

Winter birding in the Mediterranean

This tour covers the French region of Provence-Alpes-Cote-d'Azur, a beautiful area close to the Mediterranean Sea and the island of Corsica. We visit the limestone hills of Les Alpilles and the wetlands of the Camargue which in winter offer some superb birding for desired species such as Wallcreeper, Citril Finch, Alpine Accentor, Little Bustard and spectacular concentrations of wildfowl from further north and east. This area is bound to produce a few surprises in winter, with recent tours encountering Greater Spotted Eagle and wintering Richard's Pipits. Corsica is located further south in the Mediterranean Sea and offers memorable birding amid some spectacular mountainous landscapes. In particular it hosts two endemic birds: Corsican Nuthatch and Corsican Finch, with other exciting possibilities including Marmora's Warbler, Audouin's Gull and maybe even Lammergeier.

Day 1: We take an early morning flight to Marseille and transfer to our base at Beaucaire. En route we should see our first Little and Great Egrets, White Storks, and birds of prey such as Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier. If time permits we will make an initial exploration of the northern part of the Camargue.

Days 2-4: During our stay we explore three main areas with our daily routine determined by the weather and our success in finding our target species.

We will have plenty of time to explore the world famous Camargue, France's largest wetland. Greater Flamingos are among the most famous inhabitants and we are sure to find them in good numbers. Wintering species from northern Europe include large numbers of ducks, with Ferruginous Duck and Red Crested Pochard, Common Crane and perhaps Bewick's Swan also likely. Raptors include Marsh and Hen Harriers, with White-tailed Eagle and Greater Spotted Eagle also using the area regularly. The extensive reedbeds host Eurasian Bittern and Glossy Ibis with passerines including Penduline Tit, Cetti's Warbler and, with luck, Moustached Warbler.

Inland from the Camargue is La Crau a steppe-like habitat that is home to winter flocks of Little Bustard and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, although the latter can be tricky to locate. Southern Grey Shrike,

Dates

Saturday December 7th - Saturday
December 14th 2019

Leader: Simon MacLaughlin

Group Size: 8

Birds: 120-135

Eurasian Thick-knee and Calandra Lark are further possibilities, whilst there is also a regular site where small numbers of Richard's Pipits spend the winter and our group encountered a flock of five here in 2017.

Les Baux de Provence, is a small town dating back to medieval times and which is perched on top of a huge rocky outcrop with high cliffs. It is known as a regular wintering site for Wallcreeper and we will prioritise finding this sought-after bird. Other possibilities include Alpine Accentor, Crag Martin, Black Redstart, Wood Lark, Serin and Blue Rock Thrush.

On one day we visit the impressive forest and montane habitats of Mount Ventoux. The road passes through areas of forest in which we hope to find Firecrest, Crested and Coal Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, Common Crossbill and with luck perhaps the impressive Black Woodpecker. The upper slopes of the mountain above the treeline are likely to have patches of snow and here we have an excellent chance of



Western Black Redstart

Photo: Jane Stylianou

finding flocks of Alpine Accentors and we also hope to see the sometimes tricky to find White-winged Snowfinch. We will also try to find time to visit the impressive Pont du Gard, an ancient Roman aqueduct that is a regular site for Rock Petronia and also sometimes attracts wintering Wallcreeper.

Day 5: This morning we return to Marseille and fly to Bastia in the north-east of Corsica. Etang de Biguglia is very close to the airport at Bastia and is our first birding stop. Spotless Starlings and Red Kites should be easily encountered. The lake is one of the more important areas for waterbirds on the island and we should find Tufted Duck, Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes. A few Sandwich Terns can usually be found, whilst we have an excellent chance of seeing Audouin's Gull. We will then head up to the old, historic town of Corte, our base for the next three nights.

Day 6-7: Corte is conveniently placed for exploring the mountainous centre of Corsica which is dominated by pine woods, rocky gorges and areas of maquis. Our main interest is in locating the island's two endemic birds: Corsican Nuthatch and Corsican Finch. Exploring some of the

spectacular mountainous valleys we expect to find a selection of commoner woodland species including the local *koenigi* subspecies of Eurasian Wren. In the low maquis scrub, typical of more open areas, we search for Marmora's Warbler and with luck Wryneck, small numbers of which winter on Corsica. The mountains of central Corsica still have a few pairs of Lammergeier, and we visit a valley to search specifically for these magnificent birds. Other species we hope to see include Sparrowhawk, Golden Eagle, Blue Rock Thrush, Cirl Bunting, Raven, Dipper and on the highest slopes Yellow-billed Cough. A visit to the eastern coast will allow us to explore some coastal lagoons where we have a chance of seeing a variety of wildfowl and waders such as Common Sandpiper and Little Ringed Plover. Areas of scrub host Sardinian Warbler, Serin, Common Chiffchaff, Blackcap and perhaps some early returning spring migrants. If there are onshore winds we may try some sea-watching in the hope of seeing Yelkouan and Cory's Shearwaters and perhaps European Shag.

Day 8: We return to Bastia and fly back to Marseille on the French mainland. In the early afternoon, we fly back to London where the tour concludes.

Prices

Ground Price: £1,895
 Single room: £150
 Deposit: £200
 *Air Fare: £300

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, transport and permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance, baggage and credit card charges, items of a personal nature and any relevant fuel surcharges.

**Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights*