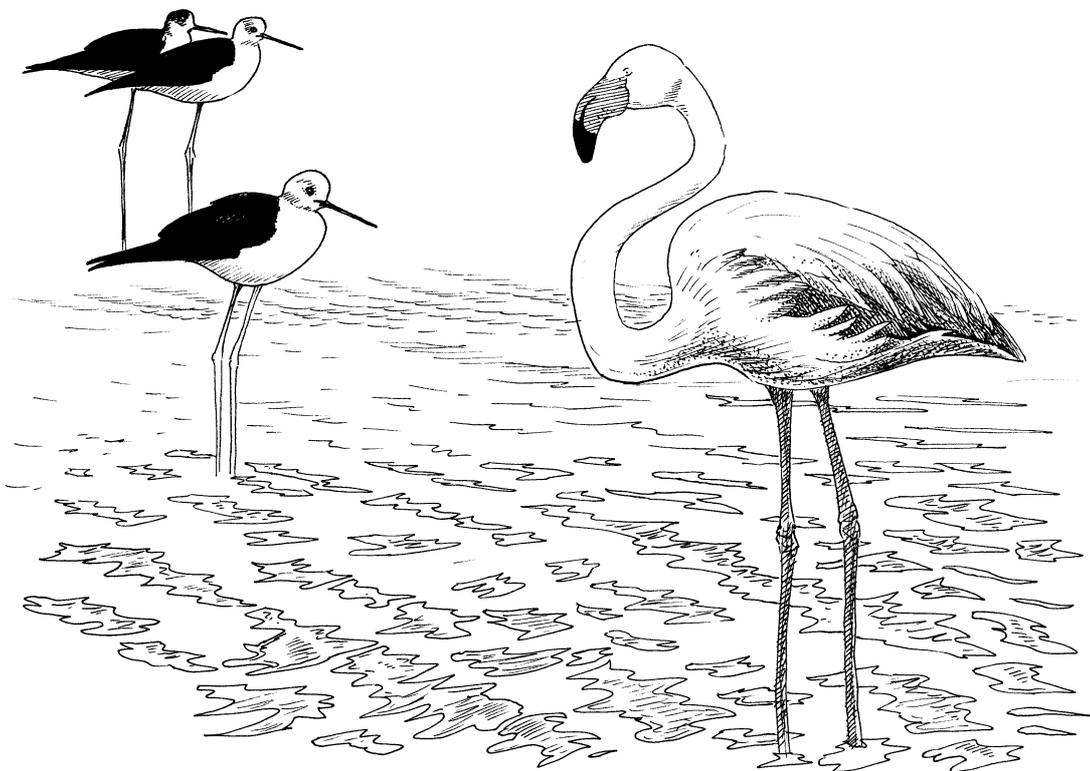


Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX
Tel: 01603 300552 Evenings & weekends Fax: 01603 491586
www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: honeyguide@tesco.net



The Camargue
Colchester Natural History Society
27 May – 5 June 2003

The Camargue
Colchester Natural History Society
27 May – 5 June 2003

Participants

David Baker

David Barnard
Sandra Barnard

Peter Douch
Monica Douch

Brian Corben
Wendy Corben

Joe Firmin
Linda Firmin

Hugh Owen
Veronica Owen

Avis Sharpe
Ken Sharpe

Tom Wiseman

Leaders

Russell Leavett
John Partridge

Report compiled jointly by Russell Leavett and John Partridge

Illustrations by Rob Hume, except black-winged stilt flock by Gary Wright. Cover: flamingo and black-winged stilts.

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 £25 per person from two groups in the Camargue was supplemented by groups in the Dordogne and French Pyrenees, leading to a total of £1050 given to La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO, the French Bird Protection League).

This brings the total given to LPO to £6,925 since 1991, and to various conservation projects in Europe to £29,800. A thank-you letter from LPO is at the end of this report.

The Camargue
Itinerary 27 May – 5 June 2003

Tuesday May 27th	Evening flight from Stansted to Nimes, then on to Hotel Des Granges, Arles, arriving early hours of May 28th.
Wednesday May 28th	Central Camargue. To Étang de Vaccares via Gageron and Villeneuve, south via east shore of étang to marshes of Tour du Vallat. Lunch at Domaine de Mejanès. Afternoon at marshes at Le Paty de la Trinité, returning to Arles via the observation post at Pont du Rousty and Mas d'Agon.
Thursday May 29th	Full day at Mont Ventoux, lunch at St Serein.
Friday May 30th	Morning at Pont du Gard, lunch at the hotel, the afternoon being spent in Arles. An early dinner followed by an evening visit to Mt. Valence.
Saturday May 31st	Western Camargue via Gimeaux and Saliers. South to Parc Ornithologique and St Maries de la Mer. Lunch taken by the Digue a la Mer. Afternoon at Cacharel, returning to Arles via Mas d'Agon.
Sunday June 1st	Early morning visit to Aerodrome du Vallon, La Crau, followed by a walk close to the hotel, lunch by the Rhone at Mas de l'Hoste, the afternoon spent on La Crau at Mas d'Icart.
Monday June 2nd	Morning at Les Baux including visit to the town, lunch amongst car park pines at start of walk to La Caume, where afternoon spent.
Tuesday June 3rd	Aigues-Mortes visit via St.Gilles, Gallician and Montcalm, south to Le Grau du Roi and Port Camargue. Lunch in the dunes at L'Espiguette, returning to Arles via Mejanès, Étang de Vaccares and Mas D'Agon.
Wednesday June 4th	Eastern Camargue. Salt pans at Salin de Giraud, south to Plage d'Arles. Lunch at Tourvieille, afternoon at the E'tang du Fangassier, returning to Arles via La Beluge, Petit Badon and Le Sambuc.
Thursday June 5 th	Abortive visit to Avignon substituted by a visit to Tarascon. Lunch in hills at western end of Chaîne des Alpilles, where part of afternoon spent. An early dinner was followed by an evening flight from Nimes to Stansted.

Tuesday 27th May

The Camargue trip started with a bit of trepidation because of the French air controllers threatened strike. As it happened, because we were booked onto a late flight, the controllers had gone back to work and by the time they had sorted themselves out we were only a matter of about an hour and a half late in leaving. It could have been much worse. We all accepted this delay but we were not quite so tolerant of the time it took the car rental lady at the Europcar desk to process the paperwork for our two mini-buses. Russell and John had to wait for almost an hour with the group having to patiently 'hover' in the background.

We finally got to the hotel at the dreadfully late hour of 1a.m (2a.m French time) but found that Simone and Marcel were awaiting our arrival with welcoming cups of tea despite the late hour! We were really ready for a sleep by now so were soon off to our beds, although for some the room locks did prove a somewhat 'testing' end to the day.....

Day 1 - Wednesday 28th May

A leisurely and late breakfast set us up for the day and it was obvious from the start that it was going to be quite a warm Mediterranean day and so it proved to be, just what the doctor ordered. The outside light at the hotel had attracted a cream spot tiger moth, three muslins and a smoky wainscot.

Soon we were making our way over the Grand Rhone at Arles, affording us fine views of the old city and the gateway to the Camargue proper. As we drove through the first of the ricefields, Cetti's warblers and

nightingales made their presence known from ditches and roadside scrub. Here and there fan-tailed warblers joined them. An occasional coypu ambled across the road and it was soon clear that painted lady butterflies were going to be very common. Black kites were already in evidence and Hugh and a few others saw a male Montagu's harrier, as it happened the only one of the trip. Less welcome were the many tiny biting flies associated with the black bulls; the results of their attention to us remained with some for several days! Where animals were found in wet places we saw the first of the cattle and little egrets and found our only greenshank of the trip. Marsh harriers quartered marshes here and there.

Our first proper stop was in a wooded roadside area south of Villeneuve, here patches of danewort were in flower and several butterflies occurred including clouded yellows, southern speckled wood and marbled white. Here too the first of the bee-eaters delighted us, hawking for insects over the road, their distinctive calls, as always, pure delight. Moths included many silver Ys, four-spotted and burnet companion.

Next stop was the shore of the Étang de Vaccares, guaranteed to produce good numbers of flamingos, along with a few great crested grebes and lots of yellow-legged gulls. The flamingos performed well for us, providing splendid splashes of colour as they flew noisily overhead.

Our final stop for the morning was at the marshes of Tour du Vallat, so much drier than in previous visits and something we were to find throughout the Camargue at this time. Although it was quite hot by now we had satisfying views of three great white egrets, the first of the whiskered terns, albeit lost in heat haze and yet more bee-eaters.

With lunch very much in mind we moved west to Domaine de Mejanès, our traditional first day stop. As always Simone had prepared us a most excellent lunch, a fine introduction to the good food we were to enjoy throughout this trip. We found that the roof of our covered picnic area held a number of bats, although we didn't manage to identify them and that carpenter bees were much in evidence. As their staff were creosoting the roof we wondered how both would fare.

The early afternoon was extremely hot as we made our way to the marshes of le Paty de la Trinité but soon we were enjoying the first of the gull-billed terns, along with more whiskered terns and the calls of Mediterranean gulls filled the air. Dave found a male Stonechat, one of only two we were to see during our stay. Here too the biting flies were a real pain so we decided to move on to the observation platform at Pont du Rousty. Noisy black-winged stilts greeted us, more bee-eaters were seen and the first of the avocets were spotted. Huge carp were seen from the platform – wonder if it's fish for dinner?

Our final stop of the day was to be the wonderful Mas d'Agon - the place of the herons, and as always a good range of heron/egret species were on show from the moment we arrived. Little egrets stood out in their pure white plumage against the creamier colours of the cattle egrets and muddy-coloured squacco herons. Both grey and purple herons were seen, the latter looking especially fine in the late afternoon sun, which seemed to enhance their colours. Another great white egret was also seen and finally a number of night herons, they breed nearby and were clearly feeding young, judging by how active they were at this time of day.

Red breasted pochards also were present, one fine male showing off the lovely colour of his head with the sun full behind him – he glowed! Quite a number of whiskered terns were here too and gull-billed terns were noisily displaying, including fish passing. The dense reedbeds held both common and great reed warblers and fan-tailed warblers were common. Moving north towards Arles took us through many rice fields, each with their little groups of mallard and often both black-headed and Mediterranean gulls. A stop at an old pratincole site failed to turn up that species but both lapwings and black-winged stilts were breeding there and in the distance a pair of stone curlews with young could be seen through the telescopes. All in all a fine introduction to the delights of the Camargue.

Day 2 - Thursday 29th May

As a clear sunny day was promised the decision was made that we should make tracks for distant Mont Ventoux, as the chances of being able to get to the top were very good weather-wise. After a journey of two hours we reached the lower slopes of Mont Ventoux but unfortunately the summit itself was closed thanks to roadworks, seemingly dealing with rock falls?

After a comfort stop for coffee and loo at the Chalet Liotard we walked along the edge of high-level slopes full of cowslips; amongst these moonwort was found along with mountain kidney vetch, ascending lousewort and the lovely daffodil *Narcissus tazetta*. On one rocky outcrop some fine flowers of alpine poppy delighted us. Much more common was alpine ladies mantle.

Birdwise this was always going to be a very different day from yesterday, finding birds here, or at least getting a good look at them, proved frustrating, nevertheless we gradually got to grips with the special species we had come to seek out. Citril finches were very active, often in family groups and from time to time would obligingly perch in full view. Likewise many family parties of crossbills were heard and seen and they too eventually performed well for us. Much less co-operative were the crested tits with only a single bird being seen all day, and then not by everyone.

In a day that proved to be surprisingly poor for raptor sightings a sub-adult golden eagle went down very well, this, along with a few ravens, providing the only real aerial interest of the day, apart from a few common buzzards en route.

Hard 'tacking' coming from rock strewn slopes amongst the trees above us alerted us to ring ouzels being about and we had some good views of both sexes on the ground and later a male in full song from a pine.

Mont Ventoux always easily turns up a range of more common species such as coal tit, blackbird, chaffinch, wren, dunnock and robin, most of which are quite scarce in the actual Camargue itself. Veronica alone saw a jay but everyone saw the fine male black redstarts on the wires.

With quite a long journey back ahead of us we made our way slowly back down the steep winding mountain road, stopping here and there to admire the views, enjoy the flowers, or whatever. One particularly productive track held lots of insects including an odd ant-lion like Ascalaphid, a most handsome insect but not one we got down to species level. During the day many butterfly species were encountered including black-veined white, Moroccan orange-tip, Queen of Spain fritillary and Chapman's blue. New moths included burnet companion, ruby tiger, latticed heath and chimney sweeper. Several hummingbird hawk moths were seen.

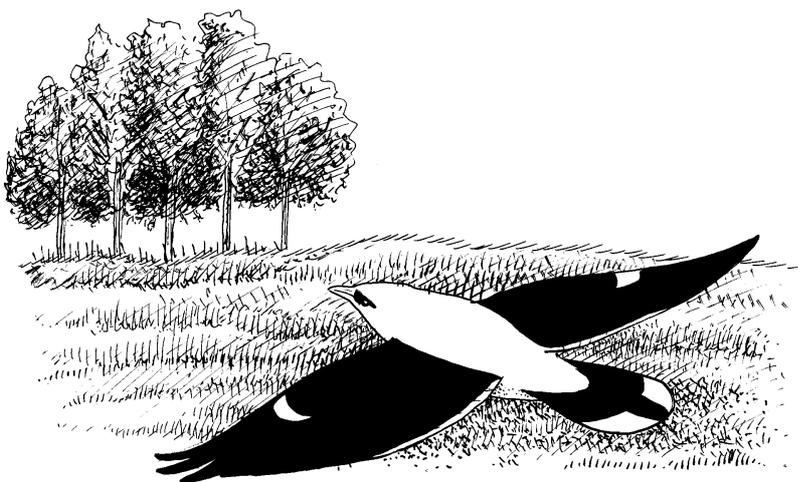
Everyone was glad to get back to the hotel and Russell noted that only he stayed awake for the entire journey, which, as he was driving, was probably just as well!

Day 3 - Friday 30th May

Most folk got up for the early morning walk close to the hotel and were rewarded by two superb rollers waiting for us at their usual station on the wires near the canal, nearby was a little owl, not a bird we see often here. A single purple heron flew over and a dozen kites were seen in the air on one occasion. Sardinian warblers were heard but as is often the case barely seen but a melodious warbler perched well for us all to see and even treated us to its 'melodious' song.

After breakfast, we set off for Pont du Gard; the sight of the Roman aqueduct always impresses, no matter however many times you've seen it, but sadly flood damage had badly affected both riverbanks recently. Areas that we used to be able to walk freely on were now fenced off including much of the riverbank.

However, golden orioles, always a bird that one looks for here, were again present and one male flew past quite close soon after we arrived, their calls are always a joy to hear and today we heard several. Rock sparrows, often very elusive, put on a really good show for us, perching in full view on the stonework of the aqueduct. High above them alpine swifts and crag martins were very active, some eventually providing good views at low levels. Several butterflies that were new to us were found including sloe hairstreak, Spanish gatekeeper and southern white admiral.



Two little ringed plovers seen scurrying about on the bank of the river and a perched serin, first spotted first by Monica, was pointed out to all. Other riverside birds included kingfisher and white wagtail but strangely no grey wagtails. Short-toed treecreeper and cirl bunting (*right*) were recorded from amongst the trees, along with several singing blackcaps and up to half a dozen black redstarts were seen including several fine cocks. Joe spotted a fine two-tailed pasha butterfly flying across the car park as we prepared to leave, a new species for many.

We went back to the hotel for a picnic lunch in the garden and then everyone spent the afternoon exploring Arles but how could Ken have found an Essex skipper on the back of his trousers this far from home – the jury is out on this one.....

After an early dinner, we went off to search for an eagle owl, which didn't take much finding, as it was sitting on top of a bush on its usual rock face waiting for us to arrive! It performed well, turning, preening and giving good views from every angle and then twenty minutes later, to finish the display off, flew slowly across the valley right above our heads. Even the sighting of a short toed eagle, our first of the week, couldn't out do the owl! Several later voted the eagle owl THE bird of the trip.



The evening was rounded off by two 'churring' nightjars (*right*) – a fine way to end the day.

Day 4 - Saturday 31st May

Today saw a return to the Camargue, this time to western parts. Leaving Arles by the Gimeaux to Saliers road took us through a nice mixture of ricefields, marshes and cattle rearing areas. Several brief stops produced yet more bee-eaters, plenty of marsh harriers, lots more Mediterranean gulls, a good look at a Cetti's warbler and a real treat, excellent views of up to twenty pratincoles. These hawked for insects right over our heads at times and gave everyone the opportunity to admire their graceful flight, take in their calls and enjoy one of the most delightful species of the area. We also had very good views of a short-toed eagle, the first of two that we were to see today.

Our next stop was the Parc Ornithologique and here we saw our first hoopoe of the trip, in exactly the same tree that Russell had seen one in two weeks earlier! A spotted flycatcher put on a good show just outside the centre viewing windows and two white storks were seen flying over, these now breed within the park area.

Moving south we drove by flamingo lined pools to the town of Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer and then on to the Digue a la Mer – both the town and the coast were extremely busy with the hot sunny weather bringing the multitudes out on to the beaches. Despite being so busy, family parties of Kentish plovers and lots of little terns were seen, and Sandwich terns were overhead, passing between the sea and their breeding islands in the étangs. An excellent lunch was wound up by the sighting of a fine Caspian tern on a distant island, here too some grey plovers and redshank could be seen by the waters edge. A bunch of linnets, the only ones we were to see, sprung out of some scrub and blue-headed yellow wagtails perched like lemon jewels on the top of clumps of *Salicornia*. Common butterflies and moths included painted ladies, clouded yellows and hummingbird hawk moths.

With holidaymakers seemingly increasing by the minute we left the delights of the Digue for the quieter marshes and coastal lagoons of Cacharel. Search as we might we couldn't find spectacled warblers amongst the scrub but several more spotted flies were seen and a very fine great-spotted cuckoo; this did all the right things including perching in full view for all to see, not a species we see a huge amount of in the Camargue, so well received.

Few gulls can be more delightful than the slender-billed, so locating three in a saline lagoon and only a couple of hundred yards away was a real treat. Other delights included a flock of thirty black-tailed godwits in full summer plumage, a couple of oystercatchers, the only ones were to see and several common terns. Good numbers of avocets were found in some lagoons and fresher pools held yet more black-winged stilts. A delightful place.

With the day rapidly drawing to an end we headed back towards Arles allowing ourselves a brief break at the Mas d'Agon. Once again squacco and night herons were on display with a host of other herons and egrets and as we made our way slowly towards Arles several crested larks were flushed from the roadside.

Day 5 - Sunday 1st June

With days proving to be very hot so far a decision was made to make a pre-breakfast trip to the Aerodrome du Vallon on La Crau to look for little bustards, this area, being flat and open, develops a strong heat haze on hot days, making viewing difficult. The bustards were a bit elusive from the usual viewing point but by moving down the road a short distance we were able to see them quite well and at least a dozen birds were recorded. Some birds were very active, rushing around at great speed, others were calling and stretching their necks so we could see them better – very co-operative.

A number of stone-curlews were also seen from various points and it was clear that their young were not far away. With the vast numbers of magpies that are such a feature of La Crau it's a wonder that any birds produce young here!

After breakfast we took a leisurely stroll down the track by the hotel, to look once again for rollers – at least three were seen affording some fine views. A 'gang' (and there is no other word) of 60 black kites were found feeding on chicken remains, not the best habitat to see them in but a magnificent sight none the less. Once again we had good views of melodious warbler and occasional buzzards were seen too.

En route to our lunch spot by the Grand Rhone we took in a long established white stork nest, where we found both birds in residence, and a bee-eater breeding colony. Although only a handful of birds was present they gave us all much pleasure and set us up nicely for lunch. Lunch was interrupted by two sightings of kingfishers and some very large fish in the Rhone.

After lunch we returned to La Crau at Mas d'Icart, only to find the entire area alive with the larvae of the brown-tail moth, even Joe seemed less enthusiastic than usual about this find! Essentially they were everywhere, soon hitching a ride on your legs or clothing. Every bit of vegetation was stripped bare and you slipped on them as you trod on them on the stones, quite a horrible experience!

All this rendered the scrubby path on to La Crau something of an obstacle course but eventually we broke out into more open areas but not before we had seen a couple of rollers, a species we were to see quite a bit of during the rest of the day, including one 'rolling' bird. Once in the open we discovered that most of the lesser kestrels were quite some way to our north and although we did manage fleeting views of them none were near. Sadly this remained the case but we did manage to see a total of four pin-tailed sandgrouse, albeit hurtling around at speed but then that is what they do!

Linda found a fine spurge hawk moth caterpillar, which unlike the brown-tails was much admired, as was the emperor moth caterpillar. La Crau proved excellent for butterflies with western marbled whites, sloe hairstreak, brown argus, swallowtail and both large and small skippers amongst many species. On leaving La Crau we passed through some very attractive farmland and dried out marsh, the former producing some roadside lax-flowered orchids, the latter a hunting lesser kestrel.

In the evening we were joined by a representative of LPO, one of the organisations that Honeyguide supports through these trips; he told of his research work, looking at bitterns in the Camargue and although they appear to be doing quite well from what he said, we didn't see or hear any during our stay!

Day 6 - Monday 6th June

Today we returned to the hills, initially at Les Baux. Here we parked below the village and spent some time scanning the nearby rock faces for blue rock thrush – our patience eventually paid off with fine views of both a male and female. Nearby crag martins were clearly nesting under the cliff overhangs. The gardens and scrub below us held many singing backcaps and the roadside vegetation produced the scarce swallowtail butterfly. Making our way down to the gardens brought us into contact with both singing black and common redstarts but best of all though was a splendid sub-adult Bonelli's eagle that flew along the cliff edge high above us. The gardens also held a few serins and the odd greenfinch.



Some time was then spent looking at the actual village of Les Baux before moving off to our picnic spot at the start of the road up to La Caume. Some of the group decided that they wouldn't hike to the summit but instead remained amongst the pines, here they found crested tits, lots of chaffinches and pleasant shade from the now searing heat.

The rest of us set off at a cracking pace behind Tom and soon we were emerging from the trees out into the real heat of the day. Our first stop was in an open area affording good views over hills that might have soaring raptors but alas we couldn't find any. The best we could do was to misidentify jackdaws and have brief views of a raven, one of three that we were to see during the day.

Hot and weary we arrived at the summit and set off for a vantage point overlooking the southern edge of the range. From here we had eyeball-to-eyeball encounters with alpine swifts racing along the cliff edge. Patient watching finally paid when a total of three honey buzzards came up and over above us, doubtless migrating

birds to breeding sites further north or east. Try as we might, we never did see anything of the Bonelli's eagles that we knew to be breeding on the cliff face somewhere below us. A few folk set off to search the nearby scrub for Dartford warblers and with success.

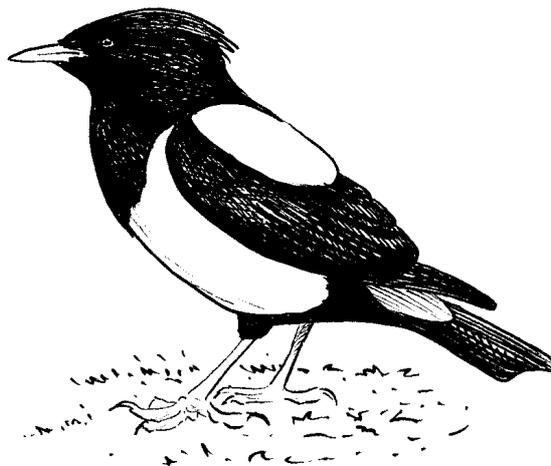
At Les Baux, the track-sides up to the top and the summit itself all proved good for insects, with a good range of butterflies recorded including high brown and spotted fritillary, blue-spot hairstreak, black hairstreak, dappled white, Provençal chalkhill blue and Adonis blue.

With a longish walk down ahead of us, we set off once again. Stopping once again at the open area vantage point proved pretty unproductive but just as we were about to leave an adult Egyptian vulture was spotted high in the sky. This remained with us for a while allowing all those present to have really good views of it. An excellent way to wind up what had been yet another very hot but fruitful day. I think we all slept well that night!

Day 7 - Tuesday 7th June

Today we were to visit the Petite Camargue proper with Joe taking us to areas he had visited in the past. The day started rather grey with a strong wind and much haze. Our route took us to Aigues Mortes via St Gilles, Gallician and Montcalm. Crossing the Petit Rhone took us through more rice fields, many with black-headed gull and some with gull-billed terns, and finally amongst the étangs and marshes of the Marais du Charnier. Here we found great crested grebes, not common during this week, quite a number of common terns and many noisy great reed warblers. All the common heron and egret species were seen along with the usual stilts, ever present flamingos and marsh harriers. Several corn buntings were seen and heard in one area, amazingly the first of the week. In a roadside field a single night heron was feeding, with two white storks close by; here too tree sparrows were quite frequent in the hedgerows, much as throughout a great deal of the Camargue. How nice to find both them and goldfinches still common. Two hoopoes were seen in flight during the course of the day and a few turtle doves flushed here and there. The day also produced one of only two sparrowhawks that we were to see this week.

We continued on through mixed farmland and occasional wet spots towards Montcalm until great excitement brought us to a rapid halt, for there mixed up with a small group of starlings were six adult rose-coloured starlings! We all had good views of these, a very rare bird in the Camargue indeed and for Russell (and many others too) a new species – the first he had had in the area in many years! We subsequently learnt that this species is appearing increasingly in winter in south-west Europe but summering birds are still few and far between. One wonders if they might be thinking of breeding nearby?



To celebrate we decided to call a halt at Aigues Mortes for coffee and by now a little rain was in the air. Time was made to briefly walk around this interesting walled town before we set off for the sand dunes close to the Phare de l'Espiguette, where we were to have lunch. It proved to be very windy here with quite a lot of sand in the air, nevertheless the botanists found some interesting plants, including sea spurge and wild stock, amongst the dunes and several butterfly species were seen including our first small coppers.

With less than ideal weather conditions we decided to abandon the dunes and slowly retrace our steps back to the Camargue proper, returning via Domaine de Mejanès for loo facilities and ice creams etc. A short drive close to the shore of the Étang de Vaccares gave us sightings of a few avocets, yet more corn buntings and a really good view of a male Sardinian warbler, the best yet.

Our final port of call was once again Mas d'Agon, which again lived up to our expectations, this time providing much aerial activity by up to eight pratincoles. By the time we left we had had our fill of this delightful species, in improving weather too. A roadside marsh once again held red-crested pochards including a most handsome male.

Day 8 - Wednesday 8th June

Our final day in the Camargue was spent in the eastern sector, taking in the saline lagoons, commercial salt pans and marshes close to Salin de Giraud, affectionally known as Salt Lake City! John Walmsley, who has lived and worked in the area for many years, joined us for the day. Our first stop was at the vast salt works where John gave us a brief appraisal of salt production in the entire Mediterranean and explained something of how the system works and how birds take advantage of it. We were soon amongst one of his favourite birds, shelduck, and looking down on to family parties of Kentish plovers – they breed commonly on the banks within the salt pans.

Driving gently southwards towards the Plage d'Arles took us close to pools with little stints and curlew sandpipers in them, many of which were in full summer plumage. More distantly we also saw turnstone, a few ringed plovers and lots of avocets. By this time though most wader species had moved on, as the majority are migrants here. All around us flamingos were extremely numerous for now we were close to their main breeding colony.

Areas of *Salicornia* held many blue-headed yellow wagtails and *Tamarix* scrub often held a spotted flycatcher or two – it is clear that migration is still well under way for this species. Many of the islands within the lagoons supported breeding populations of yellow-legged gulls, many now with young, as well as little, common and sandwich terns.

Lunch was taken among the ruins of Tourvieille, not the most pleasant picnic spot of the week but about the best shelter that could be found in this open windswept place, which by now was very hot again. After lunch we pushed towards the Étang du Fangassier, the site of the huge flamingo breeding colony. While en route John P located a fine adult red-necked phalarope within a few feet of the raised bank we were driving along. Everyone was able to watch this at very close range, surely one of the highlights of the week. At the flamingo colony John W gave us run down on the history of the breeding site here. Vandalism of nature conservation buildings continues and this year the flamingo study tower, located right in the middle of the colony had been burnt to the ground, a sad reflection on the animosity that seems to exist between the hunters and the naturalists here. Recent years have seen the destruction of many viewing facilities including the visitor centre overlooking the colony.

We retraced our way back through the saline lagoons to the freshwater marshes to the north of the salines and eventually back to Le Sambuc, where John Walmsley lives. During the course of this we stopped off at a number of wet places, some holding a good range of species. At one site a single great white egret was found, this was only the second day we had seen them. Apart from the ever present black kites and marsh harriers we also managed to see three separate short-toed eagles whilst on our way back, all showing very different plumages, ranging from a bird with very white underparts to another that was dark below. Roadside wires held a few bee-eaters, a stonechat and at least a couple of rollers. As we finally wound our way back towards Arles those so common roadside birds were still with us, the nightingale, the Cetti's warbler and the fan-tailed warbler.

John Walmsley joined us for dinner, nicely winding up a most enjoyable day. It was good to find that John has now become a 'moth-er', further strengthening his interests in the Camargue.

Day 9 - Thursday 9th June

Today was set aside for a twinning visit to Avignon but unfortunately this didn't quite go according to plan, as when we got to the walls of the old town all the parking areas were completely full with very little chance of stopping. Furthermore street demonstrations were underway adding to the confusion. A couple of circuits of the town were made but it was soon obvious that we were going to have to abort the exercise altogether.

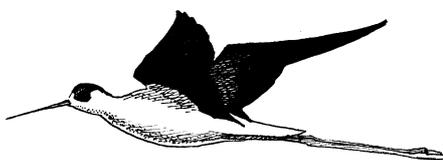
However, we went on to Tarascon, on the banks of the Rhone, which was altogether more relaxed and with plenty of parking space for two minibuses. An hour or two was spent looking at this interesting old town before heading off for the limestone hills of the Chaîne des Alpilles for lunch. Here we found a very pleasant spot under some trees (a messy mulberry) to have lunch, followed by a walk through woodland and by a stream. The stream banks held several fine specimens of the red demoiselle *Agrion haemorrhoidalis*. Particularly nice plants included violet helleborine and crown vetch. Our return route to Arles took us through some delightful hilly countryside, including the edge of Les Baux, which proved very photogenic.

Dinner had to be early today as we were flying out from Nimes later that evening – as always Simone and Marcel excelled themselves and it was a pleasure for the group to be able present Simone with some flowers as a ‘thank you’. The journey back to Nimes airport ought to have been fairly relaxed as it wasn’t very far, unfortunately however the road signage left a bit to be desired, as it didn’t seem to tally with the name of the airport that was written on our voucher from Ryanair. However we eventually rolled up at the right place, disposed of the vans and were soon safely back at Stansted.

We are most grateful for the kind gifts that were presented to us by the group and we for our part had a thoroughly enjoyable ten days.

Russell and John.

For those who would like a very attractive reminder of the Camargue can I recommend ‘La Camargue’ by Bruce Pearson, a collection of delightful water colours and sketches that for me captures the real atmosphere of the place. It is published (in French but you buy it for the pictures!) by Gallimard, Conservatoire Du Littoral, 1997. ISBN 2-07-050973-7



Finally, Avis wound up the trip with this:

We’ve had a wonderful ten days, the weather has been just great
And nearly everyday we’ve had something to celebrate.
Eagle owl or rose-coloured starling, pratincoles or phalarope
And our favourite spot for herons, seen plainly without a scope.
Wonderful species of butterflies and flowers and insects galore
We have been so lucky and couldn’t have asked for more.
The cuisine has been exceptional and our thanks go to Marcel and Simone
The variety has been quite amazing and so different from home.
Our picnics we’ll long remember, in woods or by the river.
Our only horror was brown-tailed moths and that made us all quiver.
We only had a few mishaps with camera and of course Tom’s shoe
But it’s amazing what one can achieve with a strap and good French glue.
The combined expertise has really helped us all
And our 50th Anniversary trip is one we’ll long recall.
So, before our paths divide and we all say adieu.
We say to Russell, John and Joe a sincere merci beaucoup.

Systematic List – Birds

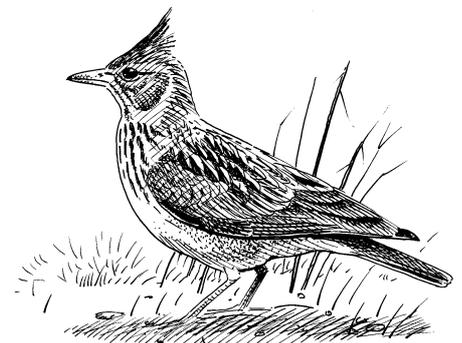
The combined list for all members of the group.

Great Crested Grebe	Small numbers on larger water bodies on a number of occasions, maximum eight in any one day.
Cormorant	Ones and twos, on larger water bodies only.
Night Heron	Up to twelve at Mas d’Agon, otherwise singles at a few other sites.
Squacco Heron	Excellent and close views at Mas d’Agon in particular, involving up to 8 birds. Smaller numbers in rice fields and at other marshes.

Cattle Egret	Daily, abundant where animals occur but also in some rice fields and even amongst animals on La Crau.
Little Egret	Much less common than the previous species and more often seen in saline situations.
Great White Egret	Up to five, at Tour du Vallat and Marais de Romieu, and a single near Tourvieille
Grey Heron	Daily, common in many marshes, some rice fields and by the coast, maximum fifteen - twenty in any one day.
Purple Heron	This handsome heron was recorded in small numbers from several marshes, especially Mas d'Agon, Tour du Vallat, Cacharel and Le Paty de la Trinite. Maximum in any one day twelve.
White Stork	Occupied nests were seen at Raphele and Pioch Badet and other birds at the Parc Ornithologique. Apparently the Camargue now holds about ten pairs of breeding birds, a recent colonist, probably initially resulting from escaped birds from captivity!
Greater Flamingo	Abundant in all coastal localities, especially at 'Flamingo City' in the Étang du Fangassier. THE bird of the Camargue.
Mute Swan	Scattered in very small numbers throughout the Camargue.
Shelduck	A characteristic bird of the saline pans and in other coastal localities. It is extraordinary to think that these birds move all the way to the German Bight to join their northern cousins on their moulting grounds.
Mallard	The only common duck in this season. Frequent in marshes, rice fields and the coastal lagoons.
Red-crested Pochard	Only seen at Mas d'Agon, where up to five birds were seen.
Honey Buzzard	Three migrating birds were seen moving north, from the summit of La Caume.
Black Kite	The common raptor of drier areas, in particular the farmland and in the hills. An estimated 60 birds were seen feeding on chicken remains close to the hotel!
Egyptian Vulture	A single adult was seen whilst we were returning from the summit of La Caume. The Les Alpilles only supports a single pair of breeding birds today, so we were lucky to see this bird close to its breeding site.
Short-toed Eagle	Several close sightings on this attractive small eagle, maximum in any one day three birds.
Marsh Harrier	The common raptor of the marshes and rice fields, often five or more could be seen in the air together.
Montagu's Harrier	Never common, we had to be content with single male in the Gimeaux area on the first day.
Sparrowhawk	A single bird on two days only.
Common Buzzard	Occasional in farmland and in the hills, never more than two or three birds in a single day.
Golden Eagle	A single immature bird at Mont Ventoux.
Bonelli's Eagle	A single sub-adult was seen above cliffs at Les Baux affording excellent views.

Lesser Kestrel	Up to five birds seen on La Crau where artificial nest sites have been set up on disused goat sheds by LPO, a project supported by Honeyguide in the past.
Common Kestrel	Daily, recorded from most localities.
Pheasant	Scarce, only seen once.
Moorhen	Probably present in all marshes but never thought common.
Coot	Very common on all larger water bodies, 'tens' recorded some days.
Little Bustard	Excellent views obtained of up to 12 birds on the old airfield at La Crau.
Oystercatcher	A few in saline lagoons in the western sector of the Camargue.
Black-winged Stilt	Often numerous in shallow wet marshes or rice fields throughout the Camargue. Upwards of sixty birds on the best days.
Avocet	Up to 60 birds in saline lagoons, in both the eastern and western sectors of the Camargue.
Stone-curlew	Recorded from the old airfield on La Crau, where up to five birds, a few sightings elsewhere, including a juvenile north of Mas D'Agon.
Collared Pratincole	Up to twenty birds recorded Hawking over Mas d'Agon and between Gimeaux and Saliers.
Little Ringed Plover	Two on river shingles at Pont du Gard.
Ringed Plover	Two in coastal lagoons in the eastern sector of the Camargue.
Kentish Plover	Frequent in saline lagoons on the coast and occasional in dried out marshes elsewhere. Breeding birds with young noted.
Grey Plover	Eight in saline lagoons close to the Digue a la Mer.
Lapwing	A few breeding pairs north of Mas d'Agon and between Gimeaux and Saliers.
Little Stint	Up to sixteen in coastal lagoons near Salin de Giraud.
Curlew Sandpiper	Nine in coastal lagoons near to Salin de Giraud, all in splendid summer plumage.
Ruff	A single sighting only.
Redshank	Up to a dozen in coastal lagoons by the Digue a la Mer.
Greenshank	A single sighting only, in a rice field.
Black-tailed Godwit	30 in flight over the Étang de Malagroy.
Turnstone	Two in saline lagoons near Plage d'Arles.
Red-necked Phalarope	A single adult in splendid summer plumage seen well at the Étang du Fangassier.
Mediterranean Gull	The calls of this bird are a characteristic sound of the Camargue these days; not always so. Many hundreds on occasions, especially in the rice fields.
Black-headed Gull	Widespread and abundant.
Slender-billed Gull	Recorded in very small numbers close to La Digue and at the Étang du Malagroy.

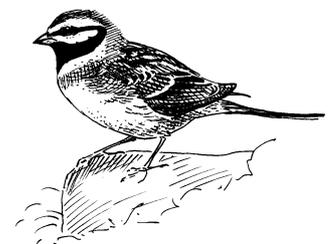
Yellow-legged Herring Gull	Widespread and super abundant.
Gull-billed Tern	The delightful tern of the rice fields, marshes and coastal lagoons. Upwards of a thirty on the first day.
Caspian Tern	A single bird of this distinctive species was seen at the Étang dit l'Imperial.
Sandwich Tern	Small numbers in coastal lagoons, especially close to St Maries de la Mer.
Common Tern	Frequent in coastal lagoons and over the larger marshes.
Little Tern	Many by the Digue and in the saline lagoons close to the sea, widespread.
Whiskered Tern	Frequent at Mas d'Agon and at Tour du Vallat, maximum 60 in any one day.
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	Four, briefly in flight at La Crau.
Rock dove/feral pigeon	Widespread and abundant.
Woodpigeon	Occasional in small numbers only.
Collared Dove	Widespread and common, especially around habitation.
Turtle Dove	Small numbers on most days.
Great Spotted Cuckoo	A single seen well in coastal scrub at Cacharel.
Cuckoo	Seen, or more likely heard, on most days in small numbers.
Eagle Owl	Splendid sightings of an adult at Mt Valence, voted by some as the 'bird of the trip'!
Little Owl	A single bird was seen near the hotel.
Nightjar	Two heard 'churring' at Mt Valence.
Swift	Widespread and abundant, thousands recorded some days.
Alpine Swift	Not uncommon at the summit of La Caume and over Les Baux and at Pont du Gard.
Kingfisher	Two at Pont du Gard and two by the Rhone near Arles.
Bee-eater	Always a popular species to see, flocks of up to 15 birds including a small breeding colony at Mas de l'Hoste. For some 'the bird of the trip'.
Roller	Two regularly by the hotel and occasional singles elsewhere, ten recorded on the best day.
Hoopoe	A single seen at the Parc Ornithologique and two elsewhere were the only sightings on this seemingly now scarce species.
Green Woodpecker	Occasional sightings of single birds in flight only.
Great spotted woodpecker	Occasional singles.
Crested Lark (right)	Not uncommon in coastal habitats, dried out marshes and by roadsides.



Skylark	Widespread but not common except between Gimeaux and Saliers.
Crag Martin	Recorded from Les Baux, Pont du Gard and La Caume, where frequent.
Swallow	Widespread and often abundant.
House Martin	Widespread and common.
Blue-headed Yellow Wagtail	Not uncommon in coastal <i>Salicornia</i> scrub and dried out marshes.
White Wagtail	Common on river shingles at Pont du Gard, a few singles elsewhere.
Wren	Heard at Mont Ventoux, Les Baux and elsewhere, generally rather scarce.
Duncock	Two at Mont Ventoux only.
Robin	Heard at Mont Ventoux and around Les Baux, La Caume.
Nightingale	Amazingly widespread and noisy, a characteristic bird of roadside verges , ditches etc.
Black Redstart	Frequent at Pont du Gard, Arles, Les Baux and around habitation elsewhere.
Common Redstart	Two singing males at Les Baux.
Stonechat	Single males on two days.
Blue Rock Thrush	Two at Les Baux, including a superb male in full view.
Ring Ouzel	Three at Mont Ventoux affording excellent sightings.
Blackbird	Occasionally heard, rarely seen, especially Mont Ventoux, Pont du Gard and Les Baux.
Cetti's Warbler	A characteristic bird of roadside ditches throughout the Camargue, common elsewhere too.
Fan-tailed Warbler	Yet another common roadside bird, especially in rice fields and wetter marshes.
Reed Warbler	Frequently heard from roadside marshes.
Great Reed Warbler	Singing well from a number of the larger reedbeds, with good views obtained. Upwards of a dozen on the best day.
Melodious Warbler	Occasional singing birds, maximum three in any one day.
Dartford Warbler	Only recorded in scrub close to the summit of La Caume where two birds showed themselves well.
Sardinian Warbler	The common scrub warbler of the area but much more often heard than seen.
Blackcap	The beautiful song of this bird was often heard, especially at Les Baux, Pont du Gard and Mont Ventoux.
Chiffchaff	Occasionally heard at Mont Ventoux.
Spotted Flycatcher	Up to fifteen amongst coastal scrub in the western sector of the Camargue.
Crested Tit	Good views of one bird at Mont Ventoux and up to three seen amongst the pines at the start of the road to La Caume.
Coal Tit	Frequent at Mont Ventoux.

Great Tit	Occasional in small numbers, especially wooded places such as Les Baux, Pont du Gard and Mont Ventoux.
Blue Tit	Three at Pont du Gard.
Short-toed Treecreeper	A single bird at Pont du Gard.
Golden Oriole	One good view of a male in flight at Pont du Gard and much song from several others.
Jay	Single sightings at Mont Ventoux and in the Les Baux area.
Magpie	Widespread and abundant.
Jackdaw	Ditto
Carrion Crow	Widespread and frequent.
Raven	Only recorded from Mont Ventoux and the Les Baux area.
Starling	Widespread and common.
Rose-coloured Starling	A very unexpected bonus – six superb adults in the grounds of a roadside Mas south of Gallician in the Petit Camargue.
House Sparrow	Widespread and abundant.
Tree Sparrow	Common, especially around habitation and animals.
Rock Sparrow	Excellent sightings of four at Pont du Gard.
Chaffinch	Common at Mont Ventoux, Pont du Gard and Les Baux, rarely recorded elsewhere.
Serin	Not common but scattered sightings at Pont du Gard, Les Baux and elsewhere.
Citril Finch	Common amongst the pines at Mont Ventoux, ‘tens’ of birds involved, often in family groups.
Greenfinch	Largely singles but up to six at Mont Ventoux.
Goldfinch	Common and widespread, the only common finch of the area.
Linnet	Up to a dozen on one day only.
Crossbill	Up to sixty amongst the pines at Mont Ventoux, often in family groups.
Cirl Bunting (<i>right</i>)	A pair at Pont du Gard.
Corn Bunting	Very scarce, with only a very few sightings.

129 species



Butterflies – list compiled by Joe:

The following 48 species were recorded:

Large Skipper	Small Skipper	Essex Skipper
Swallowtail	Scarce Swallowtail	Small White
Large White	Green-veined White	Black-veined White
Bath White	Dappled White	Orange-tip
Moroccan Orange-tip	Clouded Yellow	Wood White
Two-tailed Pasha	Southern White Admiral	Small Tortoiseshell
Comma	Painted Lady	Red Admiral
Dark Green Fritillary	High Brown Fritillary	Queen of Spain Fritillary
Spotted Fritillary	Provençal Fritillary	Marbled White
Western Marbled White	Woodland Ringlet	Meadow Brown
Spanish Gatekeeper	Southern Gatekeeper	Speckled Wood
Large Wall Brown	Wall Brown	Sloe Hairstreak
Ilex Hairstreak	Blue-spot Hairstreak	Black Hairstreak
Small Copper	Small Blue	Chapman's Blue
Brown Argus	Provençal Chalk hill Blue	Adonis Blue
Common Blue	Pearl-bordered Fritillary	Holly Blue

Moths – list compiled by Joe:

Cream-spot Tiger	Garden Tiger	Ruby Tiger
Muslin	Silver-Y	Six-spot Burnet
Four-spotted Footman	Hummingbird Hawk Moth	Burnett Companion
Mother Shipton	Latticed Heath	Chimney Sweeper
Marbled Clover	Spurge Hawk (larva)	Browntail (larvae!)
Emperor moth (larva)	<i>Anania funebris</i> (small black and white Pyrale)	
Four-spotted		

Dragonflies:

Banded Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx haemorrhoidalis</i> (the red bodied Demoiselle)	
Beautiful Demoiselle	<i>Gomphidae</i> (unidentified species)	
Golden ringed Dragonfly	Four-spotted Chaser	Black-lined Orthetrum
<i>Sympetrum erythraea</i> (the common red bodied Darter)		Scarce Chaser

Plants

Some plants of the week and their habitats/locations:

Umbrella pine	<i>Pinus pinea</i>	hills and woods
Juniper	<i>Juniperus communis</i>	ditto
Prickly juniper	<i>Juniperus oxycedrus</i>	ditto
Kermes oak	<i>Quercus coccifera</i>	waysides, hills
Nettle tree	<i>Celtis australis</i>	Pont du Gard
Fig	<i>Ficus carica</i>	ditto
Roman nettle	<i>Urtica pilulifera</i>	ruins, Camargue
Pellitory of the Wall	<i>Parietaria judaica</i>	walls, steps, Les Baux
Birthwort	<i>Aristolochia clematitis</i>	waysides
Shrubby Seablite	<i>Suaeda vera</i>	coastal locations
Sea Purslane	<i>Halimione portulacoides</i>	ditto
Prickly Saltwort	<i>Salsola kali</i>	ditto
White Champion	<i>Silene alba</i>	waysides
Common Poppy	<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>	waysides, cultivation
White Mignonette	<i>Reseda alba</i>	Waste ground, verges
Spanish Broom	<i>Spartium junceum</i>	Hillsides
Common Vetch	<i>Vicia sativa</i>	waysides
Crown vetch	<i>Coronilla varia</i>	waysides, near water
Mountain kidney vetch	<i>Anthyllis Montana</i>	Mont Ventoux

Black Medick	<i>Medicago lupulina</i>	ditto
Dragon's teeth	<i>Tetragonolobus maritimus</i>	road edges, Camargue
Star Clover	<i>Trifolium stellatum</i>	La Crau, stony places
Dove's foot Cranes-bill	<i>Geranium molle</i>	widespread
Round-leaved Cranes-bill	<i>Geranium rotundifolium</i>	ditto
Herb Robert	<i>Geranium robertianum</i>	ditto
Common Stork's-bill	<i>Erodium cicutarium</i>	La Crau
Beautiful Blue Flax	<i>Linum narbonense</i>	La Caume
Large Mediterranean Spurge	<i>Euphorbia characias</i>	hillsides
Turpentine Tree	<i>Pistacia terebinthus?</i>	ditto
Common Mallow	<i>Malva sylvestris</i>	waysides
Grey-leaved Cistus	<i>Cistus albidus</i>	hillsides
Sage-leaved Cistus	<i>Cistus salvifolius</i>	hillsides
Rockrose	<i>Cistus populifolius</i>	hillsides, La Crau
Spotted Rockrose	<i>Tuberaria guttata</i>	ditto
Tamarisk	<i>Tamarix</i>	Camargue, common
Squirting cucumber	<i>Ecballium elaterium</i>	dry places
Shrubby Hare's ear	<i>Bupleurum fruticosum</i>	dry waysides, hills
Olive	<i>Olea europaea</i>	hillsides
Dogwood	<i>Cornus sanguinea</i>	roadsides
Scarlet Pimpernel	<i>Anagallis arvensis</i>	dry waysides
Madder	<i>Rubia tinctorum</i>	Camargue roadsides
Pink Convolvulus	<i>Convolvulus cantabrica</i>	ditto
Blue Hound's Tongue	<i>Cynoglossum creticum</i>	waysides
Bugloss	<i>Anchusa arvensis</i>	dry waysides, La Crau
Wall germander	<i>Teucrium chamaedrys</i>	Les Alpilles
Cut-leaved self heal	<i>Prunella laciniata</i>	dry open ground
Thyme	<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	La Crau
Rosemary	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	hillsides
Lavender	<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>	ditto
Clary	<i>Salvia verbeneca</i>	cultivation, waysides
White henbane	<i>Hyocyamus albus</i>	Les Baux walls
Mullein	<i>Verbascum sinuatum</i>	waysides
Broomrape sp	<i>Orobanche sp</i>	Mont Ventoux, lower areas
Danewort	<i>Sambucus ebulus</i>	roadsides
Valerian	<i>Centranthus rubbe</i>	roadsides
Stink aster	<i>Dittrichia viscosa</i>	dry places, La Crau
Lavender cotton	<i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i>	walls, Les Baux
Milk Thistle	<i>Silybum marianum</i>	common, waysides
Urospermum	<i>Urospermum dalechampi</i>	banks, hillsides
Asphodel	<i>Asphodel sp</i>	La Crau, La Caume
Aphyllanthes	<i>Aphyllanthes monspeliensis</i>	hillsides, La Caume
Flag (Yellow) Iris	<i>Iris pseudocorus</i>	Camargue ditches
Daffodil	<i>Narcissus tazetta</i>	Mont Ventoux
Needle grass	<i>Stipa pennata</i>	Les Alpilles
Giant reed	<i>Arundo donax</i>	Camargue, wet places
Lax-flowered Orchid	<i>Orchis laxiflora</i>	ditch banks, edge of La Crau
Cowslip	<i>Primula veris</i>	Mont Ventoux
Ascending lousewort	<i>Pedicularis ascendens</i>	Mont Ventoux
Moonwort	<i>Botrychium lunaria</i>	Mont Ventoux
Phillyrea	<i>Phillyrea angustifolia</i>	dry hillsides

Note that this is not a complete list for the trip but with assistance from Peter and Dave covers the more noticeable and/or interesting species.