

Provence at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 29 December 2009



The 2009 Naturetrek group



Common Buzzard



White Horse with Cattle Egret



Greater Flamingo

Report and images compiled by David Morris



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Day 1

Tuesday 22nd December

London - Montpellier – Arles

Mild with heavy rain in late afternoon

Both David and Kate met the group at Montpellier after the delayed flight from a snow bound Gatwick airport. The drive to the hotel took us through the Carmargue but the torrential rain and approaching evening darkness prevented us appreciating the hundreds of flamingo's, white horses and wetland spectacle. We settled into our comfortable hotel and enjoyed a home cooked evening meal and local wine from Provence.

Day 2

Wednesday 23rd December

Eastern Camargue – Mas d' Agon, Mas Neuf, Etang de Vaccares, La Capeliere, Digue a la Mer, Plage de Piemanson.

Mild and overcast with light rain late pm

After breakfast, we set off to explore the varied habitats of the eastern Carmargue. We started in the arable farmland near Arles before working through reedbed, freshwater wetlands, glasswort steppe, brackish lagoons and saltpans to end the day at the beach of Arles. The wetlands at Mas d' Agon were alive with wildfowl, egrets and herons. Marsh and hen harriers hunted over the reeds and buzzards were numerous in all directions. We moved on a short distance to Mas Neuf viewpoint where we observed kingfisher and water rail along with a small party of cranes feeding in an adjacent field. We visited the reserve at La Capeliere en-route to the coast where we all enjoyed a pleasant picnic and watched an obliging wild boar in front of the hide. Stripeless tree frogs clung to the branches of tamarisks providing a great photo opportunity for many.

The journey through the saltpans and brackish lagoons was filled with hundreds of flamingo's that brightened the day looking so out of place in the overcast winter surroundings. On the lagoons behind the beach, we worked our way through the numerous gulls and waders to add Mediterranean gull, sandwich tern, little stint, curlew sandpiper and Kentish plover to the list. At the end of the day, we returned to the hotel to enjoy a delicious wild boar dinner and local wine from Le Baux.

Day 3

Thursday 24th December

Western Camargue – Etang de Vaccares to Etang de Consecaniere, Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer, Etang de Scamandre and Aigues-Mortes

Mild and overcast with strong southerly wind and light rain at lunch time

Today's forecast did not look good with heavy rain predicted all day, however we woke to a dry start so headed off to the western side of the Camargue. We started by driving a track down the western side of Etang de Vaccares that would eventually bring us out towards Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer. The strong southerly winds made viewing difficult at times but we soon found large finch flocks containing mostly Chaffinch and Tree Sparrow that were constantly on the move due to a Sparrowhawk that was in the area. Flamingo's, wildfowl and white horses were plentiful keeping all amused but we were keeping a keen watch out for a Spotted Eagle that was wintering in the area. A stop on the track near Etang de Consecaniere failed to find the eagle but found a mix of other raptors including numerous Hen and Marsh Harriers, Peregrine, Kestrel and Merlin. We continued on to the coast but the stormy sea conditions prevented our planned sea watching so we headed on to Etang de Scamandre where we enjoyed a picnic in the centre overlooking the reserves wetlands. A walk around the centre grounds found Chiffchaff, Short-toed Treecreeper and a couple of Black Redstart.

After lunch, we went to the medieval town of Aigues-Mortes via France's largest reedbeds at the nearby Etang du Charnier but the persistent wind made observing more than the present White Storks and coypu difficult. After our cultural stop in Aigues-Mortes we headed off to try and find Eagle Owl near Le Baux in the remaining daylight but drew a blank. We returned to a warming hot drink in the hotel shortly before the power went out to plunge all of Arles into a 4-hour power cut. Not to let the lack of lighting dampen our spirits, we all enjoyed the fantastic candle-lit traditional French meal and wine that our host managed to rustle up using only the gas hob.

Day 4

Friday 25th December

Chaîne des Alpilles – La Caume and Les Baux-de-Provence

Mild, bright and sunny

Christmas morning started bright and sunny so we headed off to the Alpilles range just northeast of Arles. We started the day by walking through the pines and Mediterranean scrub to the radar station at the peak of La Caume. Sardinian Warbler, Chiffchaff and Crested Tit were observed on the gentle climb to the top but one of our targets, Bonelli's Eagle was not to be seen. The plateau at La Caume gave great panoramic views over the Camargue and up over the Luberon hills and on to Mount Ventoux. Dartford Warbler, Woodlark and a small party of Citril Finches were located at the top. We picnicked back at the buses in the sun where we had excellent views of Crested Tits and Firecrest in the pines.

After lunch, we moved on to the magnificent fortified town of Le Baux, perched on top of a large limestone rock. We walked around the base of the cliff to a scrubby suntrap full of Warblers and Blue Rock thrush with even the odd butterfly putting in an appearance in the afternoon sun. We reached the cliff at the base of the castle and it was not long before there were excited shouts of “wallcreeper!”. We spent about 20 minutes observing a couple of these fantastic birds flicking around the rock in the sun and flashing their scarlet wings. They were also joined on the rock by a number of Alpine Accentors feeding around the rockwork. After the short walk back to the village, we had a chance to explore the narrow streets of the town before another unsuccessful attempt for Eagle Owl on a nearby cliff. Back at the hotel, we enjoyed a traditional French Christmas dinner of local liquor, venison and buche noel. What better Christmas could you wish for!

Day 5

Saturday 26th December

Eyguieres airfield, Etang de Entressen, Entressen tip, La Crau and Pont du Gard

Cool and overcast

After breakfast, we set off east in search of birds on the steppe grasslands of La Crau. Our first port of call was an airfield outside of Eyguieres that holds good numbers of wintering Little Bustard. We were not disappointed with first locating a couple of flocks within the grassland next to the air strip before 130 took off and flew around giving excellent views before landing again. Other birds around the airfield included Red-legged Partridge, Skylark and Crested Lark. After our success at Eyguieres we moved on towards La Crau, pausing briefly at a nearby rubbish tip to add Red Kite, Buzzard, White Wagtail, White Stork, along with thousands of Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls to the daily total.

After a lunch stop on the edge of the vast open grassland, we moved across La Crau towards Peau de Maux nature reserve. The steppe of La Crau and the reserve were relatively quiet with only Peregrine, Crested Lark and Merlin present along with a Kingfisher using a wet ditch across the site.

For the afternoon, we drove up north of Nimes to visit the Pont du Gard to take in the splendid Roman architecture and hopefully observe the “extra” Wallcreeper that David and Kate saw earlier in the week. Unfortunately, we failed to find the Wallcreeper, but stayed as the day drew in to observe Crag Martin and up to fifty Rock Sparrows coming in to roost on the aqueduct.

Day 6

Sunday 27th December

Mount Ventoux and Gorges de la Nesque

Bright, sunny and cold

With the sunny conditions arriving as planned, we headed north to Mont Ventoux today to find some of the classic Alpine species and gain a magnificent view of the Provence region. As the sun shone, we drove through vineyards and rolling countryside until we started the ascent of Mont Ventoux through beech, pine and oak woodlands. A stop in the beech woods half way up produced Hawfinch, Marsh Tit and Siskin but as we reached the barrier at the end of the road, the pines were filled with Crossbill, Crested Tit and wintering Fieldfare.

The group set off en-route to the summit observing fleeting views of Citril Finch, Chamois and part of the group observed a small number of elusive Snow Finch along the snow line. The view from a ridge near the summit gave us splendid views of the rest of the Alps covered in snow, and Ravens displayed above us in the updrafts of the northern edge of the mountain. We picnicked in the woods of the southern slope and continued to descend during the afternoon with us finding a large feeding flock of Chaffinch, Brambling, Hawfinch, Linnet and Crossbill. Our journey back to Arles took us via the stunning landscape of the Gorges de la Nesque. From a viewpoint we observed obliging Alpine Accentors and some even managed a distant Wallcreeper on the massive cliff face on the side of the valley.

Day 7

Monday 28th December

Eastern Camargue – Mas d' Agon, Mas Neuf, Etang de Vaccares and Digue a la Mer. Arles or Eyguieres airfield and Mount Valence.

Overcast and cool

Today we set off to re-visit some of the Camargue species, as it was to be our last full day in France. We first called in at Mas d'Argon and Mas Neuf where the typical Camargue bird life was present, but we also managed to add Bearded Tit and Fan-tailed Warbler to the list. A distant pale Common Buzzard near Mas d' Agon added an interesting bit of discussion on identification of raptors.

We moved further round the large Etang de Vaccares before taking lunch adjacent to salt pans full of flamingos, gulls and waders. After lunch the group split and one bus went on a cultural exploration of Arles to take in the amphitheatre and architecture of the town. The other group set off to Eyguieres airfield for more steppe specialities. The airfield was busier with planes and people today and it took a while to find some of the target species, but we were soon viewing Red-legged Partridge, Larks, Southern Grey Shrike and a party of 100 Little Bustard coming in to roost.

Both groups re-convened in the late afternoon and drove to Le Baux for a final attempt to see Eagle Owl. We arrived at the rock face at dusk and within 10 minutes heard the distinctive deep call of Eagle Owl from the cliffs. Suddenly an impressive owl took flight and landed upon the cliff top calling to another bird across the valley. We all got excellent views as it sat in the open for a few minutes showing its characteristic ear tufts clearly. Eventually it glided off into the hills so we departed to the hotel for a final delicious meal provided by our host Marie-Clare. A fine conclusion to our last full day in Provence...

Day 8

Tuesday 29th December

Western Camargue - Etang de Vaccares to Etang de Consecanriere – Montpellier

Mild and overcast

After we said our farewells to our host, we set off to the western Camargue for the morning on our journey to the airport. We decided to drive the track between Etang de Vaccares and Etang de Consecansere to look for the elusive wintering Spotted Eagle again and get some last sightings of flamingos and other wetland birds. We were not to be disappointed with good numbers of flamingo's, some displaying in groups close to the track.

Buzzard and Marsh Harriers quartered the saltmarsh, but unfortunately, the Spotted Eagle could not be found. However, the lagoons around Etang de Malagroy proved excellent for waders and wildfowl with us adding Scaup, Red-crested Pochard, Avocet, Common Sandpiper, Bar-tailed Godwit and Redshank to the list.

We enjoyed our very last alfresco picnic lunch before travelling on to Montpellier airport for our flight back to London Gatwick where we said our final farewells.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = abundant; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	2	4		40+		4	10+
2	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	1						1
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	2						
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	100+	✓		20+	2	✓	✓
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	400	100+		15		✓	✓
6	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	100	10		3		30+	15
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	100	50		20+	3	✓	✓
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	100+	✓		1	1	✓	✓
9	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>	1000+	800				200	2000+
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	1	1		20+		2	
11	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	30	10				20	✓
12	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	40+	100		10		5	100+
13	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	100	40+				✓	✓
14	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	200+						✓
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	100	✓		15	✓	✓	✓
16	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	25			10			200
17	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	200+	30				300+	
18	Red Crested Potchard	<i>Netta rufina</i>							100+
19	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	2						
20	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	50					6	20
21	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	50						
22	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	6						
23	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>							8
24	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				20			
25	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6	6				6	4
26	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	4	5		1		2	
27	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	3	2	1		1
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	50+	15	2	20+	✓	✓	✓
29	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	1		1		1	
30	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	10	10+	3	6	3	✓	✓
31	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		2		2		1	
32	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	3	2				1	H
33	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				20+		30+	
34	Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>		4					
35	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	6	H				1	
36	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	20	✓		3		✓	✓
37	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	100+	✓		20+	✓	✓	✓
38	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	5			3			
39	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				130		100+	
40	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		H					10
41	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						40+	15
42	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	2						6
43	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	1					200+	
44	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	5						40
45	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			1	20+		50	20
46	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	400+	30				30	100
47	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	10+					6	3

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
48	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>							2
49	Curllew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	2	1					H
50	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1						4
51	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1	1					
52	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>							2
53	Curllew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	6						
54	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	6	3		1		1	
55	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	400	✓		500		✓	✓
56	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	10+			1			
57	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				2			
58	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	200	✓		1000+	✓	✓	✓
59	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	6	10+		1		2	
60	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	3						
61	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		50+		10+			
63	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	1	2					
64	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>						2	
66	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			1		H		
67	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	5	3		1		1	
68	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			1				
69	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		3		30+	6	40+	2
70	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				15			
71	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				10+			
72	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>	2					1	
73	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>						1	
74	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	30+	10+		15+		20+	✓
75	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1		20	1		1
76	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				3			
77	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	2	✓	✓	✓			
78	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	1						
79	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>			4		3		
80	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1
81	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1	2		3		3+	2
82	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		3	15+	30+	✓	10+	
83	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			3	1			
84	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>					30		
86	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			2	2		2	
87	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	1				2		
88	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>						3	
89	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cettia</i>	10	H				H	H
90	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			3			1	1
91	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			6	1	3	3	
92	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	2	✓	✓	H		✓	✓
93	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	2	2	1		2	2
94	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		3	H			1	
95	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>			6	H		1	
96	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>						1	4
97	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	6	3	10			✓	
98	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	H					H	

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
99	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					2		
100	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			6		6		
101	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>					1		
102	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
103	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	1	✓	✓		✓	✓	1
104	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		1	2				
105	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>			2		1		
106	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>						1	
107	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	200+	✓	✓	✓	✓	2000	✓
108	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>							
109	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
110	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	300+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>			3+				
113	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			1	1	5		
114	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		20+		10+			
116	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				30+			
117	Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>					8		
118	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	500+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
119	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		10		✓	✓	✓	2
120	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	3	6	10	✓	✓	✓	✓
121	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	40	✓			✓		
122	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					10+		
123	Citril Finch	<i>Serinus citrinella</i>			20		2		
124	Serlin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			1	30+		10	
125	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>					2		
126	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					10+		
127	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>					15+		
128	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>						1	
129	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			2				
130	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓	✓	2	✓		✓	✓
131	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	15+	3		30+		50+	