Birding Trip Report: Provence, southern France
(Le Camargue - Les Alpilles - La Crau)

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Dates: 18th - 25th January, 2014

TRIP SUMMARY

This trip was, in essence, a short winter break (from the vagaries of the British weather) with birding as the primary, though not exclusive, focus. It was carried out at a fairly leisurely pace. Although I did a fair amount of birding (5+ hours) each day, it was by no means a dawn-till-dusk endurance test! I wasn't trying to compile a long trip list so I didn't make a point of recording any of the common species (as many other report authors seem to do).

I'd previously visited this region in late summer and in autumn. On those occasions the birding was limited by a combination of high temperatures and bad timing (many summer visitors having already departed south, for example). Hence I was curious to see how a winter visit compared.

Weather-wise, I guess I was expecting it to be noticeably warmer and drier than the UK. In an ordinary year that might well be the case. However, during the first couple of days of my visit the whole of France was affected by the same vigorous Atlantic depressions that were battering the UK. After day 2, though, it remained dry for the rest of the week and the temperatures were similar to, or a shade cooler than, the UK. From what I've read and heard, January is normally a bad time of year for the Mistral wind. I had one day that was effectively 'blown out' by the Mistral, and one or two other days during which the wind was annoying but still bird-able. Visitors need to be prepared, therefore, to either battle it out, or have alternative plans for Mistral days (there being little if any shelter at any of the main birding sites – with the possible exception of Les Baux).

I had a nominal list of some 10 target species I was particularly keen to see: of these Great Spotted Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Eagle Owl, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Wallcreeper, Moustached Warbler and Alpine Accentor were the pick of the crop. In the end I saw about 3/4 of my target species which, on balance, was a reasonable return on effort. Frustratingly my two most sought-after species – Bonelli's Eagle and Moustached Warbler – continue to elude me. I've lost count of the number of days and hours I've spent looking for both species!

Having now visited this region in winter, summer and autumn, my fairly obvious conclusion is that the best time to visit – both for variety of wildlife and better weather – is spring or maybe early summer (unless one is specifically wanting to target the winter specialities such as Wallcreeper, of course). Next time, perhaps!
As regards a winter trip, I imagine that a visit in mid to late February is likely to offer up a better chance of seeing more species, in better weather conditions and, somewhat obviously, with longer days.

TRANSPORT AND ACCOMMODATION

I took the Eurostar from Ashford, Kent to Paris (Gare du Nord), then the TGV from Paris (Gare de Lyon) to Avignon, where I picked up a hire car. Total journey time was roughly 6 hours, but that included a longer transit time in Paris than is really necessary. If you're familiar with taking the metro (actually, the RER) between the two Paris mainline stations then I reckon you could comfortably complete the journey in about 5 hours. Both the Eurostar and TGV trains are comfortable, blazingly fast and – important this – punctual almost to the second. Plus, at around £200 return, the cost from door to door is probably comparable to flying (though naturally this will depend upon your home location).

At either end of the trip I had single overnight stops in Avignon at the Adagio Access hotel, which is about 5 minutes level walk from the TGV station and car hire kiosks. The hotel itself was absolutely fine for an overnight stay, though there are only a couple of eating options in the vicinity.

I then spent 4 nights in the Ibis Arles hotel in the city of Arles, followed by 3 nights in the Best Western Aurelia in the town of Maussane. The Ibis Arles is very conveniently located on the south side of the city for access to both the Camargue and the sites around La Crau. Although it's situated in a really drab industrial/retail park, there is a good variety of eating places nearby at different price points. It's a bit overpriced for what you get: see the hotel full review under my TripAdvisor account at www.tripadvisor.co.uk/members/cataloger_of_ships

The Best Western in Maussane is a good base for access to sites in Les Alpilles (Les Baux, La Caume, Les Opies) and also to sites in La Crau. It would also serve well as a base for sites further afield, e.g. Mont Ventoux, the Luberon massifs, or Pont du Gard (if you fancy some culture and don't mind paying the 18 euro parking fee!)

The sterling-euro exchange rate was better for this trip (1:1.2) than it was a couple of years ago (nearly 1:1), but the fact remains that France is an expensive destination for Brits at the moment. Outside the winter season this can be mitigated somewhat by camping (as I've usually done in the past), but that wasn't an option for this latest trip.

SITE HIGHLIGHTS

The majority of the sites that I visited are well-known and well-documented. The USEFUL ONLINE RESOURCES section below lists a handful of the more instructive (though not necessarily up-to-date) trip reports which contain good site descriptions for the region. Rather than repeat those here, I've just included some hints and tips regarding the things that worked – or didn't work – for me.
The Camargue

This huge area of the Rhone delta (much of it a nature reserve) is obviously well-documented, both online and in a number of printed titles (the Crossbill Guide to the Camargue is a good text – see www.crossbillguides.com/camargue). I spent one day visiting sites on the eastern side of the delta, one day on the western side (including the Parc Ornithologique at Pont de Gau), and half a day in the north-central section around the popular Mas D’Agon area (which I first visited way back in 1989!).

Owing to the heavy rain that preceded and partly overlapped my visit, the nature reserves (La Capelliere & Salin de Badon) on the eastern side were partially or, in the latter case, wholly flooded. I did a full circuit of La Capelliere reserve in the vain hope of seeing Moustached Warbler but, as anticipated, I didn't score. The person at the reserve centre didn't seem to know whether or not they might be present. None of the trip reports I've read from the past 5 years or more have reported this species here, so either it's no longer present at this site, or there is a very narrow time window (early spring perhaps when the males are singing?) when they might be encountered. Or maybe I'm just a lousy birder!

The same scenario played out at the Parc Ornithologique (off the main road north of Sainte-Maries-de-la-Mer). The species is vaguely claimed to be present here, but again the warden didn't give much cause for optimism that they could be seen. Perhaps this particular population of Moustached Warblers is migratory?

The Parc Ornithologique itself is a two-sided affair, being composed of two circuits: a southern and a northern. The shorter southern circuit is what I'd call 'ornamental' (e.g. along the lines of Slimbridge) and is most likely to appeal to non-birders. There are good, close views to be had of Greater Flamingos, herons, egrets, and White Storks, many of indeterminate origin. The longer northern circuit is much more like a classic wetland reserve (think Minsmere, Titchwell, etc) punctuated with several decent bird hides. I didn't see much of note myself – smallish numbers of common ducks and waders – but in other seasons I imagine it's pretty lively. At 7.5 euros I thought it was a bit overpriced. Note that there are no refreshment facilities at the park; you’ll need to bring your own snacks or else call into nearby Sainte-Maries.

In the vicinity of the Parc Ornithologique the extensive – and mostly inaccessible – region of marsh and lagoons to the northeast of the D85A road between Pioch Badet and Ste-Maries was the highlight of this trip. Between Pioch Badet and the horse-riding centre at Cacharel (the halfway point along the road) there are very few safe places to pull over, and even where you can stop the views are mostly obstructed. South of Cacharel, though, there are numerous safe places to pull over. However, by far the best option is to drive, cycle or walk along the wide gravel track which heads NNE from the bend in the road near Cacharel.

This track – which is in good enough condition to negotiate in a hire car – eventually takes you to Domaine de Mejanes, some 10+ km away to the northeast. At certain times
of year (summer presumably) the full end-to-end traverse is blocked, purportedly, by metal barriers. These, however, were open when I drove the route part way from both ends. The track gives views over an outstanding variety of habitats: rough grazing, reedbeds, fresh marsh, salt marsh, open lagoons, and so on. Moreover the track is little used by other vehicles, so it's possible to pull over and explore on foot almost anywhere along its length. There is a small parking area some 2-3 km north of Cacharel, near where the Etang de Consecaniere meets the Etang de Malagray. It's worth spending a reasonable amount of time here.

On this trip I found the section of the track between Cacharel and the aforementioned parking area especially productive. The reedbeds held Bittern, Great White Egret, Bearded and Penduline Tits, Hen Harrier, plus several Marsh Harriers (common everywhere). The habitat here looks ideal for Moustached Warbler but, needless to say, I didn't get even the faintest whiff of one! Looking N-NW from the track over Etang de Consecaniere and the surrounding marsh and woodlands revealed good numbers of raptors, albeit distant at times. This is where I had 1, possibly 2, Great Spotted Eagles (which had been reported in this general area over the previous 2-3 weeks).

At the right time, and in the right weather conditions, the area adjacent to this track could easily merit 1 or 2 days focussed effort. Be warned, however, that it's likely to be a fairly torrid experience if the Mistral is blowing hard!

**Les Baux-de-Provence, Les Alpilles**

A deservedly popular destination for birders and general tourists alike. Although the site is extensively described online, including via its official web site (see www.lesbauxdeprovence.com/en), I didn't have much luck finding a detailed map of the site before the trip. Since returning, however, I discovered the following site map\(^1\), which describes the Chemin de Tremaie footpath that runs along the base of the rock spur. This is the path to walk if you're searching for Wallcreeper in winter. I visited Les Baux on two separate days and obtained cracking views of what appeared to be the same smart male on both occasions: above location 4 (see the aforementioned site map) on the first day, and between locations 8 and 9 on the second day.

Many of the trip reports I read beforehand made mention of the Vierge Noire statue as a good place to look for Wallcreeper. It is indeed a good spot, but its location is seldom described accurately. It's close to location 18 on the map. Note that there isn't really any need to pay for on-road parking here; there's a good-sized lay-by where you can park for free about 50 m downhill from location 18. In winter all the metered parking places (5 euros) were deserted, and I suspect you could park in them for free, even quite close to the entrance to the chateau. But I didn't fancy taking my chances and ending up on the wrong side of a dispute with the local gendarmes!

One particular advantage of Les Baux is that it offers some shelter from the elements if the weather turns against you. If the Mistral is blowing - typically from the NW sector, I think - then the east side of the rock spur can be relatively calm. This was exactly the

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\(^1\) www.lesbauxdeprovence.com/sites/default/files/verso_chemin_de_tremaie_baux_de_provence.png
situation on my second visit. Similarly, if it's raining hard one can find shelter either in the surrounding woods/forest, or within the village itself. In this way, I bumped into an Alpine Accentor feeding in a garden right beside the main walkway up through the village!

One word of warning: in winter only a couple of shops and a single restaurant (no cafes), are open in Les Baux, and these mainly at the weekend. Thus, if you're planning to visit during the week you may want to carry your own provisions.

La Caume, Les Alpilles

This is the small, elevated limestone plateau which dominates the central part of the Alpilles chain of limestone hills. It's the most frequently quoted site for catching up with Bonelli's Eagle. Unless you're me, that is. I have now visited this site 4 times – putting in several hours on each visit – and had not a sniff of this species. On this latest trip, quite by chance I got chatting to an American birder (an unusual occurrence in itself for this neck of the woods) who lived in the nearby town of Saint-Remy. He said that he'd visited the site some '20-30 times' and still not seen Bonelli's.

This suggests that this site is far from being a 'dead cert' for this particular species. The fact that most trip report authors do seem to connect with this species here either means that I'm desperately unlucky, that I've visited at the wrong times, or perhaps that a (small?) minority of visitors are mis-identifying the birds they're seeing. All my visits to this site have been in near perfect raptor-watching conditions. In previous late Summer visits I've seen plenty of mid-size raptors, but these were a mix of Buzzards, Honey Buzzards, Booted Eagles and Short-toed Eagles. Whatever the case, this time around I did find an eyrie location...so maybe my luck will change next time! (For obvious reasons I wouldn't want to disclose the location.)

Mas de L'Oulivie

This is the very well-known – and seemingly ultra-reliable – site for Eagle Owl. The site, which lies about 200 m behind the hotel Mas de L'Oulivie (closed for the winter when I was here), is described in detail in other trip reports. See, for example, report [Burch2009] below. Glad to say that I was not disappointed: I saw and heard one owl in pretty much identical circumstances to those described in the aforementioned report (perched on the exact same rock, in fact). A second bird was heard hooting nearby, but not seen.

DAILY HIGHLIGHTS

The following paragraphs list some of the trip highlights. Some species, such as Black Redstart, Sardinian Warbler and Cetti's Warbler, were noted at most sites. The latter species in particular seems to be uber-abundant and emitted an astonishing range of vocalisations, much more so than those in the UK.
Sat 18th Jan

Les Baux-de-Provence: Stunning views of a **Wallcreeper** from 11:45 to 12:10 at the southern-most end of the plateau, viewed from the chemin de Tremaie path. Also 3+ **Firecrests** in the pines near the Vierge Noire statue; several Black Redstarts scattered around. 1 **Alpine Accentor** in gardens about halfway up the main thoroughfare through the village. Viewed down to c. 5 m. Wet, windy weather precluded a visit to the fee-paying part of the chateau.

Sun 19th Jan

Etang de Vaccares (eastern side): 1 **Black-necked Grebe**; many **Greater Flamingos**; 3 **Great White Egrets**; 2 **White Stork**; 3 **Spotted Redshank**; 2+ Marsh Harriers; Yellow-legged Gulls

La Capelliere reserve: Other than large numbers of Teal, almost nothing worth noting. Very disappointing.

Mon 20th Jan

Near Albaron (c.10 km SW of Arles): c.200 **Common Cranes** west over the D570. Also, 10 Cranes (in 3 family groups) feeding in roadside fields in roughly the same area on the way back.

Area northeast of Cacharel (up to 3 km along gravel track): Possibly the most productive site visited during this trip. Numerous **Greater Flamingos**; 1 **Sacred Ibis** (presumably from the nearby Parc Ornithologique); 30+ **Red-crested Pochard**; 7 **Red-breasted Merganser** (scarce here?); 1 **Bittern**; several Little and **Great White Egrets**; 1 Green Sandpiper; 1 or 2 **GREAT SPOTTED EAGLES**; 1 **Hen Harrier**; several Marsh Harriers; 2 **Penduline Tits**; 2 Bearded Tits; 2+ Chiffchaff

Post-trip note: The ornithomedia.com web site (see resources section below) reported a possible **Lesser Spotted Eagle** a short distance north of this area on the 26th Jan. So there is a slim possibility that the second large eagle I saw – which was too distant, and seen too briefly, to distinguish between Lesser and Greater – was in fact the former.

Parc Ornithologique, Pont de Gau: Flamingos again; Great White, Little and Cattle Egrets; 2 White Storks; several hundred Gadwall on the adjacent Etang de Gines; 1 **Zitting Cisticola**; pictures of the mythical Moustached Warbler! (I didn’t know about the Lesser Flamingo here until I got home. Doh!)

Tue 21st Jan

La Crau - Peau de Meau reserve: Reasonable flight-only views of 3 flocks of **PINTAILED SANDGROUSE**, 1 close flock of 14 birds near the P-d-M barn, then two more distant flocks of <10 birds; 1 distant **Southern Grey Shrike**; a pair of Black Redstarts at the barn; several R-L Partridges dotted around. This was the windiest day of the trip, so I
was relieved to see any birds at all!

Etang des Aulnes (nr St-Martin-de-Crau): Called in to look for the over-wintering Pied-billed Grebe. No sign of it, probably owing to the very strong wind. 20+ Little Grebe.

**Wed 22nd Jan**

La Caume plateau, Les Alpilles: Spent 4 solid hours searching for Bonelli’s Eagle. Didn't even see a single large raptor, 1 Sparrowhawk being the only raptor of the morning. The day was saved, but only partially, by finding a party of 3 Alpine Accentors halfway along the southern edge of the plateau. Woodlark, Sardinian Warblers and Dartford Warblers all present on the plateau. Crested Tits readily seen and heard in the pine forests between the car park and La Caume.

Mas de L'Oulivie (SW of Les Baux): 2 Eagle Owls - 1 hooting frequently and seen well in flight and perched on rocks, the second heard only. First heard at 17:00 h. Last seen flying off at 17:50 h.

**Thu 23rd Jan**

La Caume plateau: Another fruitless 3+ hour search for Bonelli’s Eagle. The only raptor seen was a lone Booted Eagle which passed high over the plateau and headed south at great speed (presumably to join all the other eagles hunting over the Camargue!!)


Les Baux-de-Provence: Further prolonged views mid-afternoon of what looked to be the same Wallcreeper on the eastern side of the limestone plateau, sheltering from the wind.

**Fri 24th Jan**

Mas D’Agon area (north of Etang de Vaccares): 1 probable Booted Eagle; 2+ Water Pipits; plus the familiar assortment of herons, egrets and Marsh Harriers, the latter being especially common here (not unusual to see 6 or more in the same field of view).

Domaine de Mejanes: Drove 3-4 km along the gravel track that eventually joins the D85A at Cacherel in the southwest. Outstanding habitat, and very little human disturbance (at least at this time of year). Highlight was a loose flock of c.50 Slender-billed Gulls feeding along the western shore of the Etang de Vaccares. 100s, possibly 1000s, of Flamingos.

**USEFUL ONLINE RESOURCES**
Web Sites

Oiseaux Rares - http://www.ornitho.fr/index.php?m_id=4 (rare birds in France; French language only)

Ornithomedia.com - http://www.ornithomedia.com/observations.html (recent French bird sightings; French language only)

Trip Reports

This represents a very small selection of the many reports that can be found on the web. I found these ones to be the most informative for the region covered by this trip.


The CloudBirders web site (http://www.cloudbirders.com) is an excellent source of trip reports from around the globe, including a good selection covering southern France)