

Provence at Christmas

Including the Camargue

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Marseilles</u>
Day 2/7	<u>Explore the Provence region</u>
Day 8	<u>Fly London</u>

Departs

Over the Christmas period

Focus

Mainly birds, a few mammals; Roman and medieval antiquities

Grading

Grade A with easy optional day walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA18) or brochure

Highlights

- Combine birds, culture & Christmas in Provence!
- Enjoy the birdlife of the famous Camargue
- Highlights include Greater Flamingos & birds of prey
- Eagle Owl, Little Bustard & Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in La Crau
- Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor, Citril & Snow Finches in the hills



Images from top: Greater Flamingos at sunset, Camargue Horses and Naturetrek group in Provence



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction



Lunch break in Provence (left) and sunset on the Pont du Gard (right)

Provence and the Camargue are usually thought of as spring venues for birdwatchers. However this area of France is also an extremely rewarding winter destination. Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Penduline Tit, Rock Bunting, Citril Finch, Snow Finch, and Alpine Chough are some of the dramatic passerines we can expect to observe during this trip. Is Wallcreeper on your wish list? They have been a regular highlight on our previous trips and we shall be hoping to see them again this year. We have also observed up to seven species of warbler, including Cetti's, Sardinian, and Dartford, and six species of bunting, including Rock and Cirl. Raptors are well represented having observed Bonelli's, Booted and Spotted Eagles and at a nearby site we hold a good chance of seeing the impressive Eagle Owl.

Provence is rich in architectural and historical features, a number of which we usually fit into the course of our birding activities. The name itself reminds us that the region was a Roman provincia and it is extremely rich in Roman antiquities, the spectacular du Gard being one of the best-known. In the western part of the Rhône delta we find the fully-walled medieval city of Aigues-Mortes, founded in 1241 by Louis IX to compete with other Mediterranean ports, and to act as a base for Crusades. It now lies five miles inland as a result of natural silting. Less grand but nonetheless interesting buildings include shepherd's refuges in exposed parts of the delta, with characteristic rounded ends placed towards the prevailing wind.



Wallcreeper

Day 1

Arles

We will depart from London on a flight to Marseilles (or, if schedules to Marseille are inconvenient - as they sometimes are - to Montpellier). We will then transfer to our comfortable family-run hotel just outside Arles, where we will spend the next seven nights.

Days 2 - 7

Arles



Greater Flamingo

We will likely spend three of these days exploring the Camargue itself. The Camargue, covering about 750 square kilometres, is the marshy area of the Rhône delta. The Greater Flamingo is probably the best-known denizen of this area but other wetland birds abound: 3-4,000 Red-crested Pochard in one flock, Black-necked Grebe, Kentish Plover, Avocet, considerable numbers of Mediterranean Gulls, Cetti's Warbler, and both Penduline and Bearded Tits. Raptors include Marsh and Hen Harriers and we have also seen Spotted, Booted and Bonelli's Eagles. Buzzards seem as common as Magpie in England. The famous bulls and wild horses are a further point of interest.

The ancient delta of the Durance - now a tributary of the Rhône - forms the area known as the Crau covering some 50,000 hectares and we will spend a day here. This dry stony habitat has been extensively irrigated and is used for crops such as melons and the famous Crau hay. This latter crop - three cuts a year - is especially prized for feeding racehorses. The intact areas of original habitat hold good numbers of Little Bustard and France's only population of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Calandra Lark, Dartford Warbler and Southern Grey Shrike are also found here.

If possible, we will pick a calm day to drive north-east to Les Alpilles, a range of hills rising to 387 metres. Les Alpilles are an extension of the Lubéron range. On previous visits we have regularly observed Wallcreeper near the village of Les Baux. A very important site in medieval times, it was near here in 1822 that aluminium ore was found, hence the common name for this ore - bauxite. The day we spend here should yield some of the most colourful and dramatic birds of the trip: Wallcreeper has already been mentioned, we may also see Alpine Accentor, Rock Sparrow, Blue Rock Thrush and Bonelli's Eagle.



Alpine Accentor

On our last day we will make a longer drive to Mont Ventoux (1,912 metres). The Italian poet and scholar, Petrarch, ascended Ventoux with his brother in 1336 and initially revelled in the view. Later however he read St Augustine's admonition that "...men should not take pleasure in mountains or scenery..." and regretted his frivolity. Hopefully,

we can enjoy this splendid mountain without similar pangs of guilt. On its lower, wooded slopes we will look for the beautiful Citril Finch and here we may also see Crested Tit. Higher on the mountain, above the tree-line, we may find Snow Finch and we will have another search for Alpine Accentor if we have not seen them already. En route to Mont Ventoux, we pass the great aqueduct known as the Pont du Gard. This aqueduct was constructed by Agrippa in about 19 BC to carry the water of the Eure (from near Uzés), to Nimes, some 25 miles away. The maximum daily flow was 20,000 cubic metres - 400 litres of water per person. It is generally regarded as one of the most remarkable feats of Roman engineering, and sometimes we get an "extra" Wallcreeper here!

Day 8

London

We must now leave our base in Arles to drive back to the airport for our return flight to London.

Grading & Focus

Easy optional day walks only. Grade A. This holiday is suitable for anyone of any age and fitness, being a relaxed week of gentle birding and wildlife/historical exploration. It will probably not suit avid birders with a finely-tuned hit list of must-see target species.

Weather

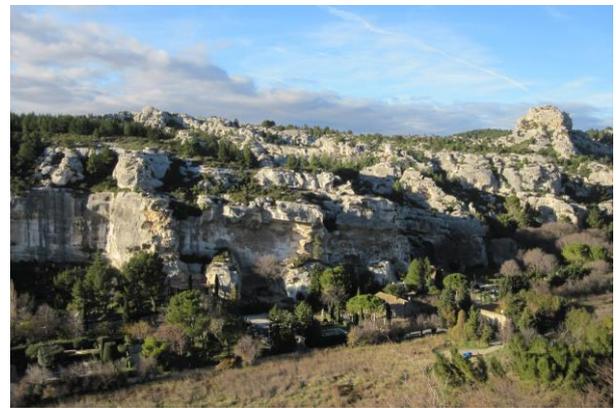
The climate is normally milder than the British winter – as evidenced by the variety of warblers wintering in Provence - and the length of daylight is significantly longer than in England at the same time of year. The daytime temperatures are usually in the 50'sF (10°C), however, the notorious mistral can cause a significant drop in temperature and therefore you should pack plenty of warm layers! In addition, of course, an added bonus is that in the winter we are not plagued by biting insects!

Food and accommodation

All food (from evening meal on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 8) and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. All rooms have private facilities.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking



Images clockwise from top-left: Naturetrek group watching Wallcreeper, Greater Flamingos, Red-crested Pochard, Provence scenery, Slender-billed Gull, Black Woodpecker, Crested Tit and Coypu