

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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**Flowers and Birds in the Lot
10 – 17 May and 17 – 24 May 1997**

Flowers and Birds in the Lot 1997
10-17 May and 17-24 May 1997

Participants

10-17 May

Mary Parrilla
Ann Brown
Judith Booth
Michael Jeeves
Doreen Jeeves
Marjorie Stevens
Sarah Rejman-Greene
Patricia Duffield
John Durdin

17-24 May

Daphne Page
Brenda Brett
Sophia Hankinson
Verna Lennard-Jones
John Lennard-Jones
Pamela Roberts
John Roberts
Margaret Pegg
Angela Turner
Ann Suckling

Leaders: David Brewster

Chris Durdin

Our hosts at Galoubet: Lynn and Doreen Todd.

Galoubet is but a tiny hamlet, not even marked on most maps. But it is a real and rather special place now to scores of people who have stayed at Maison Meulet, and even more firmly on the map for David and myself who have had the pleasure to lead holidays here since 1991.

This report is a souvenir for those there in 1997. We hope it may also be an encouragement for anyone else who may be thinking of going there in the future to enjoy the flowers, birds and butterflies in the French *département* of the Lot.

The holiday reports from weeks one and two are combined, and they have much in common. One of the pleasures of natural history is its unpredictable nature and the changes from year to year. A feature of 1997 was the long, dry and warm spell in the Lot in late winter and early spring, much as we had a period of drought in much of the UK. The most obvious effect of this was to reduce the number of orchids this year, though probably only noticeable to David and myself, and they were still common and varied and stole the show. They are nowhere better than around Galoubet, especially in Maison Meulet's fields - literally outside the back door - which remain the best place to see military and lady orchids.

This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. The conservation contribution of £25 per participant sums to £475 sent to La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO, the French Bird Protection League), part of a total given to LPO of £2,775 since the first holiday here in 1991. A thank-you letter from LPO appears at the report's end, plus a clipping from LPO's L'Oiseau magazine.

At the back of this report there are various lists - including of cheeses - but we start with our daily diaries. I hope you enjoy reading it.

Chris Durdin

Illustrations by Rob Hume. Front cover: Maison Meulet, Galoubet.

Week 1 with David Brewster

Saturday 10 May - Gatwick to Galoubet

The news that there was a strike in France and that only two thirds of the passengers could board the Toulouse flight was less than welcome. However with a bit of juggling the whole group minus the leader managed to get with only relatively little inconvenience. This detachment from the leader failed to dampen enthusiasm for Maison Meulet and an excellent meal prepared by Paul kept the group at the table till nearly midnight.

Sunday 11 May - Local Walks

Leader and group were united after a rather circuitous trip to Galoubet via Bordeaux and a leisurely morning walk was taken up the hill to La Croix Blanche. Spring had obviously come early to the Lot and the orchids were well advanced with bee, woodcock and lizard orchids almost in full flower and on this south facing slope, most of the lady orchids were already over. The first raptor was a honey buzzard, which flew conveniently low so that its barred underside could be clearly seen. The first French butterfly was, however, a less exotic wall brown. By mid-day we had covered less than a mile but hunger pangs drove us homeward down a convenient track. Half way down John spotted a nightingale singing, fully visible on a branch. Despite his assertions that it would continue to sing as we approached it disappeared into more familiar territory of dense scrub. As we left its call throbbing in the air, it was not long before the next one could be heard in bushes adjacent to delightful meadow clary-filled meadows.

As the cloud increased in the afternoon we walked down the valley on a leafy path that runs along the bottom of the oak woodland, adjacent to lush hay meadows. In the shade of the woodland were the first birdsnest and fly orchids and in the grassland good views of meadow and spotted fritillaries, which were too cold to be flying. The destination of the walk was a meadow, which had previously been covered with poet's narcissi and lax-flowered orchids. However the Limousin cattle had got there before us and had demolished all but a couple of the orchids. The narcissi were still there in graceful drifts, each flower solitary with its short trumpet having a crisped, orange margin. While admiring these, the trees suddenly bowed dramatically as a squall struck and as the heavens opened we had to dive for shelter. Out came the waterproofs and it was heads down as we trudged back through the rain to Galoubet. We had commented on the way down the valley about the proliferation of mosses and lichens and now we could see how they survived in what looked such a dry environment.

Paul revived our spirits with a delicious confit of duck and when we finally staggered from the table to see the barn owl the noise of laughter was such that no self-respecting owl or indeed nightjar, which was heard on the other side of the valley, was going to show itself.

Monday 12 May - Labastide-Murat

No formal early morning walk because of the semi-comatose state of the leader, who still managed to get a tantalising glimpse of a red squirrel, thereby whetting everyone's appetite for an early start the next day. Everyone else was getting frustrated with the golden orioles, whose fluting calls were echoing around the valley, but which remained remarkably difficult to see in the oak canopy.

Then off to market day at Labastide-Murat. Ignoring a rich array of local produce the group plunged in utilising their varied knowledge of French to purchase waterproof hats and dry

footwear, which in Judith's case were some startling black and white trainers. Patricia's skills with the language were much in demand already. The purchases suggested a degree of pessimism about the weather, which proved to be groundless as the clouds cleared as we walked past Murat's chateaux and into the countryside. It was only a mile to the lunch stop but the blue-headed wagtails spotted by Michael, the serins twittering from the trees, a melodious warbler confusing us from the scrub and the botanical delights of Nottingham catchfly and field gladioli slowed the pace dramatically. In addition we gained another canine friend; yesterday it had been the neighbours' hound Gibus, today a sheepdog which proved to be remarkably difficult to detach.

Lunch was taken in the sun overlooking a small valley and in the distance the rather incongruous sight of a small golf course, which Ann our resident golf expert was rather disparaging about. We shared our packed lunch with the wood ants, while rather more interesting insects in the form of adonis blues and pale clouded yellows performed over the cone knapweed and field eryngo. Oh, and what were those lovely black and yellow ant lion things? Ah yes, *Ascapthalus libelluloides*.

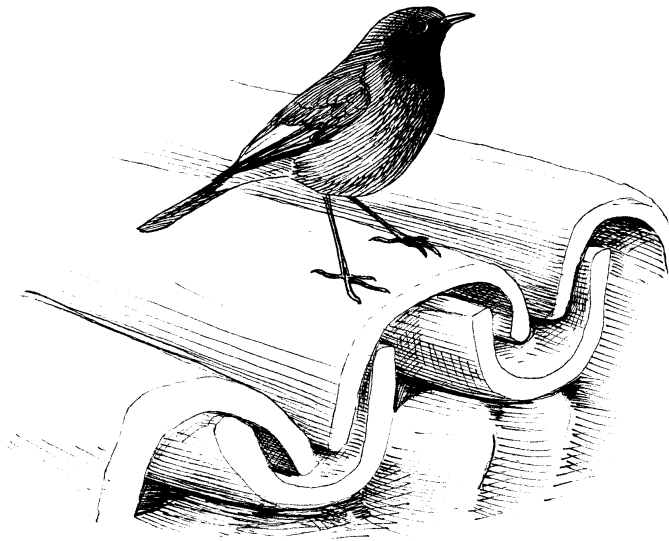
Then down the hill through open woodland, bedecked with various helleborines and bastard balm, to the meadows at the bottom where swallowtails and black-veined whites were visiting the field scabious, clary and star of Bethlehem. While looking at Judith's spiked star of Bethlehem a cry from Michael heralded a more unusual bird - was it a wryneck or was it one of the pair of red-backed shrikes that were hunting among the scrub on the far slope? We gave him the benefit of the doubt although given his track record on identification of orchids I really do not know why! As legs were beginning to get weary we were confronted by the steeply rising track to Beaumat, so the red helleborine, bee orchid and ciril bunting were greeted enthusiastically as excuses to pause and gain breath.

Lynn met us at the top of the hill but alas without the tea. So it was a speedy descent to Galoubet with only the evil smelling dead frog with its attendant sexton beetles and a quick discourse on crucifer identification delaying a brew up. The meal and its accompanying Cahors red wine again left the group brimming over with laughter so a sighting of the nightjar was a forlorn hope, although a couple who were more patient did hear the wing "clapping".

Tuesday 13 May - St Cirq Lapopie and Pech Merle Caves

At last an early morning walk was organised and we would have been accompanied by Doreen if a red squirrel could be promised. It was a pity because Marjorie ably spotted one crossing open ground to a pile of oak logs. There it obligingly spruced itself up giving excellent views. That and a close up view of a Bonelli's warbler left the modest group of early risers very satisfied that their efforts had paid off.

At 10.00am Guy managed the seemingly impossible feat of getting the coach outside Maison Meulet and then we were off to St Cirq Lapopie. The road followed increasingly steeper tributaries of the River Célé until it discharged into the muddy waters of the Lot, and there clinging precariously to the towering limestone cliffs was the clifftop village. Being early May the winding pathways were uncluttered by tourists and a full appreciation of the architecture could be achieved. However it was what was flying over the houses, sitting on them or beside them that excited most interest. Serins and black redstarts on the tiles, swifts and crag martins overhead and scarce swallowtails and hummingbird hawkmoths on the red valerian growing out of the cracks and crevices. Alpine swifts cavorted over the more distant cliffs with breathtaking speed and all too quickly we had to find Guy for the trip to the caves.



Black redstart

Lunch was taken beneath the dappled shade of oaks as nuthatches fed overhead and a honey buzzard flew over at canopy height with nest building material in its beak. Despite Ann noisily squelching tomatoes, Mary managed to hear the first wood warbler. The caves were much admired by the group both for their natural wonders and the early stone age paintings and their appreciation was considerable enhanced by Patricia's simultaneous translation. Out into the warmth again to see the crested cowwheat and winged broom by the car park and then the descent to Cabrerets. Sarah spotted the first of three snakes on the way down, a very well-fed grass snake well over a metre in length once it had been prodded into motion. The second was a yellow and black western whip snake that was nearly trodden on by David as he gallantly tried to retrieve some stonewort in order to demonstrate how it got its name. The third was trying to catch tadpoles in the trout pond formed by the damming of the stream and, as if Paul had read our thoughts, trout was on the menu that night.

Wednesday 14 May - Local Walks

The mist hung around top of the valley discouraging the early risers from venturing too far, however good views of golden oriole and middle spotted woodpeckers were taken close to the house. Both great spotted and middle spotted woodpeckers appeared to be nesting nearby making identification more difficult but this morning the red head and rosy flanks of the adult middle spotted could be clearly seen as it fed at the base of a Lombardy poplar.

Gibus lolloped with us as we walked up the ridge above Combe de Cayrès. As there was short stretch on the main road, John was given the difficult task of getting him to return home, which he managed with a stick and a severe tone. Ahead a woodlark could be heard displaying and eventually two were spotted having a rare old aerial battle while a female observed unimpressed from a nearby oak. After crossing the road we slumped in what was promised to be a patch of grassland studded with pyramidal orchids but alas hardly one raised its lovely head above the grass level. The vagaries of orchid populations or the effect of a dry spring, we never discovered but as we still had not seen monkey, early spider or man orchids we suspected the latter. As the temperatures climbed, out came the speckled woods, pearly heaths and scarce swallowtail and even a four-spotted chaser was seen by one of the trackside ponds, laying eggs on the opposite-leaved pondweed.

The butterfly net was in good use during the afternoon in the meadows down the valley. Firstly a field full of fritillaries including heath, false heath, high brown, meadow, spotted and knapweed and then one full of blues, which necessitated much reference to the butterfly book. Sarah's find proved to be a delightful baton blue, then a mazarine blue was caught, followed by small blue and brown argus. As we returned through the wood in a shower we met John coming the other way and he was able to show us the diggings of wild boar. They had come out of the woods into the meadows to carve up considerable sections of turf in their search for bulbs, tubers and invertebrates. Now that would really make a good early morning sighting.

In fact we thought that we might have heard one crashing through the undergrowth as we stood listening for the nightjar later that evening and anxious glances were cast behind us into the moonlit woodland. The harsh barking a few moments later however identified it as a roe deer which seemed most put out by our nocturnal ramblings. So were the glow-worms which failed to show even though they did not have to compete with Sarah's white ensemble this evening. And as for the barn owl, was it one of Lynn's bluffs?

Thursday 15 May - Rocamadour

Only two managed the early morning walk but were rewarded with excellent views of the golden orioles in the field next to Maison Meulet. In addition we came across a large flock of tits moving through the hedgerows with short-toed treecreepers in attendance and willow tits watching from a distance. It seemed to be very early for flocking, but it would explain the large tracts of woodland with little evidence of them.

Everyone was looking forward to the stop before Rocamadour because waist high lizard orchids had been promised; however these too seem to have succumbed to the dry spring. It was up to Mary to salvage the visit and sure enough, hot on the heels of her red kite, she identified a female subalpine warbler scolding us from her nesting site in a juniper bush. It took the male's arrival for David to be convinced; you would think that by this point in the week he would have acknowledged Mary's superior knowledge! Michael's praying mantis and a patch of white asphodel completed an enjoyable stop and it was with reluctance that everyone boarded the coach.

At Rocamadour, David's discourse on the effect of the Hundred Years War on the town was interrupted, firstly by a hoopoe spotted by Marjorie that turned out to be a great spotted woodpecker and then by the call of a wryneck. With evident relief everyone rushed off to see this small elusive woodpecker and after many descriptions of exactly which branch it was on we all had good views. Over lunch a spotted flycatcher was added to the list and then we all went our different ways for sightseeing and shopping. When we reassembled for tea and beer there was talk of a short-toed eagle being seen, but another larger eagle was seen as we were boarding the coach which confirmed that they were flying the birds of prey collection off the cliff top. Pity, as we were getting near to last year's number of birds seen.

Loubresac was another fortified village whose condition was almost too good to be true but again we spurned the architecture in favour of the birds that could be seen from the viewing point: melodious warbler, serin, black redstart and stonechat. We were not such philistines however that we did not admire the Dordogne Valley with the strategically situated castle of Castlenau. Then back past ragged robin-filled meadows and the odd fallow deer to an identification session by the pool. It was a shame that only David was there when the sparrowhawk flew over at about four feet. The temperature was again tested but remained too low to tempt anyone to plunge in - perhaps tomorrow. Maybe we could have done with an

invigorating dip for there was much yawning and stretching as we finally hauled ourselves away from the table and the evening walk was a few desultory steps while we discussed black holes.

Friday 16 May - All Day Walk

First stop on the all day walk was the pond beside the track past the Mayor's house where crested newts, diving beetles, water boatmen and four large pool frogs were seen among the pondweed. Despite guttural promptings, the frogs unfortunately failed to utter a note. Farther on we left the beaten track and went past clumps of French and dovesfoot cranesbill before gaining access to the wooded ridge. This in previous years had proved itself very good for orchids and so it was this year. Fourteen species in all with Patricia's violet helleborine and later Doreen's spectacular specimen of white helleborine with its creamy flowers and yellow base to the lip.

At the bottom of the slope was a delightful meadow full of scabious and clary which had attracted a host of butterflies. A selection of these was caught with great skill by your leader who brought them for admiration by the group as it reclined in the shade. The most popular was a pristine high brown fritillary that glowed a rich fulvous brown in the sunlight. Another deserted, winding green lane led us down Combe de Font-Neuve until the front markers were stopped by a commotion among the bird life. An unusual assemblage of Bonelli's and melodious warblers and willow tits were mobbing a female red-backed shrike. While the shrike decided that discretion was the better part of valour the other birds remained, affording good views of the warblers for those who had not seen them earlier in the week.

Patricia's sighting of a fox generated a discussion on hunting that took us to the lunch stop. Limousin cattle were grazing the meadow below with an impressive Charolais bull which was much admired until it was realised that there was no fence between us and him. We moved on. A retreating red squirrel marked our return into the oak woods as we climbed up the ridge to Murat. Here at last were the towering lizard orchids that were promised; however not everyone was convinced by the reputed goat smell. The warmth was taking its toll and a number took up Lynn's offer of a lift back to Galoubet. However it was the exertions of the return journey that convinced a select group that the time had arrived to test out the pool. To say it was bracing was an understatement but for Sarah, Marjorie, Judith (in borrowed cozzie) and your leader it certainly honed appetites for Paul's lamb. Afterwards the odes and limericks caused much merriment with Patricia and John sharing the honours for the best ditty. We wandered out into the dusk conscious that it was our last evening in France and we still had not seen a nightjar, nor would we given the noise that accompanied this group wherever it went.

Saturday 17 May - Toulouse

Most of the commoner plants and birds had been identified close to home so we were able to set a brisk pace on the early morning walk to Le Plaget. While admiring someone's new pond, large drops of rain disturbed the surface and we were forced to rethink the route, descending to a grassy track running through woodland. At last lesser butterfly orchids were found. One was picked to show the rest of the group, well there are literally millions of orchids in the Lot, and it was left in the vase on the table to tantalise the next party when they sat down for their first dinner. Breakfast, packing, a leisurely walk, an even more leisurely lunch and suddenly it was all over. Even David finding the first monkey orchid did little to raise spirits. The trip to Toulouse was marked by an epic downpour which made departing easier but we still envied the next group as they came through customs. Still, we did see more orchids than they did ...

Week 2 with Chris Durdin

Saturday 17 May - Gatwick to Galoubet

After a slightly delayed flight, there was David Brewster and three of the first week's group through the glass at Toulouse airport as we waited at baggage reclaim. A black kite drifted around the airport as we loaded into two minibuses and headed north up the *péage* through the rain. Buzzards, magpies and collared doves could be seen alongside the road, and a fine view over Cahors before climbing into the limestone of the Gramat Causse where the first pyramidal orchids could be seen growing by the roadside.

At Galoubet were met by our hosts Lynn and Doreen Todd, housekeeper Erica, and finally chef Paul who seemed able to hold several suitcases in each hand as we were showed to our rooms. The meal that evening in Maison Meulet's pretty dining room showed that carrying cases was a minor talent compared with Paul's culinary talents, a delight for us all week. Complementing the food, the wine is an enthusiasm of Lynn's in which we graciously indulged him; tonight the white a Cotes de Gascoigne and the red a gamay from Touraine. Between the main meal and pudding, the cheese 'checklist' started too - three tonight and every night. And there was wildlife close to hand in the flowers on the table; the reflexed sepals of bulbous buttercup and a lesser butterfly orchid, the origins of which remained obscure - until reading David's account above.

Sunday 18 May - local walks

The usual form for *Honeyguide* groups at Galoubet is a pre-breakfast walk for birds, for which it was wet underfoot but clearing up. Several of us walked up the hill past the Mayor's house, before which there was a cirl bunting on a wire and nightingales and blackcaps singing. In the woods, a Bonelli's warbler trilled and a rich flutey sound told us that a golden oriole was not far away. On the first morning's bird walk ignoring the orchids is impossible, this morning a fly orchid by the track and violet birdsnest orchids under the oak trees.

The morning walk took us down the road and right as far as the farmhouse at Cayrès. In the edge of the hedgebank were the flowers of Jack-go-to-bed-at-noon, which were indeed closed when we returned for lunch. Spindle trees stripped of leaves were followed by two species of maples, happily well-leaved, showing the distinctive three-lobed leaves of Montpellier maple alongside the more familiar five-lobed field maple. Turning right, the rich pink of a clump of Dame's violet caught the eye - as crucifers go relatively easy to identify, unlike so many. A fine black-veined white butterfly was soon outclassed by a perfect, newly emerged southern white admiral which settled on Daphne's shoe.

A middle spotted woodpecker was briefly glimpsed as was a golden oriole; orioles were singing on the edge of the oak wood. White and black bryonies were compared, cypress spurge and chalk milkwort appreciated and the first of many cranesbills were studied - cut-leaved and the less familiar long-stalked cranesbill especially.

A honey buzzard was being mobbed by crows as we turned towards Maison Meulet for lunch, during which, by popular request, Paul showed us how to prepare the curly red peppers that decorated the omelettes and salad.

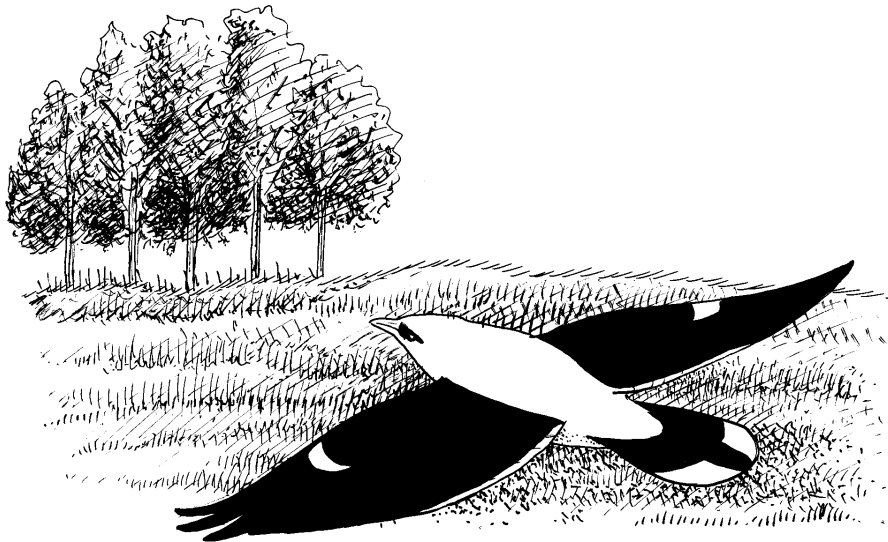
Before the afternoon walk, we popped into Maison Meulet's meadows to see the military, lady, monkey and woodcock orchids. It was a warm afternoon, and Gibus, the local dog who befriends visitors and enjoys a walk with them, led us past his house and along the path with woods on the left and meadows on the right. The warm afternoon began to tempt some

butterflies to come out, for which the net and butterfly box were ready. Black-veined whites - a species extinct in Britain - were common, and several green hairstreaks were real gems. A wood white, with its characteristic weak, fluttering flight, did not need to be netted. A melodious warbler sang its unmelodious, scratchy, sedge warbler-like song from a thick hedgerow. The orchids were steadily being added to the list too: early purple orchid; white-flowered narrow-leaved (or sword-leaved) helleborines were particularly striking; the easily overlooked brown-coloured saprophytic birdsnest orchid; and broad-leaved helleborines, albeit not yet in flower, fairly plentiful alongside the woodland path once your eye was tuned to the species.

This walk ends up at a low-lying, often very wet, meadow, though this year dry as a bone. But despite the drought, the deep magenta flowers of loose-flowered orchids were still to be found, along with one indeterminate marsh orchid, perhaps a hybrid between southern marsh and robust marsh orchids. The seasons can be a funny thing, and never before have I seen so many of the delicate poet's narcissus in this field, perhaps commoner than usual or more likely flowering a little later than usual. Alongside these were many white clusters of star-of-Bethlehem and the fleshy green leaves that show the presence of the September-flowering meadow saffron.

Angela took a detour down the lane and found a flock of starlings with the cattle. But the bird highlight here was a short-toed eagle - a first for Galoubet? - with its distinctive pale underside and, on this individual, dark head, apparent before it soared ever higher and out of sight. Two honey buzzards then dipped and climbed in display flight in the opposite direction. Down at ground level, in the first and rather dry field to the right as we retraced our steps, was a little patch of wild candytuft. A movement in the grass alerted me to a large green lizard, its name as well its appearance, which happily tried to keep out of the way by climbing a small bush so everyone was able to see it well.

Special mention in despatches to Brenda who was the first of six in the pool. Two lengths were quite enough for the less hardy members of the party, but the pool did warm up during the week as the solar panels did their stuff.



After super we stood outside and listened to the churring of nightjars which were in fine, if sometimes distant, voice all week. In one briefest of brief moments, a tawny owl flew into a tree as a barn owl flew into Maison Meulet's barn. The scops owls were silent here, despite trying to whistle them up, which was all the more odd as one had called in broad daylight during the afternoon walk.

Monday 19 May - St Cirq Lapopie and Pech Merle

On the pre-breakfast walk the first flower on the lizard orchid up the road had emerged. A new orchid was found in the woods opposite the hives, at this stage a bit of a mystery.

The drive towards St Cirq took is round the edge of Labastide-Murat and through delightful countryside to the south. The road briefly followed the Célé until that river itself joined the Lot river, over which we crossed a few miles up the river by the narrow bridge which leads to St Cirq. From the car park above we walked down into this immaculate hilltop village. Black redstarts are nowhere scarce in this area but it is curious how they prefer the towns and villages, and they are at St Cirq in plenty, along with a few serins. Many swifts - no alpiners among them - flew around us and way down into the river valley below. Ice creams and postcards were bought, and several climbed to the viewpoint over the river above the village. This is worth doing for botanical as well as scenic reasons, with vipers bugloss, yellow woundwort, French figwort and hoary mullein being found.

St Cirq has been tastefully modernised for the benefit of residents and especially tourists, though few in our group were tempted by what the gift shops and galleries had to offer. But all admired the picturesque, narrow streets and cottages with tiny cottage gardens. There was a curious mixture of garden and wild flowers in almost every crevice; the latter including much pellitory-of-the-wall and ivy-leaved toadflax (no surprises there) and a pale-coloured member of the pink family that is probably tufted catchfly *Silene saxifrage*. All found the archway at the bottom end of the village, as did Jean-Claude and the coach to take us onto Pech Merle.

Our picnic lunch was eaten in the shade of the oaks near the Pech Merle car park. Nearby a yellow pea flower with pronounced wings on the stem was later named as winged greenweed (= winged broom) *Chaemaspartium sagittale*.

Everyone took the tour of the *grottes* with its amazing cave paintings of bison, mammoth and wild cattle, the children's footprints, the brown bear scratch marks and the tap root of an oak - marked outside by a question mark - that descends through the cave and into the floor below. The guide spoke rather rapidly in French, but enough was deciphered to make sense of the history and geology of this relatively recently discovered (1922) cave complex.

After a cup of tea we descended the hillside from Pech Merle alongside banks which are a delight for limestone flora. A patch of crested cow-wheat, a semi-parasitic plant; sheets of Nottingham catchfly, that unfurls its petals for night-feeding moths; bloody cranesbill and bastard balm, lots of vincetoxicum (swallowwort), white and common rockrose, and grass-leaved buttercup were among highlights. The spotted leaves of narrow-leaved lungwort *Pulmonaria longifolia* were found. [At the time, another lungwort *P. mollis* could not be eliminated from the information in the books with us, but the Illustrated Flora of Britain and Northern Europe by Marjorie Blamey and Christopher Grey-Wilson (hardback, Hodder & Stoughton) has this without spotted leaves.] A bellflower was hastily picked as we were collected down the road by Jean-Claude; homework later revealed it was spreading bellflower *Campanula patula*.

There were two stops as we headed north towards Galoubet, one scheduled, the other not. The first was in the woods to look at lesser butterfly orchids along the woodland edge. The second was the most convenient breakdown you could have asked for, just behind the *chateau* at the edge of Labastide-Murat. Jean-Claude borrowed my broolly and in five or ten minutes was back with a minibus, a taxi and Mme Guy from the base of *Guy Transports*, just around the corner. We gather a faulty fuse was eventually diagnosed.

After supper the nightjars again churred and we found a glow-worm under the old cart in the drive.

Tuesday 20 May - Gourdon, and walk from Vaillac

The local market today was in Gourdon, and two bright male serins sang from a TV aerial as we walked into town. The town was full of bustle as the group split up to look or with various purchases in mind. Some made it to the provision market by the church and most met for a coffee at the Hotel Divan and all were back for the agreed 12.30 departure. Jean-Claude then took us to Vaillac, where we picnicked on a wall overlooking the dry bed of the stream that runs through the village. A hummingbird hawkmoth joined briefly and we looked at ferns in the wall, including wall rue and rustyback. A few metres along the road took us to the yellow cross from where we were to follow the yellow waymarks towards Beaumat.

Through the woods, then left in a southerly direction we went. Brenda climbed a fence to take pictures of red helleborine, out early this year. A field of grassy scrub was explored, with many pyramidals but otherwise unusually thin on orchids, but good for flaxes as we looked at both pale and purging (=fairy) flax. A nice find here was the prostrate purple flowers of cone knapweed and the cone like seedheads from which its name comes.

The next leg was down through an oak wood, rich in red helleborines and with a nice clump of fly orchids, through a dry dip that last year was a flood, and up again to the road. Here the umpteenth cranesbill of the day was flowering, small-flowered cranesbill, but not for long as a man with a lawn mower moved in as we left.

We popped into the small church at Beaumat, restored in 1994, before heading along the roads and tracks towards Galoubet, all coping well with a brief shower of rain. In the arable area was a rich patch of birds; corn bunting singing on the wires, whitethroat in song flight, a hoopoe flying through, woodlark, melodious warbler and a flock of long-tailed tits. In the edge of the corn, approaching Merle, was a real, wild cornflower: when did anyone last see one of those? Right by it in the grass were several deep crimson flowers of brown vetch, a name that undersells this attractive vetchling.

The bird of the day was, undoubtedly, the woodlark that sat on a concrete electricity post just after the barking dog at Merle. It sat there as patiently as any bird possibly could, allowing us time off from watching it to follow the two honey buzzards behind.

A black and white woodpecker disappeared from a tree by the turn to Galoubet, and the nest hole was soon located. With a group of us there, even with young in the nest calling away, the adult bird understandably seemed to be thinking better of returning. I waited a while after the group left and in minutes a great spotted woodpecker appeared. The following morning all was quiet; almost certainly the young had fledged.

Wednesday 21 May - local walks

Armed with butterfly net, the morning walk took us past the Mayor's house and into the oak woods. The day turned out to be rather overcast and the butterflies not performing. Very nearly out in the wood was small yellow foxglove - a new flower for Galoubet. A Bonelli's warbler trilled but remained elusive for most, but while searching for this a short-toed treecreeper appeared. We took time out to look at the mystery orchids in the wood, which by then had been identified as violet helleborines. Margaret has these growing on her lawn in deepest

Bedfordshire, it turned out, and she was able to confirm and tell us about the discovery of these back home. Birdsnest orchid and red helleborine were growing nearby.

The pond by the track had a large frog in it, and watched what we assumed were newts that kept popping to the surface to take flies. Farther along was a delightful clump of wild gladiolus *Gladiolus illyricus*.

At the end of the track we turned left and walked a few metres along the road. It is curious how the dry roadside creates a different habitat; cone knapweed was evident as was the yellow flowers of common fumana. We turned left onto the next track that goes through the Combe de Cayrès and back to base, finding a tree pipit on a perch just above the farm at Cayrès and two woodlarks on the home stretch.

After a siesta, six of us decided to brave the showers. Along the D22 and up the scarp to Pisserate we went, pausing only to admire the wildlife and not for breath, of course. Two rather similar pea flowers were found side by side, both with a bizarre structure where what look like leaves are in fact developed stipules. The larger was yellow vetchling, also found in Britain, the smaller second being annual scorpion vetch which is only in the Mediterranean flower book. John R then headed back, improving the ratio of umbrellas (3) to walkers (now 5). A scops owl called several times, and we took time out to compare it with the reversing bleeps of a lorry somewhere. Had the latter set off the former?

The umbrellas soon came in handy as we sheltered under them and a tree while a strong but brief shower passed. The rain gone, and immediately the 'wet-my-lips' song of a quail floated across the fields. A nice find in the cultivated area was an unfamiliar umbellifer hartwort *Tordylium maximum*. Like all hartworts the outer petals of the umbel are larger; this species has bristly, down-turned hairs on the stem.

A buzzard flew up we started down the 'runner's track', so called as the tumble-down wreck at the end was once described as a nice runner for conversion by an early Galoubet visitor. A trough at the top, presumably once for cattle, had the most enormous tadpoles, and brooklime was growing in the damp bits alongside. We passed more gladioli on the track on the last leg back to base.

Thursday 22 May - Rocamadour

Between Calès and Rocamadour, part of the Gramat Causse makes an outcrop onto a the limestone plateau that always makes a good stopping place. Pink convolvulus, the yellow pea argyrobium and fumana were soon found, and grass-leaved buttercup recognised from earlier in the week. Two different small butterflies took a little identifying as safflower skipper and baton blue; also on the wing were a black kite and a singing woodlark. Many of the specialities here need getting down to; white rockrose, Montpellier milkvetch, cut-leaved self-heal, bastard toadflax and white (=Pyrenean) flax being examples. We made our way up the slope and around the corner to the right in search of a flower nearer to eye level, and the tall, pale spikes of St Bernard's lilies were in good form. Presumably, like the dogs, they were named in honour of St Bernard of Aosta (d.1081 aged 85) who took special care of alpine travellers.

Jean-Claude took us on to the top of the cliff at the spectacular site of Rocamadour. Our picnic lunch was taken in the cliff-top round the corner from the chateau. This was interrupted by the strident calling of a wryneck in the trees over the wall; its camouflage meant it took a little finding but it very decently kept still for several minutes.

Then we descended past the 14 stations of the cross, albeit in reverse order and not in the time-honoured fashion on one's knees. Robins are reputed to be shy woodland birds on the continent but those in the wood on our descent evidently hadn't read the textbooks; no doubt they are very used to visitors, and so too the great spotted woodpeckers in a nest hole by the path. The fern southern polypody was noted, much larger than common polypody but with a similar growth form, and several Judas trees were in leaf. Most visited the celebrated black virgin in the chapel before descending to the shopping street on the bottom layer. Special mention in despatches to Daphne who walked back up to the top with me; most sensibly took the *ascenseur*.

A photostop a few hundred metres along then gave us the chance to record what a striking place this really is; part hanging from, part hewn from the towering cliffs over the river Alzou.

Gluges was our final stop of the day, a pretty village under a cliff and by the river Dordogne, though here in the department of the Lot. Blue lettuce was found, then something bluer still: a kingfisher on a backwater of the river, then a second, then a third, no doubt a family. House martins by the score were nesting on the rugged cliffs, as were pigeons that looked like real rock doves. Maidenhair ferns, just those you buy in pots back home, were growing in a damp corner by an old tap supplying spring water.

Back at the coach, Jean-Claude had disappeared and was replaced by Guy of *Guy Transport*. Guy's progress with English is steady: I have known him since 1990, seven years, and he can count in English to ... seven. By the end of the week he was just about coping with eight, but nine was definitely a step too far.

Maurice, the local farmer, neighbour and Mayor of the commune of Beaumat joined us for supper, along with his wife Brigitte. They know less English even than Guy, but their friendliness as ever overcame language barriers. Many thanks to the French speakers - on my table especially Sophia - who helped to make the evening such a success, and thanks to everyone for giving them such a warm welcome.

Friday 23 May - Labastide-Murat and walk back

Labastide-Murat is a pretty market town. Main stop was the new *huit-à-huit* supermarket, plus a look at the church and the birth place of Labastide's famous son, Joachim Murat, Napoleon's brother-in-law. None of this takes too long when it's not market day, and it wasn't long before we were all at the Hotel Climat for a drink and ready for Lynn's timely arrival to take our various purchases back to base. Serins and black redstarts in town led us onto the cross-country walk back to Galoubet. There was some time spent recapping on the many local geraniums, including shining, cut-leaved, long-stalked, round-leaved, dovesfoot and hedgerow cranesbills, plus herb Robert and little Robin. Round the back of the chateau a roe deer appeared in the road ahead of us, and was pursued by the dog that had briefly adopted us. It look set to follow us for a time, including on the next brief stretch on the main road, but a fierce "Go!" successfully sent him scurrying away, while giving quite a start to those within earshot. The route then took us along a quiet lane past Guy's house, before crossing the main road to seek out a spot for lunch. This was part in the shade and part in the sun, by a field of pyramidal orchids and accompanied by a singing corn bunting.

The route took us past a patch of scrub with a singing melodious warbler giving good but brief views, then rather more obvious stonechat and linnet. Flower-rich woods followed which included our first twayblade, burnt-tip orchids and round-headed rampion; it seems surprising that this last scabious-like flower is related to the bellflowers. A brief detour took us into the golf club at Bourrat, where Alison supplied much needed drinks and told us of the long periods

without water and electricity before she and Paul got the place up and running. Their dog followed us back to the road, but was sent back a little less ferociously than the previous one.

It was the warmest evening so far and there were several glow-worms glowing.

Saturday 24 May - Galoubet to Toulouse

Maurice had invited us to their place this morning, where we watched the local tourist board's promotional video on the Lot and bought home-made honey from the hives we had seen in the woods. Then lunch, farewells, by coach to Toulouse and a smooth flight back to England.

CHEESES

This list of cheeses has rapidly moved from being an eccentricity to being *de rigueur* in the holiday report. There were at least three every evening, the usual combination being a hard cheese, a soft cheese and a blue, a real touch of luxury. This is the list for the second week; the range was similar in week one. The meals were always served with generous supplies of good wines, so this may account for any omissions or spelling mistakes ...

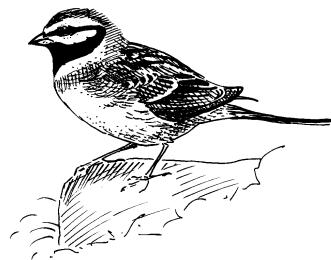
Saturday	Reblochon Comté Bleu d'Auvergne	Soft cheese from Savoy Jura, hard
plus	Cabécou - cooked	local goats cheese, Gramat <i>causse</i>
Sunday	Forme d'Ambert Cantal entre deux Vigner	a mild blue hard soft local cheese from Gourdon
Monday	Ponte-l'Eveque Etorki Bleu St Agur	soft, Normandy Basque hard
Tuesday	Brebis Saint-Nectaire fermier Roquefort	hard sheeps' milk cheese Auvergne the famous blue cheese
Wednesday	Beaufort Bleu de Bresse Carré Emmental	Hard cows cheese from Rhone-Alpes local hard, from various regions
Thursday	Salers (at lunch) Grieges d'arriege Fougerus Tomme de Pyrénées	Auvergne hard blue brie-type, Ile-de-France hard
Friday	Cabécou Munster-Géromé Vache de Pyrénées Bleu de Bresse or Grieges	soft, Alsace-Lorraine hard, from cows milk

BIRDS

Species marked with a 1 or 2 were seen only on the first or second week respectively, otherwise everything was seen both weeks. H = heard.

Purple heron	1	Robin	
Mallard		Nightingale	
Honey buzzard		Black redstart	
Black kite		Stonechat	
Red kite	1	Blackbird	
Short-toed eagle	2	Song thrush	
Buzzard		Mistle thrush	
Kestrel		Grasshopper warbler	H, 1
Quail	H, 2	Melodious warbler	
Red-legged partridge		Subalpine warbler	1
Pheasant	1	Whitethroat	2
Moorhen	2	Blackcap	
Black-headed gull	2	Bonelli's warbler	
Rock dove/feral pigeon		Chiffchaff	
Woodpigeon		Goldcrest	H, 1
Collared dove		Spotted flycatcher	
Turtle dove		Long-tailed tit	
Cuckoo	(only H for week 2)	Willow tit	1
Barn owl		Blue tit	
Scops owl	H	Great tit	
Tawny owl		Nuthatch	
Swift		Short-toed treecreeper	
Alpine swift	1	Golden oriole	
Kingfisher	2	Jay	
Hoopoe (only H for week 1)		Magpie	
Wryneck		Jackdaw	
Green woodpecker		Rook	1
Great spotted woodpecker		Carrion crow	
Middle spotted woodpecker		Raven	1
Woodlark		Starling	
Skylark		House sparrow	
Sand martin	1	Chaffinch	
Crag martin	1	Serin	
Swallow		Greenfinch	
House martin		Goldfinch	
Tree pipit		Linnet	2
Grey wagtail	1	Cirl bunting	
Blue-headed wagtail	1	Corn bunting	
White wagtail			
Wren			
Dunnock	1		

79 species



BUTTERFLIES

Numbers vary from week to week and between years according to the weather, the amount of effort put into catching and identifying the difficult groups such as fritillaries, and the time of year. But irrespective of all this, a combined list of 40 species underlines the richness of this area for butterflies.

	week 1	week 2
Dingy skipper	x	
Safflower skipper		x
Grizzled skipper	x	
Brown argus	x	x
Green hairstreak	x	x
Holly blue		x
Duke of Burgundy fritillary	x	
Small blue	x	
Adonis blue	x	x
Common blue	x	
Baton blue	x	x
Mazarine blue	x	
Small tortoiseshell	x	
Painted lady	x	
High brown fritillary	x	
Niobe fritillary		x
Southern white admiral	x	x
Glanville fritillary	x	
False heath fritillary	x	
Knapweed fritillary	x	
Spotted fritillary	x	
Heath fritillary	x	
Provencal fritillary	x	x
Meadow fritillary	x	x
Comma		x
Red admiral	x	x
Scarce swallowtail	x	x
Swallowtail		x
Orange tip	x	x
Black-veined white	x	x
Small white		x
Clouded yellow	x	
Pale clouded yellow	x	
Brimstone	x	
Wood white	x	x
Pearly heath	x	x
Small heath	x	x
Wall brown	x	x
Meadow brown	x	x
Speckled wood	x	x



ORCHIDS

Most orchid species - 19 in the list below - were seen in both week one and week two.

Pyramidal orchid
Narrow-leaved helleborine
Red helleborine
Violet helleborine
Broad-leaved helleborine (not in flower)
Lizard orchid
Violet birdsnest orchid (limador)
Birdsnest orchid
Common twayblade
Bee orchid
Woodcock orchid
Fly orchid
Loose-flowered orchid
Early purple orchid
Military orchid
Lady orchid
Monkey orchid
Burnt-tip orchid
Lesser butterfly orchid



White helleborine and early spider orchid were seen in week one as well, and a hybrid marsh orchid in week two.

The dry late winter meant orchids were fewer in number than usual so neither group found man orchid, southern marsh orchid, green-winged orchid, robust marsh orchid, early marsh orchid or common spotted orchid. On the up side, it was an excellent year for red helleborine, often too late to see in flower, and violet helleborines were found by both groups for the first time.

Un généreux soutien aux Refuges LPO

Chris Durdin, membre de la Royal Society for the Protection of Birds - Grande-Bretagne, organise chaque année des séjours naturalistes dans le Lot, dont le charme l'a conquis. Depuis 1991, Chris et son agence Honeyguide - Wildlife Hollidays, soutiennent l'action de la LPO en faveur des Refuges et de la reconnaissance du droit de non-chasse. En sept ans, près de 28 000 F ont ainsi été versés à la LPO. Encore un grand merci et bon séjour de "birdwatching" en France !

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des Oiseaux



L'OISEAU magazine n° 48



Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux

Association reconnue d'utilité publique

Rochefort, 15 July 1997

Dear Holidaymakers,

By joining Chris Durdin on his Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays and discovering the beauty of nature in the Lot, you are helping our national campaign " Créez un REFUGE LPO chez vous ".

Since 1991, Honeyguide has been helping this action that aims to create a network of havens for birds and nature.

REFUGES LPO are private gardens, parks in towns, properties in areas of marshland or woodlands,... where the owner wants to protect fauna, flora and landscape.

They are places where there is no hunting and which are managed in a natural way for wildlife.

This autumn, LPO is going to launched a new campaign called " Jardins d'oiseaux " (Birds gardens) in order to incite people to be more aware of their immediate environment and to care daily about it.

Yet, new "REFUGE LPO" signs are available and we will soon dispose of a new leaflet.

Since January 97, 120 REFUGES LPO have been created, and the trend is that more and more people are motivated for this action.

Moreover, because a lot of people are facing hunting on their land, we are developing information to help them to solve their problems.

So, thank you very much to support us and have a fine birdwatching stay in France.

Yours sincerely.

Sophie Creusot
In charge of REFUGE LPO



Siège social national : LPO - Corderie Royale - BP 263 - 17305 Rochefort cedex - Tél 05 46 82 12 34 - Fax 05 46 83 95 86

Représentant officiel de BirdLife International en France