

# Provence at Christmas

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 29 December 2010

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Chalk plateau of la Caume



Scamandre Nature Reserve



Chalk plateau of la Caume

Report and images compiled by Maurice Sempé

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Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour Leaders: Maurice and Eva Sempé

Participants: Douglas Williams  
Elizabeth Horn  
Ann Brigstock  
Carol Williams  
Alfred Williams  
Margaret Wheatley  
Jonathan Wheatley  
David Lee  
Julia Spragg  
Ann Le Sage-Cridland  
Julia Currie  
Inez Weston

## Day 1

Wednesday 22nd December

The flight from Gatwick to Marignane Airport in Marseille arrived 15 minutes behind schedule with 9 tour participants. Julia travelled by train and joined us at the airport. The tour leaders, Maurice and Eva, who had already arrived in Arles the previous day to attend to last details, received and transferred everyone towards the Hotel des Granges on the outskirts of Arles. A further two participants, Alfred and Carol Williams, were already waiting at the hotel when we arrived at about 2.30 pm. Our host Marie-Claire had prepared hot chicken soup for us which was completed by home made pâté and a cheese platter. With around another 2 hours of daylight to spare we decided to visit the old historic town of Arles and a stroll along the Rhone River. We even managed to throw in some bird watching with Grey Wagtail and Black Redstart.

## Day 2

Thursday 23rd December

Having kept an eye on the weather-forecast for the next days to come we had to adjust our programme accordingly. We decided to start off with a first day in the Camargue at La Capelière and Salin de Badon Nature Reserves. It started to rain as we arrived at La Capelière. Fortunately the rain eased and we could start our walk through the reserve. Around the Vaccarès lagoon some Marsh Harriers, two Hen Harriers, a large group of Black-necked Grebes and Slender-billed Gulls were seen amidst Little and Great White Egrets as well as our first Greater Flamingo. On the trail winding its way through samphire marshes, woodland, around brackish and freshwater lakes with stops at three bird hides, everyone managed to get very good views of Water Rail and Cetti's Warbler, only a few meters from us, as well as some resting Snipes on the edge of the reed beds. Sardinian Warblers and Penduline Tits were contacted in the bushes, but unfortunately only by a few of the group. Furthermore a Zitting Cisticola gave a good display to be enjoyed quite a while by all of us. After an enjoyable picnic under the shelter of a heated room in one of the nature reserve buildings, thanks to staff of La Capelière, we headed for Salin de Badon, another part of the large reserve, where many ducks such as Shovelers, Teals and Shelducks were the birds to be added to our list as well as a bright flush of a Kingfisher.

Four large male Wild Boars and a Coypu were observed along our walk. Further along on our way to Arles Beach, some waders completed our list of the day such as Dunlins, Sanderlings and Ringed and Golden Plovers.

## Day 3

## Friday 24th December

After a lovely breakfast served by our host Marie-Claire, we decided to drive up to Mont Ventoux before the heavy drop of temperatures announced by the weather forecast. We knew that the road on the top was already closed due to snowfall and icy roads but that we could still get as far as Chalet Reynard where we parked our vans. From there we walked up towards the Col des Tempêtes (Storm Saddle) hoping to get some of the key birds announced. Gusts of wind kept most birds hidden, low to the grounds. Some of us managed nonetheless to spot some Citril Finches, Redwings and a Raven. We then drove further down well below the tree-line to set our picnic buffet in a sheltered spot, where we also had spotted some Coal and Long-tailed Tits.

After lunch we headed straight toward the Pont du Gard to spend the afternoon at this very impressive roman monument set in the beautiful gorges of the Gardon River. Eva was the first to spot the elusive Wallcreeper sunning itself in a crack of the stone work. We had all plenty of time to observe this magnificent bird at leisure as it was foraging around the rock walls. A very unusual sight for this time of year was a Crag Martin seen flying over the roman edifice. The sun setting on the bridge gave a grandiose drama to the scene. But time was running late and we had to leave! Content with this second day in the field with the high-light being close-up views of Wallcreeper, we arrived just before dark at our hotel to meet for our daily log before dinner.

## Day 4

## Saturday 25th December

This morning, we had strong cold winds which are called Mistral here and which descend all the way down the Rhone Valley. Thinking that in the southern parts of the Alpilles, a low mountain range, we would be partly protected from the winds we headed for the chalk plateau of la Caume. This is the area where we hoped to sight Bonelli's Eagle, observed here on another tour earlier and being one of the few nesting territories of this very rare species in France. There were no eagles around the escarpment but we did get a glimpse of a Peregrine Falcon. After a drive towards Les Baux de Provence to look for a sheltered spot to have our picnic, we found a grove where we observed Crested Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper.

After lunch we decided to have a look around the narrow alleys of les Baux de Provence and were compensated with excellent views of some Alpine Accentors feeding on fat balls beside the village chapel. After hot drinks in a local tavern, we headed for the old Les Baux marshes, where we stopped shortly at a few different spots, and added some Serin and a lonely Calandra Lark to our list. We went back to the hotel to enjoy a wonderful Christmas dinner prepared lovingly by our host Marie-Claire.

## Day 5

## Sunday 26th December

We headed towards the Ornithological Reserve of Pont de Gau in the Central Camargue. The wind didn't feel as strong as the previous day, the sky was clear and blue and the sun was shining brightly. Some of the wetlands were frozen but we managed nonetheless to see quite a few birds. Near the entrance hundreds of Flamingos were gathered and performed nuptial displays already. The birds turned heads and paraded in unison while vocalising loudly.

Sacred Ibis, originally escaped from captivity but now breeding freely since about ten years in France, were also present at the same site, accompanied by Red-crested Pochards, Night Herons, Cattle Egrets and a hybrid of Ferruginous Duck x Red-crested Pochard. Further along the trail we saw a large group of Teals, Greylag Geese, Firecrests, Green Sandpipers and some Penduline Tits. A rare Rough-legged Buzzard was seen also but only by two members of the group.

After lunch we went to Les Saintes-Maries de la Mer to try some sea watching towards La Digue à la mer, a stretch of 20 kilometres acting as a rampart against the invading sea, but only a Grey Plover and Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls were present. We then decided to spend the rest of the day looking for waders and try a site for the Spotted Eagle which had been mentioned earlier on the board at La Capelière. We drove along a fairly rough dirt track between Etang de Consécanières and Etang de Vaccarès. No Spotted Eagle could be seen today but we had instead thousands of Pochards, 600+ Red-crested Pochards, 600+ Avocets, many Dunlins, Bar-tailed Godwits, Kentish Plovers, four Common Cranes, Curlews, etc...

## Day 6

Monday 27th December

This day was dedicated to La Crau, the stony characteristic floodplain between Camargue and Marseille. As usual, we managed an early start and went straight to the Airfield of Eyguières hoping to spot some Little Bustards on their wintering grounds and had a short glimpse of four of them there. Other birds spotted there were Red-legged Partridges and hundreds of Lapwings.

We continued on to the Eco-museum of Saint-Martin de Crau to get our admission tickets to the Nature Reserve of Peau de Meau. After a very interesting visit of this particularly well presented display of all the traditional activities and natural history of the La Crau environment we left to join our lunch spot at Etang des Aulnes. Around our picnic table we had sightings of Red Squirrel and Firecrests and Goldcrests. The walk through the Peau de Meau Nature Reserve brought us to an old sheep barn in which a bird hide had been set up. On our way to the building, we spotted a Little Owl trying to get some warmth on the roof of an old farm building. Large flocks of Calandra and Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Linnets and Goldfinches were present on the Coussouls, the Crau steppe. We continued on through la Crau which brought us good observations of Southern Grey Shrike and a Little Bustard which was flushed in front of us.

## Day 7

Tuesday 28th December

After a hearty breakfast we drove straight towards the Etang of Scamandre with a stop on the way near a bridge over a canal. Overlooking large reed beds we observed four Marsh Harriers and two Hen Harriers and some fleeting glimpses of Penduline Tits. Another impressive sight were more than a thousand Common Cranes passing through on their way southwards, fleeing from cold conditions further north. Walking through the wetlands at Scamandre Nature Reserve we saw some Teals and Mallards in the distance and had some close looks of Camargue Black Bulls but not much else along the trail. Luckily, further on a group of twelve Glossy Ibises flew overhead and we managed to spot a Purple Gallinule and had a close look at a small group of Bearded Tits. To add some cultural dimensions to the day, we finished off with a stroll through the town of Aigues-Mortes where we enjoyed hot drinks. This city was established in 1240 by Louis the IX as a means to access the sea to participate in the crusades. On our way home we were lucky to spot just before nightfall two White Storks on the side of the road.

## Day 8

Wednesday 29th December

We departed after breakfast and packed up to make sure that we were on time at the airport. We arrived in good time for pre-departure procedures and the flight back home to the UK was on time.

Birdwise, considering some harsh conditions, we had some good sightings even if the birds were not plentiful. Most target birds for the trip were observed with some exceptions. We managed even to add some new species to the bird list as Rough-legged Bustard, Common Crane, Glossy Ibis, Ortolan Bunting, White Stork and others. The highlights of the tour were certainly the very close and prolonged observations of Wallcreeper on the Pont du Gard, the Little Bustard in the Crau steppe and the troops of Common Cranes flying southwards while vocalising loudly. A total of 115 bird species was observed on the tour.

Our host Marie-Claire tended very carefully to everyone's needs and served us wonderful meals in a very comfortable hotel.

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## Species Lists

### Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	December							
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28	
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		50				20	200+	10
2	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		40				2	20+	
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2				3		
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		100	15			50	25	50
5	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		3					3	6
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		50	2			50+	1	10
7	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		12				10	3	10
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		6	1			10	1	10
9	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>		100+				100+		500+
10	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>						2		
11	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>								5
12	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>								12
13	Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>								12
14	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			4					1000
15	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		1				4		20+
16	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>						5	1	
17	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		20				10		6
18	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>						1		100
19	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		100+	3			100+	100+	
20	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>						14	10	
21	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		30				2		
22	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		4				100+		10
23	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		300+				100+		100+
24	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>						600+	100+	500+
25	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>						1000	80+	200+
26	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		3					5	
27	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>							5	
28	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		2				10	2	10
29	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		10				5	1	5
30	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>							1	
31	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>						1		
32	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		30+	2			5	10	10
33	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2			1	2	1	2
34	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1			1			
35	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					5		10	1
36	Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>		5						
37	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		4			1			1
38	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>								1
39	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		15			20			2
40	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		100+			100+		500+	100+
41	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>							5	
42	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>						600		12
43	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		4				10		
44	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>						5		
45	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		50				10		
46	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						30		1
47	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		200				50	40	

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
48	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		6					
49	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		10			50		5
50	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					10		3
51	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>					40		
52	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		15			5		
53	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1	1				
54	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					7		
55	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		3					1
56	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>		6					
57	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		200+	1		50	500+	20
58	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cacchians</i>		300+	4		50	2	20
59	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		20					
60	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		100+	50+	10			50
61	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		10	2	4			
62	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2			1		30
63	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>						1	
64	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>						1	
65	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	2	1	2			1	1
66	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1				2	1
67	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			1				
68	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		10				15	
69	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				1		100+	
70	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		10			2	50+	1
71	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			4		2		1
72	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	2						1
73	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1				1	1
74	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>				5			
75	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1	1		1	2	2
76	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	2		2			5	15
77	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>					1	5	10
78	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		5			1	3	1
79	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>						20	
80	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			10				
81	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			40				
82	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		1			1		1
83	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		5			1		5
84	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>						4	1
85	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1	1	1		1	2
86	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>					1		1
87	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		1	1	5	1	1	1
88	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>					1	2	
89	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>							8
90	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>		2			1		
91	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			1				2
92	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				1			
93	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		50	1	1	10	5	10
94	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		10	1	1	10	2	5
95	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>			2	1			
96	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				1			
97	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>			1				
98	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>						2	

	Common name	Scientific name	December						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28
99	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		50+	100		1	20	20
100	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			1	1			
101	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		5	10	5+	2	15	10
102	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		150	10+	50+	20	100+	10
103	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			1				
104	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		8	5	10	10	20	10
105	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					1		
106	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		50+	50+	50+		50	10
107	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		5	2	10	10	35	2
108	Citril Finch	<i>Serinus citrinella</i>			3				
109	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				5		25	
110	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>						1	
111	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		20	15	10	1	10	10
112	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>						50+	20
113	Ortolan Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>						1	
114	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	7					10	
115	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>							1

### Mammals

1	Coypu	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>		2					
2	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		4					
3	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1			1	
4	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>						1	
5	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>						1	