

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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**Flowers and Birds in the Lot
9-16 May and 16-23 May 1998**

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Participants

9–16 May

James Stott
Jean Stott
Vic Dowsett
Brenda Dowsett
Rosemary Bonney
Michael Bonney
Evelyn Maddock
Helen Daniell
Terry Hotten

16–23 May

Guy Lewis
Iris Lewis
Elizabeth Holman
Pete Peters
Rita Peters
Vic Dowsett
Brenda Dowsett
Helen Daniell
Gordon Collinson
Pauline Collinson
David Green
Janet Green

Leaders: David Collins

Chris Durdin

Our hosts at Maison Meulet, Galoubet: Lynn and Doreen Todd

I first visited Galoubet in September 1990. Maison Meulet was then in need of considerable renovation. The earth closet in the garden was still in use, for example; quite a contrast with the present comforts which include the best of food & wine and a solar-heated swimming pool.

Equally important though is what has not changed. May should be a good month to come, I thought, to coincide with the orchid flowering season, but I underestimated the splendours there to greet us the following spring. This year, ten or twenty metres up from the spreading chestnut tree that gave shade to outdoor breakfasts, outside that old earth closet, there were military, lady, monkey, woodcock, lizard and pyramidal orchids. Each new Honeyguider seeing this natural show gives me a chance to relive my first astonishment in 1991.

The holiday reports from both weeks are combined here as usual. There is much in common, but also differences between what we saw, as there is between different years too. This is in part down to the different pairs of eyes and ears in the group, not least this year those of David Collins who so admirably stepped into the breach at a week and a half's notice when David Brewster had to drop out.

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 this year of £425 sent to La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO, the French Bird Protection League) brings the total given to LPO to £3,200 since 1991. A thank-you letter from LPO appears at the report's end.

At the back of this report are various lists, including cheeses, but we start with our daily logs. I hope this makes a good souvenir and aide memoire for those on the holidays and gives a good taste of the area for anyone thinking of going to Galoubet in the future.

Chris Durdin

Illustrations by Rob Hume (including cover) and Brenda Dowsett (fire salamander and broad-bodied chaser). Front cover: Maison Meulet, Galoubet. At the end of the report there is also a scanned copy, in two parts, of an article from the Eastern Daily Press by David Green.

Week 1 with David Collins

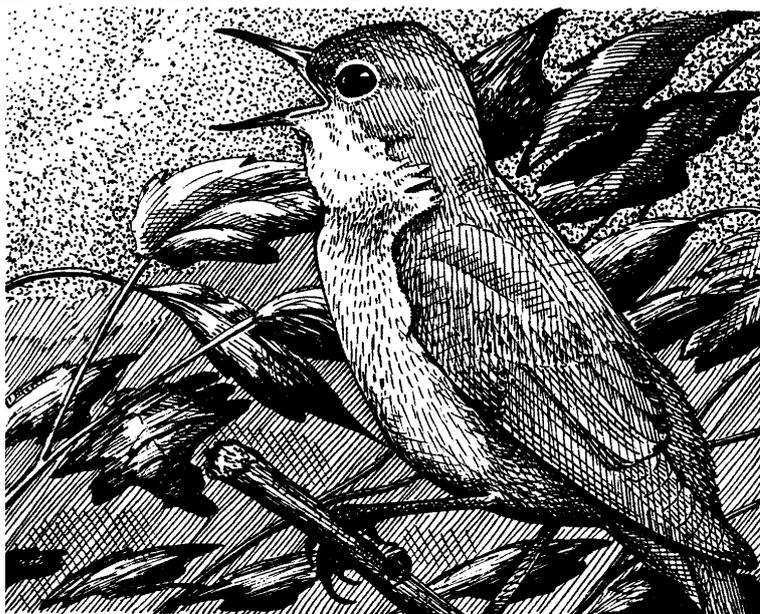
Saturday 9th May – Gatwick to Galoubet

Just over a week before, Chris had phoned to ask if I could stand in for David Brewster, who normally leads the first group at Maison Meulet. Well, here I was at Gatwick airport, none too sure that I had remembered to bring everything. It wasn't until I actually got on the plane and could finally relax that it dawned on me that I was indeed short of one important item. I had remembered to pack the butterfly net, but not the all important butterfly box. Without this it would be next to impossible to identify what we managed to catch! Fortunately, British Airways had the perfect solution in the form of a clear plastic drinking cup and neatly interlocking plastic juice container!

Soon after landing at Toulouse we were aboard the coach and on our way to Maison Meulet. To begin with the countryside was quite English looking, although occasional Black Kites served as a reminder that we were in France. As we neared our destination, though, the fields became smaller, the countryside emptier, and the lanes narrower. Just as it seemed the lanes would become entirely impassable for our coach, we arrived at Galoubet, and Jean-Claude drew up outside Maison Meulet. We stepped outside into the warm evening air, and there were our hosts to greet us.

This was my first time at Maison Meulet, so as soon as I had dropped my luggage in my room I joined Lynn for a quick briefing. This consisted of a ten minute stroll through the little fields behind the swimming pool, drinking a glass of fine red wine whilst at the same time taking in the dozens of Lady Orchids in prime condition – all to the accompaniment of a Nightingale! This, I decided, was the way to hold a briefing.

Shortly after, we sat down to our first meal together. It was a meal of exceptional quality; or at least it would have been anywhere else – we soon found that this was the norm at Maison Meulet.



Sunday 10th May – Local Walks

Mick and I were the only early risers for the pre-breakfast bird walk. We headed up past the neighbouring farm and on to the higher land beyond, notching up a total of 29 species. Although the list of birds singing (including Nightingale, Melodious Warbler, Bonelli's Warbler, Golden Oriole and Short-toed Treecreeper) was rather more impressive than the list of birds seen we did spot both Woodlark and Cirl Bunting. More unexpected was a female Pied Flycatcher – the only one of the week.

Breakfast was *al-fresco* to the sound of Nightingale, Golden Oriole and Cuckoo. We then set off on the morning's walk, starting with a quick look in the orchid fields by the house. In addition to the splendid Lady Orchids we quickly found Monkey Orchid, Woodcock Orchid and Burnt Orchid, as well as literally hundreds of Military Orchids which were just about to flower. Closer inspection revealed a number of Adder's-tongue Ferns, a fine Early Spider Orchid and Early Purple Orchids. We also admired Cypress Spurge, Spurge Laurel and the distinctive foliage of Montpellier Maple. Butterflies included a delightful Green Hairstreak, both Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, and Glanville Fritillary.

Thus far we had managed only about 200 yards, and our "quick look" had taken up the best part of the morning. With lunchtime fast approaching, we decided to press on down the valley. The lane was something of a highway

for blue butterflies: the beautiful Adonis Blues were relatively easy to identify, but the butterfly net was essential for confirming the much smaller Provencal Short-tailed Blue. The British Airways drinking set proved ideal for butterfly identification!

After lunch we set off on our first proper walk, with the friendly local dog Gibus quickly established his position as a member of the group. We passed his house and followed the track down through meadows and woods, stopping to admire flowers, butterflies and birds as we went. At one point we somehow lost the track, and it was thanks to Gibus (who knows the area rather better than a first-time leader!) that we managed to find it again. As a result of our short detour though, we did stumble upon a meadow full of Poet's Narcissus.

In an open area Pale Clouded Yellows danced over meadows which were a riot of colour: yellow Cypress Spurge, blue Chalk Milkwort and Globularia, and numerous spikes of Early Purple Orchids. There were also large numbers of Burnt Orchid, and our first Fly Orchids. A Melodious Warbler singing in the hot sunshine stayed in view long enough for most of the group to get excellent views through the telescope.

Finally we crossed a lane (not a vehicle in site) and descended into a wet meadow where several Loose-flowered Orchids were in peak condition, and we also found a single Early Marsh Orchid. We were all quite hot by now, so we set off back along the track towards home, with thoughts of a cold drink and a refreshing shower uppermost in our minds. However, the return journey was punctuated by stops to look at some of the things we had missed on the way out, including a colony of Green-winged Orchids, a group of Narrow-leaved Helleborines and best of all several spikes of Birds-nest Orchid.

As a second sensational dinner came to a close, Lynn suggested we might like to take advantage of the beautiful warm, moonlit evening for a Nightjar/owl session. Stepping outside the sound of Nightingales was all around, the Barn Owl was glimpsed briefly as it flew from the Pignonier, and we did indeed hear a Nightjar calling on the far side of the valley. It had been a long day though and the group decided to turn in. I decided to find out whether the Nightjar was accessible, and was rewarded by fine views of two birds performing the wing-clapping display in the moonlight!

Monday 11th May – Labastide-Murat

Again, only two of us set out for the pre-breakfast bird walk – this time Vic was my companion. We tried the “runners track” which produced a reasonably obliging Bonelli's Warbler and three hares playing chase in a weedy field. Back at base, I had a quick look in the wood near the house - by now known as the Oriole Wood - and was rewarded with a good if brief view of a splendid golden male. This despite the ever present Gibus.

After breakfast Guy arrived to ferry us by minibus to the market in Labastide-Murat. After purchasing presents we gravitated to the Climat Hotel for refreshing drinks prior to the walk back to Galoubet. Last year the group had purchased assorted rain-wear. This time it was shops selling sun-tan lotion that made a killing!

Clutching a map in one hand I lead the group off through the quiet streets of the town and out into open countryside. In view of the heat, I must admit that I was just a little worried in case we got lost and the planned 5 mile walk became extended! However, both Chris Durdin and Lynn had coached me well, and there were no problems.

The first part of the walk was along a series of minor roads. Plants growing on the banks included good numbers of Woodcock Orchids, Early Spider Orchid and Slender Bedstraw. A Cirl Bunting singing its dry rattle from somewhere near the top of a tree eventually provided some of the group with good views, and Mick spotted a Red Kite circling over a wooded valley. Shortly after that there was excitement of a different kind when an Adder slipped away through the grass verge, after having been narrowly missed by someone's boot!

We then crossed the main road onto the track to the golf course. Once we had put sufficient distance between ourselves and the road we found a suitable grassy slope for our picnic. Trying not to flatten too many orchids, we settled down to enjoy our packed lunches. The origin of the strange white substance in my day-sack was revealed when I opened my lunch box to discover that the salt had emptied itself from the seller!

From our vantage point we looked over a lovely flowery meadow, with a scrubby patch beyond where a Melodious Warbler was singing. With lunch drawing to a close, a superb male Red-backed Shrike appeared and we all had great views through the telescope. The butterfly net was then produced and with the British Airways contraption pressed into action again we managed to confirm three species of Clouded Yellow (common, pale and Berger's), plus the first of many Meadow Fritillaries.

At this point we decided that drinks at the golf course was next on the agenda, but we had reckoned without the rich display of orchids which awaited us in the open wood lower down. There were literally hundreds of spikes of Narrow-leaved Helleborine, all in prime condition, also large numbers of Burnt Orchids, plus Fly and Violet Birds-nest Orchid. Meanwhile, a Quail was uttering its distinctive song in a nearby meadow.

When we finally made it to the golf course it was well into the afternoon and the English couple who run it had almost given us up as lost! Suitably refreshed we set off resolutely on the last leg of the walk, but we were soon dallying again to admire plants; not orchids this time but Purple Gromwell and Lungwort. At the top of the hill we noted our first Corn Bunting of the week before dropping down towards home. Beside the road more Violet Birds-nest Orchids were much admired, and the butterfly net was put into action again as we descended via the "running track". Here we added Pearly Heath, Dingy Skipper and Duke of Burgundy Fritillary to bring the day's butterfly list to 20.

After another delicious meal, most of the group set off on a lovely warm evening in search of Nightjars. Unfortunately they were not performing so well tonight, but we did briefly see one flying in the moonlight.

Tuesday 12th May – St.Cirq-Lapopie and Pech Merle Caves

Mick was the only early riser this time, and during breakfast he delighted in describing his amazing views of a male Golden Oriole which had evidently perched in full view for some time. He had also heard a Hoopoe calling somewhere across the valley.

Breakfast over, Guy arrived in the coach to take us to the picturesque cliff-side town St. Cirq. We were dropped off above the town and made our way down through the narrow, winding streets. Hoary Mullein, Towercress, and both Round-leaved and Bloody Cranesbills were noted, but it was the architecture that stole the show, although four Alpine Swifts briefly demanded our attention.

We were then taken to the caves at Pech Merle where we lunched at picnic tables under oak trees. At was at this point that my second disaster involving the salt seller was discovered. This time it had been carefully wrapped in foil to prevent further spillage. Unfortunately, it was completely empty! Redstart and Spotted Flycatcher were singing but neither were seen, and the main natural history interest during lunch was provided by the rather large number of caterpillars descending from the trees above!

In the cave we did our best to understand the softly spoken French guide, matching our English notes to the features as best we could. Whilst some of the figures needed a good deal of imagination to decipher, the spotted horses were really wonderful. Emerging back into daylight, I couldn't help wondering what it would have been like to do so 12,000 years ago when the mammoths, bears, bison and wild horses depicted in the cave drawings were here to be hunted. What would the flora have been like then?

Descending the track through woodland to the small town of Cabrerets below we found that today's flora is interesting enough, with a profusion of Bloody Cranesbill, White and Common Rockrose, Nottingham Catchfly, plus the inevitable orchids, this time including Monkey. On the edge of the village Rue-leaved Saxifrage was found on a wall, and a Star of Bethlehem somehow survived the attentions of a man with a strimmer who appeared to be doing his best to thwart our botanical investigations.

And so to the bar for a welcome drink before setting out to explore Cabrerets. Growing on the cliff above us were clumps of the pretty, red flowered Rock Soapwort, and several Crag Martins were located amongst the hundreds of Swifts and House Martins wheeling overhead. At the river were both White and Grey Wagtails, and a Coypu was observed carrying weed to its nest. Then it was back to base for more delicious food and wine. After that another search for Nightjars which we heard churring but could not see. Tawny Owls were also noisy.

Wednesday 13th May – local walks

Mick and I were again the only early risers. This time we walked down the lane in the direction of the Loose-flowered Orchid marsh. Two species were added to the bird list - Nuthatch and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. The Nuthatches were seen well quite close to Maison Meulet, but the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was only heard drumming. A Bonelli's Warbler perched in the top of a tree gave good views with the aid of a telescope.

After breakfast we walked up past the Mayor's house, with Gibus for company as usual. A Cirl Bunting gave good views but a tantalisingly close Golden Oriole, just past the house, proved as elusive as ever. We did, however, catch a glimpse of a Red Squirrel. In the open country beyond we watched a Woodlark singing high above us, and we stopped to admire a particularly fine Bastard Balm.

There was a short stretch of road, where I had to hold Gibus by the collar in order to prevent catastrophe, then we headed back down into the valley towards Galoubet. A field near the road held large numbers of Green-winged Orchids, but a much more spectacular display of orchids was found under trees just to the right of the track. This area was full of Narrow-leaved Helleborines, with good numbers of Violet Birds-nest Orchids, Burnt Orchids, Birds-nest Orchids, Lady Orchids and Fly Orchids. It was with some difficulty that we tore ourselves away from this spot and headed quickly back to the house for lunch. Quickly that is except for a stop to admire an obliging Melodious Warbler singing near the top of a bush. As if this was not enough, a dashing male Stonechat then came and perched on the same bush.

The afternoon was declared a free half day and, with the hot weather continuing, it was no surprise that most of the group opted to relax by the pool. However, Terry and I ventured up the "running track" in a more serious attack on the butterfly list. Surprisingly, the only species we added were Holly Blue, Green-veined White and Wall Brown - hardly due reward for a couple of hours running about in the heat. We did, however, have particularly fine views of the handsome yellow and black "ant-lions" *Ascaphalus libelluloides*.

Back at the house I finally tried the pool, which had now reached the magic 20 degrees. If that sounds warm, it certainly didn't feel it! After that, Mick, Vick, Brenda and I rounded the afternoon off with a very enjoyable game of *boule*.

Thursday 14th May – Rocamadour

We changed tactics for the early morning bird walk and started out at eight for the Oriole Wood. This proved a popular decision and most of the group attended. The target bird was, as ever, Golden Oriole. Although the singing birds remained elusive, we did all get good views of a male flying over a clearing. After a while we sat down on a bank where there were good views into the wood. Although we saw no orioles, we were amply compensated by excellent views of a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, which proved to be the only sighting of the week.

Mick and Rosemary, who had their own car with them and had been to Rocamadour before, plus Vic and Brenda (who would be going the following week) spent the day doing their own thing (i.e. eating and drinking at various local establishments!). After breakfast Guy arrived in a minibus to take the rest of us to the town of Rocamadour (France's second most visited tourist site).

On route we stopped at the recommended limestone area just beyond Cares which is part of the *Causse*. As soon as we got out of the minibus it was obvious that the flora here was quite different, with a distinct alpine element. We had barely walked 100m before we had found Blue Lettuce, Pyrenean Flax, Thyme-leaved Fumana, Pyrenean Angelica, Pyrenean Spurge and Montpellier Milk-vetch. We also added Baton Blue butterfly. A little further on were fine clumps of both Large and Spiked Speedwell, and in a hedge, Wild Jasmine in flower. It was with some reluctance that we clambered back into the minibus (which Guy had thoughtfully driven to the top of the slope we had climbed) in order to continue to Rocamadour. Scarcely had we started off down the track, however, when we spied several thick clumps of chest-high Asphodel, which we all climbed out to admire and photograph.

Arriving at Rocamadour the first priority was lunch. We descended the first part of the steep path that zig-zags down the cliff to the town, and found a suitably cool, sheltered spot. This time Helen had wisely taken charge of the salt seller, which was both loaded and wrapped, so we were able to enjoy our boiled eggs and tomatoes as never before! Lunch over we continued down at a leisurely pace, taking in spectacular views of the cliff-hugging town as well as a particularly obliging Spotted Flycatcher. Having reached the town we did a bit a sight seeing and shopping after which Terry, Evelyn, Helen and I retired to a terrace cafe for a refreshing drink. We then bought tickets for the two stage lift back to the top. The first stage was fine, but the second stage has clearly just broken down. With no sign of imminent repair, we left the operator tutting and head scratching at the bottom and set off up the steep path. Predictably, we got to the top just as the lift started again, much to the amusement of Jim and Jean who had evidently got to the top just before the problem occurred.

Then on to the pretty village of Loubressac. Pretty as it may be, the heat, together with an impending thunder storm did nothing for the energy levels. Nevertheless, there were a surprising number of good finds. First was a Nuthatch's nest in a plane tree opposite the cafe, then the distinctive call of a Wryneck from somewhere behind the car park. We managed to track it down to a tree behind the tennis courts. It gave brief views here, then later on in a nearer tree where Jean and I had good views. Meanwhile, close inspection of the lawn by the tennis court revealed Subterranean Clover and Bedstraw Broomrape just coming into flower.

Back at base we learnt that the "B-team" had had great views of the Hoopoe on the hill above Galoubet!

Friday 15th May – Beaumat

Incredibly, our last full day at Galoubet. After breakfast we set off on an all day walk. I had made a mental note of the two species we had so far failed to see which I thought might be target species for the day. These were Southern White Admiral, which only Jim and Joan had so far managed to see, and Honey Buzzard, which none of us had yet seen but which appears in nearly all of the past trip reports.

Strangely enough Southern White Admiral was about the first thing we saw in the meadow below Maison Meulet. We then headed up the running track, noting the still unopened flower spikes of Lizard Orchid. We stopped by a flower-filled meadow for a quick spot of butterfly catching. Several Meadow Fritillaries were caught and admired, and we then hit Bonanza. In one well aimed (or lucky?) swoop I caught two Knapweed Fritillaries and a splendid Broad-bordered Bee Hawkmoth. I was busy in the tricky process of getting these into the British Airways butterfly box (loosing one of the fritillaries in the process) when Mick spotted three birds of prey circling overhead. Leaving the entomologists to admire the butterfly and hawkmoth, I could then concentrate on the birds of prey. One was clearly a Black Kite, and the second, which unfortunately dashed out of view just as I got on it, was the Honey Buzzard we had been hoping for. But what was the third bird? In size it was similar to the kite, but the tail was square and pale. The wings were dark but with paler inner primaries. It had to be a Booted Eagle - the first recorded here in seven years of Honeyguide trips.



Reaching the road, another Honey Buzzard appeared. This time we all had good views as it passed quite close by, showing the characteristic small head and finely barred under-wings. There was even a Common Buzzard for comparison. So both of the target species had been seen in the first hour.

We carried on through La Croix Blanche and then rested in the lovely little village of Beaumat, with lunch taken on a grassy slope just beyond. Just after this was a meadow with our first Man Orchid of the trip, plus Early Spider Orchid, Burnt Orchids and a Common Twayblade. A little further on Vic, Brenda and Evelyn took a shortcut back towards Galoubet and the rest of us carried on across lovely open countryside with Corn Buntings and Stonechats singing. Sheltering from the heat under the shade of a big oak it would have been very easy to doze off, but after half an hour or so we were on our way again, spotting our first definite Bee Orchid of the trip, plus Pyrenean Flax. We arrived back at Maison Meulet just as the weather began to look threatening, and shortly after the rain began - our first rain of the week.

After our final delicious meal, we set out in search of the Scops Owl. We could clearly hear two, but unfortunately they were much further away than we had thought, in the woodland beyond the neighbouring farmhouse. But yes, they really were Scops Owls and not cow bells!

Saturday 16th May – Galoubet

After breakfast we sauntered out for a last walk in the lovely quiet countryside. It was now that we finally got to grips with a strange plant we had been noticing. It was Coriaria, a Mediterranean shrub which has very different young growth. It was only now that we found an older one with flowers that we realised what it was.

We ended up at the wood with the orchids we had found on Wednesday, and spent a last half hour admiring the helleborines and birds-nest orchids before retracing our steps to Galoubet. Then there was a feeling of sadness - a wonderful week had suddenly come to an end, and the group would split. Evelyn, Joan, Jim, Terry and I said our fond farewells to Mick and Rosemary, who were heading south; to Helen, Vic and Brenda who were staying on for the second week; and to Lynn, Doreen and the rest of the team who had looked after us so well.

At the airport there was just enough time for us to meet up with Chris and the second party arriving from London, to pass on the more significant news and wish them as great a week as we had had.

Week 2 with Chris Durdin

Saturday 16 May – Gatwick to Galoubet

After a straightforward flight, we were met outside baggage reclaim by David Collins and the four from the first group who were not staying or moving on. Jean-Claude took us just around the corner to where the coach from *Guy Transports* was parked. The first part of the journey is up the péage, then off the motorway and past Cahor before heading into the limestone area as we neared our base. There was plenty to see and talk about: buzzards and black kites, and is Guy's wife Elizabeth or Iris? There is a magnificent view over Cahor part way along the

route, and shortly afterwards we were surprised to see two black tern as we crossed the Lot river. On the last leg, there were the first signs of the new motorway to be built through the area, which no doubt has the usual mixed blessings. The journey was a touch over two hours.

A nightingale was singing as we arrived at Galoubet. There to meet us were Lynn and Doreen Todd, our hosts at Maison Meulet, this year's housekeeper Gloria, and Helen, Vic and Brenda still in residence from week 1. We were soon settled into our rooms and then gathered at the table for the first of many splendid meals. Lynn is enthusiastic about fine wines, which we encouraged just a little: tonight the white was a Muscadet and the red a Gamay from Touraine.

Sunday 17 May – local walks

One of the great benefits of Galoubet is that you can set off in almost any direction on a wide farm track or quiet country road, so local walks are the core of the week's itinerary. With breakfast at 9am there is time for a pre-breakfast walk, and this week's routine was to start off at 7.30 – usually with a select few – and head off in varying directions. This morning it was up the road towards and beyond the house of Maurice, who is both the local farmer and mayor of the commune of Beaumat. The fluty calls of golden orioles and the rich warbles of blackcaps were with us from the start, and further up the hill there was a male cirl bunting on a walnut tree. Over the wood a woodlark sung - they are usually more in the open, despite their name – and a firecrest was singing in the wood too but was only seen by me.

Breakfast was outside accompanied two nightingales that seemed to be competing with each other from different corners of the garden. We had already heard about short-toed treecreepers that were nesting in a hole in Maison Meulet's pigeonier (pigeon house); perhaps it was these same birds in a family party that that appeared over our head, first in the horse chestnut, then the ash. In the false acacia, a jay appeared to be collecting nest material.

After breakfast we started by looking at the host of orchids in Maison Meulet's fields. The short-toed treecreeper re-appeared, this time on a telegraph pole. We looked at the difference between the five-lobed field maples and three-lobed Montpellier maples that so often grow side-by-side in this area. Then past an astonishing show of military orchids in Lynn's big meadow; this remained the only place we saw them all week. Through a gap in the hedge and the next field is juniper and oak scrub, but equally orchid-rich. Here for now we only looked into the nearest corner, full of lady and military orchids, found fly orchids (no surprise) then early spider orchid and with Vic's help a man orchid back in the grassy field (more of a surprise here). In the old well just beyond the swimming pool we noted three fern species, common polypody, rustyback and the black-stemmed maidenhair spleenwort.

Down the road a honey buzzard flew over, an individual with a missing flight feather that we saw again later. Turning right towards Cayrès, I put aside my reluctance to identify crucifers for the pretty obvious (in both senses) dame's violet. A long-tailed tit moved between the hedges of dogwood, hawthorn and spindle. We already had a long list of geraniums: long-stalked cranesbill was added along the roadside. Splashes of blue were provided by a crowd of adonis blue butterflies on a dead something or other, and by chalk milkwort in the grass. We went a little way past the farm at Cayrès, finding violet birdnest orchids (=limodors) and burn-tip orchids, before turning back. Janet was surprised by some pretty black and red shield bugs on cow parsley and I was even more surprised to be able to remember their name – *Graphosoma italicum*.

Lunch of salad, quiche, meats and cheeses was washed down by fresh lemon squash, outside in the shade.

After a short siesta, the telescope was swapped for the butterfly net for the afternoon walk. Soon caught for examination in the butterfly box were Provençal short-tailed blue and Duke of Burgundy fritillary, the latter taxonomically not a fritillary. David took the net and started with a wood white. They are recognisable by their weak fluttery flight so easy to catch, I said, and stung by this David proved his worth by netting the fast-flying black-veined white, a species now extinct in the UK. Scarce and scarce swallowtail were soon seen too, then the day-flying lattice heath moth. As we moved through the wood there were patches of early purple orchids still in good condition then, having found one fly honeysuckle with its pairs of creamy-white flowers emerging from leaf junctions, we came across lots more of the same. A short diversion into a field on the left revealed wild candytuft; on the right the gone over spikes of what I suggested might well have been green-winged orchids which now, reading David's report, seems more than likely.

In the damp meadow at the end - this afternoon's destination - the poet's narcissi were still in good numbers, and there were also star-of-Bethlehem and the thick green leaves of the autumn-flowering meadow saffron. Loose-flowered orchids were there too, by the dozen, and single specimens of early marsh and robust marsh orchid. This

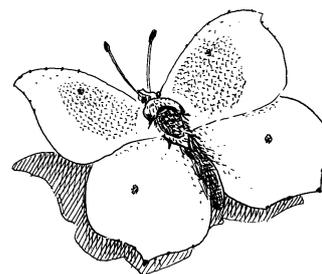
was today's final destination, and we retraced our steps to Galoubet and for some to the cool of the swimming pool.

Monday 18 May – Pech Merle and St Cirq Lapopie

A male golden oriole before breakfast was almost outdone by the realisation that one of the local cuckoos was a rufous phase individual. The local middle spotted woodpecker stayed still in telescope view in the oriole wood on the other side of Maison Meulet's meadow, and stonechat and melodious warbler were seen.

Three who wished to pass on the caves of Pech Merle were dropped at St Cirq. The rest of the group went to Pech Merle, either for the cave tour or to sit outside in the warm. Many caves have fine stalactites and stalagmites; here also are prehistoric cave paintings of auroch, bison and mammoth, a child's footprint preserved in petrified mud, evidence of bears from long ago and an astonishing subterranean column of tree roots. The explanation is in French, but with a little careful listening and reference to the English translation, it's not too difficult to get a good feel for it all.

After a drink at the café, it was time for some botanising on the slopes by the road. Having taken a careful look at other bugloss flowers, we concluded here was blue bugloss *Ajuga genevensis*. One of the UK's rarest flowers, the semi-parasitic crested cow-wheat, is common here, as too is the toxic swallow-wort and the sticky-to-the-touch Nottingham catchfly. Lunch was on picnic seats around the corner from the Pech Merle entrance; entertainment was provided by a group of very young school kids who tramped off to our right for a communal wee.



A Cleopatra butterfly marked the start of a hot afternoon in St Cirq. In the main square we found the other three, and many sought out drinks or ice cream before or during a wander around this pretty hilltop village. An alpine swift was found by Guy, from the castle ruin above the village, and there was a black kite too. Then a wander down through the village to the river Lot to find grey and white wagtails and Monsieur Guy with the coach.

Tuesday 19 May – Gourdon and walk from Vaillac

Golden oriole and middle spotted woodpecker on the pre-breakfast walk was a good start for the early risers.

Gourdon market was its usual bustling self and we divided to look for maps, gifts or whatever or to admire the goats cheese and strawberries in the provisions market by the church. I had an idea that the name of the suggested rendez-vous had something to do with beds, and accordingly we met for coffee or beer at the Hotel Divan, served by a man with a moustache that would make even Hercule Poirot a little envious. Then back at the coach for the agreed 12.30 departure and with Jean-Claude on to the pretty village of Vaillac. A picnic table in the shade in the village centre could not have been more convenient, as was the arrival of Lynn at two o'clock to take purchases, picnic boxes and three opting for a quiet afternoon. In the meantime we watched a great tit disappearing into a hole in the wall and heard our first dunnock.

The walk back to Galoubet is only four miles or so, but it seemed at times longer in today's heat. Happily the first leg is mainly in the shade of an oak wood, where the green hairstreak butterflies seemed determined to avoid capture. A melodious warbler sang from the top of a bush; Pete pointed out a common twayblades under our feet and others were then suddenly obvious nearby. Up to the top of the slope and then a left turn into and through a longish stretch of open woodland. On the right, a tree pipit could be heard, perched as they often are at the very highest point of a tree, and it then performed at its best with its parachuting display flight. The potentially confusing crossroads, with a painted mark on the remains of a tree, had a reassuring sign to Beaumat. The next bit is quite a steep descent through the wood, but slowed by a violet helleborine in the most trampled part of the middle of the path, then two red helleborines showing more colour than you'd expect for this late flowering orchid. The ford at the bottom was dry and the climb up the other side hard work, demanding rests from time to time – to admire the view, of course.

Pausing in the shade at the top, there drifted past was perhaps the best of all the local butterflies, better even than the two swallowtails, namely a southernwhite admiral. A swoop with the net and it was admired close to in the butterfly pot. It is just a short stroll from there into Beaumat, where we popped into the simple yet elegant local church, restored in 1994, at the heart of our local commune.

Heading across the arable land, in a patch of dwarf elder (also known as danewort) was a fine wild gladiolus. Late afternoon and the heat began to ease as we arrived at Merle where a mysterious brown bird on a wire then made a whizz and a click to reveal that it was a very young stonechat. The last leg to Galoubet by the D22 has some dry, stony habitats on which were the distinctive-smelling leaves of curry plant, cone knapweed by the roadside then, farther on in the shade, our first red helleborine in flower.

Wednesday 20 May – local walks

The early risers did well for warblers: a melodious warbler sitting in the field of view of the telescope to start with. So many warblers offer fleeting glimpses but here, at least, this chunky warbler shows well, with its longish beak, steep forehead and bright - if variable - yellow coloration. If only the song is as good as the name suggests, but once you realise how similar they are to sedge warblers tuning in to the unmelodious song gets easier. Similarly an ear for a song helps to find Bonelli's warbler - actually quite common in the oaks around here. But separating the rattle of a curl bunting from the trill of a Bonelli's may take a little time, and if high in the canopy, as today's individual was, the yellow rump may be out of sight. Happily in the high oak hedges by the D22, as on this morning's walk, they are easier to see than in a wood.

Gibus, the dog from Michel's house down the road, joined us on the morning walk. He has a great knack of making friends with groups at Maison Meulet, and knows the rules about keeping out of the house. But what does he do for walks the rest of the year? Pierre, aged 11, was tinkering with machinery as we passed the farm of his father, Maurice. Some reflected that the rabbits and pigeons in the cages were unlikely to be pets, though the racing pigeon ring on one bird left room for doubt.

Towards the end of the wood we stopped to squeeze and sniff the leaves of some wayside plants and with a little prompting about the smell of tar and clover-like leaves we arrived at the name of pitch trefoil. Some Nottingham catchfly, in the shade next to bladder campion, still had some petals unfurled before closing up for the day. We listened to mistle thrush, blackcap and distant com bunting. The track then briefly meets the road, where a quick turn left and left again had us on the homeward leg. Gibus disappeared at this point, but he seems to be road wise and he reappeared a little later. A tree pipit, like yesterday, did its classic descending flight with its tail held very nearly vertically aloft. The woods were full of limodors, some in fine flower rather than their sometimes gone-over look, and more than a few bumt-tip orchids.

A siesta after lunch gave time for sketching or reading, and just three – Vic, Pete and Rita – came for a wander later. The orchids we then sought were like Lynn's wines - one white, one red. We started in the field of juniper scrub where earlier I had found a white helleborine (my first for Galoubet) on a steep slope. Rita, bless her, found my lens cap, lost while I was photographing the helleborine earlier; my searching led to another lens cap which turned out to be Iris's. We then took Vic to see the red helleborine in flower not too far away. The descent was via the runner's track where there were tall water speedwells by the cattle pond, then fine gladioli by the path.

The nightlife this year was generally uncooperative, despite tonight's warm, still weather. Four of us heard nightjars clearly enough, but they weren't to be seen. Brenda reported a glow-worm outside her room.

Thursday 21 May – Rocamadour and Gluges

Passing the melodious warbler in its usual spot, the pre-breakfast crew headed up the limestone scarp towards Pisserate. The reward was a hoopoe that was seen disappearing with beakfuls of food into a group of buildings. "It'll appear again any moment," I guessed, and it did, returning to feed at the same spot and repeating the performance.

The limestone plateau between Calès and Rocamadour is now a regular stopping point. Pink convolvulus by the road was immediately obvious, and so was a large white umbellifer that has escaped identification, by me at least, for many years. (Bob Gibbons suggested *Laserpitium siler* or *L. gallicum*, but having seen siler in Switzerland in August 1998, David's Pyrenean angelica looks much better.) The elegant, slender Pyrenean (or white) flax *Linum suffruticosum* dominated the lower slope of 10 metres or so, before we reached several lizard orchids in full flower, if smallish specimens. Turning right down a grassy path as the plateau touches the minor road at the top, and a few yards down there under the trees were many of the slender, tall, white spikes of St Bernard's lily. In the hedgerow a melodious warbler sang, with some blackbird notes in its repertoire. By the edge of the minor road were the blue spikes of a large speedwell. One of the unwritten rules of botany is that none of the books are anything like as comprehensive as bird field guides, and new information can be gleaned from new sources. Helen's book suggested large speedwell *Veronica austriaca austriaca*, but looking at a further book there is also the similar *Veronica prostrata*, maybe subspecies *scheereri*. How nice it is to for next year's group to have a challenge, if someone can face subspecies of speedwells! More straightforward were Montpellier milkvetch (=

false vetch), a cone knapweed found under a small tree by Pauline and Gordon, fumana and argyrolobium, the last a Mediterranean species here (and indeed at Galoubet) with a mixture of northern European and alpine flowers.

There were serins buzzing around us as we lunched in the garden at the top of the cliff of Rocamadour. The black kite over us was so low that its jesses could be seen; a bird from the collection nearby. We were later to see griffon vultures from the same source, though flying with them were alpine swifts which were truly wild birds. We then split to take in the sights and sounds of Rocamadour at our own pace and style for a couple of hours. I watched a short-toed treecreeper ascending a stone column between the 13th and 12th stations of the cross (from here one descends in reverse order) and Guy found our first spotted flycatcher. Most will have called at the shrine of the black virgin built into the rock, and from the chapel next door there were the sounds of an informal recital of organ, trumpet and horn. Down at the bottom street level Rocamadour gets commercial, but if you can put that to one side the way the buildings are part hewn from, part attached to the cliffs over the (this year, at least) dried up Alzou river is quite astonishing.

Final stop of the day was by Gluges, a pretty village close to the river Dordogne, though here still in the department of the Lot. The promised quiet riverside walk was dashed somewhat by the extra traffic of Ascension Day, but it didn't deter the white wagtails by the river, nor the house martins that build here as nature intended, their mud nests attached to the cliffs. Two or more crag martins mingled with their cousins; serins showed well, at last; and maidenhair ferns were found in a damp corner. A drink at the café opposite where Monsieur Guy had parked his coach helped us cool down at the end of another hot day.

At supper we were joined by Maurice and Brigitte from the farm up the road. Maurice's billing as the mayor of the local commune of Beaumat is a little unfair as it conjures up images of chains of office. They are good company, despite their lack of English, and special thanks to the French speakers – however rusty, which reminds me to make special mention in despatches of Brenda on my table with Maurice – and to tolerant non-French speakers for making it work so well. There is a serious point though: as local farmer and community leader it helps Maurice to see both the trade and enthusiasm that the wildlife of the area creates.

Friday 22 May – Labastide-Murat and walk back

Almost ignoring the usual melodious warbler, the pre-breakfast contingent had enough eyes on the D22 for a most astonishing find: a fire salamander slowing crossing the road, presumably on its way to bed for the day. Our luck stayed in, as by the loose-flowered orchid meadow was a fine male red-backed shrike. Good things often come in threes and a willow tit in the wood on the way back was a new bird for the week.



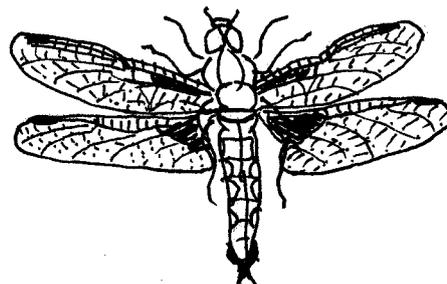
Twelve of us were taken in two minibuses to our local town of Labastide-Murat. There was time for a little sightseeing and shopping, the latter mostly in the *huit-à-huit* supermarket, before gathering for a drink at the Hotel Climat. Lynn then arrived to ferry back to Galoubet and into his car were loaded the non-walkers and heavy purchases such as bottles of wine and packs of *boules*. The second half of Labastide-Murat's name comes from the town's most famous son who was Napoleon's brother-in-law and King of Naples. Janet discovered, literally just around the corner from his birthplace, the equally important site of his mother's birthplace. The first leg of the walk back took us round the back of the chateau, passing all our favourite geraniums and a new one to add to the list, hedgerow cranesbill. At the left turn into the little road that goes past Monsieur Guy's house we paused to watch at least four male black redstarts. One looked like a female, without the black and the white wing panel

of a typical male. This would have been a first year male: it sang as well as the others.

The next leg of the walk starts after crossing the main road, and not far along here we stopped for our packed lunch in a shady spot overlooking a field rich in pyramidal orchids. Lunch-time excitement was created by a short-toed eagle - the only one of the holiday. The route winds through meadows and woods, and as we paused to watch a woodlark on a wire the 'wet-my-lips' sound of a quail was picked up. The woods here are especially orchid-rich - but isn't everywhere round here? Round-headed rampion was found in the path's centre. Next stop was at the gold club at Bourrat where Alison – English, but long resident in the Lot – provided tea while husband Paul got on with the never ending round of grass cutting. We found our way from there fine – despite suggestions

to the contrary that I might have trouble – and we were soon back to the road opposite the house with the white fence at Bel-Air.

The most direct route back would have been along the road, but it was a modest diversion that took us through La Croix Blanche. Just before the village's white cross, there was a photostop by the village pond over which there were many broad-bodied chaser dragonflies: blue bodies for adult males, brown for young males and females.



Then via Merle back to the road, and immediately off it again down the 'runner's track', named after an early visitor to Galoubet described, tongue-in-cheek, the very tumbledown cottage at the end of the track as a good runner for conversion. The runner's track has some particularly fine gladioli, which Pauline and I admired for David's camera. But another of his photos was used by the Eastern Daily Press in his splendid account of the holiday that is included in this report.

There was time to relax back at base. A little later, as we ran through the checklists for the final time outside the downstairs pigeonier, the short-toed treecreeper appeared; it sang, disappeared into the hole in which last week's group had reported it nesting, then climbed the pigeonier roof and disappeared from view.

Saturday 23 May – Galoubet. Toulouse and home

With no 'official' pre-breakfast walk to allow time for packing, several people rediscovered that a quiet walk on your own can often be very fruitful for wildlife, and there were reports over breakfast of a roe buck (Guy) and red squirrel (Vic and Brenda). Vic and Brenda took me to see com cockle in flower, that rarest of flowers in Britain: it was by the roadside on the way to Cayrès, but only just coming out so it was missed earlier in the week.

Several people joined me in Lynn's scrubby meadow to see the white helleborine I'd discovered earlier in the week, along with lots of man orchids and some particularly fine limodors. One of those was Bob Gibbons, awaiting his group for the next week. He helped to clear up a botanical mystery, the identity of the greenish-flowered hogweed-like umbellifers in the fields at Galoubet. They are exactly that, it turns out: a variety of hogweed *Heracleum sphondylium* var. *sibiricum*. Then a few Honeyguiders went in pursuit of honey at the Maurice's house, to be met by his daughter Celine who told us much about French education, which was in French so a good French education for us too.

A couple of games of *boules* took us to lunchtime and then it was time to return to Toulouse in Jean-Claude's safe hands.

CHEESE AND WINE

Our usual bit of fun for the report is to list the cheeses in addition to the birds, butterflies and so on. They were served, traditional French style, between the main course and pudding, and every evening there were three - one hard (H), one soft (S) and one blue (B). This year's scrupulous team of note-takers went one better and recorded the wines too - white (W) and red (R). Whether I can spell them all correctly is another matter.

SATURDAY

Brebis (H - Pyrenees)

Bleu de Causse

Munster Jeromé (S – Alsace-Lorraine)

Muscadet - Sèvre-et-Maine (W)

Gamay from Touraine (R)

SUNDAY

Forme d'Ambert (B)

Pont L'Evêque (S)

Tomme de Savour (H)

Gaillac Perlé (W)

Cahor –Les Hauts de Chambert (R)

MONDAY

Cantal entre-deux (H)

Roquefort (B)

Reblechon (S)

Bourgoyne Aligote (W)

Côtes du Rhône Village - Valreas (R)

TUESDAY

Comté (H)
 Tomme de la Montagne (Pyrenees) (S)
 Carre blue (Massif Central)

Saint-Véran, a Burgundy (W)
 Alsace Gewurtraminer (W)
 Touraine (R)

WEDNESDAY

Comté (H)
 Vieux Panné (S)
 Crème de bleu - Mont Salvat

Roussette de Savoie (W)
 Bourg – Chateau de Bousquet (R)

THURSDAY

St Aubray (S)
 Blue d'Auvergne

Pouilly-Fumé - Loire (W)
 Cahors – Domaine la Borie 1994 (R)

Morbière (H)

FRIDAY

Cantal entre-deux (H)
 Roquefort (R)
 Nectaire (S)
 Carré (S)

Sancerre 1996- Loire (W)
 Chateau la Fleur de Riegnac 1995 – Bordeaux supérieure (R)

ORCHIDS

	week 1	week 2
Robust marsh orchid		x
Early marsh orchid	x	x
Lizard orchid	x	x
Violet birdsnest orchid	x	x
Birdsnest orchid	x	x
Common twayblade	x	x
Woodcock orchid	x	x
Bee orchid	x	x
Fly orchid	x	x
Early spider orchid	x	x
Loose-flowered orchid	x	x
Early purple orchid	x	x
Military orchid	x	x
Lady orchid	x	x
Monkey orchid	x	x
Burnt-tip orchid	x	x
Man orchid	x	x
Pyramidal orchid	x	x
Green-winged orchid	x	gone over spikes!
White helleborine		x
Violet helleborine		x
Red helleborine		x
Narrow-leaved helleborine	x	x
Broad-leaved helleborine	leaves	leaves

Twenty four species of orchids is a reminder of how rich this area is. For completeness, the following species of orchid have been found in previous years: dark red helleborine, lesser butterfly orchid, southern marsh orchid, common spotted orchid.

Reptiles and amphibians

Adder
 Green lizard
 Wall lizard
 Fire salamander

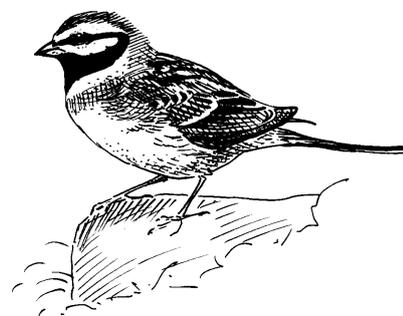
Mammals

Rabbit
 Hare
 Red squirrel
 Roe deer

BIRDS

Birds marked with a 1 or 2 were seen only on the first or second week respectively, otherwise everything was seen (or occasionally just heard, one week) both weeks. H = heard.

Mallard		Nightingale	
Honey buzzard		Black redstart	
Black kite		Redstart	
Red kite		Stonechat	
Sparrowhawk	1	Blackbird	
Short toed-eagle	2	Song thrush	
Booted eagle	1	Mistle thrush	
Buzzard		Melodious warbler	
Kestrel		Whitethroat	
Red-legged partridge	1	Blackcap	
Quail	H	Bonelli's warbler	
Pheasant		Wood warbler	2
Black-headed gull	1	Chiffchaff	H, wk 2
Black tern	2	Firecrest	
Rock dove/feral pigeon		Spotted flycatcher	
Woodpigeon	2	Pied flycatcher	1
Collared dove		Long-tailed tit	
Turtle dove		Willow tit	2
Cuckoo		Marsh tit	1
Barn owl		Blue tit	
Scops owl	1	Great tit	
Tawny owl		Nuthatch	
Nightjar		Short-toed treecreeper	
Swift		Golden oriole	
Alpine Swift	1	Red-backed shrike	
Hoopoe		Jay	
Wryneck	1	Magpie	
Green woodpecker		Jackdaw	
Great spotted woodpecker		Carrion crow	
Middle spotted woodpecker		Raven	1
Lesser spotted woodpecker	1	Starling	
Woodlark		House sparrow	
Skylark		Chaffinch	
Crag martin		Serin	
Swallow		Greenfinch	
House martin		Goldfinch	
Tree pipit		Linnet	1
Grey wagtail		Corn bunting	
White wagtail		Cirl bunting	
Wren			
Dunnock	2		
Robin			



Cirl bunting

BUTTERFLIES

Butterflies do appear and disappear, but the main difference in the two lists is probably simply greater efforts by the David's group, especially for the more difficult groups like blues and fritillaries. More than forty species can't be bad ...

	week 1	week 2
Dingy skipper	x	
Grizzled skipper	x	
Brown argus	x	x
Green hairstreak	x	x
Holly blue	x	
Small blue	x	
Provengal short-tailed blue	x	x
Duke of Burgundy fritillary	x	x
Adonis blue	x	x
Common blue	x	
Baton blue	x	
Small tortoiseshell		x
Painted lady	x	
Southern white admiral	x	x
High brown fritillary		x
Glanville fritillary	x	
False heath fritillary	x	
Knapweed fritillary	x	
Spotted fritillary		x
Meadow fritillary	x	x
Red admiral	x	x
Peacock	x	
Scarce swallowtail	x	x
Common swallowtail	x	x
Orange lip	x	x
Black-veined white		x
Green-veined white	x	
Small white	x	x
Berger's clouded yellow	x	x
Clouded yellow	x	
Pale clouded yellow	x	
Brimstone	x	x
Cleopatra	x	x
Wood white	x	x
Large white	x	x
Bath white	x	
Pearly heath	x	x
Small heath	x	x
Large wall brown		x
Wall brown	x	x
Speckled wood	x	x



Scarce swallowtail

Other invertebrates noted

- Latticed heath - a day-flying moth
- 6-spot burnet moth
- Broad-bodied bee hawkmoth
- Graphosoma italicum* - black and red shield bugs
- Ascaphalus libelluloides* - something between a lacewing and an ant-lion
- Carpenter beetle
- Paper wasp
- Broad-bodied chaser dragonfly



Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux

Association reconnue d'utilité publique

Rochefort, 17 June 1998

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 supporting this action. REFUGES LPO are sanctuaries for wildlife where there is no hunting and which are managed in a natural way.

Last autumn, LPO launched a new campaign called « Jardins d'oiseaux » (Gardens for birds) to encourage people to be more aware of their immediate environment and to take care daily of it. About 1600 owners of private gardens, town parks, properties in wetlands or woodlands, etc. have joined this campaign.

Today, the REFUGE LPO network has about 2,600 plots of land protecting 22,230 acres.

In order to help REFUGE LPO owners, LPO has created an information sheet and cards with practical hints. Special information, individual advice and support is specifically given to people facing problems of hunting and large infrastructure projects that might affect their land.

Thank you very much for your support and we hope you will enjoy your birdwatching holiday in France.

Yours sincerely.

Sophie Creusot
Coordinator REFUGES LPO network



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

Eastern Daily Press
Tuesday 16 June 1998

More than happy with their Lot

South of the Dordogne, Middle England's favourite spot, lies Lot. **David Green** extols the virtues of a haven for wildlife in this lesser-known corner of France.

It is nearly midnight.

The nightingale sings its heart out from a tree next to a derelict cottage.

A nightjar "churrs" on the limestone escarpment nearby while the light of a glow-worm shines from the roadside verge.

On the other side of the valley, most of the holidaymakers are already asleep, in a fine house surrounded by wildflower meadows rich in orchids.

This is France, in the southern region once known as Quercy but now the department of the Lot.

South of the Dordogne and its middle-class British "ghettos", the Lot is wilder and more sparsely populated. It is interlaced by deep valleys, villages clinging to the sides of rocky headlands, and populated by families who farm at subsistence level and cannot afford the pesticides and artificial fertilisers of their more wealthy European neighbours.

This has helped the Lot to remain a



valleys, villages clinging to the sides of rocky headlands, and populated by families who farm at subsistence level and cannot afford the pesticides and artificial fertilisers of their more wealthy European neighbours.

This has helped the Lot to remain a wildlife haven, the reason for its choice as one of the annual locations for holidays offered each year by Norwich-based naturalist Chris Durdin.

My wife and I were members of the 12-strong party which accompanied Chris to Galoubet, a hamlet 30 miles from the city of Cahors and his base in the Lot since he set up Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays eight years ago.

The accommodation is in Maison Meulet a restored "master's" house owned by Lynn Todd and his wife, Doreen, who also cook and serve meals which include a selection of fine wines and a glorious array of cheeses. The couple, who also host trips from other wildlife holiday firms as well as private guests, say the business helps sustain the local environment and the local economy.

The weather was hot throughout our stay in Galoubet and breakfast was taken outside around a large communal table, often to a background of nightingale song from a nearby tree.

Then it was time to gather cameras, binoculars, text books, water bottles and sun-protection creams, and sometimes a picnic lunch, together for the day ahead, rambling through the local countryside looking at flowers, birds and butterflies.

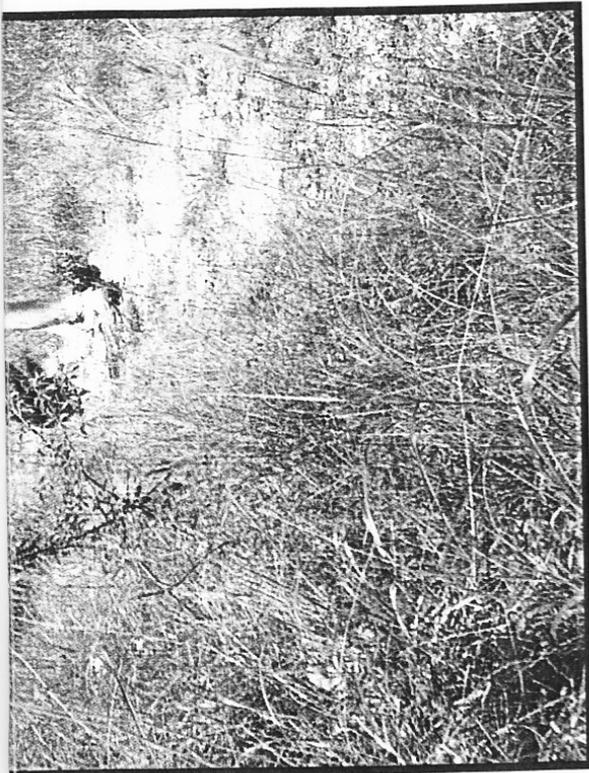
Occasionally there was a coach trip to a more distant area or to one of the more touristy and commercially exploited attractions such as the village of Racamadour, embedded in the side of a 150-metre high rocky headland.

The pace was generally slow although a reasonable level of fitness was needed to complete some of the daily three- or four-mile walks because they included some fairly steep hillsides.

However, the less agile were able to pick and choose those walks which they attempted or to spend a few hours back at base, painting, sketching, reading or swimming in the large solar-heated pool.

Before the four-course suppers in the dining room, most participants gathered to discuss the sightings of the day and tick off a check-list of species identified.

During the week these included more than 20 species of orchid, some superb fritillary butterflies and birds such as the short-toed eagle, the red kite, buzzards, golden orioles, melodious warblers and blackcaps.



Wild times: Chris Durdin leads a party through the Lot Valley.

Picture: Supplied

people understand the natural world," said Chris whose interest in wildlife was stimulated as a child by his own father.

The enthusiasm sparked by the visits to the Nile and Pyrenees eventually led, in 1991, to the founding of Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays which now offers seven European destinations.

As well as two separate weeks in Galoubet, there is a choice of holidays in central Spain, the Pyrenees, one of the lesser-known Canary islands, Menorca, Crete and a combined Italy and Slovenia tour.

Chris leads some of the holidays but the rest are supervised by other experts, all of them all-round naturalists. The holidays, from seven to 11 days, cost between £720 and £1100 per person and include scheduled flights and full board accommodation.

The sum of £25 from each holiday cost is donated to a bird protection project in the host country and more than £14,000 has already been handed over.

■ Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays, 36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich, NR7 0PX, tel and fax 01603 300552, evenings and weekends.

Other sightings included red squirrels – now extinct in East Anglia apart from Thetford Forest – building a dray only a few hundred yards away from Maison Meulet.

We found the holiday very relaxing and informative for all levels of expertise, from casual enthusiasts such as ourselves to those with deeper knowledge of the natural world.

Chris Durdin, who is 42 and has an 11-year-old son, runs Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays as a sideline from his main employment with the RSPB at its East Anglian headquarters in Norwich.

He aims to provide people interested in wildlife a means of increasing their knowledge while enjoying all the traditional features of a luxury holiday – high-class accommodation and good food and wine.

An economics graduate of the University of East Anglia, Chris joined the RSPB at its headquarters in Sandy, Bedfordshire in 1981 and soon had the opportunity to be the bird-watching leader on a luxury holiday cruise up the Nile. Later, he led tours in the Spanish Pyrenees and Crete.

"What I learned from those was that I enjoyed the organised holidays and helping