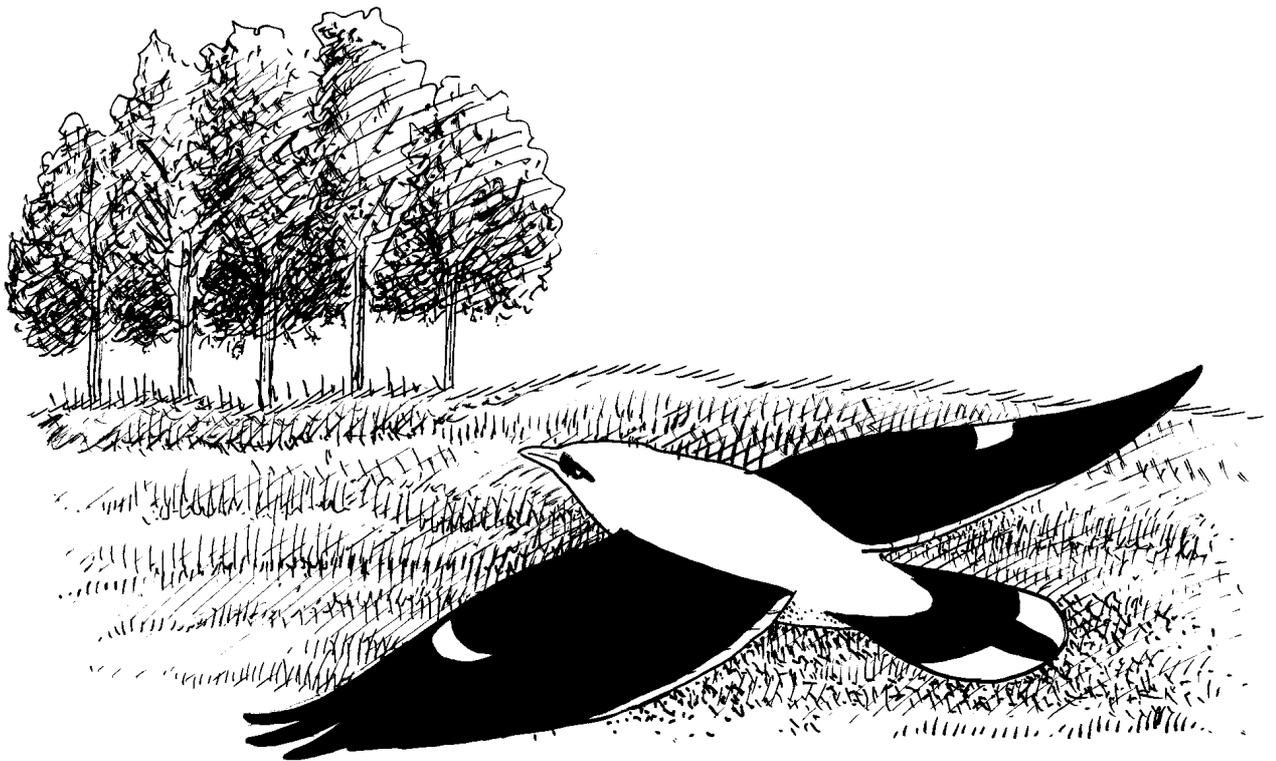


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Flowers and birds in the Dordogne
10 – 17 May 2003

**Flowers and birds in the Dordogne
10 – 17 May 2003**

Participants

Edna Howard	London
Kate Dalziel	Cornwall
Sue Burge Peter Burge	Oxon
Vic Dowsett Brenda Dowsett	Essex
Humphrey Kay Sallie Kay	Wilts

Leaders

Chris Durdin	Norwich
Robin and Rachel Hamilton	Suffolk

Our hosts: Keith, Cathy and Olivia Parker, Castang, Le Coux-et-Bigaroque,
24220 St Cyprien, Dordogne, France

Illustrations by Rob Hume, except field cricket by Maureen Gibson. Front cover: golden oriole
Report written by Rachel Hamilton.

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 the Dordogne was supplemented by two groups in the Camargue groups and one in the 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.

Flowers and Birds in the Dordogne, 10-17 May 2003

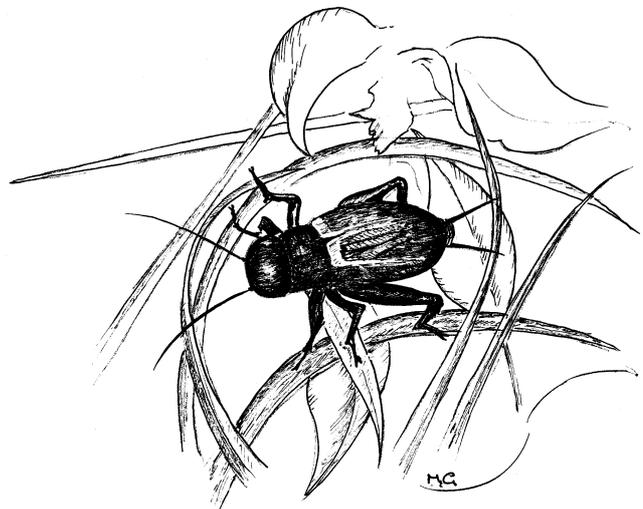
Saturday May 10: Arrival and Castang

A happy band of new and old friends gathered, on a warm, bright, early summer's morning in the modern, international bustle of Stansted airport. The flight gave us clear, exciting views of the French coast and landscape and the magic of the French countryside was upon us immediately as we landed. Bergerac's tiny airport with its sea of dog-daisies and wheeling black kites was a delightful contrast to the one we had left.

Gilles was our driver, guide, mentor and entertainer throughout the week. He gathered us up, heaved huge cases effortlessly into the bus, and then regaled us with information of local interest: geology, agriculture, the villages we passed and the history of the Dordogne river navigation, on our hour's journey to Castang. There were many more black kites to be seen – a common bird all through the week – grey heron, mute swans, yellow-legged gulls and mallard on the river, an entertaining language confusion between gannets and cormorants (the cormorants won) and spectacular sweeps of water crowfoot in flower in the shallow, stony reaches. To Gilles's amazement, we admired the brilliant blue patches of meadow clary in the fields and on the verges. It is regarded as a weed (*une mauvaise herbe*) by the local farmers, and cut down mercilessly. So we were all delighted and amused, on our arrival at Castang, to see that large clumps of meadow clary had been carefully protected for us to enjoy along with the pyramidal orchids standing proudly among them.

Our welcome at Castang was wonderful; Cathy and Keith, with their daughter Olivia, greeted us with such warmth, and the beauty of the Castang buildings and their setting gave us all an immediate sense of comfort and relaxation. It was lunchtime and our first taste of Cathy's cooking: homemade soup and a table piled high with pâtés and quiches, pastas and taboulés, breads and salads. And a plentiful supply of the house wines, local, light, mellow and fruity, entirely suited to the occasion.

The meadows drop gently away below the house and our first excursion was to explore these. It was Saturday, so Olivia was able to join us and help to search out some delights for us. Not only were the meadows full of meadow clary, but the magnificent displays of orchids were breathtaking in the long grass. Pyramidal orchids, with their bright pink heads, were the most common and widespread but we found clumps of bee orchids and the delicately shaded burnt-tip orchids and, farther down the hill as the ground became damper, there were patches of green-winged orchids and a number of lax-flowered orchids with their striking purple flowers. These meadows were later to be cut for hay and the many grass species were enriched by tassel hyacinths, yellow rattle, pepper saxifrage and by swathes of lady's bedstraw, hedge bedstraw, field scabious and knapweed. Insects were plentiful too: bush crickets and field crickets (*pictured, right*), 5-spot burnet, latticed heath, clouded buff and speckled yellow moths, Glanville fritillaries and, thanks to an energetic sprint by Humphrey, a fine scarce swallowtail butterfly.



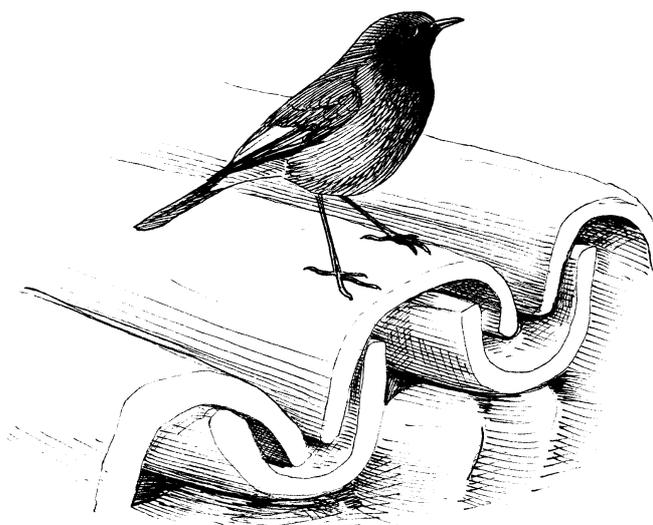
As we neared the bottom of the hill, a hare started up from its form and shot away to hide elsewhere. We felt the warmth of the bare shape left by its body among the grassy tussocks. A few moments later, quite by chance, we came upon a tiny fallow fawn, lying motionless in the grass, its huge eyes gazing warily at our intrusion. We enjoyed it for the briefest of moments and then moved quickly away so as to cause it as little disturbance as possible; it was a magical moment that we shall all remember, especially Edna who looked back upon it as so special that it was the highlight of her week. Throughout our walk we were regaled by the songs of blackcap and cirl bunting, the constant 'dzip dzip dzip' of fan-tailed warblers and snatches of nightingale song. Swallows were feeding over the meadows and we had excellent views of cirl bunting and, on a perch beside the drive, a red-backed shrike that became very familiar to us as the week went by. Olivia disappeared a few minutes before

we arrived back at the house and reappeared with a brimming bowl of deliciously sweet scarlet cherries freshly picked from a tree in the garden. We stopped by the path to admire the ferns growing in the garden wall, the aptly named rusty back and hart's tongue ferns. Then it was time for an aperitif on the terrace before the first of Cathy's amazing five-course dinners: homemade pumpkin soup followed by an omelette, then deliciously cooked, succulent beef with a dish of French beans to follow. We were presented with a wonderfully varied selection of local cheeses and finally, a pear and chocolate gateau. There were teas, coffees and a selection of tisanes and, of course, a plentiful supply of red and white wine. We trooped contentedly to bed to a chorus of crickets and midwife toads.

Sunday May 11: Around Castang – Lagrave and Coux

There were some enthusiastic early risers so an optional before-breakfast walk, with special emphasis on birds, became the pattern. The rendezvous point on that first day was the walnut tree at the top of the drive, to the dismay of a hard-working pair of parent bluetits. We quickly moved off and spent a few minutes watching a fine male melodious warbler singing from a regular song perch on the top of the hedge. The slight mist in the morning air gave a resonance to the hoopoe calling from nearby in the wood. We followed it as it flew ahead of us, though we didn't manage to see it. There were white wagtails and swallows to be seen around the farm buildings, spotted flycatchers feeding from wires, a blackcap singing and, while we stood in the wood, watching in the hope that a brilliantly eloquent nightingale would show itself, we were able to follow the antics of a red squirrel, scampering among the treetops.

We passed Keith on the 'bread run' to the village for fresh *boulangerie* for the day, and returned to the house for a welcome breakfast of homemade jams, an assortment of fresh bread and croissants, tea, coffee, fruit and juices.



After breakfast, we set off on a circular walk which took us around Castang up through the tiny hamlet of Lagrave, and back to Castang for lunch. We were able to show everyone the obliging melodious warbler, still singing from his hedgerow vantage point. The hoopoe was still calling and this time had set up a duet with a cuckoo echoing in harmony through the trees. We paused beside the little vineyard above the house to watch a black redstart (*left*), a stonechat and a woodlark, all obligingly taking advantage of the posts supporting the vines. The vineyard is well tended but, under the vines, the arable weeds were flourishing: changing forget-me-not, pale flax, cut-leaved cranesbill, parsley piert and blue pimpernel. The

soil is dry and free-draining and, on the hill slopes, calcareous, with patches of the lemon yellow mouse-ear hawkweed, wild clematis (old man's beard), wild madder and wayfaring tree. The hills are capped by sands from which the lime has leached out so bracken thrives in the hedgerows with clumps of sweet chestnut on the hilltops. We could hear an astonishing chorus of frogs coming from the far corner of a lush green field and, where the soil was more fertile, the hedgerow flowers became more striking: clumps of colourful forage vetch, the delightful and delicate brown vetch, cranesbills (long-stalked cranesbill, little Robin and herb Robert) and dwarf elder.

Lagrave is a lovely hamlet built of the local honey-coloured limestone, with an intricate arrangement of houses and cottages, fascinatingly complicated roofs and beautiful views. We stopped to explore the recently renovated communal bread oven and the village pond where a water frog was 'playing dead', but allowed us to have a good look at it before it dived out of sight. Its small size and its apparently extremely long legs suggest that it was probably a pool frog but the water frogs are a notoriously difficult group. The village roofs and trees are home to numbers of swallows, black redstarts and serins and we had an excellent view of a girl bunting singing from the branch of a magnificent tulip tree. We compared white and bladder campions in a meadow beside the road and examined the local hogweed

flowers; they are slightly greenish in colour, have a rather different petal shape and belong to a different subspecies, *Heracleum sphondylium* ssp. *sibiricum*, from the one at home. As we returned past the bottom of the Castang meadows we were able to watch a fan-tailed warbler unusually well in the morning light, enjoy the antics of a colony of peacock butterfly caterpillars on some nettles and admire a beautiful specimen of lady orchid flowering on the roadside.

After another excellent lunch our excursion took us, again on foot, down towards the Dordogne river, through the village of Le Coux et Bigaroque. At first we retraced our steps of the morning, again watching the woodlark in the vineyard. Then we turned steeply downhill through rich woodland of downy and sessile oaks, field maple and coppiced hazel. Ferns were much in evidence, especially hart's tongue and polypody. Bonelli's warblers and short-toed treecreepers tantalised us with their songs and calls but resolutely refused to show themselves. As we emerged from the wood onto a farm track we were rewarded by the first sighting of the week of a hoopoe as it flew across the valley and we watched the activities of a pair of turtle doves calling and flying to and fro among the clumps of trees while a black kite soared over the woods behind us.

A main road passes through Coux, but even so, there was plenty to see, with particularly good views of serins and black redstarts. We quickly left the village though, and followed a farm track across the floodplain down to the river. The light alluvial soil is very fertile and we passed fields of luscious looking asparagus and kiwi fruit and watched a jay hunting through a well-grown poplar plantation. There is a little beach and picnic area beside the river and Olivia was able to show us a remarkable outdoor mural that she and other classmates from her school had painted, depicting all the fish species for which the Dordogne is so famous. We sat by the river for a little rest, watching white wagtails and swallows on the river and black kites soaring above. Then it came on to rain – the only rain of the week – and we headed for home. Some of us warmly welcomed the timely arrival of Keith with the car and an offer of a lift home. The more energetic found another route up through the wood, but the rain soon stopped and we all assembled for drinks on the terrace. Cathy had excelled herself again with another delicious dinner. This time we started with a vegetable soup followed by melon; then came baked salmon served with a wonderful creamy sorrel sauce and followed by a dish of deliciously roasted potatoes with herbs. The cheese board came next and then a walnut gâteau with our choices of coffees and infusions – and wine of course.

The midwife toads were in such good voice after dinner that some of us decided to follow their calls in the moonlight and we tracked them down to the garden of one of the houses in Lagrave. We wondered whether their relentless bell-like chorus was as welcome to the locals as it was to this visiting group of intrigued naturalists!

Monday May 12: Woodland Walk and Limeuil

After the first morning the meeting point for the early walk was relocated to under the cherry tree. That meant that the early arrivals could feast on fresh cherries while they waited and we could watch the conscientious blue tit parents from further afield. We took the track towards Lagrave, giving us a chance to compare two fine examples of small- and large-leaved lime, just coming into fruit. The hoopoe (*right*) was calling again as we walked along the track. A chance encounter with the owner of the midwife toad garden enabled us to negotiate a visit for later in the week. We turned uphill in Lagrave, retracing our steps of the previous day and enjoyed watching the swallows and serins in the village gardens.



A delicious breakfast again, this time was followed by a very effective system of assembling our own packed lunches from an assortment of meats and pâtés, quiches and salads laid out in the kitchen, then packed up in named boxes and transported for us in Gilles's bus.

This morning's walk was a circuit on quiet country lanes through an area of open limestone woodland. The excitement began immediately as we piled out of the bus and realised that Gilles had missed parking on a clump of fly orchids by only a few feet. We donned sunhats and walked up the lane past

sunny banks covered in lime-loving plants such as chalk milkwort, dropwort, rockroses and the much less familiar, but very pretty, fumana. For comparison, there was also common milkwort close by on some more fertile soil. In a meadow beside the road we admired the strange flight of the ascalaphids – like heavy-duty, fierce lacewings, a scarce swallowtail butterfly and, thanks to another athletic dash with a butterfly net, this time by Chris, a large copper. We watched its brilliant colours disappear along the stream wondering how far it would have to go to find its food plant, the great water dock, of which there was none to be seen. Another brilliant colour caught our eyes – the vivid green of a rose chafer perched high on a hawthorn bush. Excursions up the hillside, a little distance from the road, were fruitful for orchids: lady orchids, woodcock orchids and twayblades, and the highly poisonous swallow-wort. The lane was lined by spindle bushes and field maple, honeysuckle and old man's beard. There were the leaves of both cowslip and oxlip together for comparison and damp ditches with rushes, black bog rush and meadowsweet. Halfway round the walk the view opened out to the left into a beautiful flower-rich meadow on dry, stony soil. The display of tongue orchids here was breathtaking and we lingered, finding violet limodore, field gladiolus and fairy flax among the variety of sedges and grasses. The butterflies were much in evidence: black-veined white, Adonis blue, clouded yellow, among many others. In a tiny hamlet on the homeward leg of the walk, we paused for a welcome rest and leisure to watch a pair of short-toed treecreepers in a garden, cavorting over the roofs and trees. The group stretched out after that, some people finding the strange, saprophytic bird's nest orchid in its characteristic habitat, under coppiced hazel, and others finding some fine spikes of man orchid in a roadside meadow.

Gilles drove us, and our lunches, down into Limeuil where we ate our picnic under the trees overlooking the confluence of the rivers Dordogne and Vézère. Sand martins, house martins and swallows skimmed over the rushing water and we ate our lunches to the constant tinkling of goldfinches above us and shared them with a tree sparrow mingling with the chaffinches, greenfinches and house sparrows hopping around us. What could be more special than the loos in the village that had tree sparrows nesting in the roof above the doorway?

The ancient little town of Limeuil has played an important part many times during the history of the Périgord because of its extraordinarily valuable strategic position high above the confluence of these two great rivers. After lunch, Gilles drove us again, this time up to the top of the hill, where he dropped us off to let us explore the village, following the gently winding descent. The streets are narrow, with high, tightly packed houses, opening from time to time into squares with churches or prettily decorated municipal buildings. There are beautiful views out over the valley and from the parapet we watched tobacco being planted in the rich floodplain far below. The sand martins nest in holes in the stonework and, under the archway at the bottom, the heights of some of the Dordogne's most massive floods are marked in the stone. We had a welcome drink and ice cream at a café by the river before returning to the coach and heading for home.

After the homemade tomato soup and a goats' cheese salad, the centre point of tonight's dinner was delicious braised guinea-fowl with courgettes, followed by bowls of local strawberries and cream.

Tuesday May 13: Le Bugue and The Cave Walk

The pre-breakfast cherry-feasters headed towards Lagrave again on a misty early walk. Though we had heard song thrushes several times earlier in the week, we had not seen any but Vic spotted one at last, feeding around the fruit trees in the Castang garden. As the sun came through the mist, a cirl bunting sang for us from the top of a cherry tree and enabled everyone to see his striking facial markings at leisure and in good light. In Lagrave, we turned downhill this time, seeing fan-tailed warblers again and green- and goldfinches in the treetops. Kate, Peter and Robin caught a tantalising glimpse of a golden oriole as we walked up the drive to Castang.

Tuesday is market day in Le Bugue and no visit to France is complete without a visit to a market! Gilles dropped us all in the town centre and we divided into two groups: the inveterate marketers and the energetic naturalists. The latter group took a lane leading steeply up from the town towards the Grotte Bara-Bahau. A wooded hillside rose up on one side and on the other, fell sharply away to a magnificent view over the town and the valley below. Bonelli's warblers were singing in the trees and there were some good orchids: fly orchids on the way up and a fine woodcock orchid outside the cave.

The excellent bustling market and adjacent shops, selling a mix of local produce, clothes, household goods and temptations for tourists enabled everyone to stock up with postcards, maps and presents for home, mementos of the holiday and a few forgotten essentials. The groups rejoined, shared experiences and took the riverside path – passing more sand martin nest holes in the river walls – to the rendezvous with Gilles, the coach and lunch. We watched moorhens and mallard, white and grey wagtails beside the river and sampled fresh strawberries from the market.

A short drive took us to the start of the afternoon's walk, through open woodland and dry, stony fields to the famous crystal cave, the Gouffre de Proumeyssac. The coach dropped us at a little quarry beneath a steep limestone slope and here we saw more of the beautiful limestone vegetation, adding the pretty blue globularia, and delicately veined Pyrenean flax, wild thymes and yellow-wort to the list of characteristic lime-lovers from yesterday's walk. Woodcock orchids were in fine flower here and we wondered at the association with woodcock, which is maintained in the scientific name, *Ophrys scolopax* as well as the English. (*Scolopax* is the scientific name for the bird.) Bonelli's warblers were singing in the trees and we examined the remains of a great tit nest in a mail box, discovered in occupation by last year's group.

The plateau at the top of the hill was exposed and the grassland was parched so that the lush vegetation in the shelter of the scrubby bushes of sweetbriar and St Lucie's cherry was notable. It was there that we found long-lipped serapias, ivy broomrape and spiked star-of-Bethlehem. The edge of the wood and the meadow were alive with butterflies: orange tip, brimstone, comma, clouded yellow, heath and meadow fritillaries. Some of the group saw a southern white admiral, and others a green hairstreak. The meadow flowers were amazing. Among the grasses we discovered horseshoe and scorpion vetches, tongue orchids and, a real highlight, a mass of the charming and anything-but-aptly-named sombre bee orchid.

It was a short walk from the meadow to the cave entrance, well equipped with the 'necessary facilities'. We pondered over the idea of descending into the cave in a basket, the only access until relatively recently. Then several of the group opted for the official tour, leaving the others to cups of tea and ice creams in the sunshine. We learned that the cave entrance is home to a substantial colony of pipistrelle bats and saw the phenomenal crystal structures of the cave, illuminated and 'interpreted' for the visitor.

Out in the sunshine again, we explored the woodland a little, finding several wild service trees, aspen and sweet chestnut. High in the treetops we could hear firecrests calling and caught the occasional frustrating glimpse. Knowing the bird's fascination with rivals though, Robin played a recording of the song and we were quickly rewarded as its shyness was suppressed in its curiosity to investigate the 'intruder'. Everyone had wonderful views of the tiny bird flitting in the low branches just above our heads and calling.

Gilles was waiting for us at the top of the hill and we followed a beautiful cross-country route back to Castang. Dinner tonight was as wonderful as ever; homemade spinach soup, smoked salmon, lamb cutlets and flageolet beans, cheese and French apple flan! Kate and Rachel were displaying the earrings they had bought in the market!

Wednesday May 14: Two Views Walk, Berbiguières and Beynac

Flushed with our success with the firecrest we decided, before breakfast, to see if the same technique would work for golden orioles. We set off down the drive to a vantage point overlooking the woodland where they had been seen and heard, but no matter how much we played their songs and calls to them, they showed no interest. We contented ourselves with good views of the red-backed shrike and the singing of the nightingale, blackcap and melodious warbler in the woods above us.

After breakfast we headed in the coach for the village of Berbiguières. This is the beginning of a route that has come to be known as the Two Views Walk following as it does the ridge, called Le Cap del Pech, within a loop in the Dordogne, giving spectacular views out over the Dordogne valley to both the southwest and the northeast. The coach dropped us in the village and our first challenge soon appeared, with very curious, obviously ornithological noises coming from a copse on the hillside. They turned out in the end to be guinea-fowl, rather more prosaic than some of the suggestions that were put forward at the time! We had excellent views of a pair of stonechats on the hedgerow bushes. The walk took us up through woodland with great spotted woodpecker calling and Bonelli's warbler

and blackcap singing, and then opened onto a track hedged with not only field maple but also the similar, more southern, Montpellier maple, together with wayfaring tree, wild privet, honeysuckle, wild rose and St Lucie's cherry. We came to an astonishingly diverse area of rough grassland with an almost overwhelming number of species of butterflies: several fritillaries, Adonis blues and black-veined white among others and spectacular patches of orchids, especially pyramidal and bee vying with colourful clumps of other meadow flowers.

We settled ourselves in a shady meadow to wait for Keith and Olivia to arrive in the car with our lunch. It was very warm and no one was in a hurry to rush about so, under Rachel's 'tuition', we had a look at the dozen or so different grasses that were growing around us. After lunch, we followed the ridge walk as far as the water tower, diverting from time to time to one side or the other. There was a patch of huge limodores among the juniper scrub, some butterfly orchids and a little arable field with ground pine, a pretty little flower related to bugle. The path back to the village drops steeply and where it is clearly subject to severe erosion during wet weather, it took us through a deep gully flanked by soft shield fern.

We had a leisurely look at the beautiful village of Berbiguières, admiring the church and the well-kept and prolific vegetable gardens, the swallows and swifts and the first dunnock of the week. We watched a number of black kites circling over the hillside as we drove away, heading farther up the Dordogne to Beynac.

Beynac is another strategically placed fortified medieval town, this time high above a great loop in the river. It is very beautiful, but now geared towards the tourism industry. Nevertheless, those who elected to climb the steep path up through the town were rewarded with lovely views and some interesting wildlife. The swallows, swifts and black redstarts were much in evidence, there were jackdaws on the cliffs, a few crag martins about, there were grey herons flapping lazily along the river and we caught a glimpse of a coypu swimming in a lagoon beyond the river. There was some stylish shopping to be done too, for anyone in the mood, and Sue stocked up on some family Christmas presents.

We all assembled in a riverside café to relax over a drink and an ice cream, but the bird-watchers, especially Chris, were alert and a few alpine swifts among the common swifts and a distant short-toed eagle rounded off the afternoon beautifully.

There was homemade leek and potato soup to come home to, followed by a delicate layered crab and egg pâté. Then we had chicken in tarragon sauce with cauliflower followed by a chocolate vacherin. A little challenge was implicit in the report of the first Honeyguide visit to Castang. Could we think of a song about a bird beginning with every letter of the alphabet? Well, of course we could, and very enterprising and entertaining were some of the renditions!

It was not bedtime yet and the day's natural history was not over. Armed with torches, we set off along the path to Lagrave. Madame was expecting us and she took us round into her back garden where, in cracks in the walls and in holes under the paving, following the carillon in the torchlight we were able to pick out several pairs of midwife toads. It was a first for everyone and we were completely enchanted by the little animals. Many of the males were, as is characteristic, and gives them their name, carrying eggs on their backs. They showed little concern for us and carried on calling to each other and creeping about. We were delighted to see that Madame was clearly very fond of them despite the racket! It was unforgettable for us all!

Thursday May 15: Gorge d'Enfer, Font de Gaume and Roque St Cristophe

For the early-risers we took a longer walk than usual, southwest towards the chateau of Cazenac. We watched a young male black redstart, still not in full adult plumage and so confusingly similar to a female, learning to sing. He repeated his little figure over and over again, never getting it quite right. Returning up the drive towards Castang we were rewarded at last by the sight we had hoped for – golden orioles flashing through the treetops below us and this time giving all of us a brief but excellent view.

The only other visitors at Castang during the week we were there were a very charming German couple on a 'normal' holiday. They accepted the mildly eccentric behaviour of our group with great amiability

and we were very glad to be able to compensate them a little by inviting them to join us for our visit to the caves at Font de Gaume near Les Eyzies on the Vézère. Advanced booking is essential now and numbers are strictly limited but we had two spare places. Our visit was scheduled for 1.30 pm so our plans for the morning were to explore a little valley not too far from the caves.

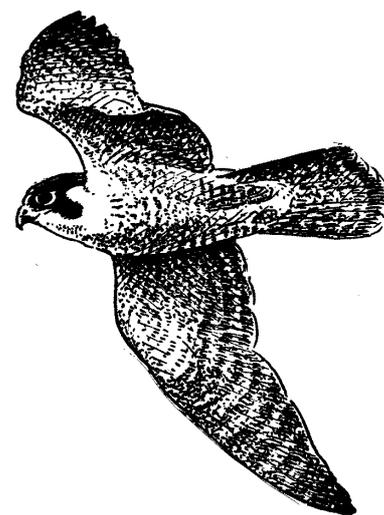
The valley follows a little brook up to the Gorge d'Enfer. It is a 'refuge LPO' site and access was restricted when we were there; they were preparing to re-open formally later in the season but were very happy to let us explore the area on our own. For the first part of the walk, the path wound prettily up through damp meadows beside the brook, with rushes and sedges and patches of willowherb and brooklime. We had an excellent view of a Cetti's warbler singing from a willow tree. Above the meadows, the stream was dammed to form a small lake with carp and dragonflies. Here, the cliffs soared above us and were cut away under an enormous overhang, or *abri*, the Abri du Poisson. This, we discovered, was renowned as the largest *abri* in the Dordogne region and was known to have been used as a shelter in prehistoric times. There were scratchings on the rocks that we were not able to interpret, but it gave us all a tremendous sense of antiquity. Some of the rock strata were clearly more porous than others and the damp seepage lines were supporting seams of maidenhair fern festooned from the roof.

It was hard to tear Brenda away from the *abri* with its strong sense of 'atmosphere' but the path drew us on upwards, through coppiced woodland, with wood sanicle and stinking hellebore. In pools of sunlight, we found several clumps of bird's nest orchid. Time did not allow us to complete the walk up to the top so we retraced our steps and rejoined Gilles for an early lunch. Even the lunch-stop was noteworthy – from a rocky lay-by by the river, with perilous ladders leading to troglodyte caves high above us, we had excellent views of crag martins and a short-toed eagle.

We met our German friends at Font de Gaume at 1.00 pm ready for our 1.30 pm tour. As we climbed the steep path up to the cave entrance we were delighted by the wealth of flowers on the rocky hillside and resolved to spend a few minutes looking at them on the way down. The Font de Gaume caves are rich in polychrome paintings and engravings, mainly from the Magdalenian period, some 14,000 years BC. Because of the damage caused by exposure, these are the only caves in France where it is still possible for the public to see this polychrome painting technique. The majority of the 200 or more figures are of bison but there are mammoths, horses and reindeer too. We were all captivated by the famous figure of a male reindeer licking a kneeling female. Our English-speaking guide was extremely well informed and sensitive; we were all very moved by the experience and felt extremely privileged to be able to visit the caves, as they must surely be closed to the public in the not-too-distant-future, for their own preservation.

Out in the sunlight again, we had leisure to look at the landscape around us. The cave entrance is high on a limestone cliff with limestone rocks and scree all around. The vegetation here is typical of the limestone *causses* of the area and it was the most extensive we had seen. Holm oak, Montpellier maple and Cornelian cherry grow out of unpromising rock crevices and the sparse ground flora is adapted to severe drought conditions – leaves are tiny, or hairy, or silvery, to reduce water loss. We saw wild thymes and rockroses, including the white rockrose, lavender, *Helichrysum* and the beautiful silver-leaved convolvulus. A 'good shout' from Kate enabled most people to see a peregrine in flight (*right*) as we walked down the path and there were holly blue butterflies, flitting among the flowers and sunning themselves on the stones.

We drove on a few miles up the Vézère to Roque St Cristophe, a highly developed troglodyte village, now made safe for visitors. We didn't visit the caves, however, but paused under the cliffs to enjoy the breeding colony of crag martins. We watched them as they swooped again and again up to their nests in crevices in the rock. House martins were there too, their nests, plaster excrescences on the cliff face. Jackdaws were calling and nesting in the cliffs and several of the group had a good view of a raven. Then we were attracted by screeching above us on the cliff top and there, perched clearly in a branch in a small tree directly above us was one of the great sights of the week, a peregrine. We watched, and photographed, the bird for many minutes as it showed no sign of leaving – truly memorable.



A little farther on there was a car park among the trees and a little outdoor café. Some of the party went ahead for a 'recce', others stayed for a welcome cup of tea or an ice cream. After a while, refreshed, everyone foregathered in a remarkable meadow, surrounded by woodland. The butterflies and other invertebrates were excellent here: both grizzled skipper and Oberthur's grizzled skipper (one of the highlights of Humphrey's week), sooty copper, meadow and marsh fritillaries, several field crickets and a very large hunting spider – the nursery web spider *Pisaura mirabilis* – carrying her egg sac. The flowers in the meadow were good too, with burnt tip and military orchids and twayblades and, for the first time in the week, a large colony of the charming little adder's tongue fern. At the edge of the wood we found common spotted orchids and under a tree in the car park, some plants of the very attractive creamy-yellow flowered tuberous comfrey.

Our dinner tonight began with carrot soup followed by salmon and sorrel pastries. Then we had confit of duck and ratatouille, with cheese as usual and banana mousse to finish. Another little challenge was set by Chris: limericks, on themes from the week, were to be composed in time for dinner tomorrow night.

The natural world still had more delights for us because, although the weather was not altogether promising, and the consensus was that an organised 'watch' was not appropriate, there was a total eclipse of the moon in the early hours of Friday morning. Those of us who were awake were able to see it well, if intermittently, and the lovely rosy glow of the moon at totality was clearly visible through gaps in the cloud.

Friday May 16: Keith's Walk

For our last early walk we repeated the route of the first day and enjoyed again some of the birds that had grown familiar during the week – though the weather was cooler after some rain during the night, the bird song was generally quieter and the golden oriole did not perform again.

After breakfast we set off on a more extensive exploration of some of the local walks, led by Keith. He took us across a field below Castang to where a fine medieval dovecote stands, somewhat in need of repair. We crept cautiously inside and as our eyes became accustomed to the darkness it was possible to see little heaps of owl pellets on the floor. Barn owl seemed likely but there was no easy way of confirming it. We could hear turtle doves calling across the valley and as we looked for them we picked out a fine buzzard perched on a tree in the morning sunshine. Keith led us down the hill to where an ancient and complex stone irrigation system of tanks and sluices has been preserved, and is still used in winter. Then we followed the path up into woodland where we were led up to an ancient ruined cottage with a badger sett close beside it. We searched for evidence of occupation and soon found tracks and slides, scratching logs and freshly used dung pits. We were attracted to some movement in the undergrowth and watched a gruesome battle being fought out between an ichneumon fly and a caterpillar which was, not surprisingly, putting up some resistance to the idea of having eggs laid inside it. Further into the wood a disturbed area, again with evidence of droppings, was tentatively identified as a wild boar wallow.

The wood gave way to sunny, open fields, big stone barns and stone farmhouses. The air was full of swallows and martins with linnets and stonechats in the hedgerows. Some of the group watched two lizards sunbathing for some minutes among flowerpots. Close to Castang, Keith introduced us to an interesting feature, characteristic of the area; a *laverie*, an ancient communal laundry area. It was a complicated stone construction, sited over a natural spring, with stone archways and various tanks for washing and livestock drinking troughs. In one deep tank, a particularly fine water frog was lazing quietly in the sun. From its large size, it was probably a marsh frog but, as with the frog in the Lagrave pond, it was difficult to identify with confidence.

We went back to Castang for another lovely salad lunch and afterwards, a 'free' afternoon was scheduled. This meant various things to different people. For some, it was a garden chair and a snooze in the sun. For others it was a chance to get those postcards written. For others it was a chance to search out more orchids or more butterflies and moths in the meadow. For others, it was the moment to explore the boiler room under the terrace from which we had seen bats emerge earlier in the week. Sure enough, there they were, half a dozen or so lesser horseshoe bats, hanging from the ceiling – some apparently sleeping, others carefully grooming themselves, with their strange, crumpled little faces within easy view for everyone to see.

The final delicious dinner of the week began with a mixed vegetable soup, followed by pâté and salad. The main course was pork steaks in a creamy sauce accompanied by carrots. Following the cheese, the meal was completed with a pear tart. Some lively limericks and other verse forms appeared as a result of Chris's challenge, and began an entertaining session in which a considerable amount of 'light' verse was shared. Then Olivia appeared to announce that a little bit of local wildlife was ready for inspection – to Sallie's delight, the resident female toad was visible in her hole under the terrace steps. Now, female common toads get larger the farther south you go in Europe; the Castang toad was a fine specimen that would not have looked lost on a dinner plate!

Saturday May 17: The return home

Brenda had brought her watercolours and from time to time we were aware that she had found herself a quiet corner and was painting away with them. The resulting studies of some of the flowers we had seen were truly lovely. In gratitude to Gilles for the part he had played in enriching our week, and as a gentle tease for his rude remarks about *la mauvaise herbe* on the first day, we were able to give him a beautiful painting of meadow clary. Brenda had also done a painting of a selection of the flowers around Castang which made a perfect gift for Cathy, Keith and Olivia who had together truly given us a week to cherish.

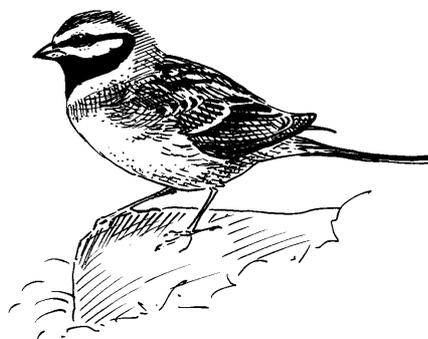
Gilles was ready and waiting for us to load our cases onto the coach after breakfast and we were soon off. The now familiar scenery unfolded for us as we followed the river back to Bergerac. Black kites soared over the airport again and we left a bright early summer morning with a promise of a hot day. England was warm and welcoming too, and, after a wonderful week and some real friendships made, we regretfully bade each other goodbye, or perhaps *au revoir*.

BIRDS

Grey heron
Mute swan
Mallard
Honey buzzard
Black kite
Short-toed eagle
Buzzard
Kestrel
Peregrine
Grey partridge
Yellow-legged gull
Rock dove/feral pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared dove
Turtle dove
Cuckoo H
Barn owl H
Tawny owl H
Swift
Alpine swift
Hoopoe
Green woodpecker
Great spotted woodpecker
Woodlark
Skylark
Sand martin
Crag martin
Swallow
House martin
Grey wagtail
White wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Nightingale H
Black redstart
Stonechat
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song thrush
Spotted flycatcher
Fan-tailed warbler
Melodious warbler
Whitethroat
Blackcap
Bonelli's warbler
Chiffchaff
Firecrest
Long-tailed tit
Blue tit
Great tit
Marsh tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed treecreeper
Golden oriole
Red-backed shrike
Jay
Magpie

Jackdaw
Carrion crow
Raven
Starling
House sparrow
Tree sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Cirl bunting (*below*)

H – heard only



Mammals

Fallow deer
Rabbit
Hare
Red squirrel
Badger (droppings)
Shrew sp
Wild boar (rootings)
Pipistrelle sp (Gouffre de Proumeysac)
Lesser horseshoe bat (Castang)

BUTTERFLIES

Swallowtail
Scarce Swallowtail

Black-veined White
Small White
Green-veined White
Orange-tip
Clouded Yellow
Berger's Clouded Yellow
Brimstone
Wood White

Green Hairstreak
Small Copper
Large Copper
Sooty Copper
Small Blue
Holly Blue
Adonis Blue
Common Blue

Southern White Admiral
Peacock (caterpillars)
Red Admiral
Painted Lady
Small Tortoiseshell
Comma

Glanville Fritillary
Knapweed Fritillary
Heath Fritillary
Meadow Fritillary
Marsh Fritillary
Spotted Fritillary

Meadow Brown
Small Heath
Pearly Heath
Speckled Wood

Dingy Skipper
Grizzled Skipper
Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper
Red-underwing Skipper
Safflower Skipper

Moths – mostly day-flying

5-spot burnet
Speckled yellow
Latticed heath
Common heath
Muslin
4-spotted moth
Mother Shipton
Wave sp

Yellow shell
Burnet companion
Clouded buff
Silver Y
Lime hawk-moth
Forester
Heart and dart
Fox
Lackey (caterpillar)
Pine processionary (nest)

Adela reaumurella – micro-moth with very long antennae

Lime hawkmoth
Spurge or bedstraw hawk-moth

Other invertebrates

Graphosoma italicum – black and red shield bug, the 'Millwall bug' (our name) or Hogweed bonking bug (official)

Ascaphalus libelluloides – something between a lacewing and an ant-lion

Violet carpenter bee
Hornet
Bee-fly sp

Rose chafer
Summer chafer
Oxythyrea funesta a chafer beetle

Firebug
Field Cricket
Bush Cricket

Beautiful Demoiselle
Demoiselle *Agrion virgo*
Broad-bodied chaser

Ichneuman fly sp

Misumena vatia Crab spider
Nursery web spider *Pisaura mirabilis*

Wood ant sp
Campanotus vegus a wandering ant

Reptiles and amphibians

Grass snake (dead)
Wall lizard
Viviparous lizard
Green lizard
Marsh frog
Common frog
Midwife toad (heard)
Common toad