Southern France in Winter with Shetland Wildlife

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This was our fourteenth consecutive year running trips to the region and it was another hugely successful visit. The weather varied throughout with a couple of days dominated by the cold, dry mistral while other days the temperature rose into the mid-teens and it was extremely pleasant. As usual, our hotel delivered superb food throughout and provided an ideal base for exploring the region.

We made two trips up to the impressive citadel of Les Baux. Located in a spectacular position at the heart of Les Alpilles and set atop a rocky outcrop that is crowned with a ruined castle, the views overlooking the plains to the south are fantastic. Here we found several **Wallcreepers**. Our first visit proved quite frustrating with just one bird seen rather briefly but on our second visit, we had prolonged views of at least two individuals. It was a true delight to be able to spend over an hour watching these 'masters of the rock-face' foraging and picking insects off the weathered limestone cliffs.

Another speciality of Les Baux are **Alpine Accentors**. These 'high mountain Dunnocks' also descend from the high-tops of the Alps during the winter and are found around the town itself. We enjoyed incredibly close views as the birds fed unconcerned just metres away. Other highlights at Les Baux included **Blue Rock Thrushes**, **Black Redstarts**, **Crag Martins**, **Sardinian Warblers** and a pair of stick-carrying and displaying **Ravens**!

Nearby, we spent dusk at one of our picturesque **Eagle Owl** sites and were rewarded with a fantastic display. The male appeared well before dark and performed wonderfully well, perching on the rocks and then flying around calling. After about ten minutes the female owl flew in from one of the surrounding cliff faces and the pair then mated several times in full view. Amazing - and one of the highlights of the trip!

La Crau is an area of dry, stony, steppe-like plains characterised by low growing hardy herbs. A cool mistral made for a rather challenging first visit to this area but, even so, under crystal blue skies we located a pair of confiding **Stone Curlews** hiding among the short vegetation. Their gleaming yellow bills and piercing eyes made them look rather reptilian! A group of 70 **Little Bustards** were located and on our second visit several days later, we watched transfixed as the birds began to display. This involved the male bustards leaping into the air and flashing their pure white wing-feathers – a truly amazing spectacle! The calmer weather during our second visit was also perfect for bird song and we were serenaded by one wonderful **Woodlark** for over 20 minutes.

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The scattered trees and bushes on this open habitat were home to **Southern Grey Shrikes** and we saw several including wonderful views of a perched bird being mobbed by a small group **of Reed Buntings**. Other species encountered included large numbers of **Skylarks**, **Common Buzzards**, **Red-legged Partridges**, **White Storks**, **Stonechats**, **Sardinian Warblers, Black Redstarts** and a rather dapper male **Merlin**.

The farmland adjacent to La Crau is a traditional wintering site for the **Richard's Pipit** which breeds in Siberia. These much larger cousins of the Meadow Pipit normally winter in South-east Asia but small numbers of birds now spend the winter here in Europe. They can be difficult to find, but we were rewarded with superb views of at least eight birds as they fed in short grass just metres from our mini-buses! The fringes of La Crau are excellent for seed-eating birds and we found a lovely sheltered sun-soaked hedge that contained a cracking group of **Cirl Buntings** including at least four fine males.

Our visit to a very icy Mont Ventoux resulted in stunning views of **Crested Tits, Marsh Tits** and **Common Crossbills** but, unfortunately, we failed to see any Citril Finches here. However, the hot chocolate served-up at Chalet Reynard plus the stunning views to the south made up for the disappointment!

The fertile fields and wetlands of the Camargue are a haven for wildlife, and we visited many sites throughout the area. Our first visit started rather damp with a strong southerly wind blowing but this didn't hamper us from seeing some wonderful family groups of **Common Cranes** feeding in roadside stubble fields on our way to Petite Camargue. Here we enjoyed incredibly close views of a pair of **Penduline Tits** with views down to just a few metres! Marsh Harriers were everywhere quartering the reed-beds and other species seen here included **Blackcaps**, **Chiffchaffs, Glossy Ibis** and **Bearded Tits**. On our final visit here, we also encountered a pale morph **Booted Eagle** and en-route to Saintes Marie de La Mer we had the rather surprising sight of an **Osprey** right over our minibuses! This is a species we have never recorded on our Southern France in Winter trip before. At Saintes Maria de la Mer itself we sipped coffee and 'sea-watched' from the promenade. The shelters here provided fantastic cover for watching the gulls and terns which were close by, huddled on the beach. Among the **Black-headed** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** we found a rather stunning adult **Mediterranean Gull**, two **Slender-billed Gulls** and a good number of **Sandwich Terns**. Also here, a pair of **Crested Larks** were closely watched as they ran busily about on the sand.

It didn't take long to locate our first of many **Greater Flamingos** plus several **Avocets**, **Kentish Plover**, **Water Pipit** and **a Dartford Warbler**. At Etang de Consecaniere we found **Black-necked** and **Great Crested Grebes**, **Spoonbills**, **Sardinian Warbler, Hen Harrier** and **Grey Plover**. As we left this site we located a wonderful flock of 20 **Slender-billed Gulls** feeding in a track side pool.

At Mas d'Agon we found a flock of over 400 **Glossy Ibis**, which was quite a sight. Also here were **Great White** and **Little Egrets**, **Red-crested Pochard**, **Water Pipit**,

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Cetti's Warbler, **Ruff**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, many more **Greater Flamingos**, **Kingfisher** and a flock of 21 wintering **Bewick's Swans**. At Pont du Gau we were treated to prolonged views of two **Firecrests**, several **Chiffchaffs** and several recently emerged **Wall Brown** butterflies. Hundreds of **Greater Flamingos** and smaller numbers of **Grey Herons**, **Cattle** and **Little Egrets** were constantly in view and at Etang Vaccares, many hundreds of **Black-necked Grebes** were seen. Near the reserve centre at La Capeliere several pairs of **White Storks** were watched as they attended their nests but a superb pair of close **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** in the car park stole the show. At Salin de Badon we recorded **Cetti's Warblers**, **Marsh Harriers**, good numbers of **Teal**, **Tree Sparrow** and **Red crested Pochards.**

Near Piemanson we witnessed the spectacular site of an incredible flock of over 1000 **Common Cranes**. The birds were circling in the deep blue sky and calling continually - a highlight of the trip for many people. The roadsides here were carpeted with impressive displays of **Giant Orchid**. The mudflats and salt pans at Piemanson itself were teaming with birds including displaying **Greater Flamingos**, several groups of **Avocets**, many **Yellow-legged Gulls**, **Shelducks** and a large gathering of smaller waders which included **Little Stints**, **Kentish Plovers**, **Sanderlings**, **Grey Plovers**, **Common Redshanks**, **Ringed Plovers**, **Curlews** and **Dunlin** (including a Polish colour-ringed bird!).

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Great-crested Grebe – small numbers seen on four dates. One pair were watched displaying at Mas d' Agon on 21/02

Black-necked Grebe – over 500 were on a flat-calm Etang de Vaccares on 23/02

Little Grebe – seen on three dates at various sites

Great Cormorant – seen daily at many locations

Grey Heron – common even in the 'dry' areas

Little Egret – small numbers seen daily

Great White Egret – small numbers seen on five dates

Cattle Egret – small groups seen daily at various locations, by far the largest flock was over 110 with horses right in front of our hotel every day

White Stork – seen in small numbers most days, including several pairs on nests

Glossy Ibis – a huge flock of over 400 were at Mas d'Agon on 25/02, with smaller numbers at two other sites in the Camargue

Eurasian Spoonbill – c20 were at Consecaniere on 21/02

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Greater Flamingo – seen in large numbers (many hundreds) on the three dates we visited the Camargue

Mute Swan – small numbers seen on three dates at various locations

Bewick's Swan – 21 at Mas d' Agon on 21/02 with three there on 25/02

Greylag Goose – seen on two dates including a flock of 30 flying over Les Baux

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

Mallard – small numbers seen at a variety of locations

Gadwall – small numbers seen at several sites within the Camargue

Eurasian Wigeon - small numbers seen at several sites within the Camargue on one date

Common Teal – small numbers seen in the Camargue

Northern Shoveler – several small groups seen on two dates

Red-crested Pochard – small numbers seen at three sites in the Camargue

Tufted Duck – c10 at Las Capeliere on 23/02

Osprey – one circling over the road en-route to Saintes Maries de la Mar on 21/02 was quite a surprise

Red Kite – three sightings on two dates

Black Kite – one over fields in the Camargue on 25/02

Booted Eagle – a pale morph bird was seen near Mas d'Agon on 25/02

Eurasian Marsh Harrier – common in the Camargue
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Hen Harrier – two males and a female seen in the Camargue on two dates. One of the males was seen fighting with a Merlin!

Eurasian Sparrowhawk – singles on three dates

Common Buzzard – seemingly everywhere, everyday!

Merlin – a cracking adult male at Vergieres on 23/02 and a female fighting with a male Hen Harrier in the Camargue on 25/02

Kestrel – seen almost daily

Red-legged Partridge – seen in small numbers on three dates

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Common Pheasant – singles on three dates

Water Rail – heard at three sites in the Camargue with one showing briefly at Salin de Badon on 24/02

Common Moorhen – seen in small numbers in the Camargue

Purple Gallinule – two showed well along the reed edge at Petite Camargue visitor centre on 25/02

Common Coot – good numbers at many sites on four dates

Common Crane – up to 100 in several small flocks in the flocks at Petite Camargue on 21/02 and 25/02, and a wonderful flock of c1000 over fields en-route to Piemanson on 23/02

Little Bustard – up to 80 at Vergieres on 22/02 and 23/02 including several displaying males

Avocet – c50 at Consecaniere on 21/02 and a similar number at Piemanson on 23/02

Stone Curlew – a small group of at Vergieres on 22/02 and 23/02

Northern Lapwing – small flocks seen on four dates

Golden Plover – c75 on La Crau on 22/02

Grey Plover – small numbers seen at Piemanson and in the Camargue on three dates

Ringed Plover – a single at Piemanson on 23/02 and several at Mas d' Agon on 25/02

Kentish Plover – at least 30 with the fantastic wader flock at Piemanson on 23/02 and a single in the Camargue on 21/02

Dunlin – c400 at Piemanson on 23/02, including a Polish colour ringed bird

Little Stint – c75 with the wader flock at Piemanson on 23/02

Sanderling – c20 with other waders at Piemanson on 23/02

Ruff – four at Mas d'Agon on 25/02

Common Redshank – small numbers seen in the Camargue on three dates

Green Sandpiper – several birds seen on two dates in the Camargue

Black-tailed Godwit – up 250 feeding in flooded fields at Mas d' Agon on two dates

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Eurasian Curlew – seen at two sites within the Camargue on three dates

Common Snipe – several birds seen at Mas d'Agon on two dates

Black-headed Gull – seen daily at many sites

Mediterranean Gull – small numbers seen on three dates in a variety of locations

Yellow-legged Gull – common

Slender-billed Gull – a superb group of 20 displaying adults at Consecaniere on 21/02 and two first-winter birds at Saintes Maries de la Mer on the same date

Sandwich Tern – up to 30 birds seen on three dates at Piemanson and Saintes Maries de la Mer

Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon) – common

Wood Pigeon – small numbers seen most days

Collared Dove – common

Eurasian Eagle Owl – wonderful views of a male and female at one of our sites on the evening of 20/02

Common Kingfisher – ones and twos seen at various sites in the Camargue on three dates

Lesser-spotted Woodpecker – superb views of a pair around the car park at La Capeliere on 23/02

Green Woodpecker – one calling around the hotel most mornings

Skylark – seen at various locations in good numbers

Woodlark – two near Les Baux on 20/02 and six at Vergieres at 23/02

Crested Lark – small numbers seen on three dates at a variety of locations

Crag Martin – two at Les Baux on 22/02

Meadow Pipit – common

Richard's Pipit – at least eight Mas Chauvet giving fantastic close views on 22/02

Water Pipit – several seen at three sites in the Camargue on 21/02 and 25/02

White Wagtail – ones and twos seen daily

Grey Wagtail – singles seen on two dates

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Wren – singles on three dates

Alpine Accentor – three at Les Baux on 20/02 and 22/02

European Stonechat – small numbers seen on four dates

European Robin – common

Black Redstart – singles and small groups at many locations daily

Blue Rock Thrush – two at Les Baux on 20/02 and 22/02

Song Thrush – singles seen daily at many sites

Common Blackbird – common, seen daily

Cetti's Warbler – seen and heard on three dates at a variety of locations

Common Chiffchaff – seen daily in small numbers

Blackcap –seen daily around the hotel and ones and twos seen elsewhere most days

Sardinian Warbler – ones and twos seen at a few sites

Dartford Warbler – a male briefly at Consecaniere on 21/02

Firecrest – a single at Les Baux on 20/02 and two birds at Pont du Gau performed wonderfully well on 25/02

Goldcrest – singles at four sites on 3 dates

Crested Tit – at least eight birds seen on Mount Ventoux on 24/02

Blue Tit – ones and twos seen daily

Coal Tit – small numbers seen on Mount Ventoux on 24/02

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Marsh Tit – several showed well on Mount Ventoux on 24/02

Great Tit – common

Long-tailed Tit – small groups seen on two dates

Penduline Tit – two in the Petite Camargue on 21/02 and 25/02 gave some incredibly close views

Bearded Tit – two birds in the Petite Camargue on 21/02 and again on 25/02

Eurasian Nuthatch – seen on Mont Ventoux on 24/02

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Wallcreeper – a single at Les Baux on 20/02 and at least two there on 22/02

Southern Grey Shrike – five birds seen at sites in La Crau on two dates.

Eurasian Jay – seen at Les Baux on 20/02

Eurasian Magpie – common

Common Raven – two birds seen at Les Baux and Mont Ventoux

Rook – recorded on five dates

Carrion Crow – common

Eurasian Jackdaw – common

Common Starling – common

House Sparrow – common

Eurasian Tree Sparrow – a small group seen at the Petite Camargue visitors centre on 25/02

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Chaffinch – common

European Goldfinch – small numbers seen at quite a few sites

Eurasian Siskin – several birds seen on Mont Ventoux on 24/02

European Greenfinch – common

Eurasian Linnet – small numbers at several sites

European Serin – singles seen on two dates

Common Crossbill – four seen very well on Mount Ventoux on 24/02

Reed Bunting – small numbers on three dates

Corn Bunting – small numbers on three dates

Cirl Bunting – a group of six (including four males) at Mas Chauvet on 22/02

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