

Southern France in Winter with Shetland Wildlife

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15 – 21 February 2019

Leader: Judd Hunt

Friday 15 February 2019

The group met at London Gatwick airport and we were soon on our way, arriving on time in Marseille. With minibus formalities taken care of, we drove for less than an hour before arriving at our base for the next six nights, the hotel Mas de la Feniere, which is located in a beautiful rural setting just outside Arles. The weather that greeted us was delightful with light winds, clear skies and 18°C of warmth and we watched a flock of **Cattle Egrets** that were feeding in the horse paddock in front of the hotel.

After checking into our rooms, we drove the short distance to the beautiful town of Les Baux - an ancient citadel where the older, more elevated sections are carved out of the rocks. The rock-faces that surround the town are a traditional wintering site for the enigmatic **Wallcreeper** and it didn't take us long to find not one - but two - of these amazing birds, and we all had wonderful 'scope views.

At this location we also saw a pair of gorgeous **Crested Tits**, a few **Sardinian Warblers** and at least eight **Crag Martins** that were wheeling overhead and around the cliffs in front of us. On the way back to the minibus, we searched in vain for Blue Rock Thrush but did have a great consolation in the form of a stunning male **Girl Bunting** who was in full song.

Back at the hotel, we gathered for a delicious dinner (a common theme throughout our stay) and all commented on what a fantastic start to the trip we'd had!

Saturday 16 February 2019

This morning we headed off to search the areas within La Crau and again, the weather was lovely. In fact, we had superb weather all week which was a pleasant contrast to that in the U.K. before leaving.

Our first stop was at Vergieres and we walked a track that skirted the western perimeter of an area of stony semi-desert. We were soon watching a pair of **Southern Grey Shrikes** as they scanned for prey from atop bushes and stunted trees. Whilst watching these we located a group of **Little Bustards** and saw a minimum of 10 as they tried their best to conceal themselves in an area of long grass.

We changed our viewpoint and in doing so found three wonderful **Stone Curlews** which showed extremely well ahead of us. A few **Stonechats** and **Black Redstarts** were seen before we headed off and drove the short distance to another area of similar, but much larger habitat.

While scanning, we picked up a distant soaring bird of prey and views through the 'scope revealed it to be a fabulous immature **Bonelli's Eagle!** From the same spot we also saw **Red Kite** and good numbers of soaring **White Storks**.

Later, we stopped for refreshments at a nearby cafe and before leaving, we had great views of a **Short-toed Treecreeper** that was feeding in a small copse at the rear of the building.

We visited the large lake named Etang de Aulnes where we enjoyed views of **Red-crested Pochards** and a good assortment of common waterbirds, but a calling **Water Rail** just wouldn't reveal itself.

We then moved to another site on the eastern fringe of La Crau and here we had super views of a **Richard's Pipit** that was associating with a group of **Meadow Pipits**. This Siberian breeder winters in small numbers around the Mediterranean basin and the distance between summer and winter sites is extraordinary! Also here, we watched 28 **Common Cranes** apparently migrating as they flew east, uttering their wonderful and distinctive calls.

In the late afternoon, we returned to Les Baux and we headed up into the town itself to search for another wintering speciality here, **Alpine Accentors**. The warm weather may have encouraged these birds to move back towards the mountains where they breed as we struggled to find them but eventually, we had brief views of one bird. More **Crag Martins** were seen as well as some canary-yellow male **Serins**.

As dusk approached, we drove the short distance to another rocky outcrop to try and see the Eagle Owls that live there. We arrived while the sun was still shining on the rock-face but amazingly, an **Eagle Owl** had begun hooting already! After some time and with the post sunset glow still in the sky, we had great 'scope views of one bird as it sat at the top of a small conifer tree before taking off and gliding out of view – what an amazing way to end the day!

Sunday 17 February 2019

Today we headed into the Camargue and began by searching the fields near St Gilles and it didn't take long to find our target species here, **Common Cranes**. We had amazing views and throughout the day we saw at least three hundred of the incredible birds, some of which were in small family groups containing last year's juvenile birds.

While watching one of these groups, a beautiful male **Hen Harrier** was seen as he quartered above the fields. We then found him on the ground and were able to obtain great 'scope views of this stunning bird. Throughout the day we saw another two of these birds which are sadly still being persecuted at certain areas in the U.K.

We headed on and stopped near Scamandre which lies within Le Petit Camargue. At our first stop, we noted at least a hundred **Purple Swamp Hens** as they called to each other whilst feeding on the vegetation amongst

the cut reeds. We also saw a couple of **Marsh Harriers** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** from this spot before moving to another spot one kilometre away. A short walk from the vehicles produced incredible views of three **Bearded Tits**, lots of singing **Chiffchaffs** that were making their way north plus a booming **Bittern** that remained concealed within the vast reed-beds.

Egrets and herons were everywhere, and we noted **Little, Cattle** and **Great Egrets** plus plenty of **Grey Herons**. We heard many **Cetti's Warblers** singing but good views were at a premium and a **Moustached Warbler** that uttered its occasional sub-song couldn't be located.

From here we moved south towards the coast and stopped in the town of St Marie de la Mer where we used the facilities. Along the beach we watched small groups of **Sandwich Terns** as they flew across the breakwaters and others as they roosted in with the groups of **Black-headed** and **Yellow-legged Gulls**.

We drove out of the town and soon encountered our first **Greater Flamingos** of the trip and had amazing views of birds wading and feeding in the roadside salt pans.

At our lunch stop at Consecaniere we saw two stunning, pink adult **Slender-billed Gulls** and although the views of the first bird we all too brief, the second remained in view for the whole time we were there and afforded us great views through the 'scopes.

A male **Sardinian Warbler** showed well as he delivered his harsh, rattling calls and a **Wren** was seen in the same area of bushes. As we drove away from our lunch stop, we encountered a group of 30 **Glossy Ibis** which were feeding in a roadside pool.

After lunch we visited the reserve at La Capilliere. In the car park we watched a pair of **White Storks** repairing their nest and then found a beautiful little **Firecrest** as it fed in the bare twigs of the surrounding trees, giving some great views.

We then drove for approximately thirty minutes to the eastern fringes of the Camargue and visited the Plage de Piemanson and surrounding salt pans. Along the roadside verges we found a few newly emerged spikes of **Giant Orchids** plus spotted a flock of at least a thousand **Avocets**. From here we saw a group of 40 **Little Stints** and on the river, at least fifty **Black-necked Grebes**.

A few small groups of **Mediterranean Gulls** were watched flying past as we headed down the beach. Here we found a group of fifteen **Common Scoters** which were tricky to watch as they bobbed up and down in the surf. Behind the car park we found more **Slender-billed Gulls** with three adult and two first winter birds present plus better views of a **Mediterranean Gull**.

To end the day, we drove back towards the northern edge of the Camargue and visited a site near Mas D'agon where we watched a flock of six **Spoonbills** fly over. We also saw many more **Glossy Ibis** plus both **Marsh** and **Hen Harriers** - a great way to finish a fantastic day.

Monday 18 February 2019

Following an early breakfast, we headed towards our first destination of the day, the stunning Mont Ventoux. We arrived in good time and were greeted by clear, calm weather and stunning views across southern Provence from our position, approximately five thousand feet above sea level!

Before stopping at Chalet Reynard for refreshments, we pulled over at a traditional site for **Black Woodpecker**. It didn't take too long before we located our quarry with Europe's mightiest woodpecker flying through the trees ahead of us. The red crown revealed that it was a male and he began to drum from deep within the wood. What a fantastic start to the day.

After a comfort stop, we took a stroll through the mixed woodland and almost immediately found another of our target species as a female **Citril Finch** showed very while feeding on the side of the road. The male was nearby but well hidden in a conifer and after a few minutes the birds departed.

A sizable mixed flock of **Fieldfare** and **Redwings** brought a wintery flavour to the birding and a few **Ravens** overhead were watched displaying.

We drove a few more kilometres towards the summit until we reached the snow barrier where the road was closed. This felt a bit odd as there was hardly any snow on the mountain!

We walked for roughly one and a half kilometres above the barrier and were delighted to find a pair of **Rock Buntings** feeding under a stunted conifer. Also feeding on the ground here was a beautiful **Crested Tit** plus a few **Coal Tits** were nearby.

The views from this part of the mountain very breath-taking and we hoped that a few raptors might appear but the only bird of prey we encountered was a **Sparrowhawk** that caused some concern amongst the mixed thrush flock.

After lunch we returned to the site where we'd seen the Citril Finches and were soon watching a beautiful male **Common Crossbill** as he sang from the top of a nearby conifer. The sun was shining on him and really lit-up his gaudy red plumage.

It was soon time to head off towards our next stop, the famous world heritage site at Pont du Gard. The short walk from the visitor centre produced a few **Firecrests** and **Long-tailed Tits** and, as we approached the ancient Roman aqueduct, many **Crag Martins** were seen wheeling around the structure.

We spotted a **Kingfisher** on the river here, but a small, distant flock of **Siskins** proved harder to see. After waiting for an hour or so we began to see

a few **Rock Sparrows** as they arrived for their pre-roost gathering. Initially we saw various bits of the birds as they peaked over the parapet but eventually, we managed good 'scope views of a whole bird that performed well.

It was soon time to leave but at a fuel stop nearby, we heard a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** but despite a thorough search, it couldn't be located. It had been a long but very enjoyable day and after dinner we all retired for a good night's sleep.

Tuesday 19 February 2019

Today we headed back to La Crau area and our first stop was at Marais du Vigueirat and almost immediately saw our main target species here, **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** – initially a distant flock of 20 birds but another group of 11 were seen as they flew over the minibus, occasionally uttering their distinctive calls. Other notables here included **Red-legged Partridges**, several **Little Bustards**, **Stone Curlew**, **Southern Grey Shrike** and a single **Richard's Pipit**.

We then moved to the eastern side of La Crau and stopped near Mas Chauvet. Here we walked for roughly two kilometres in a loop that took us out on to the stony, Steppe-like habitat and saw another small group of **Little Bustards** and three **Stone Curlews**. Before long, our main quarry here was located and we watched eight chunky **Calandra Larks** as they flew around and above us while delivering their delightful song-flights.

A few **Woodlarks** played hard-to-get but **Southern Grey Shrikes** and **Corn Buntings** were more obliging as was a hunting **Red Kite**.

We took our lunch at Etang de Aulnes in a failed attempt to see Penduline Tits but did have amazing, if albeit brief views of a singing **Cetti's Warbler**.

We then headed north to stop again at Les Baux in our continued hunt for Blue Rock Thrush. The thrush evaded us once again, but we did connect with a stunning **Wallcreeper**, some gorgeous little **Serins**, at least twenty **Crag Martins** and good views of a single **Alpine Accentor** inside the town. Also seen well here were **Black Redstarts**, **Sardinian Warblers** and the same male **Cirl Bunting** that we encountered a few days previously.

All too soon it was time to return to our hotel for another tasty dinner.

Wednesday 20 February 2019

We headed back out to La Crau at Marais du Vigueirat before breakfast to see if we could obtain more views of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. We failed to see any sandgrouse but did witness a most glorious sunrise whilst being serenaded but a few close **Woodlarks** and this experience made-up for missing our target birds.

The **Stone Curlew** was heard calling and more **Southern Grey Shrikes** and **Red-legged Partridges** were seen before we headed back to our hotel.

Following breakfast, we headed back into Le Petite Camargue in our quest to find **Penduline Tits** and amazingly, the area where we'd seen none a few days previously produced at least eight birds! We also saw many **Purple Swamp Hens**, a few **Marsh Harriers** but the booming **Bittern** remained unseen.

Tree Sparrows were watched near a lakeside lodge and some of us had brief views of a **Green Sandpiper**, but we failed to locate any Moustached Warblers.

We stopped at the reserve centre in Scamandre and took a stroll around the reed-beds seeing **White Storks** on the nest and some tame **Coypus** that seemed oblivious to our presence! **Cetti's Warblers** were calling everywhere, and we heard **Penduline Tits** but just as we were leaving, we spotted three **Booted Eagles** that were soaring overhead and good views were had by all.

A forty-minute drive took us up into Les Alpilles hills and we took our lunch at the picnic tables in La Caume. After this we strolled along the trails which took us through peaceful woodland until we arrived at the escarpment that houses a large communications tower. From here we walked along a ridge which contains heathland habitat and were having good views of at least four beautiful **Dartford Warblers**. Also here we heard both **Girl Bunting** and **Woodlark** before we began our descent.

After less than a quarter of a kilometre we stopped to scan the ridges just to the north of us and we soon found a pair of adult **Bonelli's Eagles** that were sat in full view. After 'scoping the birds for some time they both took flight and we watched as they drifted across the valley until they were eventually lost to sight. Fabulous - and what a way to end the trip!

Thursday 21 February 2019

After breakfast we bid farewell to the wonderful staff at the hotel who had done a great job looking after us during our stay. We drove back to Marseille airport and took our flight back to London Gatwick arriving just after lunch.