

**ORNITHOLIDAYS' TOUR TO FRANCE – WALLCREEPER TOUR AT LEISURE**  
*Mountains and Marshes*

**15 - 20 January 2013**



**Leader: Paul Rogers**

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### A Personal Diary

#### **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> January**

Winter arrives in the UK so most of the party take no chances and travel down to London the day before our departure to Provence. Our mid-day Easyjet flight from Gatwick allows us to reach the airport in a relaxed fashion. The check-in is fast and efficient at a very quiet desk but the flight to Marseille is surprisingly full. Low cloud screens our views of the Alps. After one hour and twenty minutes we land, collect bags and head for the car rental desk. Soon we are on our way in a splendid Mercedes mini-bus. We have to add an hour so most of the journey is in diminishing light with a chilly brusque wind. Several Common Buzzards and parties of foraging Common Magpies perch in trees and roadside hedges.

The welcome at the hotel in Beaucaire is as warm as usual. Ornitholidays' have been staying here for more than forty years. Over an aperitif we outline plans for the next few days before enjoying an excellent dinner.

#### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> January**

After a buffet breakfast we are keen to explore our new surroundings and are on the road by 8.30 am. Wallcreeper is the main target on this particular tour, when the birds descend to lower altitudes in the winter as snow covers the high mountain slopes. The steep cliffs of the vast limestone monolith on which sits the ancient town of Les Baux-de-Provence are a favoured and normally a reliable site. A wide flat track offers many good vantage points of the cracks and crevices eroded by eons of wind and rain. Today, one such wind continues the erosion. Unfortunately it blows from the north, it is the Mistral, these are not ideal conditions. The chill factor is considerable and even many layers of clothes do not seem to help. Only Western Jackdaws, Feral Pigeons and a Common Kestrel are obvious but Penny finds a Blue Rock Thrush high on the cliffs and a Black Redstart favours a bare tree.

In a Mistral, the sheltered Val d'Enfer has been productive in the past. Here there is little wind and it is a little warmer. A trio of Common Crossbills feed atop of a tall pine and nearby a party of tits includes several delightful Crested Tits. Hilary thinks she is back in Scotland. Despite these obvious delights there is disappointment we cannot find a Wallcreeper.

Diligent searching more cliff faces on the road towards St Remy fails to reveal our elusive target. Nearby are the Saint-Paul Hospital where Vincent Van Gogh spent a year in 1889 and the Roman Arch that spanned the northern entrance to the city of Glanum. We take in a little culture.

A large picnic table at the start of the track to La Caume is required to accommodate the vast array of delicacies from our very large picnic box. Only a lone Goldcrest interrupts our lunch. Another valley in Les Alpilles is normally sheltered and a possible place for Wallcreeper as well as roosting Eagle Owls and raptors. Today the wind whistles down the valley and all birds are hidden in deep cover. Plan E (or is it F?) is implemented and we head north enjoying the warmth of the vehicle. The Roman aqueduct of the Pont du Gard is another possibility; at this time of the year this heritage site is deserted, even the cafés and souvenir shops are closed. Walking by the impressive 2,000 year old structure we scan every arch, every span and every pillar, but only Crag Martins above the top level are visible. More disappointment but we enjoy this remarkable edifice and take some photographs. The level of the River Gardon is low and the muddy margins are dotted with many White Wagtails, several Meadow Pipits and a lone Grey Wagtail. Hilary points out a Common Kingfisher perched in a small shrub; it adds a splash of colour to the dull light of the day. The bridge is normally a roosting place for Rock Sparrows but even they fail to turn up as the light fails. Gareth finds a female Blackcap feeding on ivy berries and a small flock in the Holm Oaks contains several Goldcrests and Firecrests.

It has been hard birding all day due to the strong wind and we are pleased to return to the warm rooms of the hotel and another excellent dinner.

## Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> January

We wake to a dull day with the Mistral blowing stronger and colder than yesterday, it is going to be another hard day. Perhaps the vehicle will best be used as a mobile hide to explore the marshes and lakes of the Camargue. Progress to the western side of the huge Etang du Vaccarès is fast along the good roads, our only stop is for seven Common Cranes flying in front of us, heading for their undisturbed feeding grounds not accessible by roads. We head for the wetlands around Mas de Cacharel, this has been a favoured area for wintering Greater Spotted Eagles over the recent past, a species that Gareth is keen to see.

Before we take a track that skirts open water and reed beds we stop to view a flock of Golden Plovers in a field grazed by the infamous White Horses, rarely are they seen with flying hooves and spray as they gallop through water. The plovers are tucked behind tussocks of reeds seeking respite from the annoying wind, but the bright sunshine does highlight the colours that give them their common name. Western Marsh and Hen Harriers quarter low over the extensive reeds, large numbers of Common Shelduck add colour to the dark grey mud banks.

A variety of waders on the edge of the lake tempts us out of the vehicle, we view them through the telescopes. The bus offers a little shelter from the blasting biting wind. Here are good numbers of Dunlin, lots of Common Redshanks, a long line of Eurasian Curlew, a few Grey Plover and three Bar-tailed Godwits. On the other side are pairs of Mute Swans, three Greylag Geese and large numbers of wildfowl and egrets put to the air by a large raptor. It dwarfs a Common Buzzard and its dark colour, bulging secondaries and slow wing beats confirm it as a Greater Spotted Eagle, and we enjoy good views through the telescopes.

A well vegetated island offers shelter for Grey Herons, Little and Great Egrets and Great Cormorants but the sight of several hundred Red-crested Pochard is memorable. The bright sunshine emphasises the ginger “crew cuts” of the large number of males. The wind makes life very difficult for a Water Pipit as it struggles over the floating vegetation, every few minutes it is blown back several metres before it retires to the taller stems on the edge of the water. Nearby a group of Blue Tits look particularly colourful as they search the long golden stems for food. Penny draws our attention to another bird at the base of the reeds; it is a female Bearded Reedling, perhaps our only chance of seeing one in these turbulent conditions. Far easier to see are a trio of Greater Flamingos sifting food from the salty water through inverted beaks, their large size offers them a little more stability. Lines of flying birds move to more sheltered sites looking very strange with long necks matched by equally long legs, at times they appear to be flying backwards!

Our circular route takes us through the town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, a very popular tourist resort, with much new development but very sleepy at this time of year. In fact the whole area seems to be “fermé” as we try not one, or two but three establishments for a warming cup of coffee without success. Today the back of the minibus has to suffice as our picnic table in an attempt to avoid the wind in a quiet lay-by.

The marshes at Mas D’Agon are often productive but not today only Coypu are noteworthy, these South American rodents seem to find conditions here to their liking. The eastern side of the Etang de Vaccarès is even more windswept and a group of Greater Flamingos look most uncomfortable huddled behind a group of willows. They are all adults, an individual with a colour ring, (read on a previous tour) revealed that as a juvenile it had spent the first four years of its life wintering in Italy and only returned here to breed as an adult, perhaps the explanation for our observation. Long lines of Great Crested Grebes number several hundred and as many Mallard sit in a sheltered bay with a few Eurasian Teal and a single Gadwall.

La Capelière doubles up as research station and tourist information centre with displays of the habitats and local wildlife. Here also is a trail leading to several hides, at last one hide provides some respite from the chilly conditions. A Grey Heron sits on a bank making the most of the weak sunshine and a Hen Harrier flies slowly past, not so a Common Snipe that flies at high speed, wind assisted. Our patience is rewarded as a Water Rail moves stealthily along the muddy edges that are dotted with patches of ice, it is always a pleasing species to see well. Further to the south the road runs close to the shore, passing more Greater Flamingos and Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes. The birds are close and we enjoy good views as they bob up and down on waves that are more akin to the Atlantic Ocean than a Mediterranean lake.

As we complete our long circular route we pass dozens of hunters waiting for the wildfowl coming into roost, we do not tarry. It has been a long but rewarding day in our mobile hide that offered some warmth from the cold. We did not expect to see sheets of ice in southern France even in January.

### **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> January**

The morning promises to be a little less breezy with some sunshine according to the local forecast. We take their word for it and opt to seek out the specialist species found on the stony desert of La Crau. As we head to an area just south of St Martin-de-Crau several Red Kites circle overhead, a species that is no longer a rarity back home, particularly for Pat who has them over her garden. Once off the main road we can stop and start in safety, first for a large flock of Common Skylarks and then for a Iberian Grey Shrike on a wire. Much of the area has been cleared and “improved” for sheep grazing, however, one area is little changed over the years. Driving along the tracks into the heart of the desert all appears quiet, scanning eventually picks out two Little Bustards in flight, at least we now know where to concentrate our efforts. Winding our way along the rough track a flock of 18 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse circle around the bus, a real success as they are not numerous here and a bird that we see only infrequently. On the track are a group of Little Bustards, we have excellent views before they fly a short distance to join others. Out of the bus we have prolonged views through the telescopes of a group of 37, some of the males display to the smaller females, the cold conditions have not diminished their ardour. As we watch a male Merlin dashes low over small stunted shrubs occasionally perching on one for us to admire briefly through the telescopes before it speeds across the apparent barren landscape once again. It is a fruitful morning.

The nearby Etang d’Entressen has little on the open water only a Common Pochard and several Tufted Ducks are new for the week. Our visit is memorable for the very close views of a male Firecrest that flares its spectacular crest for us to admire and hopefully for some to photograph.

Lunch is in a quiet tree-lined pull off overlooking Les Alpilles. As usual we enjoy a wonderful spread with rosé and white wine for the non-drivers. Although it is still breezy the track beneath Les Baux offers a little more shelter but the area is still bereft of Wallcreepers although several Blue Rock Thrushes briefly raise our hopes. We take some consolation in the fact that several French birdwatchers have failed to find our quarry on the cliffs or indeed in the area. The town of Les Baux is a tourist hot spot but not at this time of the year, now the streets are deserted and the shops closed, finding cafés open is nearly as difficult as finding small grey and red birds but not quite, a single one is open. Whilst most enjoy a hot drink, I explore the upper châteaux along with Gareth. Once we have paid our dues we explore the limestone pavement for another high altitude species that winters here in good numbers, Alpine Accentors. We can only find European Robins, Black Redstarts, a Sardinian Warbler and a male Blackcap. Returning to the car park Roger points out a single Alpine Accentor seeking food on the stone walls. Although it is only a black, brown and grey bird it is a most attractive species, at least the area has produced one of its specialities.

Late in the afternoon the wind has dropped, the Val d’Enfer is remarkably quiet so we try another nearby valley. In the past Wallcreepers have been seen here but we are hoping for larger quarry, European Crag Martins glide high above the cliffs but the star is a perched Bonelli’s Eagle, perhaps the rarest European raptor, we see it well through the telescopes. Here also are Eagle Owls, but an owl-shaped brown rock is a false alarm. There are no deep calls echoing across the valley, although they are early breeders perhaps the cold weather has delayed courtship behaviour.

Another fine meal is enjoyed with a large leg of duck as the main course, helped down with glasses of complimentary wine. No chance of losing weight on this tour!

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> January**

We awake to a light drizzle with more rain forecast for most of the day, not a good sign for the mountain stage of the tour, a trip to Mont Ventoux. Pat takes the navigation hot seat through Avignon, not an easy task but eventually we find the road north to Carpentras and onto Bedouin. The drizzle turns to rain and sleet as we gain height, the steeper inclines are covered in ice and snow but we venture on through the pine woods to reach Le Chalet Reynard and a very welcome cup of hot chocolate. Conditions are very different when the Tour de France tackles this monstrous mountain. We learn that a heavy snow blizzard last night deposited three inches of snow and the roads had yet to be cleared, to make things worse the low cloud base means visibility is down to thirty yards. They are not ideal conditions for birds or bird watching, the only birds we see are three Eurasian Jays. There is little point in lingering here with the chance of getting stuck; Citril

Finches will have to wait for another time. The vineyards in the foothills often hold feeding flocks and as the rain eases we find such a flock. Here are hundreds of Common Chaffinches, a few European Goldfinches, a couple of European Serins and several Fieldfares. Although the rain has stopped the wind has not abated and we endure a picnic in a sparse copse in a force 6 wind, the bare trees offer little shelter, not we hoped for or expected.

Trying to salvage something of the day we head for Collias and a gorge cut by the River Gardon, another site that has produced sightings of our number one target. The cliffs look ideal but yet again we draw a blank, Crag Martins, White Wagtails and Grey Wagtails are added to the very short day list. Once more we return to Les Baux and walk the length of the Vald'Enfer, now we know every detail of the rocky faces, here and on the cliffs below the town. Despite the most diligent searching and scanning we have to admit failure.

Our farewell meal is most enjoyable, the finale is a Provençale version of "baked Alaska" complete with large sparklers and a brandy liqueur.

### **Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January**

With a midday flight we have no time for any last minute birding and make for Marseille airport through a very heavy rainstorm. Despite torrential conditions we make good time and are on time to check-in for our flight. Conditions in the UK have also been trying with heavy snow fall, London Heathrow particularly affected with flights cancelled. Fortunately Gatwick is not so badly hit but our flight is delayed and we land in a snow covered airport only an hour late. Luggage is delivered quickly on the carousels and we say fond farewells and wish each other safe onward journeys. We cannot escape inclement weather even at home.

### **Acknowledgements**

I thank you for good humour and high spirits, despite the horrific weather everyone made the best of each day in the field without complaint. Each day had its own challenges but nevertheless we saw some special species and had some memorable moments. Many thanks for travelling with Ornitholidays and hopefully we will meet up again in the not too distant future. Also thank you to Roger for allowing me to use his photograph in this report.

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February 2013

## **Itinerary and weather**

- 15<sup>th</sup> January    International flight from London Gatwick to Marseille onto Beaucaire  
Fine and sunny with chilly wind 5°C
- 16<sup>th</sup> January    Les Baux – Les Alpilles – Glanum – Pont du Gard  
Overcast with a strong cold northerly wind – 2 to 4°C
- 17<sup>th</sup> January    Camargue – Chacherel – Sts Maries – Mas d’Agon – La Capelière  
Sunny periods with a very strong cold northerly wind -4 to 0°C
- 18<sup>th</sup> January    La Crau – Etang d’Entressen – Les Baux – Les Alpilles  
Sunny morning with strong northerly wind, calmer cloudy afternoon 0 to 2°C
- 19<sup>th</sup> January    Mont Ventoux – Le Chalet Reynard – Collias – Les Baux  
Rain, sleet, snow & ice, low cloud with poor visibility, cloudy late afternoon  
Strong south-easterly wind -1 to 10°C
- 20<sup>th</sup> January    Beaucaire to Marseille international flight to London Gatwick  
Thunderstorm and very heavy rain, thick snow at Gatwick max 2°C

## CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

### No of days recorded

1 2h means seen on 1  
day and heard on 2  
other days

### Abundance Scale (max. seen on 1 day)

1 = 1 – 4 individuals  
2 = 5 - 9  
3 = 10 - 99  
4 = 100 - 999

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Mute Swan	1	3	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Greylag Goose	1	1	<i>Anser anser</i>
Common Shelduck	1	4	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mallard	2	3	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Gadwall	1	1	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Northern Shoveler	1	1	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	1	1	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Eurasian Teal	1	3	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Common Pochard	1	1	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Red-crested Pochard	1	4	<i>Netta rufina</i>
Tufted Duck	1	2	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Great Crested Grebe	2	4	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	1	3	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Great Cormorant	5	3	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Cattle Egret	3	4	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Little Egret	2	2	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great Egret	4	3	<i>Egretta alba</i>
Grey Heron	5	3	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Greater Flamingo	1	4	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>
Greater Spotted Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila clanga</i>
Bonelli's Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>
Red Kite	1	2	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	1	2	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	1	2	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Common Buzzard	6	3	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Kestrel	5	1	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Peregrine Falcon	1	1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Merlin	1	1	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Water Rail	1	1	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Common Moorhen	1	1	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	1	3	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Crane	1	2	<i>Grus grus</i>
Little Bustard	1	3	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>
Grey Plover	1	1	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
European Golden Plover	1	3	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Northern Lapwing	1	3	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Dunlin	1	4	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Green Sandpiper	1	1	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Redshank	1	3	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	1	1	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Eurasian Curlew	1	3	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Snipe	1	1	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Black-headed Gull	4	3	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	2	1	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	5	4	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	1	3	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	6	3	<i>Columba livia</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	3	1	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	6	3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Kingfisher	1	1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
European Green Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Picus viridis</i>

Great Spotted Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Common Skylark	2	4	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Crested Lark	1	1	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	3	3	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Water Pipit	1	1	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Meadow Pipit	3	3	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
White Wagtail	6	2	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Grey Wagtail	3	1	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Alpine Accentor	1	1	<i>Prunella collaris</i>
European Robin	4	1	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Black Redstart	3	2	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Common Stonechat	2	1	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
Song Thrush	3	1	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Redwing	1	2	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Fieldfare	1	3	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Common Blackbird	1	1h	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	2	2	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Sardinian Warbler	2	1	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Blackcap	2	1	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Common Chiffchaff	1	1	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Firecrest	2	2	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Goldcrest	2	1	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Great Tit	1	1	<i>Parus major</i>
Coal Tit	1	1	<i>Periparus ater</i>
European Blue Tit	3	3	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Crested Tit	1	1	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Bearded Reedling	1	1	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
Iberian Grey Shrike	1	1	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Eurasian Jay	3	1	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Common Magpie	6	3	<i>Pica pica</i>
Western Jackdaw	4	4	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Carrion Crow	6	4	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Common Starling	6	4	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	4	3	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Tree Sparrow	1	3	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Common Chaffinch	5	4	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Goldfinch	3	1	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
European Serin	1	1	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Common Crossbill	1	1	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Common Reed Bunting	1	2	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
<b>MAMMALS</b>			
Coypu	1	2	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>

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



**Greater Flamingo**



**Greater Flamingo**



**Greater Flamingos**



**Firecrest**



**Copyu**



**Great Crested Grebe**



**Pont du Gard**



**Etang d'Entressen**

**Front cover: Alpine Accentor**

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