PROVENCE AT CHRISTMAS

December 2025

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Introduction

Despite having lived in the UK for two years now, I've spent very little time on the European mainland, and less still proper birding (a week in Switzerland in June 2024 the only real exception). As a consequence, most of Europe still has plenty of lifers available to me, including some pretty cool birds (not to mention the various other non-birding attractions on offer).

The caveat is that a significant portion of these potential lifers are summer migrants and thus the options for a lifer-rich winter trip are somewhat more limited. Thankfully, this isn't equally true everywhere, and indeed Provence stands out to me as an excellent winter birding destination – not only is it a regular wintering area for a variety of species (e.g. Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor, Tundra Swan) alongside hosting some high-quality resident birds (e.g. Little Bustard, Bonelli's Eagle, Eurasian Eagle-Owl), but it also has a number of breeding migrant species that winter in small numbers around the region (e.g. Black-winged Stilt, Common Hoopoe, Slender-billed Gull) – a trait that I suspect will only become more notable as climate change means milder winters and less incentive for individual birds to migrate. In the end I did quite well for species in the latter category (including some unexpected surprises), and there were several further species I missed that fall into the same category (Bluethroat, Black-crowned Night Heron etc.).

A trip like this had been on my mind for some time and faced with the prospect of a fairly solitary Christmas in Scotland I opted to pull the trigger, hoping that I would be rewarded for the decision with warmer temperatures and good birds. As it transpired, the temperatures weren't much warmer than they would have been in Scotland (although the longer days were much appreciated!), but the birds duly obliged, and it was on the whole a very successful trip. This was especially pleasing considering I did the whole trip (*) without a car, relying solely on public transport and my own two feet. From my base in Arles, I found it straightforward to get around most of the best sites in the Camargue and Alpilles, although most days involved a fair amount of walking.

This trip report is designed to help anyone looking to embark on a similar journey to Provence, particularly the Camargue, Alpilles and Coussouls de Crau. I have tried to keep it readable and packed with information, but I will have inevitably missed things. If you spot an error or want to give me feedback or ask for more information about any of the birds, sites, public transport, or anything else mentioned in the following pages, feel free to **email me** or contact me via **Facebook**.

I have split the report up into a couple of sections. Each day gets a full page of text – I didn't take as many photos during this trip as I have on past adventures (I left my camera at home, as I didn't want to have to carry it around on my back each day in addition to a scope, water, food etc.). Species seen are noted **in bold**, and personal lifers are **underlined**. Finally, at the top of each page I have listed the number of species seen that day, the number of new species for the trip, and the number of checklists submitted to eBird (complete or otherwise), for example:

59 Species (3) | 4 Checklists

I hope to be able to provide some up-to-date information in this trip report, as it is surprisingly difficult to find good winter-specific information about many of the areas I visited. Of course, all of my sightings for the trip went onto **eBird** as well. You can find a simple eBird trip report **here**.

Happy reading!

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Prologue: Travel Days

Day -3, 20/12/25: St Andrews – Dover

Up early to get a 7:30am train from Leuchars. The late sunrise meant no birds were seen until after Edinburgh, and there was nothing especially interesting until Bedfordshire, with a **Red Kite** seen flying over Biggleswade (a common bird in England these days but still rare locally in Fife). Once in Dover around 3:00pm I spent most of the remaining daylight scanning around the Port of Dover in the vague hopes of picking out a Yellow-legged Gull (a potential UK tick). No luck on that front (no doubt there was one around somewhere, but picking one out from the thousands of other gulls was always going to be tough in the fading light), but I did have a nice surprise in the form of five **Red-billed Chough** flying over Dover Castle and the nearby section of the cliffs – presumably all birds part of the local reintroduction programme which seems to be doing quite well.

Day -2, 21/12/25: Dover – Lille

Up again pre-dawn to catch the first passenger ferry of the day over to Calais. The English section of the Channel crossing was fairly quiet (no Yellow-legged Gull), but the French half picked up slightly as we neared the coast, with an out-of-season **Great Skua** the main highlight, in addition to a handful of **Yellow-legged Gull** seen mixed in among the other gull species. Once in Calais I had about an hour to kill before the next train, so I walked from the train station to the Citadelle de Calais and back along the canal, which was pretty birdy all things considered (23 species in half an hour) – admittedly nothing too exciting although it's always nice to get close views of **Great Crested Grebe**, and **Rose-ringed Parakeet** still feel novel to me, even if they are a pest species! Nothing too exciting from the train between Calais and Lille, and I didn't get much chance to bird in Lille itself before dusk. On a whim, I made a quick hop across the border into Belgium for dinner, which turned into a great evening – even if the only bird of note was a calling **Redwing**.

Day -1, 22/12/25: Lille – Arles

Another early train meant little was doing for most of the trip down through France. The best bird of the day was probably a single **Great Egret** seen in flight as we passed Saint-Firmin in Saône-et-Loire. Once in Arles, I spent most of the afternoon exploring the town and settling into my AirBnB.

The Arènes d'Arles, one of the main non-bird attractions in Arles.

Day 1, 23/12/25: Camargue

57 Species (57) | 11 Checklists

Several long days of travel, morning rain, and the late sunrise (around 8:30am local time) meant a sedate start to the first full day of birding. The forecast was for rain throughout the day, so I opted to try some of the sites on the western side of the Camargue. A 10:05am A50 bus down to Pont de Gau immediately paid dividends in the form of four **Black Stork** standing in a flooded field by the side of the road – my first lifer of the trip, and while a frustratingly brief view, a good bird to run into at this time of year (and indeed, the only time I encountered this species on the trip).

Once at Pont de Gau, I was informed by the staff member at reception that owing to the heavy rain earlier in the week all the tracks were flooded, and entry wasn't worth attempting (although the park was still technically open). I heeded this advice and decided instead to walk down the road towards Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer (since the next bus was two hours away), figuring there would likely be birds along the road. This turned out to be the case – along the road near Pont de Gau I quickly added my second lifer of the trip, **Greater Flamingo** (hundreds of birds flying overhead and calling), as well as other nice birds in the form of **Western Cattle-Egret**, **Zitting Cisticola** and **Cetti's Warbler**. Nothing particularly unusual, but all birds I don't see very often in Scotland!

Further down the road between Pont de Gau and the Étang des Launes another lifer was in store in the form of a single **Western Swamphen** – exhibiting typical swamphen behaviour as it fed in the drainage ditch beside the road. Other nice birds along this stretch included a pair of **Western Marsh Harrier**, more **Cetti's Warbler**, and the first **Common Firecrest** and **Black Redstart** of the trip. The section of road directly east of the Étang des Launes was a little quieter, although a single **Gadwall** in a **Mallard** flock added some interest, as did my first (of many) **Common Kingfisher** for the trip.

I reached the seaside town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer around 11:45am and headed for the beach, hoping to attempt some seawatching (with the primary target species being Yelkouan Shearwater). Unfortunately, seawatching conditions were poor, with a fresh northerly wind (the Mistral) probably blowing birds offshore (I'm told a westerly wind is best here for shearwaters?). This, combined with the swell, low elevation of the seafront, and heat haze meant I saw very little for my efforts – the only real birds of note being a **Ruddy Turnstone** on the rocks and a single **Red-throated Loon** offshore.

Continuing on foot east along the beach (Plage Est), I had good views of my first **Sardinian Warbler** in some scrub near the beach car park, and a small mixed flock of **Sanderling** and **Dunlin** further down the beach. The Bassins de Décantation were quieter than I expected (stiff afternoon Mistral breeze probably not helping matters), although there were plenty of **Northern Shoveler** and **Green-winged Teal** in several flocks spread across the ponds, as well as more **Greater Flamingo** flocks, at least one **Western Marsh Harrier**, and a couple more skulky **Cetti's Warbler** and **Sardinian Warbler**. Back towards town in the saltmarsh at Trabas de Jusiou I found my first pair of **Crested Lark** (in addition to many more **Greater Flamingo**, a pair of **Western Marsh Harrier**, another **Zitting Cisticola**, and a few more **Sardinian Warbler**).

Back in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, a quick check of the little lagoon north of town yielded a flock of several dozen **Pied Avocet** among the other usual fare, and a quick check of the south-eastern edge of the Étang des Launes produced the first calling **Water Rail** of the trip, as well as a flyover **Green Sandpiper**, distant **Sandwich Tern**, and another **Common Kingfisher**. By this point it was 3:00pm and the rain looked to be setting back in for the afternoon, so I opted for an early finish to the day and hopped on an A50 bus back to Arles. The final highlight of the day was a trio of **Common Crane** in a field along the Route de la Trinité – my sixth lifer for the first birding day of the trip.

Day 2, 24/12/25: Alpilles

32 Species (14) | 6 Checklists

Having done well for myself on Day 1 around the Camargue, and with bus timetables being as they were, I opted to spend Christmas Eve exploring the western section of the Alpilles – in particular the town of Les-Baux-de-Provence, which is a very well-known wintering site for Wallcreeper. On public transport, Les Baux is accessible either directly via the 707 bus, which stops right at the town but only runs once or twice a day during winter (and at inconvenient times), or indirectly via the 702, which stops in the nearby town of Maussane-les-Alpilles (about an hour's walk south of Les Baux). I opted for the latter and arrived in Maussane shortly after sunrise on a cool and clear morning, the highlight of the bus ride being a flock of **White Stork** near marshy field between the Abbaye de Montmajour and Fontvielle.

The walk up from Maussane to Les Baux was uneventful, largely due to the wind – this was the strongest day of Mistral wind for the trip, with a consistent 15-20kt northerly all day heavily impeding birding (and my enjoyment of it). The highlight (if it can be called that) was a pair of **Eurasian Blackcap** in an olive grove – the first of the trip, although certainly not the last – loosely associating with a **Sardinian Warbler**.

I arrived at Les Baux around 9:30am and headed straight for the Sentier des Tremaïé, which is the loop track that encircles the base of the outcrop the old town is built on. This walk affords good views of most of the best cliff faces and crucially would allow me to get on the leeward side of the outcrop, out of the wind, which I hoped would increase my odds of seeing some birds. It didn't take long for this move to pay off – on the south-east cliff face I first found a **Eurasian Kestrel** and some **Rock Pigeons** sheltering from the breeze, and then things picked up with a small flock of **Eurasian Crag-Martin** hawking insects, and then REALLY picked up when I spied an adult **Wallcreeper** creeping along the cliff face. What a bird! I had good views in the scope for about ten minutes as it moved northward along the cliff, at times flying from one spot to another but mostly just creeping along (sometimes fully inverted, which was very cool to see). I followed it for a little while but eventually lost sight of the bird, at which point I decided to finish the loop and head up to the town itself to look for Alpine Accentor and Blue Rock-Thrush, both of which are meant to be reliable in the area.

Once in the town of Les-Baux-de-Provence it was obvious that birding was going to be very challenging in the strong breeze, and this problem only became worse the higher up I climbed. I searched around the citadel (having paid the 8-euro (student) admission price!) for the accentor but came up empty (I later found out they often prefer the churchyard in the town, which I did not check); indeed the only real highlights up the top of the outcrop were a handful of **Black Redstart** and a flock of **European Serin** – no Blue Rock-Thrush nor Alpine Accentor despite my best efforts. Before leaving town, I explored a little bit up the valley to the north (as far as the Route du Val d'Enfer), which was a little more sheltered and consequently had more bird activity, with the highlight being a mixed tit flock containing several **Crested Tit**.

Leaving Les Baux around 1:30pm, I chose to take a circuitous route back to the bus, first walking through some woodland south of Les Baux (once again on the sheltered side of the outcrop), which yielded another nice mixed passerine flock with a couple more **Crested Tit**, five **Long-tailed Tit** and my first **Short-toed Treecreeper** of the trip (a pair), among various other species. Back on the road, I walked instead back to Paradou (west of Maussane) to catch the bus home, which was unsurprisingly quiet in the wind except for a single **Eurasian Siskin** on the outskirts of Paradou. A relatively early end to the day, and a low diversity day overall – but with one very clear stand out bird!

Sunrise from the bus on Christmas Eve, a couple of kilometres north-east of Arles.

*Looking north towards the outcrop on which Les-Baux-de-Provence sits. The **Wallcreeper** was seen on the prominent cliff face visible here later in the morning.*

Day 3, 25/12/25: Coussouls de Crau

61 Species (19) | 14 Checklists

Christmas Day. No buses running meant I had effectively two options: a slower day around Arles, or a big day walking out to the Crau steppe from the train at St-Martin-de-Crau. I opted for the latter, keen to make the most of the good weather forecast and some helpful tips provided by local birder Thomas Galewski. An early train had me at St-Martin-de-Crau shortly after 7:00am, leaving plenty of time to walk the 8.6km out to the northern edge of the steppe at Peau de Meau before sunrise.

Arriving onsite at 9:00am, I took a circuitous route around the northern half of the reserve, covering the area between Peau de Meau and Mas Chauvet. As I arrived at the car park both **Water Rail** and **Cetti's Warbler** were calling in the canal. The first lifer of the day came early once I was on the steppe proper, in the form of an **Iberian Gray Shrike** perched on a fence post – one of ten I saw throughout the day. As I scanned around in the scope a stunning male **Hen Harrier** came into view, quartering over the fields to the south-west, and then shortly after I had my first encounter with the second lifer of the day – a **Common Hoopoe** along the fenceline east of the Peau de Meau car park. As it transpired, I saw three hoopoes throughout the day, a rather high count considering the time of year.

Things became a little quieter as I walked east towards the Fossé des Poulagères, although I did have my first flocks of **European Golden-Plover**, the second **Common Hoopoe** and several **Iberian Gray Shrike** to keep me entertained, as well as many flocks of small passerines**.** I crossed the Fossé des Poulagères and the Canal Centre Crau, before turning south for a couple of kilometres. It was at this point that I flushed the only **Little Bustard** of the day, which gave good albeit brief views as it flew away from me. A **Peregrine Falcon** took a vague interest in the bird as it landed. Turning back east, I followed a track for about a kilometre before turning north again towards the Mas Chauvet car park.

The Mas Chauvet area was very birdy, perhaps unsurprisingly. The standout bird was a **Richard's Pipit** that flew over the track a couple of times, calling as it did so. Other good birds near the car park included a couple more **Iberian Gray Shrike**, half a dozen **Crested Lark** in two separate groups (my only birds for the day – although I probably missed some in mixed flocks), a showy **Zitting Cisticola**, and the day's only **Corn Bunting** (another species that I surely missed in mixed flocks). I searched here for Calandra Lark but had no luck – they apparently tend to prefer the southern end of the reserve.

Following Mas Chauvet, I turned back towards Peau de Meau and took a different (slightly more direct) route back towards the car park. This was mostly quiet (with the exception of the final **Common Hoopoe**, more **Iberian Gray Shrike** and a couple of **Black Redstart**) until the very end, when just a couple of hundred metres shy of the car park I flushed a flock of 22 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** hiding – my fifth lifer of the morning and one of the major targets for the whole trip! All told I spent 5 and a half hours walking around the Crau, covering 14.3km in that time and seeing 37 different species.

With several hours of daylight still to play with, I allowed myself the freedom to stop at a couple of places on the long walk back to St-Martin-de-Crau. The afternoon turned out to be unexpectedly brilliant, with minor highlights including **Green Sandpiper**, **Eurasian Green Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper**, and **Black Redstart** along the road south of the Étang des Aulnes, **Little Grebe** and **Great Crested Grebe** on the Étang des Aulnes itself, and **Stock Dove**, a large flock of **Western Cattle-Egret** and another male **Hen Harrier** in a field south-west of St-Martin-de-Crau. The major highlights for me however were my first **Cirl Bunting** (great views of a flock of two males and two females about 2km north of Peau de Meau) and **Dartford Warbler** (one, maybe two birds skulking in the scrub south-east of the Étang des Aulnes). By the time I arrived back at Arles in the evening, I had walked nearly 34km, but it's hard to complain when you get 7 lifers on Christmas Day!

Sunrise on Christmas morning on the walk out to Peau de Meau.

Looking south over the Coussouls de Crau from the car park at Peau de Meau.

Day 4, 26/12/25: Camargue

67 Species (13) | 5 Checklists

Back down the western side of the Camargue today, with several outstanding wetland targets still to try for. The first stop of the day was at Pont de Rousty, with Tundra Swan and Eurasian Penduline-Tit the primary birds of interest. I had no luck with either species unfortunately – it felt like a rather quiet morning overall (moderate strength Mistral wind not helping matters), and yet paradoxically I did manage to notch up 44 species in a 2 hour walk down to the bird hide and back. Highlights throughout the morning included great views of a big flock of **Common Crane** on the fields east of the canal, flyover **Wood Sandpiper** and **Spotted Redshank** (the former rather rare at this time of year in the region), around five **Western Marsh Harrier** and another male **Hen Harrier** down the far end, a nice assortment of warblers including a calling **Dartford Warbler**, and more than a dozen **Corn Bunting**, including one bird which gave a brief bout of song in the morning sunshine.

Two hours after getting off the bus I was back on the next one heading further south, stopping off at Pont de Gau once again, which thankfully had dried up since the 23rd and was now very busy with visitors. As with Pont de Rousty, I felt like this site underperformed relative to my hopes and expectations although this time I did at least come away with one of my three targets, in the form of **Black-winged Stilt** (I dipped on Black-crowned Night-Heron and Eurasian Penduline-Tit, despite recent reports of both species from the park). I spent most of my 90-minute visit in the less-trafficked northern half of the reserve, which in addition to several stilts had other minor highlights in the form of multiple calling **Water Rail**, about sixty **Pied Avocet**, five more **Western Marsh Harrier**, another **Zitting Cisticola**, and great views of a **Common Firecrest** at eye level.

Once again back on the bus, I returned to the eastern side of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer with a few targets still on my mind – Lesser Flamingo (a mobile bird had been reported from several spots in the area in recent days), Slender-billed Gull and Yelkouan Shearwater. Sadly, there was no sign of any of these three at either the Plage Est or the Bassins de Décantation, with the closest I got to a lifer being a distant view of about half a dozen *Chroicocephalus*-looking gulls that plausibly might have been Slender-billed but were too far away to be confident (and in any case, were probably Black-headed).

Birding the beach – in spite of once again poor seawatching conditions – was still enjoyable, with an extended walk out to the Windsurf World Record Channel paying off in the form of a lovely mixed shorebird flock comprising about 10 **Black-bellied Plover**, 45 **Kentish Plover**, 9 **Sanderling**, 94 **Dunlin**, and 3 **Little Stint** – I was particularly pleased with the Kentish Plovers, having only seen the species once before (a vagrant bird in south-east Queensland several years ago). Three close **Eared Grebe** in the Roubine de Barrachin were a similarly exciting sight for someone coming from Scotland, as was another **Crested Lark** in some dune scrub.

I ended the day walking around the Bassins de Décantation once again, with a similar set of species to my earlier visit, although the late afternoon burst of bird activity meant it felt perhaps slightly more productive on the second attempt. I got more excellent views of **Greater Flamingo** as I searched in vain for a Lesser hiding among the flocks, but otherwise the best birds of the evening were an unexpected pair of **Eurasian Spoonbill** that flew in to feed in the shallows just north of the ponds – a scarce bird in the area at this time of year (and once again a rare bird in Scotland at any time of year!) and thus an excellent addition to the trip list and a good way to end the day.

Day 5, 27/12/25: Alpilles

43 Species (8) | 16 Checklists

Back up into the hills for a second attempt at some of the species I'd missed on Christmas Eve. This was perhaps the best day of the trip – good birds, and incredible scenery too. The landscape around Aureille is stunning! The main goal for the day was to walk up to the summit of Les Opies – the highest point in the Alpilles at 496m and a wintering site for Alpine Accentor.

Another pre-sunrise 702 bus had me in the town of Aureille around 9:00am. The walk up to Les Opies was beautiful – the Vallon des Opies is a lovely bit of habitat, starting off meandering through olive groves before moving into more natural vegetation. **Dartford Warbler** was a near-constant presence in the scrub, as was **Sardinian Warbler**, and I had great views of both species throughout the morning. As I walked up the valley, I was regularly checking the cliffs in hopes of spotting a Blue Rock-Thrush or soaring Bonelli's Eagle. Imagine my surprise then, when I picked up a trio of thrush-like birds in flight near the peak opposite Les Opies only to get the scope on one and find not a Blue-Rock-Thrush but rather a stonking male **Ring Ouzel**! This species is rare in the region at any time of year, but a late-December record must be about as unusual as it gets! Having been teased with the "wrong" species of montane thrush I was very pleased to finally get a distant male **Blue Rock-Thrush** at the top of the cliff – perhaps one of the other birds I'd picked up in flight.

The final ascent up to the summit of Les Opies was quite a scramble, but very worthwhile – not only were the views phenomenal (in spite of the brisk wind), but nearly as soon as I'd reached the top I found myself face to face with an **Alpine Accentor** – a beautiful little bird, much like a Dunnock but more colourful, and a very confiding individual that allowed very close approach as it hopped around the rocks at the top (a second bird slightly further down was a little more circumspect). The walk back down the valley was quieter than it had been on the way up; the **Ring Ouzel** was still in the same place as it had been an hour or so earlier, although the Rock-Thrush had disappeared. A couple of calling **Red-legged Partridge** were a nice addition to the trip list, but the best bird of the return journey came in the form of a soaring pair of **Bonelli's Eagle**– my views were sadly distant, and all too brief, but the birds were unmistakable with their pale underparts and broad wings.

With the main three targets for the Opies out of the way, I had a leisurely walk back towards Aureille through the olive groves, hoping that along the way I might bump into a Wood Lark – a potential lifer which had so far eluded me in the trip. No such luck unfortunately, and indeed it was quiet overall – I had another **Blue Rock-Thrush** on a different cliff closer to Aureille, and a pair of **Eurasian Jay** (the first of the trip) by the path, but it was otherwise uneventful. Back near town at 1:30pm but with no bus until 3:00pm, I chose to venture east of town into Les Plaines – a subtly different kind of habitat, more open and with consequently different birds. The highlights were a couple of **Iberian Gray Shrike**, another **Eurasian Jay**, and a huge finch flock that comprised several hundred **Common Chaffinch**, several dozen **European Goldfinch**, a dozen or so **European Serin**, and a stunning male **Cirl Bunting** – nothing new for the trip, but additional views of several species I'd only seen once or twice before.

The final goal for the day was to try for **Eurasian Eagle-Owl** at Mas de l'Oulivié. I arrived at the famous pair of rocky outcrops at 4:40pm, 30 minutes before sunset. Frustratingly, the owls didn't appear until 5:50pm, by which point it was too dark to manage anything other than a heard-only tick. Not all was in vain, however – as I was waiting for the owls a third **Blue Rock-Thrush** of the day flew into roost, and more incredibly, a **Eurasian Woodcock** flew overhead at 5:40pm – a scarce bird in southern France and a surprising addition to the trip list. Mas de l'Oulivié is probably one site where having a car would have made a big difference – being able to visit on multiple evenings without having to walk an hour each way from the bus each time would have surely paid off with proper views of the owls.

Typical habitat in the Vallon des Opies, looking up towards the cliffs.

The view back down the valley towards Aureille from the top of Les Opies.

Day 6, 28/12/25: Arles & Camargue

78 Species (6) | 16 Checklists

My final day in the area. I had organised to spend the afternoon with local birder Thomas Galewski, who kindly offered to drive me around some less bus-accessible sites to try and nail down my remaining targets. That gave me the morning to myself, so I started the day at the Marais de Beauchamp on the outskirts of Arles – this is a reliable site for woodpeckers, and indeed basically as soon as I arrived, I heard a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** calling in the trees near the car park. I searched for it for about ten minutes but had no luck spotting the bird, so I gave up and began the ~2km walk around the lake. Perhaps this was a mistake, as it transpired that I didn't hear (or see) the woodpecker again despite my best efforts, having to settle for a second frustrating heard-only tick in two days. Nevertheless, the walk was productive with 45 species in two-and-a-half hours. Several **Water Rail** were calling from the reedbeds, and I heard **Eurasian Green Woodpecker** in two separate spots, getting decent views of one bird as it flew up off the track in front of me. **Cetti's Warbler** were everywhere and very vocal, as were **Eurasian Blackcap**, with an accompanying warbler cast of several confiding **Common Chiffchaff** and a couple of **Sardinian Warbler**. A couple of **Water Pipit** on the far side of the lake were a nice surprise (and the other addition to the trip list) to round out the morning.

Back in town by midday, I got the bus again to Pont de Rousty, hoping to try once more for Tundra Swan and Eurasian Penduline-Tit. As with my first visit to the site, things felt quiet – and this time I only managed 27 species in a 90-minute out-and-back walk to the bird hide at the end. There was still no sign of the swans on any of the visible water bodies (despite recent reports), but I did have late joy with a vocal and eventually showy **Eurasian Penduline-Tit** near one of the viewing platforms overlooking the reedbeds. The first **Common Shelduck** of the trip was the only other bird of note.

I met Thomas at the car park around 2:00pm. Our first stops were north of Pont de Rousty in the vicinity of Mas de Bernacles. A large flock of **Common Ringed Plover** on a muddy field was interesting, although sadly didn't have anything too exciting mixed in (a handful of **Little Stint** and a decent number of **Dunlin** the only other waders). A little way further down the road we found yet another wintering **Common Hoopoe**, which gave great views from the car as it perched in a tree beside the road. In the fields near Pont de Gimeaux there were several large flocks of various species: **Common Crane** (about 450), **Northern Lapwing** (400), **Eurasian Skylark** (150), **European Starling** (510) and **Corn Bunting** (120) – we scanned through the bunting flock for something rarer (Pine and Rock both being on the cards at this time of year, apparently) but had no luck.

Moving on, and with sunset now rapidly approaching, we stopped briefly at Marais du Mas d'Agon to look for Tundra Swan – no luck, although a second **Western Swamphen** for the trip was a nice bonus; this site is definitely one that I would have liked to spend more time properly birding but is unfortunately too far away from any public transport to be feasible on foot. Further up the road we stopped at a semi-reliable Little Owl spot, but the birds were not obvious (a **Merlin** on a tree was an acceptable consolation prize though, and ultimately the last addition to the trip list). Arriving at the northern edge of the Étang de Vaccarès a quick scan of the marsh north of the road proved pretty birdy albeit with nothing too exciting – the highlights being a range of waterfowl (**Gadwall** the pick of the lot for me) and shorebirds (three **Green Sandpiper** and two **Spotted Redshank**). We checked every gull we saw around the Étang de Vaccarès, but sadly none were Slender-billed. We ended the day with a quick look along the road near the Tour du Valat (the site itself is access-restricted!) where the highlight was another **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, but sadly much like the morning's bird it called once – unseen – before vanishing into thin air!

Epilogue: Travel Days

Day +1, 29/12/25: Arles – Calais

Up very early to catch the first train up to Paris. A nocturnally active **Black Redstart** on my walk to the train station was a nice bird to leave Provence with! Given the early hour, I had no birds from the train until I was north of Paris, and even then, there was very little of interest. I arrived in Calais early enough in the afternoon that I could have gone birding but was tired enough that the alternative option of a lazy evening in the hotel sounded much better!

Day +2, 30/12/25: Calais – St Andrews

Once again up early to get the first ferry of the day. Another **Redwing** pre-dawn at the Port of Calais was a decent start to the day. Once on the ferry, things were pretty quiet within the Port itself (a **Little Grebe** and four **Great Crested Grebe** the best birds), but picked up considerably once out in open waters, with a much more birdy crossing than on the way over. Highlights for me in the French half of the Channel included good numbers of **Mediterranean Gull** (including a mix of both adults and young birds), at least one **Yellow-legged Gull**, and about a dozen **Northern Fulmar**. Things were much the same but a little quieter in the English half – with only one **Mediterranean Gull**, no Yellow-legged Gull (still elusive on the UK list…), and fewer fulmars. The highlight was a flyby **Common Loon** and about a dozen **Red-throated Loon** – nothing exceptional, but enough to keep me interested! Once back on land, I saw at least one **Red-billed Chough** in a quick scan of the Castle as I walked through Dover up to the train station, a good way to end a very successful trip!

The famous White Cliffs of Dover, seen on approach from the ferry.

Notable Dips

Tundra Swan: one of my major targets for the trip, so a disappointing dip. There were a few birds reported throughout the week in the wetlands around Pont de Rousty and Mas d'Agon, but I didn't bump into them on any of my attempts. Given the huge expanse of suitable habitat in this area, and the relatively small proportion of it that is actually accessible, this is perhaps unsurprising.

Slender-billed Gull: another major target, and one I'd hoped to run into at some point – but no such luck. Birds are scarce in the region at this time of year (most of the population being on the other side of the Mediterranean), but there were a couple of reports in the area during the time I was there.

Lesser Flamingo: a fairly marginal target but included here as there was at least one bird present in the south-west Camargue during the week I was there, with reports from near Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer and Pont de Gau. I was checking most Greater Flamingo flocks but didn't spot the bird. This is one instance where having a car might have been useful, allowing me to same day twitch a reported bird.

Yelkouan Shearwater: a bird I'd really wanted to see, and one I put in a decent bit of effort for as well. Not the best time of year for them but it should still have been possible – although the wind direction was never optimal, and the swell and haze also weren't conducive for seawatching.

Black-crowned Night Heron: another pretty marginal target given the time of year, but a handful of birds do typically overwinter in the region, with Pont de Gau being a particularly reliable site. Indeed, there were several reports of a few birds from the park while I was there (even on the day I visited!), but I didn't run into any myself despite keeping an eye out for them.

Booted Eagle: always scarce around the Camargue, but birds are reported fairly regularly throughout the year. Probably not surprising I didn't see one, but equally I could have run into one at nearly any of the sites I visited. They are apparently a little more reliable closer to the Petit Rhône, but this part of the Camargue is inaccessible via public transport, so I didn't have the chance to look there.

Little Owl: seemingly a fairly tricky bird in the area. I wasn't aware of a reliable winter site – the Crau is apparently pretty good for them, but I didn't spot any during my day there (despite looking). The only other spot I looked was north of Mas d'Agon with Thomas, but there was no sign there either.

Wood Lark: probably the most common / surprising dip (at least among species I was explicitly targeting). It's very possible I missed one somewhere – although the call is distinctive, I didn't have my ear in for it, and I might have overlooked a non-vocal bird as a Skylark or Crested Lark.

Calandra Lark: really only achievable around the Crau, and apparently tough at this time of year with most birds forming one large flock that tends to prefer the southern part of the reserve. There were a couple of reports from around Mas Chauvet during my visit, but I didn't see any despite searching. As with Wood Lark, it's possible I missed one among all the other passerines on the steppe.

Moustached Warbler: by all accounts a tricky species to get around the Camargue at any time of year, and certainly I had no hint of any birds anywhere (although I think most of the better sites are outside the reach of public transport). Apparently early spring can be a good time for the species, as they begin singing before the arrival of other vocal reedbed species (e.g. the other *Acrocephalus* warblers).

Bluethroat: another fairly marginal target, although there were a few birds being reported from around the region during my visit. Mas d'Agon was perhaps the most likely site but given how brief our visit was on the 28th it's not surprising that we missed it. An easy bird during spring and summer elsewhere in Europe in any case!

Conclusion

I'm very glad I did this trip, and by just about every account it exceeded expectations. I saw a total of 117 species in my six days in Provence (plus a further 18 species on the journey down and back – mostly seabirds on the Channel crossing), including 21 lifers (2 heard-only, but oh well) and a further 11 year ticks, the majority of which were birds I'd only seen once before (e.g. in Switzerland in 2024, or as vagrants). Given that my pre-trip goal was 100 species and 15 lifers I think I smashed it! I was especially pleased to get great views of the **Wallcreeper** – a dream bird for me for many years and it certainly did not disappoint.

Provence is a great birding destination – and as I think my efforts show, even good in the depths of winter or when entirely limited to public transport. Certainly, I'd probably have seen more birds and got more lifers if I'd visited in spring (although probably no Wallcreeper in that case) or hired a car to get around, but I enjoyed both challenges and am happy to leave the spring lifers for another trip!

*The confiding **Alpine Accentor** on the summit of Les Opies.*

List of Bird Species Seen

#	Scientific Name	Common Name
1	*Cygnus olor*	Mute Swan
2	*Tadorna tadorna*	Common Shelduck
3	*Spatula clypeata*	Northern Shoveler
4	*Mareca strepera*	Gadwall
5	*Anas platyrhynchos*	Mallard
6	*Anas crecca*	Green-winged Teal
7	*Phasianus colchicus*	Ring-necked Pheasant
8	*Alectoris rufa*	Red-legged Partridge
9	*Columba livia*	Rock Pigeon
10	*Columba oenas*	Stock Dove
11	*Columba palumbus*	Common Wood-Pigeon
12	*Streptopelia decaocto*	Eurasian Collared-Dove
13	*Pterocles alchata*	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
14	*Tetrax tetrax*	Little Bustard
15	*Rallus aquaticus*	Water Rail
16	*Gallinula chloropus*	Eurasian Moorhen
17	*Fulica atra*	Eurasian Coot
18	*Porphyrio porphyrio*	Western Swamphen
19	*Grus grus*	Common Crane
20	*Himantopus himantopus*	Black-winged Stilt
21	*Recurvirostra avosetta*	Pied Avocet
22	*Pluvialis squatarola*	Black-bellied Plover
23	*Pluvialis apricaria*	European Golden-Plover
24	*Charadrius hiaticula*	Common Ringed Plover
25	*Vanellus vanellus*	Northern Lapwing
26	*Anarhynchus alexandrinus*	Kentish Plover
27	*Numenius arquata*	Eurasian Curlew
28	*Scolopax rusticola*	Eurasian Woodcock
29	*Gallinago gallinago*	Common Snipe
30	*Tringa ochropus*	Green Sandpiper
31	*Tringa glareola*	Wood Sandpiper
32	*Tringa erythropus*	Spotted Redshank
33	*Arenaria interpres*	Ruddy Turnstone
34	*Calidris alba*	Sanderling
35	*Calidris alpina*	Dunlin
36	*Calidris minuta*	Little Stint
37	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*	Black-headed Gull
38	*Larus michahellis*	Yellow-legged Gull
39	*Thalasseus sandvicensis*	Sandwich Tern
40	*Phoenicopterus roseus*	Greater Flamingo
41	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*	Little Grebe
42	*Podiceps cristatus*	Great Crested Grebe
43	*Podiceps nigricollis*	Eared Grebe
44	*Gavia stellata*	Red-throated Loon
45	*Ciconia nigra*	Black Stork
46	*Ciconia ciconia*	White Stork
47	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	Great Cormorant
48	*Plegadis falcinellus*	Glossy Ibis
49	*Platalea leucorodia*	Eurasian Spoonbill
50	*Egretta garzetta*	Little Egret
51	*Ardea ibis*	Western Cattle-Egret
52	*Ardea alba*	Great Egret
53	*Ardea cinerea*	Gray Heron
54	*Aquila fasciata*	Bonelli's Eagle
55	*Accipiter nisus*	Eurasian Sparrowhawk
56	*Circus aeruginosus*	Western Marsh Harrier
57	*Circus cyaneus*	Hen Harrier
58	*Buteo buteo*	Common Buzzard
59	*Bubo bubo*	Eurasian Eagle-Owl
60	*Upupa epops*	Common Hoopoe
61	*Alcedo atthis*	Common Kingfisher
62	*Dryobates minor*	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
63	*Picus viridis*	Eurasian Green Woodpecker
64	*Falco tinnunculus*	Eurasian Kestrel
65	*Falco columbarius*	Merlin
66	*Falco peregrinus*	Peregrine Falcon
67	*Lanius meridionalis*	Iberian Gray Shrike
68	*Garrulus glandarius*	Eurasian Jay
69	*Pica pica*	Eurasian Magpie
70	*Coloeus monedula*	Eurasian Jackdaw
71	*Corvus frugilegus*	Rook
72	*Corvus corone*	Carrion Crow
73	*Lophophanes cristatus*	Crested Tit
74	*Cyanistes caeruleus*	Eurasian Blue Tit
75	*Parus major*	Great Tit
76	*Remiz pendulinus*	Eurasian Penduline-Tit
77	*Alauda arvensis*	Eurasian Skylark
78	*Galerida cristata*	Crested Lark
79	*Cisticola juncidis*	Zitting Cisticola
80	*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*	Eurasian Crag-Martin
81	*Phylloscopus collybita*	Common Chiffchaff
82	*Cettia cetti*	Cetti's Warbler
83	*Aegithalos caudatus*	Long-tailed Tit
84	*Sylvia atricapilla*	Eurasian Blackcap
85	*Curruca melanocephala*	Sardinian Warbler
86	*Curruca undata*	Dartford Warbler
87	*Regulus regulus*	Goldcrest
88	*Regulus ignicapilla*	Common Firecrest
89	*Tichodroma muraria*	Wallcreeper
90	*Certhia brachydactyla*	Short-toed Treecreeper
91	*Troglodytes troglodytes*	Eurasian Wren
92	*Sturnus vulgaris*	European Starling
93	*Turdus philomelos*	Song Thrush
94	*Turdus merula*	Eurasian Blackbird
95	*Turdus torquatus*	Ring Ouzel
96	*Erithacus rubecula*	European Robin
97	*Phoenicurus ochruros*	Black Redstart
98	*Monticola solitarius*	Blue Rock-Thrush
99	*Saxicola rubicola*	European Stonechat
100	*Prunella collaris*	Alpine Accentor
101	*Prunella modularis*	Dunnock
102	*Passer domesticus*	House Sparrow
103	*Passer montanus*	Eurasian Tree Sparrow
104	*Motacilla cinerea*	Gray Wagtail
105	*Motacilla alba*	White Wagtail
106	*Anthus richardi*	Richard's Pipit
107	*Anthus pratensis*	Meadow Pipit
108	*Anthus spinoletta*	Water Pipit
109	*Fringilla coelebs*	Common Chaffinch
110	*Chloris chloris*	European Greenfinch
111	*Linaria cannabina*	Eurasian Linnet
112	*Carduelis carduelis*	European Goldfinch
113	*Serinus serinus*	European Serin
114	*Spinus spinus*	Eurasian Siskin
115	*Emberiza calandra*	Corn Bunting
116	*Emberiza cirlus*	Cirl Bunting
117	*Emberiza schoeniclus*	Reed Bunting