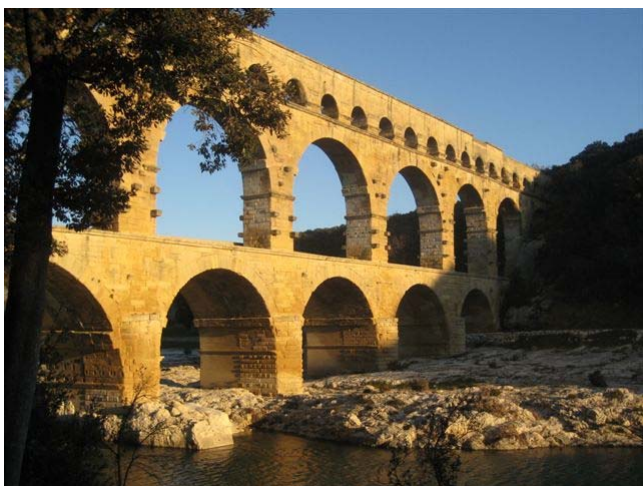


France - Provence at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 29 December 2008



Sunset on the Pont du Gard



Mont Ventoux



Les Baux de Provence



Participants

Report and images compiled by Maurice Sempe



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Anita McConnell
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Day 1

Monday 22nd December

Eleven people arrived by the 09.55 AM flight from London at the Marignan Airport in Marseille and were picked up by Maurice and Eva who had already been in Arles and around for the last 3 days, to prepare the tour and attend to last details. Peter Connolly and Anita McConnell were to join us directly at the hotel later in the afternoon. Gerald Hinkins and Anne Bennett Evans were to arrive by the 5.55 PM flight from London and were picked up by our host Marie-Claire.

The two minibuses arrived at the hotel at around lunch-time and picnic was organised and served on the terrace while everyone settled in his room. Anita McConnell who luckily got herself a lift from the train station directly to the hotel arrived just on time to join us for an afternoon tour of the town of Arles and its well known architectural assets.

Day 2

Tuesday 23rd December

Having kept an eye on the weather-forecast for the last 3 days, and since it wasn't favourable to maintain the program as previously set, we decided to go to the Mont Ventoux on that first day rather than at the end of the tour. After a lovely breakfast served by our host Marie-Claire, we drove straight up to Chalet Reynard where we parked the vans. From there, the road to the Mont Ventoux was closed due to heavy snowfalls (more than a metre thick) the previous weeks and the risk of ice. So we had the road (almost) to ourselves and walked up towards the Col des Tempêtes hoping to get some of the key birds.

The sun was shining brilliantly and the sky was blue and spotless. Everybody had followed the leaders' advice to dress well against possible cold and chilling winds. So we were all steaming up by the time we got to the first flat on the road but it didn't matter much since we had already spotted some Citril Finches flying by and had a excellent view of a pair of Crossbills perched on the top of a pine tree.

Some of us managed even to see a bunch of Snow Finches but unfortunately nobody got a good view of them. Trying harder to find them again, we were very surprised to spot some Bramblings mixed with Chaffinches in a perfect setting and lighting which everyone enjoyed thoroughly. After almost an hour looking for Snow and Citril Finches without much success we drove down below the tree-line to try our luck and contact Crested and Coal Tits, Goldcrests being plentiful, in the forest.

After a wonderful picnic sheltered under the trees, we drove straight down to the Pont du Gard to spend the remaining hours enjoying the late afternoon sun on the beautiful roman monument. Eunice was the first to spot the elusive Wallcreeper sunning itself in a crack of the stone work. And this time, we had all plenty of time to observe this magnificent bird at leisure ... except Eric, who had chosen this tour to see this very specific bird, and who had wandered uphill out of reach of our calls. Somebody went to look for him in vain. We also got good views of some Rock Sparrows. The sun setting on the bridge gave a grandiose drama to the scene. But time was running late and we had to leave!

As we were about to leave the bridge with the darkness falling, we met Eric, panting, coming back from the parking lot. He had been looking for us and was sorry to miss such a "lifer". Confronted with this sorrow, Maurice kindly rushed him back to the bridge hoping to avoid an unfavourable pink form report. The bird was still there, just 30 meters above the trail, hunting for insects in the cracks of the stone work. Great! Relieved, and everyone contented with this first day in the field, we arrived after dark at our hotel for a well deserved diner.

Day 3

Wednesday 24th December

After a hearty breakfast, and since we did not have any shopping to do for our picnic, this having been done the previous evening, we drove directly towards La Capelière, a Nature Reserve owned by La Société Nationale de Protection de la Nature, the oldest nature protection ONG in France. On the way, we had a very good view of a Marsh Harrier hunting along the edges of the Vaccarès, the biggest lagoon of the Camargue. As we stopped by to enjoy the sight, we had the good surprise to also spot a Short-eared Owl settled on a bush (Soude) a few hundred metres from us.

The short walk through the reserve gave us the chance to contact and observe a Rock Bunting out of its usual habitat and a White Stork preening itself on the top of an empty nest. Peter, who had walked ahead to stretch his legs, had the chance to see a company of Wild boars swimming across the main pond of the Reserve. We took advantage of the amenities provided by the RN de la Capelière to have our picnic there, and what a feast again surrounded by Cetti's Warblers calling.

For the afternoon, we drove to The Nature Reserve of Salin de Badon for another short walk and a couple of bird hides. Everyone was astonished at the view of a huge wild boar wading in front of the hide through the big lagoon amongst Flamingos not looking especially concerned at all. We also had good views of a Sardinian Warbler, only 20 meters away from the hide, a lifer for some of us!

The sun which was supposed to show itself after a windless grey morning did not show up but we were not deterred and kept on driving south towards La Baisse de Cinq Cent Francs, a salt marsh by the sea, and the beach of Arles, hoping for more waders, gulls and other seabirds. We finally ticked off the Shelduck, more Flamingos, Avocets, Black Redstarts and some others, Grey Plover and Dunlin notably.

Back to the hotel, we were treated with a wonderful Christmas dinner which started by a choice of aperitifs kindly offered by our host. We were then served foie gras and salmon mousse, then a stew of wild boar and the fruit and chocolat Bûches de Noël, the traditional French Christmas dessert. Everyone stayed a bit longer that evening to enjoy the friendly atmosphere.

Day 4

Thursday 25th December

This morning, we had the very unpleasant surprise, as we were to leave the hotel, of finding the battery of one of the mini-busses completely flat. Having planned to spend the day around the Alpilles, and not feeling to spoil the day and being stuck for hours at the hotel, we decided to push start the van hoping the battery would recharge enough during the drive there. Since the weather forecast was announcing the possibility of rain in the afternoon, we decided to go straight up to the Plateau de la Caume. This was definitely the right choice to do as we contacted two adult Bonelli's Eagles in dark plumage, flying around the cliffs as soon as we got to the saddle just underneath the plateau. They played for half an hour in the wind which was blowing in gusts sometimes and soon disappeared no to be seen again afterwards.

At the base of the cliff outcrop, we looked for Blue Rock Thrush but saw only Jackdaws and Alpine Choughs. Back to the vans, we had to push start again the minibus which failed to recharge, announcing more problems to come, and drove towards Les Baux de Provence for some sight-seeing, and eventually more birds. We had our picnic on arrival there in a spot where we thought of having more luck with the Blue Rock Thrush, being more or less protected from the chilling winds. Everybody enjoyed the hot soup, coffee and teas.

After picnicking, we strolled through the narrow alleys of Baux de Provence and had excellent views of some Alpine Accentors and Rock Sparrows again. The wind was really getting cold by then and the grey sky was not engaging for a longer walk around the lower parts of the fortified village. So we opted instead for hot wines and chocolates, and even cognac for the more daring.

Since one of the minibuses needed urgent repair, we decided to call it a day and to come back to the hotel before dark: the mechanic who came after calling the emergency services did not have the right battery and the only thing that we could do was to wait for the next morning.

Day 5

Friday 26th December

While the group was having breakfast, Maurice managed to get the faulty battery replaced and after a cup of coffee led the group towards the Etang of Scamandre with a stop on the way near a canal. The bridge over the canal overlooked a large reed bed but failed to give us good views of Penduline Tits and Bearded Tits, even if some of us had spotted some of those birds flying amongst the reeds.

At Scamandre, our expectations cooled down somehow, firstly because of the low temperature but also because of the lack of birds. Apart from Chaffinches, we had a short glimpse at a Barn Owl and some good observations of Common Redstart, but nothing else really! Due to a very cold spell end of September, 40 % of the migrating birds usually seen wintering in the Camargue did not bother to stop and flew further south to warmer climates.

Since then, for two full months, rain did not stop and the meadows that we visited that morning were flooded with at the least one meter of water. Too bad for the expected waders!

Our plan for picnic had to be reviewed since Maurice, eager to solve the battery problem before departure, had forgotten to load the crockery needed. Unanimously, it was decided to drive back to the hotel, since we were not too far away. And out of the wind, everyone enjoyed the orange peeling workshop.

To add a bit of cultural dimension to the day, we finished off with having a stroll through the town of Aigues-Mortes where we enjoyed hot drinks. This city was established in 1209 by Louis the IX as a means to access the sea to be able to participate in the crusades. Before to get there, we drove along a dirt track running between the Etangs de Consecanières and Vaccarès where a Spotted Eagle and Cranes had been seen lately. But except for some more Flamingo's, no other birds were to be added to our list.

Day 6

Saturday 27th December

As usual, we managed an early start at 8h30 and went straight to the Eco-museum of Saint-Martin de Crau. After a very interesting visit of this Eco-museum, which shows a particularly very well presented display of all the traditional activities of La Crau and some natural history explanations of the particularities of this environment we bought our pass to visit the Peau de Meau Nature Reserve expecting to see Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Little Bustard.

The day was well chosen for this visit since it is unbearable to do so when the Mistral (north-easterly wind) blows. Today, the weather was almost perfect even if a bit chilly. The walk through the Peau de Meau Nature Reserve brought us to an old sheepfold in which a bird hide has been set up. From there, we had a good view of a Merlin perched on a post, but nothing else of specific interest. On our way to the building, we spotted nonetheless a Little Owl trying to get some warmth on the roof of an old farm and, unfortunately, only Maurice, Eva and one other person managed to see the five Little Bustards taking off in the distance. So we walked back to the van still with high expectations.

Maurice prepared the picnic while the group went to check the birdlife at the Etang des Aulnes, close by. By having been hunted during the morning whilst we visited Peau de Meau Nature Reserve, nothing of special interest was to be seen there. The drive through la Crau which followed in the afternoon brought us more luck and gave us the chance of very good observations of the Southern Great Grey Shrike, which has been declared a full species now, and also of another Little Bustard which everybody could see flying away from us.

To finish off the day, we went for a short walk through the Nature Reserve of Vigueiras and were somehow disappointed by the very few birds present.

Day 7

Sunday 28th December

On this last day in the field, we first went to Les Saintes-Maries de la Mer to do some sea watching before to go to visit the Ornithological Reserve de Pont de Gau. Both ended up being rather disappointing in terms of birds but the weather was lovely for the season and very pleasant for walking outdoors.

Our last picnic in the sun, fully sheltered from the wind by a Tamaris grove, gave us the opportunity to enjoy being together and tasting some lovely food.

After lunch we went back to Les Saintes-Maries de la Mer hoping to do some good birding on the seaside towards La Digue à la mer, a stretch of 20 kilometers acting as a rampart against the invading sea. But on a sunny Sunday such as this one, the Digue à la Mer had been chosen by all the people around for a afternoon stroll with dogs, kids and the whole family. So goodbye waders!

We then decided to try our luck again on the dirt track between the Etang de Consécanières and Etang de Vaccarès to be rewarded with the sight of the elusive Spotted Eagle perched on a Tamaris, a bit far away but a nice sight to finish off with.

Day 8

Monday 29th December

Today, departure had to be very early to make sure that we were on time at the airport for our flight. So we took off at 6.30 AM and got there in good time for pre-departure procedures and a flight home right on time.

Summary: With two months of continuous rain prior to the trip (and all the roads around the area completely blocked by 40 cm of snow 10 days after the tour had ended) we were in fact very lucky indeed with the weather. We even managed to have two beautiful sunny days, the first one on the Mont Ventoux and the last one in the Camargue.

Bird wise, considering those conditions, we had some good observations even if the birds were not plentiful. Most target birds for the trip were observed with the exception of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Blue Rock Thrush. The highlights of the tour were certainly the Wallcreeper at the Pont du Gard, the Bonelli's Eagles at the Plateau de Caume, the Little Bustards in the Plaine de la Crau and the Spotted Eagle at the Consécanières Etang to finish off the tour.

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	December							
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			x		x	x	x	
2	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>			x					
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			x					
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>						x	x	
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			x		x	x	x	
7	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>			x	x	x	x	x	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x	
9	Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>							x	
10	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>			x		x		x	
11	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			x			x	x	
12	Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>					x			
13	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>			x		x	x	x	
14	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>							x	
15	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			x		x		x	
16	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			x					
17	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	x		x		x	x	x	
18	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			x				x	
19	Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			x		x	x	x	
20	Marbled Teal	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>							x	
21	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					x		x	
22	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			x				x	
23	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			v					
24	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>								
25	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	x				x			
26	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			x		x	x	x	
27	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	x							
28	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
29	Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila clanga</i>							x	
30	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Hieraetus fasciatus</i>				x				
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x	
32	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			x		x			
33	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>						x		
34	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				x		x		
35	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			x	x		x	x	
36	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			x		x		x	
37	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			x		x	x	x	
38	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			x		x	x	x	
39	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						x		
40	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			x				x	
41	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>							x	
42	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			x				x	
43	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			x		x	x	x	
44	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			x					
45	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>			?					
46	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					x			
47	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			x					

	Common name	Scientific name	December							
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
48	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		x						
49	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			x					
50	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>					x		x	
51	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	x		x		x		x	
52	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	x		x	x	x	x	x	
53	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			x				x	
54	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	x	x	x	x				
55	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	x	x						
56	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			x			x	x	
57	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>					x			
58	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>			x					
59	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		x	x			x		
60	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			x		x	x	x	
61	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			x					
62	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			x	x				
63	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>						x		
64	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>			x					
65	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					x		x	
66	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		x			x	x	x	
67	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			x		x		x	
68	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>					x			
69	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>				x				
70	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	
71	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		x		x	x	x	x	
72	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>						x	x	
73	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		x	x		x	x	x	
74	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			x		x	x	x	
75	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		x	x	x				
76	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>			x	x			x	
77	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			x	x			x	
78	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		x	x	x	x	x		
79	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			x		x			
80	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>						x		
81	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			x		x	x	x	
82	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	
83	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		x						
84	Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		x						
85	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		x						
86	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>						x		
87	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		x	x		x		x	
88	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				x				
89	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
90	Alpine chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>				x				
91	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	x	x		x	x	x		
92	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				x				
93	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	x	x	x			x	x	
94	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		x						
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				x	x	x	x	
96	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		x						
97	Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>		x						

	Common name	Scientific name	December							
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
98	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		x	x	x	x	x	x	
99	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			x		x			
100	Citril Finch	<i>Serinus citrinella</i>		x						
101	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>							x	
102	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>						x		
103	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>						x	x	
104	Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		x						
105	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			x				x	
106	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			x					