

Southern France in Winter

with Shetland Wildlife



February 11 - 17 2011
Leaders: Judd Hunt & David Fairhurst

Friday 11 February

After a trouble free journey from Gatwick to Marseille, we soon collected our mini-buses and were on our way to our beautiful country hotel situated on the outskirts of Arles. A few birds were seen on the journey, including the ubiquitous Common Buzzard (a bird that we saw in good numbers throughout our trip). The wonders of the French toll roads meant we had a smooth journey to our hotel and everybody was given a short while to settle into their rooms. Birds around the hotel as we unloaded the vans included: 2 White Storks, Chiffchaffs, Blackcap and a pair of Black Redstarts. As we still had a few hours of daylight it was decided that we would head straight for Les Baux and the hoped-for Wallcreeper. After a short drive we arrived at the beautiful citadel of Les Baux and under rather grey skies, headed off on the footpath below the east side of the town. We soon found a young male Blue Rock Thrush standing motionless on the cliff face, giving everybody good views. Whilst we were watching the Blue Rock Thrush sharp eyes located an interesting large flowering Orchid on the verge next to the footpath and this turned out to be our first Giant Orchid (flowering in late winter and early spring this huge orchid is quite common in places in the south of France). After a short walk we arrived at the impressive cliff face below the southeast corner of the town and within just a few minutes we had located our quarry - an amazing Wallcreeper! The bird performed superbly and everybody enjoyed prolonged views of this 'master of the rock face'. Time was moving on and the light was starting to go so we decided to head back to the hotel, but not before we had seen a couple of Crested Tits, Firecrests and heard and seen several singing male Sardinian Warblers.

Saturday 12 February

Our first full day saw us exploring the dry, stony and arid region of La Crau. We couldn't have asked for better weather; under glorious blue skies we first stopped at several sites and the birds came thick and fast. As we walked in the bramble scrub we found Dartford and Sardinian Warblers, Crested Lark, Southern Grey Shrike and Red-legged Partridge, whilst throughout we were serenaded by the lovely sound of singing Woodlarks. As we left the scrubby area a group of 11 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse circled us, calling away. Their call is very distinctive and it wasn't long before they gave us another pass overhead. As the temperature increased, a lone raptor flew low across the open ground before alighting on a telegraph pole; it was a fantastic Long Legged Buzzard! A few of these arid area dwellers winter in the vicinity, but can be very hard to find, so we were very lucky!

We lunched at Mas Chauvet with good numbers of Linnets and Corn Buntings in the surrounding trees. Under a now-warm sun with most of the group in t-shirts, there was no sign of the hoped-for Richard's Pipits. After lunch we headed out onto the Southern Crau and it wasn't long before we were back amongst some wonderful birds. Bathed in sunshine we located a singing Calandra Lark and whilst watching this stocky lark a small group of Little Bustards were seen landing some distance away. We soon located several small groups of Little Bustards (about 25 in total) and we all had reasonable views through the scopes of birds on the ground, but we were also rewarded with a couple of superb 'fly-bys' of these elusive birds. Also out here we found a single Richard's Pipit,

which flew around calling its distinctive 'schreep' note for a few minutes before heading off into the distance. Nearby, around the derelict farm building we watched a large mixed flock of Meadow Pipits, Sky and Calandra Larks, numbering several hundreds in total. Calandras can be exceptionally hard birds to find on La Crau but every year we always find them!

A quick look at the airfield near Eyguieres saw lots of disturbance by 'micro-lites' so we opted to have another visit to the beautiful citadel of Les Baux, this time not for Wallcreepers but for another speciality of the town - Alpine Accentor. Like the Wallcreeper, these 'high altitude Dunnocks' descend from the mountains where they breed, to spend the winter at much lower and more accessible altitudes. It wasn't long before we located a small group sunning themselves in the stunning evening sunshine. Shuffling amongst the tables and chair of the outdoor cafes, these fearless birds looked quite out of place!

But this incredible day wasn't quite over yet and with our luck going the way it was, we decided to stop at one of our Eagle Owl 'stake outs'. As the light started to fade, several members of the group saw a huge Eagle Owl disappear around the corner of one the huge crags - it wasn't long before the bird returned and perched in full view! Everybody was able to enjoy scope views and, amazingly, just as we were about to leave, a second bird flew in and silhouetted against the sky, mounted the first bird! Unbelievable! Mating Eagle Owls!!! What an amazing end to a truly awesome day!

Sunday 13 February

By way of a contrast to yesterday's dry habitats, today was spent in the lush, marshy, wet areas of the Camargue. Our first stop was at a scrubby edged channel near Mas Des Iscles where we had seen Night Herons in previous years - unfortunately there was no sign of any, but we did have wonderful views of a Cetti's Warbler and Tree Sparrows. In a nearby stubble field a family party of Common Cranes fed and the groups were able to enjoy prolonged views. The Petite Camargue was our next stop and despite rather cool and cloudy weather the place was alive with birds: Marsh Harriers were everywhere and several Hen Harriers were also noted, Water Pipits leapt from the reedy pools, huge Great White Egrets flopped across the reedbeds, Little Grebes and Water Rails called away and a pair of Bearded Tits gave outrageously good views. We also saw quite a few Coypu: these introduced semi-aquatic South American rodents are everywhere in the Camargue. From here we headed south and had a coffee at Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer. Along the 'prom' we had superb views of a Crested Lark and a Sandwich Tern flew by.

The huge expanse of saltpans just north of the town produced our first Greater Flamingos, and sharing these lagoons were also Dunlin, Little Stint, Mediterranean Gulls and an active group of Kentish Plovers.

We lunched at Consecanerie and were entertained by a synchronised group of displaying Flamingos. The nearby lagoon held an almost uncountable number of duck including: thousands of Red Crested Pochard and Common Pochard, Pintail, Gadwall and Mallard. Amongst this throng we were surprised to locate a 'redhead' Smew - this northern European duck is rare in southern France - and our good friend and Camargue birder Eric Durand informs us that it was only the fifth record for the region in the last 15 years!

La Capelliere was our next stop and we had a short walk around this gem of a reserve. The wind had increased somewhat and our walk was fairly quiet apart from a small number of Teal, Snipe, a couple of Spotted Redshank and a Green Sandpiper. A lucky few in the party had seen a European Tree Frog in a sink in the toilets on our arrival! As

we departed we were all rewarded with excellent views of a pair of White Storks atop their huge nest adjacent to the visitors centre. For the final hour before dusk, we explored a few small roads just to the south of the reserve. Along one lane we located a rather large finch and bunting flock containing good numbers of Chaffinch, Brambling, Tree Sparrow and a single Cirl Bunting. The nearby shore and brackish lagoons held Red Breasted Mergansers, Shelduck, Grey Plover and a feature of the Camargue: more large numbers of Greater Flamingos. Yet more Hen Harriers were seen and a single Merlin whizzed over the fields.

Monday 14 February

An early breakfast was called for today and we were on the road heading north-east. Our destination: Mount Ventoux. After about an hour and a half we arrived to find the mountain shrouded in thick fog and with very little snow; it didn't look good! We opted for ten minutes in the Chalet for a spirit-lifting hot chocolate, but unfortunately by the time we'd finished the fog still hadn't lifted so we decided to have a go at finding a few birds anyway. Unbelievably, despite the conditions, we managed Crested and Marsh Tits in the pines just around the corner from the car park and then a real stroke of luck – four Citril Finches gave us superb views, perched in the low pines just above our heads!

Descending the mountain to many Black Woodpecker sites we spent several hours searching for this enigmatic and secretive species to no avail, although we did manage to find a Short-toed Treecreeper and Nuthatch, and for the plant buffs, a wonderful display of Stinking Hellebore. Poking through the fallen leaves these early bloomers really do smell bad! Another visit to the Chalet called for a warm-up by the roaring log fire and yet more hot chocolates were consumed! Feeling more positive, we headed back down the hill for another bash at Black Woodpeckers. Unperturbed, we kept looking and looking and then our quarry - a huge Black Woodpecker swooped in. The bird gave several wonderful fly-pasts before alighting on a broken tree. Never say never!

Very happy with our 'haul' on the mountain we decided to head back to the lowlands and away from the fog. Our first stop was Entressen dump. Unfortunately it seems the dump is no longer in use so we didn't see the hoped-for Red Kites, but we came across a huge finch and bunting flock feeding in a large area of weeds. The flock contained a dozen species including: 75 Serin, 150 Goldfinch, 150 Linnet, 40 Meadow Pipit, 50 Chaffinch and small numbers of Corn, Reed and Cirl Buntings and a couple of Brambling and Tree Sparrows!

With the weather improving and having failed yesterday to find any Penduline Tits we opted to spend the last hour of the day back at La Capelliere. With much calmer conditions it was a very pleasant walk, with male Cetti's Warblers blasting out their songs everywhere. It wasn't long before we found a spanking male Penduline Tit. Located low down in the reeds it proved a little tricky to see but eventually showed very well. Other birds seen here included a good number of Snipe, yet more Spotted Redshank and a pair of Shoveler.

Tuesday 15 February

With a good forecast we planned to spend the day back in the Camargue. Once again we stopped at Mas Des Iscles but still couldn't find any Night Herons (which are clearly now extremely localised in the region during winter) but we did find a group of four Common Cranes. Parking the mini-buses in the Petite Camargue we decided to walk the road. It was lovely to be strolling in the warm sunshine with plenty of Marsh Harriers, Gadwall, Red Crested Pochard, Kingfisher and singing Chiffchaffs all putting in an appearance. A

distant Moustached Warbler sang away, another pair of Bearded Tits gave wonderful views and a Eurasian Bittern flew overhead.

A stop at the Camargue Education Centre gave everybody the opportunity to learn more about the region and its habitats and it was here that we saw our only Goldcrest and Greenfinch of the trip with yet more Tree Sparrows and also a Firecrest. A group of about a dozen Common Cranes were seen from the roadside just outside the reserve as we headed south.

Our next stop was a freshwater lagoon just outside Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer; here we enjoyed a wonderful hour in the sunshine watching Black-necked Grebes and a cracking male Sardinian Warbler but the undoubted highlight was up to three Hummingbird Hawk - moths feeding around a large Rosemary bush.

Lunch was taken once again overlooking one of the large brackish lagoons at Consecaniere. Twenty five roosting Spoonbills plus about 100 Avocets were noted and Greater Flamingos were everywhere. Several of the birds were colour ringed so we noted some of the codes – we have since been told that one of the birds was ringed as a chick in 1977 and thus without knowing it, we were watching a 33 year-old bird – nearly as old as David!

Our next location was Mas D'agon and this proved to be one of the best stops of the trip. Water levels were low encouraging large numbers of egrets to feed in the reedbed pools, including over 150 Little Egrets, 3 lovely summer plumaged Cattle Egrets and several towering Great White Egrets. But best of all, a superb adult Black Stork. More glossy green than black, one or two of these cracking looking birds winter in the area and once again, we were very lucky to find one.

The last few hours of the day were spent on the coast at Piemanson just beyond Salinde-Giraud. Crossing the salt pans we located several Sandwich Terns, the first of about thirty Black-necked Grebes and a wintering Common Sandpiper. The pans themselves produced a fantastic flock of over 300 Little Stints and 200 Dunlin, and other wading birds seen here included Ringed and Grey Plovers, Sanderling, Avocet and Snipe. In the dunes we located another wonderful Giant Orchid and offshore an adult Gannet flew by. All too soon it was time to leave and with the backdrop of a stunning sunset we headed back across the salt pans - but not before we'd stopped to enjoy an impressive flock of about 300 Mediterranean Gulls!

Wednesday 16 February

We had another try for the Richard's Pipits at our usual site but like a few days ago, the fields were empty. However, we enjoyed plenty of Linnets, Corn Buntings and a couple of reasonably sized Skylark flocks - but unfortunately, no pipits. A return to the 'dump' at Entressen found us struggling to find any of the finch and buntings from the last visit but Grey Wagtail was added to the trip list and excellent views were had of a male Black Redstart and a pair of Stonechats. As we left the dump we drove past an incredible flock of about 400 Mediterranean Gulls feeding in a roadside field; this was somewhat eclipsed as we passed Etang d'Entressen where there was an unbelievable gathering of at least 2000 'Med' Gulls sitting on the water!

Another Red Kite and a single Fieldfare were noted and we decided to head back to Les Alpilles. Lunch was taken surrounded by blossom trees, flowering gorse and honeybees. We then spent a good hour after lunch at a Bonelli's Eagle stakeout. We managed to see

good numbers of Common Buzzards, a couple of Sparrowhawks and a pair of Ravens - but no eagles.

We decided to go back to Les Baux for our last few hours and we weren't disappointed. Walking the footpath, we passed a pair of showy Blue Rock Thrushes on the way to view the impressive cliff face below the east side of the town, and it wasn't long before we located another superb Wallcreeper. This time we had the sun out, and for nearly an hour we had fantastic views. It was decided to give folk some 'free-time' to wander around the delightful town. Present again were at least a dozen incredibly tame Alpine Accentors along with a couple more Blue Rock Thrushes. Those who arrived back at the minibuses early enjoyed not one, but two more Wallcreepers - a rather fitting end to a wonderful trip!

Thursday 17 February

Unfortunately it was time to head to the airport just after breakfast and so we said our farewells to the brilliant staff at the hotel. We had a leisurely drive to Marseille Airport and we arrived in good time. Our last bird sightings in France were of at least 50 Black-necked Grebes seen through the plane windows as we taxied along the runway!

Systematic List of birds seen in Southern France 11 – 17 February 2011

Great Crested Grebe – small numbers seen on open water on four days

Black-necked Grebe – two seen on a freshwater lagoon just north of Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer on 15/02, at least 30 seen at Piemanson on the same date and c50 seen from the plane windows as we departed Marseille Airport.

Little Grebe – small numbers seen in the days we visited the Camargue but more often heard than seen with many birds displaying.

Northern Gannet - a single adult flew offshore at Piemanson on 15/02.

Great Cormorant – many seen daily.

Great Bittern – one flew west overhead at the Petite Camargue on 15/02.

Grey Heron – common even in the 'dry' areas.

Little Egret – seen almost daily but by far the largest number was 150 in one flock at Mas D'agon on 15/02.

Great White Egret – ones and twos seen at many sites on the days we visited the Camargue.

Cattle Egret – common - a daily bird for us especially in the sheep fields around the hotel! Three full breeding plumaged birds were at Mas D'agon on 15/02.

White Stork – seen in small numbers most days.

Black Stork - an adult was at Mas D'agon on 15/02.

Eurasian Spoonbill - a roosting group of 25 were at Consecaniere at on 15/02.

Greater Flamingo – seen in good numbers on the days we visited the Camargue.

Mute Swan – odd pairs seen at just a few sites in the Camargue.

Greylag Goose – one flock of c30 birds flew north over the hotel on 13/02 and about 50 were at Consecaniere on the same date and a small group of c20 flew over Les Baux on 16/02.

Common Shelduck – small numbers seen in the brackish areas in the Camargue.

Mallard – common, seen on four dates during the trip.

Gadwall – only seen at Consecaniere and in the Petite Camargue but both times well over 200 birds were seen.

Common Teal – small numbers seen in the Camargue.

Northern Pintail – a single drake at Consecaniere on 13/02.

Northern Shoveler – a couple of pairs seen at La Capelliere and Piemanson.

Red-crested Pochard – at least 1000 at Consecaniere on 13/02, c50 at the Petite Camargue and c10 at Mas D'agon both on 15/02.

Common Pochard – c500 at Consecaniere on 13/02.

Smew – a female was found amongst the many wildfowl at Consecaniere on 13/02.

Red Breasted Merganser – c25 were on the large lagoon just south of the reserve at La Capelliere on 13/02.

Red Kite – seen daily in small numbers.

Eurasian Marsh Harrier – common in the Camargue and several were seen flying over the hotel on a couple of dates.

Hen Harrier – ones and twos seen on three dates mainly in the Camargue.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk – a single chasing a Chaffinch right in front of the mini-buses on 15/02 and several seen whilst looking for Bonelli's Eagle on 16/02.

Common Buzzard – seemingly everywhere, everyday!

Long-legged Buzzard – one on La Crau on 12/02. A great bird to see!

Red-legged Partridge – c10 seen on La Crau on 12/02 and one seen on 16/02.

Common Pheasant – singles seen on two dates.

Water Rail – heard but never seen on four occasions at sites in the Camargue on 13/02, 14/02 and 15/02.

Common Moorhen – common.

Common Coot – see daily on almost any open water.

Common Crane – a family group of 4 seen at Mas Des Iscles on 13/02 and again on 15/02 and at least 10 in a field in the Petite Camargue also on 15/02.

Little Bustard – at least 25 on La Crau on 12/02.

Pied Avocet – two at Consecaniere on 13/02 and a distant flock of over 100 there on 15/02.

Northern Lapwing – small flocks seen daily.

European Golden Plover – a flock of c50 birds at Consecaniere on 13/02 and a couple of singles at Mas Chauvet on 16/02.

Grey Plover – four on a brackish lagoon just south of La Capelliere on 13/02 and a similar number on the salt pans at Piemanson on 15/02.

Common Ringed Plover – three at Piemanson on 15/02.

Kentish Plover – c12 birds feeding actively on a small lagoon just north of Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer on 13/02.

Dunlin – c20 on a small lagoon just north of Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer on 13/02 and c200 in a flock on the salt pans at Piemanson on 15/02.

Little Stint – c10 on a small lagoon just north of Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer on 13/02 and c300 in a flock on the salt pans at Piemanson on 15/02.

Sanderling – one briefly on the beach at Piemanson on 15/02.

Ruff – one flew over Consecaniere on 13/02.

Spotted Redshank – at least two at La Capelliere on 13/02 and 14/02.

Common Sandpiper – one by the roadside between Salin-de-Giraud and Piemanson on 15/02.

Green Sandpiper – a single at La Capelliere on 13/02.

Eurasian Curlew – small groups seen at several sites in the Camargue on three dates.

Common Snipe – seen at four sites in the Camargue on three dates.

Black-headed Gull – common in the Camargue.

Mediterranean Gull – c300 on the salt pans between Salin-de-Giraud and Piemanson on 15/02 and then 400 feeding in a roadside field at Entressen on 16/02 with an unbelievable 2000 just down the road on Etang d'Entressen on the same date.

Yellow-legged Gull – common.

Lesser Black-backed Gull – three singles on three dates.

Sandwich Tern – one a Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer on 13/02 and three between Salin-de-Giraud and Piemanson on 15/02.

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse – eleven on La Crau on 12/02.

Feral Pigeon – common.

Stock Dove – three at Mas D'agon on 15/02.

Wood Pigeon – common.

Collard Dove – common.

Eurasian Eagle Owl – a pair at one of our sites on the evening of 12/02.

Common Kingfisher – singles and a couple of pairs seen in the Camargue on 13/02 and 15/02.

Black Woodpecker – one seen at Mount Ventoux on 14/02.

Great Spotted Woodpecker – singles seen on three dates.

Eurasian Green Woodpecker – never actually seen on the trip but heard on four dates at four sites.

Calandra Lark – several singing males and a large flock of c100 birds on La Crau on 12/02.

Skylark – common.

Woodlark - at least half a dozen males singing on La Crau on 12/02.

Crested Lark – small numbers seen at many sites and a reasonable flock of c70 birds at Entressen dump on 14/02.

Meadow Pipit – common.

Water Pipit – about 10 in the Petite Camargue on 13/02 and 15/02.

Richard's Pipit – one on La Crau on 12/02.

White Wagtail – ones and twos at several sites daily.

Grey Wagtail – one at Entressen dump on 16/02.

Winter Wren – common.

Dunnock – our only sighting was of a single in bramble scrub on La Crau on 12/02.

Alpine Accentor – four in the town at Les Baux on 12/02 and then at least twelve there on 16/02.

European Stonechat – small numbers at several sites on every day of the trip.

European Robin – singles at many sites on five dates.

Black Redstart – singles and the odd pair at many sites daily.

Blue Rock Thrush – three at Les Baux on 11/02 and at least five there on 16/02.

Fieldfare – c20 on La Crau on 12/02, 5 in the Camargue on 13/02 and a single on 16/02.

Song Thrush – singles at several sites.

Common Blackbird – common, seen daily.

Cetti's Warbler – more often heard than seen at many sites throughout the Camargue.

Common Chiffchaff – common.

Blackcap – common.

Sardinian Warbler – common in the scrubby areas but normally very difficult to see and more often heard!

Dartford Warbler – a least five birds seen in bramble scrub on La Crau on 12/02.

Firecrest – a couple in pines at Les Baux on 11/02 and one at the education centre in the Camargue on 15/02.

Goldcrest – our only sighting was of a single at the education centre in the Camargue on 15/02.

Crested Tit - two in pines at Les Baux on 11/02 and a very showy bird on Mount Ventoux on 14/02.

Blue Tit – common.

Coal Tit – several birds seen at three sites on 14/02 and 16/02.

Marsh Tit – one seen very well at Mount Ventoux on 14/02.

Great Tit – common.

Long-tailed Tit – several groups seen on three dates.

Eurasian Penduline Tit – one at La Capelliere on 14/02 and several heard in the Petite Camargue on 13/02 and 15/02.

Eurasian Nuthatch – one at Mount Ventoux on 14/02.

Wallcreeper – one of these superb birds at Les Baux on 11/02 and an incredible three there on 16/02, including two together!

Short-toed Treecreeper – one singing and showing well on Mount Ventoux on 14/02.

Southern Grey Shrike – at least six birds seen on La Crau on 12/02.

Eurasian Jay – brief views of several birds on three dates.

Eurasian Magpie – common.

Common Raven – two flew over one of our Bonelli's Eagle sites on 16/02.

Rook – two small groups seen on 11/02 and 16/02 were our only sighting.

Carrion Crow – common.

Eurasian Jackdaw – common.

Common Starling – common.

House Sparrow – common.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow – small numbers at several sites on four dates.

Brambling – about 20 in a mixed finch/bunting flock just south of La Capelliere on 13/02 and then singles at Entressen dump on 14/02 and in the Camargue on 15/02.

Chaffinch – common, including some good-sized flocks (150+ in number).

European Goldfinch – small numbers seen at quite a few sites.

European Greenfinch – at least three at the education centre in the Camargue on 15/02.

Eurasian Linnet – common and like Chaffinches, some good-sized flocks.

European Serin – ones and twos flying over several sites on three dates but a wonderful flock of 75 at Entressen dump on 14/02 was most welcome.

Citril Finch – four showing very well in pines on Mount Ventoux on 14/02.

Reed Bunting – small numbers in the Camargue on 13/02 and 15/02 and about ten with a finch/bunting flock at Entressen dump on 14/02.

Corn Bunting – surprisingly common with the biggest numbers at Mas Chauvet (c30) and on La Crau (c80) on 12/02.

Cirl Bunting – one in a mixed finch/bunting flock just south of La Capelliere on 13/02, at least two at Entressen on 14/02 and a singing male at one of our Bonelli's Eagle sites on 16/02.

Other Fauna of Interest

Brown Hare – one on La Crau on 12/02.

Coypu – common in the Camargue

European Tree Frog – one seen briefly in a sink in the toilet block at La Capelliere on 13/02.

Hummingbird Hawk-moth – three feeding on a large flowering Rosemary bushes at Saintes-Maries-de-La-Mer on 15/02.