

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

18 – 23 January 2011



**Leader: Simon Boyes**

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**A Personal Diary**

**Tuesday, 18 January**

The Easyjet morning flight to Marseille is on time from Gatwick, and offers great views of the Alps and Mont Ventoux from the left of the plane. After 90 minutes in the air, we land and retrieve our luggage. Here we meet Martin and Maureen, who have travelled from Kidderminster by train, a journey of 12 hours. It takes a while to pick up the Renault Trafic 9-seater which is to be our mobile hide for the next few days.

In the first few minutes of the journey we pass a few Greater Flamingos wading in the salty lagoons near the road. Further on, a short stop near La Crau reveals a pair of Red Kites and several Cattle Egrets in flight. However, our priority is arriving at our hotel for lunch! The Robinson has been our base in this area for 30 years, and once again Mme Leon and her staff give us a friendly welcome. We had requested a light lunch, but it comes with three courses and wine all the same.

There is half an hour for unpacking before we set out for Pont du Gard. Since the weather is perfect we are keen to be out in the field. We walk to the west side of the magnificent Roman-built structure for better light on the honey-coloured stonework. Black Redstarts, Rock Sparrows coming in to roost, and Crag Martins make a good start. I think for a moment I've seen a Wallcreeper low down on one of the arches, but decide it must have been wishful thinking as it shows no sign for ten minutes. But suddenly Liz picks it up and we enjoy great views in the scopes of the main target bird of the week! We follow it for half an hour or so, as it explores various arches and faces of the aqueduct, sometimes disappearing in crevices. When visible, it constantly flicks its magenta wings and shows off its long curved, spider-catching bill. The Rock Sparrows, which give a great performance too, are relegated to only short glances while the star of the show is active. On the river are Goosanders (uncommon here), Great Cormorants and a Little Egret. As the sun sets and the full moon rises, we return to the vehicle elated: a wonderful start.

Back at the Robinson we meet Sammy, who lives up in the Alps and has driven down to join us. After a fine dinner of asparagus, lamb, local cheeses and *crème brûlée*, we sit around the log fire, completing our checklist and making plans for tomorrow.

**Wednesday, 19 January**

Today we awake to a Mistral, the strong north wind that sometimes blows down the Rhône valley and makes birding a trial – despite clear blue skies! After a fine buffet breakfast, we start off with a walk at Les Baux, in Les Alpilles. We take a track that passes under the eastern cliffs, and once we are out of the wind, we gaze up at the cliff-faces which have proved the most reliable Wallcreeper sites in past winters. Luckily a Blue Rock Thrush comes to our rescue, as there are no Wallcreepers to view! A sheltered garden below the village has many Black Redstarts and a Sardinian Warbler among many tits and finches. Next we walk up into the almost deserted village – such a change from the crowds in summer. It's too windy to try for Alpine Accentors on top of the hill – in the circumstances, the only coffee shop open proves a more popular choice. Hot chocolates and *cafés au lait* have the desired warming effect.

Next we try a sheltered valley nearby, where the pines and holm-oaks are a promising habitat, but there is still enough wind to keep birds such as Firecrest quiet. Luckily a pair of Bonelli's Eagles choose the right moment to fly over us, and still better... We follow one bird that lands: on the eyrie! Although it's still only mid-January, both birds are busy 'making the bed' (Maureen's phrase). The female – clearly identifiable by larger size – hauls around sticks that are more like branches than twigs, re-arranging them well in advance of their nesting season. Bonelli's Eagles form especially strong pair bonds, and often hunt co-operatively. It's an old nest, obviously used for many years. After enjoying our generous lunch picnic under the pines, we

wander a few yards along the track for further views of the house-proud eagle – one has flown off in the meantime.

During the afternoon we change scenery, and visit the stone desert of La Crau, an unusual landscape, not at its best with a strong Mistral blowing. A superb male Hen Harrier perched close to us, a few Serins and Stonechats are our first finds. We scan the *coussouls* – the local word for the herb-rich stony grasslands – for specialities such as the wintering flock of Little Bustards, but without success. One small area is strictly protected as a nature reserve (named Peau de Meau), but most of La Crau is being gradually eroded by stone-clearing and then cultivation. It originated as a river bed, (of the Durance, which later changed course), with fertile silt soils under the stones. Flocks of Skylarks and Meadow Pipits appear at intervals, and an Iberian Grey Shrike is a bonus, perched in a lonely bush. A wintering Merlin dashes past, in a hurry as usual. As we leave the desert, we pass four Red-legged Partridges in a field, and more Hen Harriers. At the Lake of Entressen, a Great Crested Grebe is surprisingly in summer plumage, but has to be viewed from inside the minibus: such is the force of the Mistral. Our final success of the day is a pair of White Storks, wading in a pond with a Little Egret, not far from Marseille's impressively landscaped rubbish dump. Surely most tours must visit a dump or a sewage works!

We return to the warmth of the Robinson, with its bathfuls of hot water and complimentary wine at dinner! Tonight's menu is a Provençale aubergine starter followed by rabbit casserole.

#### **Thursday, 20 January**

In a successful attempt to escape the Mistral, we set out for Mont Ventoux, an outtrigger of the Alps to the north-east of Avignon. The Mistral is a phenomenon of the Rhône Valley, and we leave it behind as we climb through the pine and beech zones of the Ventoux slopes. The first stop turns up a Firecrest, flicking its wings as it feeds in the holm-oaks by the road. Further up we come upon a flock of Crossbills sunbathing on the road. These we watch for a long time, as they return to feed on pine-cones, red males and greenish females together. With them is a single Citril Finch and a few Siskins. The two are similar in size, but the Citril has unmarked green underparts.

A mid-morning break at the café at Chalet Reynard helps us warm up with hot chocolate or coffee. We may be out of the Mistral, but the temperature here is minus 4°C! We drive as far as the barrier which closes off the top of the road, although there is no snow lying. We walk on higher, looking for Alpine Accentor, but only find a flock of Fieldfares. A group of ten or so Citril Finches are feeding around the edge of a small patch of snow; later, they return to the pines and feed on cones that have already opened up. Their small bills lack the strength to open the cones as Crossbills can. A walk in the pinewoods beyond the café produces a Nuthatch, a Short-toed Treecreeper and both Crested and Coal Tits. On our return to Chalet Reynard, the owner takes pity on us and allows us to spread out the vast Robinson picnic hamper in a corner of his warm dining room.

As we head down the mountain, we make a few stops in the hope of a Black Woodpecker or two. They are here in small numbers, but it is no surprise that we miss out. We make do with further Crested Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper sightings. An interesting sight is watching Crossbills and Goldfinches eating snow as a convenient way of drinking. Heading back past the famous half-bridge in Avignon (Pont St. Benezet), we return via St Remy to see if the Eagle Owl is at home in its usual site near Les Baux. We are there in good time, but perhaps the force of the wind keeps the owl from showing itself. These magnificent raptors are often defending their territories in January. The lights of the Robinson are a welcome sight after a long but enjoyable day in Provence.

#### **Friday, 21 January**

...is Camargue day. Our journey is basically a clockwise semi-circle round the huge Etang de Vaccarès, beginning at Cacharel, and spending the morning on the bumpy track to Mejanès. There is plenty to see, and we make frequent stops. First we watch close-up Greater Flamingos, feeding alongside us in their unique upside-down manner. Here are also Marsh Harriers, which we continue to see through the day, and Common Shelduck. Great Egret used to be a rarity here, but today we see at least 12, many dwarfing Little Egrets standing next to them. They are spreading west from their Eastern European strongholds. The strong wind keeps the passerines low to the ground, but we see several Reed Buntings and a wetland full of wintering

Water Pipits. They will change both plumage and habitat in the breeding season, which they spend on dry mountaintops like Mont Ventoux. At one point a Zitting Cisticola gives two brief views alongside us.

At Lac Consecanière, huge numbers of Red-crested Pochard are sheltering in the lee of an island, with Shoveler and Gadwall for company. Here are also large flocks of restless Golden Plover, which sometimes settle on a sandflat, but soon take to the air again. Further on, the shore of Vaccarès on our right has a wintering flock of Bar-tailed Godwit, with a few Dunlin and Grey Plover. We would have expected Black-tailed Godwit here, as most of the Bar-tails are in Africa now. At the restaurant in Mejanès, we drink coffee and chocolate as we watch the feeding Greater Flamingos. We negotiate the use of their sheltered terrace for our picnic, another mammoth offering from the Robinson, with cheeses, pâtés, baguettes, olives, salads, dressings, wine, fruits, cakes and jammy dodgers too.

Starting off again, we watch Curlews and Lapwings, and photograph two of the iconic Camargue creatures: white horses and black bulls. A detour to the Mas d'Agon marshes is worthwhile, as it brings us three Bewick's Swans, seven Black Storks, a Kingfisher, a Common Redshank and two Coypu. These large, vegetarian rodents were introduced from South America for fur-farming, but they are now naturalized here. There are also several Common Snipe, but they rush off as soon as the scopes point at them.

A stop where the road runs along the Vaccarès shore produces a superb assembly of grebe and duck. There are over a hundred Black-necked Grebe, some extremely close and beginning to show the black necks of summer plumage. With them are many Great Crested Grebe, in various stages of plumage. There are also similar numbers of Common Pochard, almost all drakes. (The females tend to move further south). At La Capelière, we stop to admire the exhibition of Camargue ecology, and the beautiful postcards and miniature carved and painted birds on sale. We have time to visit the first two hides, which provide superb close-up portraits (in perfect light) of Teal, Shoveler, Tufted Duck and Common Pochard. Again the cold wind foils our attempts to find Bearded Reedling or Penduline Tit. A final stop at Grenouillet Marsh produces many evening flights of Greylag Geese – but they must be careful, as hunters in camouflage gear are lurking in the bushes. We head back home with a fiery sunset on our left, and reach the Robinson at six o'clock.

### **Saturday, 22 January**

Resuming the theme of the Wallcreeper, this morning we try a return to Pont du Gard, scene of our success on Tuesday. The star of the show is absent today, or else hiding from the bitter wind in a crevice. The best bird is a Short-toed Treecreeper, which entertains us on a series of trunks. After a warming coffee, there is time for a stroll round the gift shop. A few miles upstream from Pont du Gard is the village of Collias, where the walk along the beautiful river is worthwhile at any time of year. The huge rock-faces should also be suitable for Wallcreeper, but apparently not today. Sammy spots a Kingfisher along the river, and Tree Sparrows are new for us, feeding with Chaffinches by the track. As we stroll back through the village we find several Black Redstarts, and watch Blackcaps feasting on ivy berries. There is one brief appearance from a Mistle Thrush.

Instead of another picnic in the field, we have arranged to eat in the hotel, where our table is beautifully laid out with our picnic fare. For the afternoon, we decide to avoid more Mistral in Les Baux or La Crau, but to head instead into the western Camargue around Sylvère and Scamandre. Here at least we know there will be plenty to see from our mobile hide. We start with a flock of wintering White Storks, which are increasingly finding a living here in the winter. Without migrating, they can begin breeding earlier and choose the best nest-sites. Natural selection is making them less migratory with climate change. Next we find a wetland with both Black and White Storks, feeding with Great Egrets and Grey Herons. Three Green Sandpipers fly about together. Overhead comes a Spotted Eagle, no doubt the individual that has wintered for many years in these parts. It is an adult, sooty black, with small white rump patch and bulging secondaries, all good field marks. Next comes a buzzard with a white rump, but the view is too brief to claim a rare Rough-legged Buzzard for sure. In a normal winter, their southbound migrations stop well short of the Camargue, but this one has been especially hard in Northern Europe. Indeed, the birds-in-Provence website shows that the species has been recorded in the Camargue this winter!

We press on to look for the wintering Crane flock. Sammy spots a flock of large birds in V-formation in the distance: the scopes reveal about 100 Cranes, circling and moving further away. Liz (today's navigator) and I predict their route and we backtrack until we have reached a spot where we can watch two families on the

ground feeding. One has two adults and two young; the other two adults and one young. One begins dancing, as if thinking about the spring – surely the parents must see off their youngster first! We marvel at signs of courtship in these freezing temperatures! Even if we have lost the main flock, we are delighted with this encounter. While we watch, a fine male Hen Harrier quarters the same dry rice field, and a female Sparrowhawk flies straight for us and hurtles across the road. As the sun sinks over the vast reedbeds of Gallician, our final excitement is a group of four Glossy Ibis flying east to roost. These marshbirds are rare in France, and we return for our final dinner very happy with our Camargue experiences.

Before dinner, we meet in the bar for a round of drinks courtesy of Ornitholidays. The meal comes to a literally sparkling climax as our waitress brings in a flaming *omelette norvégienne*, the local equivalent of a Baked Alaska. With it comes a glass of champagne, offered by the hotel. We share travellers' tales and re-live our fine afternoon chasing Cranes.

### **Sunday, 23 January**

Annoyingly for our day of departure, the strong northerly has finally abated! We wander out into the Robinson garden before we leave, and watch a Red Squirrel leaping through the pines. Taking our leave of Sammy, and then of Mme Leon and her friendly staff, we head for Marseille Airport, with a stop at Piste de Vallon. This is a disused airfield, which resembles La Crau in its open, stony surface of *coussouls*. Starting off with Iberian Grey Shrikes, Stonechats and a fine male Marsh Harrier, we soon have a flock of Little Bustards in our sights. There are 38, only countable when they take to the air and show off white wings. These are small bustards, only 800 grams in weight. (Africa's Kori Bustard is the world's heaviest flying bird, with mature males weighing in at 19 kg).

From here it is not far to Marseille Airport. Here we say farewell and *bon voyage* (by train) to Maureen and Martin. The Easyjet flight is 90 minutes late, but we are airborne in the end, and all have great views of Mont Ventoux and the Alps from the right of the Airbus. We land at Gatwick on a cloudy (but mercilessly windless!) evening. Luggage appears very quickly, and we say our farewells by the carousels.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to all of you, for all your enthusiasm and good humour in challenging weather conditions! I hope we may meet up on another Ornitholiday again soon. Thanks also to Roger for the photographs that illustrate this report. Also, many thanks to the staff of the Hotel Robinson for great food and wine, and the welcome they gave us.

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January 2011

## **Itinerary and Weather**

Wherever possible, shade temperatures at dawn and midday are given.

- 18 January Arrive Marseille 1200. To Hotel Robinson, Beaucaire. Pont du Gard.  
Sunny, 7°C (45°F)
- 19 January Les Baux, Les Alpilles, La Crau.  
Sunny, strong N wind, 7-11°C (45-52°F), but feeling much colder.
- 20 January Mont Ventoux, Les Baux.  
Sunny, strong N wind. Minus 4-3°C (25-37°F)
- 21 January The Camargue: Cacharel to MeJanuaryes. Mas d'Agon. La Capelière.  
Sunny, strong N wind. 1-6°C (34-43°F)
- 22 January Pont du Gard. Collias. P.m. to West Camargue at Sylveréal and Gallician.  
Sunny, strong N wind. Minus 1-4°C (30-39°F)
- 23 January Beaucaire to Marseille Airport, via Piste de Vallon. Depart 1500.  
Sunny, minus 2-5°C (28-41°F)

## 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	2	3	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Bewick's Swan	1	1	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>
Greylag Goose	1	3	<i>Anser anser</i>
Common Shelduck	2	3	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mallard	3	2	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Gadwall	1	3	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Northern Shoveler	1	3	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Eurasian Teal	2	4	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Common Pochard	1	4	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Red-crested Pochard	1	4	<i>Netta rufina</i>
Tufted Duck	1	3	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Goosander	1	1	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-legged Partridge	1	1	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Common Pheasant	2	1	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	1	4	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	3	3	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Little Grebe	2	1	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Cormorant	5	3	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Cattle Egret	2	3	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Little Egret	5	3	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Great Egret	2	3	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>
Grey Heron	5	3	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
White Stork	2	3	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Black Stork	2	2	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
Glossy Ibis	1	1	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Greater Flamingo	2	4	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
Greater Spotted Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila clanga</i>
Bonelli's Eagle	1	1	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>
Red Kite	2	1	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	3	2	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Hen Harrier	3	1	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Common Buzzard	5	3	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Kestrel	3	2	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Merlin	2	1	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Common Moorhen	4	2	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	2	3	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Crane	1	3	<i>Grus grus</i>
Little Bustard	1	3	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>
Grey Plover	1	2	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
European Golden Plover	1	3	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Northern Lapwing	2	3	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Dunlin	1	2	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Green Sandpiper	1	1	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Redshank	1	1	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	1	3	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Eurasian Curlew	2	3	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Snipe	1	2	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Black-headed Gull	4	4	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	6	4	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
Feral Pigeon	5	3	<i>Columba livia</i>

Common Wood Pigeon	2		2	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	6		3	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Common Kingfisher	2		1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Common Skylark	2		3	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	1		1	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Water Pipit	1		3	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Meadow Pipit	2		2	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
White Wagtail	2		2	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
European Robin	5		1	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Black Redstart	6		2	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Common Stonechat	2		1	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>
Song Thrush	2		1	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	1		1	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Fieldfare	1		2	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Common Blackbird	3	1h	1	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	1		1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Blackcap	4		2	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Sardinian Warbler	1	2h	1	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Zitting Cisticola	1		1	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Firecrest	1		1	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>
Great Tit	5		1	<i>Parus major</i>
Coal Tit	1		1	<i>Periparus ater</i>
European Blue Tit	4	1h	1	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Crested Tit	1		1	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	1		1	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Wallcreeper	1		1	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>
Short-toed Treecreeper	3		1	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Iberian Grey Shrike	2		1	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Common Magpie	6		3	<i>Pica pica</i>
Western Jackdaw	6		4	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Carrion Crow	6		3	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Common Starling	6		4	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	5		4	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	1		1	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Common Rock Sparrow	1		3	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
Common Chaffinch	6		4	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Goldfinch	1		1	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
European Greenfinch	2		1	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Eurasian Siskin	1		1	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Citril Finch	1		2	<i>Carduelis citrinella</i>
European Serin	3		1	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Common Crossbill	1		3	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Common Reed Bunting	2		2	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Corn Bunting	2		1	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>

## MAMMALS

Coypu	3		1	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>
Red Squirrel	1		1	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Rabbit	1		1	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour.



**Wallcreeper**



**Black Redstart**



**Black Bulls**



**White Horses**



**Common Crossbills**



**River Gard at Collias**



**Black and White Storks**



**Greater Flamingo**

**Cover photograph: Pont du Gard  
All photographs: © Roger Ackroyd**