Blue Rock Thrush. Plan B is now engaged and we move towards La Crau to see if we can spot some of the specialities of the stone plain.

Peau de Meau is a reserve in this vast sea of stone desert and we drive the bumpy tracks finding Common Kestrel, Linnets, a fine male Hen Harrier and a Southern Grey Shrike. Towards the towering rubbish dump of Entressen we spot a flock of about 15 White Storks flying south. The local name for this vegetation-type of stone, herb and low shrub is coussous. We soon find one of the quarry species – a flock of 18 Little Bustards feeding in the distance. We scope them and watch them for a while before driving a little closer. They take to the wing showing their large white wing flashes.

As we return to Beaucaire we pass our first Western Marsh Harrier, an immature male. Hot baths are the order of the evening, but by 7pm we are gathered around the warm fire sipping pastis and taking the log call. Dinner is a vegetable soup, followed by lamb and celery, then cheese, with a fine almond tart to finish.

Bird of the day – Wallcreeper, followed by Little Bustard.

Thursday 15 January

Today is a trip to La Camargue. After Peter helps with the some minor navigation problems near Arles, we are soon on the right road and motoring down the west side of the Vaccarès towards Saintes Marie de la Mer. We stop short of the town and drive up a track and scan a wetland. Here we find many ducks, but the highlight is a loose flock of 250 Red-crested Pochards, with many fine males. There are also Mallard, Eurasian Wigeon, Shoveler and many Common Teal. The water and marshes are constantly criss-crossed by Western Marsh Harriers, and Common Buzzards live up to their name here. Greater Flamingos feed in many groups in the shallow water, all pink adult birds. Some overfly us, giving their “flying hockey-stick” outline and calling like geese.

We make the next stop at a small elevated platform where we overlook reed-beds, marshes and drainage ditches. A male Hen Harrier flies close by, while many Common Buzzards and Western Marsh Harriers hunt the area, flushing a group of Common Snipe. A Penduline Tit gives its soft wheezy call nearby but star of the show is a Cetti’s Warbler that actually comes into the open and shows well for the whole group.

We now pass the eastern shores of the Etang de Vaccarès and spot the first Great Egrets, with many yellow-footed Little Egrets close by. A Kingfisher sits motionless in a tree for at least 10 minutes – enough time for some digiscoping to be attempted. La Capelière is our lunch stop and, as we pull into the drive, we spot a pair of White Storks on a nest. They seem at home here and we even hear some bill clapping display. This is a species that used to be very rare here 20 years ago but seems to be spreading – how long before they nest again in England? We spread our picnic lunch on the tables and enjoy the warmth of the sun – I search for Wall Lizards as when I was here two years ago they were just emerging from the winter hibernation. However, it is obviously not warm enough yet. After eating we visit the hides, spotting Pochard and Tufted Ducks, Common Teal and Snipe. A walk along the paths allows us brief views of a pair of Penduline Tits.

Nearby is a large marsh called Grenouillet and we stop here on an elevated platform to scan the lakes. In the distance we spot a large eagle perched on a pylon – a sub adult Bonelli’s. There are also many Coots and Gadwall here, plus a lone Greylag Goose. Peter spots our first Coypu swimming over the water.

We move south to the sea, passing the industrial salt pans of Salin de Giraud. In the last saline pool we find many waders which allows for something of an identification forum. There are many Dunlins with a few Little Stints and Sanderlings in amongst them. There are also Avocet, Common Redshank, Curlew and both Kentish and Ringed Plovers. Shelduck are also here in very large numbers.

We return to Beaucaire before dark. Dinner tonight is herring, followed by Wild Boar stew (civet de sanglier), cheese and then a kind of sweet doughnut.

Bird of the day – Bonelli’s Eagle.

Friday 16 January

We leave this morning at 8.45am and head for Avignon. We hit a small amount of rush hour traffic but we soon pass the Palais des Papes and the unfinished Pont d’Avignon. It takes just under an hour and 20 minutes to be at the Chalet Reynard on Mount Ventoux. The chalet marks the end of the tree-line and also

the beginning of the snow line. There appears to be some good snow this year with a few people out on skis or snow shoes. We stand in the car park and scan the trees and snow fields. There are many Siskins calling and it is not long before we find our first groups of Citril Finches. Common Crossbills are chipping and we find some perched up so we can scope them. Also, a Crested Tit shows well to the group.

A warming drink is called for, so we enter the restaurant and have hot chocolates. The owner shows us to warm seats by the fire and passes around a bag of local truffles for us to sniff! After availing ourselves of the facilities, we are soon outside again and looking for Snowfinches. We drive up to the barrier, where the road is always closed at this time of the year. We wrap up in extra clothes and set off up the road. There are groups of Chaffinches, Goldfinches, and even Linnets up here, together with passing Common Crossbills and Citril Finches. Bridget and I watch a pair of larger finches overfly us and realise (too late to alert the group) that they are Snowfinches. They pass overhead and out of sight, so we walk on in the hope of finding them – but with no luck.

We opt to eat our picnic back in the car park, where a Raven and Common Crossbills show well. As the weather is excellent we decide to try the higher road again, but only manage to find two groups of Alpine Accentors of note. We move lower down the mountain passing through some beech forest where we try the tape for Black Woodpecker. They do not respond, so we drop lower out of the forest zone and into the vast expanse of vineyards. We drive around until we see finches and then stop and scan. We strike lucky with a good mix of birds which we watch for the next half hour. There are many Chaffinches, but also some fine Bramblings, Serins, Goldfinches, Yellowhammers, Citril Finches and even a cracking male Hawfinch.

We leave the Ventoux and make haste for the Pont du Gard. Thanks to some nifty navigation from Bridget we arrive at the aqueduct with perfect timing. We set up a scope and watch about 20 Rock Sparrows coming to roost. There are three Crag Martins around the bridge, and we also manage to see both Short-toed Treecreeper and Firecrest.

The main course for dinner tonight is some very tender lamb.

Bird of the day – Citril Finch

Saturday 17 January

The morning sees us in Les Alpilles looking for a roosting Eagle Owl, but again the favoured sites don't produce the desired effect. We move to La Crau and begin our search for sandgrouse. The Peau de Meau is our port of call and we drive our vehicle over the bouncy tracks stopping and scanning as we go. Little Bustards show well again as do Red-legged Partridges and Southern Grey Shrikes. A Little Owl perched on an old farm house warms itself in the sunlight and Peter finds a fine male Merlin atop one of the many piles of rocks.

We take our picnic lunch by the lake at Entressen with fly-over Red Kites and thousands of gulls for company. New species are Common and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Nearby a Short-toed Treecreeper calls and we watch as it flits from tree to tree.

Thanks to Rob's navigating we circumvent a very low bridge to bring us out by the rubbish dump. A Black Stork perched on a wire fence by the rubbish seems strange! There are many Red Kites here, plus Black Redstarts, Common Buzzards, a male Cirl Bunting, a Crested Lark and a Tree Sparrow. After driving too close to a smelly section of the tip, we decide to resume our search over La Crau. Stopping and scanning reveals just two more Little Bustards (well spotted by Peter) plus some more Southern Grey Shrikes and Hen Harriers. However, our reward for perseverance finally pays off when a group of 24 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flushes from close to the vehicle. We quickly climb out and watch them as they fly around us, breaking into smaller groups and finally departing.

In the evening we are offered cassis and a chat with Madame Leon (the hotel's owner). She explains the origin of the name Robinson for the hotel. It was coined by her father over 60 years ago, as he used to visit an establishment on the banks of the Seine, after the Second World War, which had music and dancing. He liked the atmosphere of this place (called Robinson) and so he thought he would set up something similar in Beaucaire, and gave his hotel the same name.

Dinner is a splendid affair, with fish and mussel soup, followed by fillet of beef, cheese and then “omelette norvégienne” (a flaming baked Alaska), plus a glass of champagne each. Quelle ripaille!

Bird of the day – Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Bird of the trip was voted as (of course) **Wallcreeper**.

Sunday 18 January

We say our farewells to the staff at the Hotel Robinson and make our way, with a fully loaded vehicle, to Les Baux for a final look. The skies are overcast and there are even a few drops of rain. We park and have to make a hasty exit from the van as two Bonelli's Eagles are soaring overhead and displaying. It is difficult to assess their size until a Common Kestrel flies into view and we see they are enormous! There is even a discernible size difference between the two eagles, with the female being larger. One of the birds perches on a dead tree jutting from the cliff face and we have a chance to scope it and admire the pale plumage with streaks on the chest and the dark back – what a beast!

We move on and scan for Wallcreepers. Peter finds one virtually immediately and we watch it for over half an hour as it scampers over various rock faces, flashing its crimson and black wings. At one point it comes quite close and the cameras click. A purple patch with Hawfinch, Crested Tit and Firecrest keeps us occupied before we decide it is time to move towards Marseille. What a great ending to our Les Alpilles experience.

L'Etang de Berre is our final port of call where we eat our picnic lunches looking out at Black-necked Grebes and even some Mediterranean Gulls. Alas, there is no sign of the reported vagrant Green Heron but a large stray cat has a very satisfied look on its face.....

The flight leaves on time and we are soon winging our way back to a damp Gatwick, where the bags all arrive safely and we say our final goodbyes.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you for being such an easy group to be with, always punctual and full of fun. Thank you to all those who helped with navigating and trying to read the out-of-date maps, and to those who provided photos for this report. Thanks also are due to the staff at the Hotel Robinson for the great food, roaring log fire and the never-ending hot water. I hope that we will meet again on another Ornitholidays soon.

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January 2009

Itinerary and Weather

13 January	London Gatwick – Marseille – Les Alpilles – Beaucaire Fine and sunny, 6°C
14 January	Les Baux - Les Alpilles - La Crau Fine and sunny, 8°C
15 January	The Camargue Fine and sunny, 9°C
16 January	Mont Ventoux – Pont du Gard Fine and sunny, 8°C
17 January	Les Baux - La Crau Fine, 16°C
18 January	Les Baux – Les Alpilles – L'Etang de Berre - Marseille Overcast, 8°C

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING THE TOUR

No of days recorded	Abundance scale
1 2h means seen on 1 day and heard on 2 other days	(max for any one day)
	1 = < 4
	2 = 5 - 9
	3 = 10 - 100
	4 = 100 – 999
	5 = 1,000+

SPECIES	No of Days Recorded	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Great Crested Grebe	3	3	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	2	3	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Great Cormorant	4	3	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Western Cattle Egret	4	3	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Little Egret	1	3	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great Egret	1	3	<i>Egretta alba</i>
Grey Heron	6	3	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Black Stork	1	1	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
White Stork	2	3	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Greater Flamingo	2	4	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>
Mute Swan	1	3	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Greylag Goose	1	1	<i>Anser anser</i>
Common Shelduck	1	4	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	1	3	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Gadwall	1	3	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Common Teal	1	4	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	5	3	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Shoveler	1	4	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Red-crested Pochard	1	4	<i>Netta rufina</i>
Common Pochard	1	3	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	1	3	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Red Kite	1	3	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	2	3	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Northern (Hen) Harrier	3	2	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	3	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard	5	3	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Bonelli's Eagle	2	1	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>
Common Kestrel	6	2	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Merlin	1	1	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Red-legged Partridge	1	3	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Common Pheasant	- 1h	1	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Little Bustard	2	3	<i>Otis tetrax</i>
Water Rail	- 1h	1	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Common Moorhen	4	3	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Common Coot	1	4	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Pied Avocet	1	4	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Common Ringed Plover	1	3	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Kentish Plover	1	2	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Grey Plover	1	3	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Northern Lapwing	2	4	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Sanderling	1	1	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Little Stint	1	3	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Dunlin	1	4	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Common Snipe	1	3	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Eurasian Curlew	1	3	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Redshank	1	3	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Green Sandpiper	- 1h	1	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Sandpiper	1	1	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>

Mediterranean Gull	1		1	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>
Black-headed Gull	4		5	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	1		3	<i>Larus canus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	2		1	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	5		5	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	1		3	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>
Rock Dove (Common Pigeon)	6		4	<i>Columba livia</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	3		1	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	6		3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Little Owl	1		1	<i>Athene noctua</i>
Common Kingfisher	2		1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Green Woodpecker	1		1	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	-	1h	1	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Crested Lark	2		1	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Eurasian Skylark	2		3	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	2		1	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Meadow Pipit	4		3	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Water Pipit	1		1	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Grey Wagtail	2		1	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White Wagtail	5		3	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Winter Wren	2		1	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Dunnock	3		1	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Alpine Accentor	2		2	<i>Prunella collaris</i>
European Robin	6		2	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Black Redstart	6		3	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Common Stonechat	3		1	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	2		1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Common Blackbird	5		1	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	1	1h	1	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Song Thrush	5		1	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	3		1	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Cetti's Warbler	1		1	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Sardinian Warbler	6		3	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Dartford Warbler	1		1	<i>Sylvia undata</i>
Blackcap	6		3	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Chiffchaff	-	4h	1	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Firecrest	3	1h	1	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Coal Tit	1		1	<i>Parus ater</i>
European Crested Tit	2	2h	1	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Great Tit	6		2	<i>Parus major</i>
Eurasian Blue Tit	6		2	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Wallcreeper	3		1	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>
Short-toed Treecreeper	2		1	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Eurasian Penduline-Tit	1		1	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>
Southern Grey Shrike	2		2	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Eurasian Jay	1	1h	1	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Eurasian Magpie	6		3	<i>Pica pica</i>
Western Jackdaw	5		4	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Carrion Crow	6		3	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Common Raven	1		1	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Common Starling	6		4	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	4		2	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Tree Sparrow	1		1	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Chaffinch	6		4	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Brambling	1		3	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
European Serin	6		3	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Citril Finch	1		4	<i>Serinus citrinella</i>
European Greenfinch	4	1h	2	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
European Goldfinch	5		3	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Eurasian Siskin	1		3	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Common Linnet	3		3	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Red Crossbill	1		3	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Hawfinch	2		1	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>

Rock Sparrow	1	3	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
Snowfinch	1	1	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>
Yellowhammer	1	1	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Cirl Bunting	1	1	<i>Emberiza cirrus</i>
Reed Bunting	2	2	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Corn Bunting	3	3	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>

MAMMALS

Coypu	1	2	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>
Red Squirrel	2	1	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Rabbit	1	1	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>

This list represents those species seen by party members of this tour.



Alpine Accentor, Les Baux



Black Redstart, Les Baux



Les Baux



Wallcreeper



Watching Citril Finches, Mont Ventoux



Crested Tit, Mont Ventoux



Bonelli's Eagle, Les Alpilles



White Horses, La Camargue

**Front cover: Wallcreeper – Nigel Jones
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