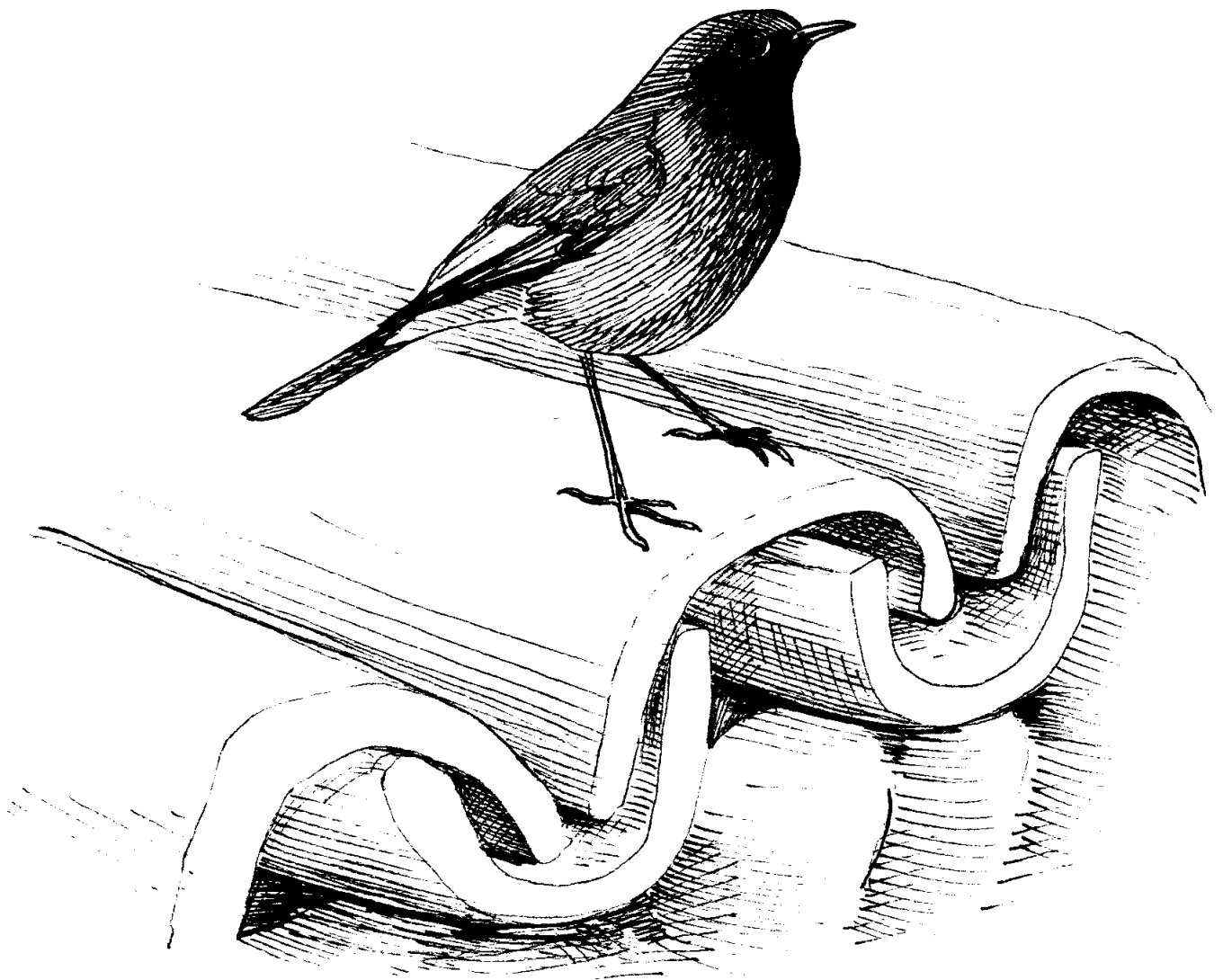


Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Telephone and Fax 01603 300552 Evenings and weekends



Flowers and birds in the Dordogne
12-19 May 2001

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12-19 May 2001**

List of participants

Norman Willis Maureen Willis	London
Beryl Lewcock Anne Rivers	Kent
Brenda Owen Delphine Hoyle	Berkshire
Stephanie Davies	Berkshire
Yvonne Griffiths Betty Annesley	Essex
Michael Lasseter Anne Lasseter	Dorset
Vic Fairbrother	Liverpool
<u>Leader</u> Chris Durdin	Norwich

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

Illustrations by Rob Hume. Front cover: black redstart

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 in the Dordogne was this year supplemented by a group in the Camargue, leading to a total of £625 handed to La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO, the French Bird Protection League) during the Camargue holiday. This brings the total given to LPO to £5,325 since 1991, and to various conservation projects in Europe to £22,805. A thank-you letter from LPO is at the end of the report. This is mainly about the lesser kestrel project in the Camargue, and if you read a little French you'll see that there were 64 pairs of lesser kestrels in 2001.

The holiday report starts with the daily log, then continues with various lists. I hope this makes a good souvenir and *aide memoire* for those on the holidays and gives a good taste of the area for anyone thinking of going to Castang in the future.

Chris Durdin

Flowers and birds in the Dordogne 12-19 May 2001

Prologue

For 10 years, Honeyguide has run a successful holiday in the Lot, the Dordogne's immediate neighbour to the south. Our base there wasn't available in 2001 and recommendations brought us to Castang instead. Those recommendations weren't from naturalists but all those booked on the Lot holiday kindly switched to the Dordogne. Everyone, I know it's fair to say, was delighted with how it worked out, with the added fun of many surprises from exploring a new area. The wildlife was every bit as rich, with many similarities but interesting differences to the Lot.

The welcome was as warm as you'd find anywhere, and the hospitality and food first class. All this was possible due to the relaxed charm but also hard work of our hosts, Cathy and Keith Parker – and their daughter Olivia. Keith and I spent two very full days finalising the itinerary that worked well for the group. This included a soaking to the skin and trying many places rejected as well as those included, one of which was the river near Bigaroque where Keith had to borrow a tractor from his neighbouring farmer when my hire car had to be towed out of the mud.

Saturday 12 May – Toulouse to Castang

The flight was some 20 minutes late arriving at a very hot Toulouse airport. Everyone was soon loaded up into our two minibuses for the week, Keith driving the leading one, and we were soon on the *péage* north. Our route took us over the bridge with the views of Cahors, across Tarn and Lot rivers and through some of the Department of the Lot, past black kites and roadside orchids. We weaved through the market town of Gourdon before crossing into the Dordogne. There was a quick stop in a village for a leg stretch, then along the Dordogne valley, including the magnificent riverside villages at Roque Gageac and Beynac.

There were nightjars churring at Castang as our three hour journey ended and we were settled into rooms for the week. As it was a little late, we made do with just a four-course meal, one less than the usual.

Sunday 13 May – local walks to Lagrave and Coux

A routine was quickly established with a pre-breakfast birdwatch from around a quarter to eight, followed by a late, leisurely breakfast at nine o'clock. Those who made the early-ish start saw black redstarts, serins and whitethroats and helped line up some orchids for the full group for later.

The morning's walk was, quite intentionally, a slow potter round local lanes to get to know the local wildlife. If you're new to orchid-rich country, the number of pyramidal orchids is quite a surprise. After a while, they get overlooked in the search for new species, but it's difficult not to appreciate their individual charm, the variety of pinks and sheer splendour of numbers. Milkwort, in both deep blue and mauve was picked out, many tassel hyacinths and several cranesbill species, including the lovely long-stalked cranesbill. Our stroll took us into Lagrave village where we looked at the village pond, there in case of fire, and the restored village bread oven.

Between Lagrave and the other cluster of houses making up the hamlet of Castang, we took in a small roadside meadow with many green-winged orchids and of one of this area's great surprises, a patch of tongue orchids. The walk took us below the big meadow making up part of Keith and Cathy's property at Castang; where the meadow touched the road a single monkey orchid was found among the long grass. A fan-tailed warbler – a bird one associates more with coastal or Mediterranean areas – did its usual zip ...zip...zip song flight. The road took us past the edge of a copse, where there was a particularly fine lady orchid on the verge (*illustrated, right*) and several narrow-leaved helleborines, before turning left up the gentle incline past the hedge with a Lombardy poplar from where a melodious warbler sang all week.



After a splendid buffet lunch, our afternoon walk took us to the local village of Coux, the nearer part of Le Coux et Bigarogue. This was via a partly wooded lane, then into more open farmland, where there were stonechats, turtle doves and many more flowers for the list. At Coux, we took in the compact village centre and school, before heading up the road. We passed the village cemetery on our right and newly planted tobacco on our left. Our first swallowtail and cleopatra butterflies were somewhere near the tobacco drying sheds, and before most took the short-cut up a track by the medlar tree. Beryl and Anne decided to stick to the slight longer route by road, but we all contrived to arrive at the same time back at base.

After a cup of tea, several were persuaded to come and look at Keith and Cathy's meadow. Green-winged orchids are not the tallest and could be overlooked in the long grass, not least as many of this early flowering species were beginning to go over. But once your eye was in, it was clear there were many hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more. As the meadow slopes downhill, the ground gets soggy, and in this area there were a dozen or so loose-flowered orchids. One early purple orchid was found too, and a diversion into the little patch of scrub added bee and man orchids to the list, plus the not yet flowering stumps of lizard orchids.

Last night's meal had given a strong hint of Castang's best. The full routine starts with a drink as an apéritif; the choice is endless, but many went for one of the French duo of *kir* or *pineau*. Soup was first course, always homemade and very tasty. Then starter, main course, cheese and dessert, followed by tea, coffee or jasmine tea to finish. It's a tough job to handle all this, but we were up to the challenge.

Monday 14 May – woodland walk and Limeuil

Before breakfast, gathered near the recycling bin, we watched a melodious warbler through the telescope on a perch high on a thick hedge across a field in which corn buttercup – a real rarity in the UK – was growing. This was in addition to the one already regular by the Lombardy poplar down the road.

Can weather be exciting? I'd now say yes, after today's breakfast. Hailstones fell, growing to the size of mint imperials, and we stood open-mouthed as we watched them bouncing off the lawn. Hail turned briefly to fierce rain and cloths had to be brought rapidly into service as the ceiling started to leak. Outside, as it eased off, we saw how flowers and leaves were ripped apart. Pity any insect on the receiving end of one of those lumps of ice. We wondered what would happen to the recently planted tobacco crop down the road; it didn't look too bad. The worst damage was to the pool cover. Having siphoned the winter rain from it on Saturday morning – Olivia and I had spent much of the morning rescuing tadpoles – it refilled with rain and those areas around the edge not protected by the water were ripped to pieces by the hailstones.

We seemed to have the knack of choosing a week where when the weather was bad it was only so at convenient times. As we arrived at the start of the circular walk, nicknamed the woodland walk, the only wet was what was dripping from trees. Being on a quiet road it was even fine under foot. Water proofs were soon packed away and sun hats dug out as it became hot and sunny. A Cetti's warbler shouted from the scrub in the river valley on our right hand side. There were spindle, the sky blue flowers of chalk milkwort, and much bird song, including blackbird, song and mistle thrushes, short-toed treecreeper and flutey golden orioles. I'd had the idea that we could introduce new orchid species at a steady pace through the week; the riches here meant some were ahead of schedule, especially woodcock orchid and twayblades. Lady orchids and narrow-leaved helleborines were there a-plenty, as we took turns to left and left again. The quiet road weaved through a farm complex, anything but gentrified as some places in the area are, and as I arrived back in good time I could then drive the route again and collect three back markers.

For lunch we drove to a small picnic site at Limeuil at the confluence of the rivers Dordogne and Vézères. Sand martins over the river were followed under the arch into the village where they were nesting in the old wall. Mute swan and tree sparrow were added to the list; ever-present goldfinches sparkled around us.

An hour and a half in the village was soon spent. Keith drove some to the top of this pretty, but steep village: most walked though narrow lanes of picturesque properties. On a warm day, villages often

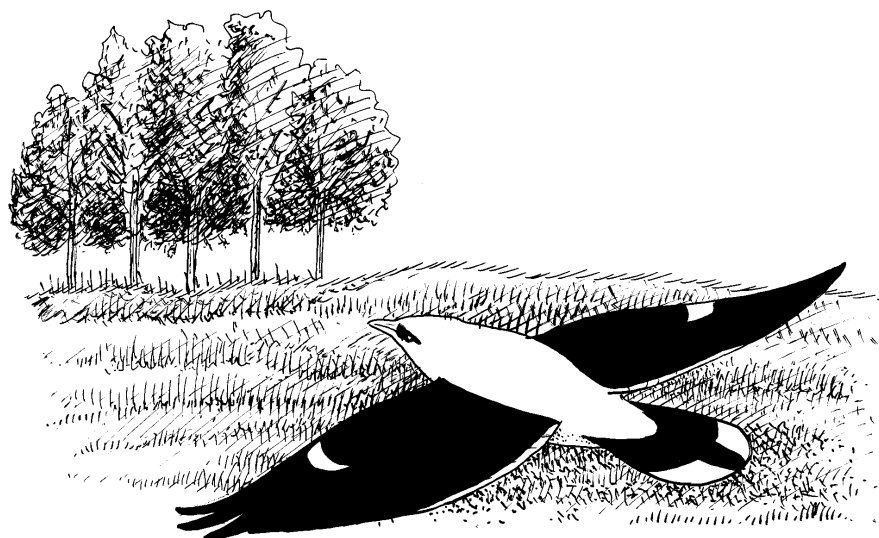
provide shelter and perches for wildlife, which today included roe deer (seen by Vic), violet carpenter bee, short-toed treecreeper, a hummingbird hawkmoth and the ever present black redstarts and serins. Tea and ice creams were enjoyed by many.

We drove a few kilometres to a viewpoint over the Dordogne where counted at least eight black kites and looked over plastic tunnels where strawberries are grown in the rich river valley soil. Rather than going straight home from there, we too a little detour to what Coux village calls its beach, though most of the *plage* is under water in May. Of particular interest, opposite the asparagus, were cordons of kiwi fruit. Being English, several paddled while others had a go on swings, slide and seesaw.

'Norman has been stirring' was the rumour; no surprises there, except that he had lent a hand with tonight's lentil soup. Then from chef's assistant to community singing leader, as somehow we were cajoled into an A-Z of songs about birds. I'm sure the generous supply of red and white wine had nothing to do with it.

Tuesday 15 May – Le Bugue and Cave Walk

Quite a pre-breakfast walk, with a red-backed shrike in the patch of scrub, a fine male cirl bunting, a male golden oriole seen flying out of a clump of trees where it had sung and a wryneck heard.



There is a tradition to visit a market town on market day on our French holidays, and today it was Le Bugue. It's a mixture of real produce for the locals and gifts for tourists. Many fine purchases were made: a basket for Anne L; two hats for Norman (Maureen is legendary for her shopping skills), including a French beret; eight presents for eight bridesmaids for the soon to be wed Betty. Those ticked off for eating cherries in church will remain nameless. An early picnic lunch was taken at the picnic site by the river below the car park.

The 'cave walk' started well with the car parking area in quarried piece of roadside, the poor limestone soil bringing a rich crop of pyramidal and woodcock orchids, plus white Pyrenean flax and globularia. The first part of the walk was quite well-wooded, including St Lucie's cherry. "Who was St Lucie, and why is a cherry named after?" I pondered. Stephanie pronounced with great authority that St Lucie was starving in the wilderness, planted her staff and it immediately bore fruit to sustain her. If you're going to bluff, do it with confidence – as every holiday leader knows. So we all believed the story, and continue to do so, despite Stephanie's later protestations that she made it up on the spot.

In a more open area, two hobbies, a buzzard and a black kite were all in the air together. Some wonderful ascalaphids were emerging; they're like a cross between an antlion and a lacewing. Anne R found a nestful of great tits in a mailbox. The trill of Bonelli's warblers was heard, the ever-alert Vic drew our attention to a large snake (probably grass snake) and butterfly orchids were noted. More on the identification of these later. As we emerged up the hill from the wood, now halfway round the walk, there was a slight puzzle over the route, as on the map, though it was clear the next stop at the

caves was close. The slight detour was easily sorted, but it led to the great bonus of a patch of sombre bee orchids by the road. Also known as dull ophrys, though the adjective is a little unfair, this species more associated with the Mediterranean, and certainly not seen in 10 years of Lot holidays. A count found 86 spikes. Annual scorpion vetch was also found – another flower from the Mediterranean book – plus countless tongue orchids. And broom and gorse together (thank you Norman).

In the early part of last century, the Gouffre de Proumeyssac received a handful of visitors who were lowered from the top in a basket. Unscrupulous locals used to dispose of victims – mugged travellers, for example – into the great cavern. Now there is a more conventional entrance down the hill, with tickets, teashop and souvenirs. Five of us visited, enjoying a bat near the entrance, a light and sound show showing off the St Paul's cathedral-sized cave to best advantage. Notable features included striking, squid like formations and perfect triangles crystallised in a pool. Tables of clay souvenirs were slowly receiving a coating of sparking limestone; pity they were all so naff. The rest of the group had a rest and a drink.

The return half of the walk was mostly downhill and generally more open. The star field – tiny though it was – had a wonderful patch of some 50 burnt-tip orchids, alongside limadors, bee orchids with white sepals, more tongue orchids and many cowslip seedheads. Then home, dropping Vic in Coux so he could phone home from the call box.

Wednesday 16 May – two views walk, Berbiguières and Beynac

The best pre-breakfast walk of the week was enjoyed by regular early risers Mike, Anne L and Vic. After the now regular red-backed shrike and melodious warbler we went to the rest of Castang where the wryneck had called yesterday. This time it performed, sitting on a roof ridge, then in full telescope view in a small, bare tree at the edge of the walnut plantation. A nuthatch was knocking around too. Down the road, we paused ahead of the regular nightingale spot to watch it several times hop around the road between the trees on one side and the bushes on the other.

The 'two views' walk, south of the river, is only about a kilometre long, but that didn't stop it taking all morning. We parked the two minibuses in the middle of the linear ridge-top track, and first walked east. It was a hot day, and butterflies were beginning to emerge. Some were sitting quietly, drying out; others were caught in the butterfly net by the quick-wristed Betty. The fritillaries at this early stage of the season were all Glanville, unless you count Duke-of-Burgundy which isn't a real 'frit'. Black-veined white, like a stained glass window as someone said, and swallowtail were well seen; nearly all the blues were small blues. Scare swallowtail and green hairstreak were other goodies. A woodlark sang, settled on a wire, before showing its short tail and a hint of its bat-like flight. Turtle doves purred. A colourful day flying moth was identified as speckled yellow; mental notes were taken of the pattern on a black and red soldier beetle. The eastwards walk took us into the edge of a wood in which there were several butterfly orchids, some so big that they demanded looking at; the features seemed closer to greater butterfly orchids than lessers.

Lunch was in a field back by the minibuses with a view overlooking the Dordogne valley in the direction of Coux. The field had amazing patches of man orchids, some thick-stemmed, large flowered fly orchids, lots of twayblades and the by now usual scattering of limador spikes and Yvonne's favourites, pyramidal orchids. After lunch we walked west along the ridge as far as the water tower, again orchid-rich along the way, then returned for some to take in the view of a chateau towards the north east.

We drove a couple of kilometres and potted round the pretty village of Berbiguières. From there we stayed in tourist mode and took a short drive east along the Dordogne to the striking town of Beynac. No doubt most tourists walk to the top of this hillside village, but us experienced travellers know the best way to admire the sights is to relax with a cup of tea and let our eyes do the climbing.

Back at Castang, while reviewing the day's wildlife, a wryneck could again be heard. Delphine was all set to go look for it, but the idea was postponed for the early walk tomorrow: my big mistake, as it wasn't seen or heard again. Fierce rain that evening may have been why.

Thursday 17 May – Keith’s walk

As well as the usual red-backed shrike, now with a female too, there was another down the hill on the other side of Castang. No wryneck, but the nightingale was seen again.

Today’s walk is one of Keith’s regular routes, if usually drier underfoot on account of the previous night’s rain. Built diversions included an old *pigeonnier* (pigeon loft) in a field, a stone sluice across a stream and a *caban*, a stone shelter for shepherds. The walk took us through woodland, cultivations and past hamlets on a selection of tracks and quiet roads. Not a great deal was added to already long lists, but we did find a patch of not quite flowering spiked star-of-Bethlehem and, continuing the biblical theme, a curious looking crucifer with leaves like Jacob’s ladder that was later identified as narrow-leaved bittercress. Many in the group had a guided inspection of the property under renovation close to base, complete with exotic wood carvings.

A latish lunch at Castang was followed by a siesta. Late afternoon we divided into two. Keith’s crew went to St Cyprien and along the river from there and saw a hare. My group, with Bob Gibbons and Nigel Spring researching the following week’s itinerary, returned to the botanically rich verges near the Gouffre de Proumeyssac. Sulphur clover was noted, the sombre bee orchids and many others re-found, and a further look at the many tongue orchids revealed that some were the long-lipped (= ploughshare) serapias. Then, with books and lenses, a careful look at the butterfly orchids revealed some to be greater with others of the more indeterminate type – between greater and lesser that is – that seem to be the most common in this part of France, but probably closer to greater.

Friday 18 May – Les Eyzies, Roque St Christophe, St Léon-sur-Vézère

A mist crept up the valley and over Castang, so the morning bird walk concentrated mostly on birdsong, though walking a short distance up towards Lagrave did take us out of the mist. Then back for a slightly earlier 8.30 breakfast so we could be away promptly.

The caves of Font de Gaume at Les Eyzies have restricted numbers so we’d booked the only available slot a week before, a 10 o’clock arrival for a 10.30 tour. The short walk from the ticket office to the cave entrance was worth doing for its own sake, with trees including Montpellier maple, cornelian cherry and holm oak and white rockrose and eyebright at ground level. Cave paintings of bison, horse and reindeer restrict numbers here and account for the strict instructions not to touch the sides of the caves. Just one is protected from visitors by a perspex screen; and it was remarkable how the pictures were painted to match the shapes of the cave walls and how well they showed in poor light, more as the artists would have seen them. One wonders how long it will be before access is restricted, much as one now has to visit a replica at Lascaux farther up the valley.

We paused for a while under the troglodytes home of Roque St Christophe; not for wrens, but another brown bird, crag martins. Then coffee and ice cream – no wonder Cro Magnon man survived so well here – followed by a brief botanical excursion. The wood here has the umbellifer sanicle, yellow archangel, early purple orchids still in flower in the shade, seams of maidenhair fern on spring lines in the rock and, out of the shade, bloody cranesbill. A tuberous comfrey was then found right by the minibuses, the drooping yellow flowers causing an initial misidentification as goldendrop.

For lunch we drove to a viewpoint over the valley, from where black kites drifted around as we watch the workers in the fields far below. A team of people on the back of a tractor planted tobacco. Was that man really ploughing a whole field with a rotavator? And at what point would the man on the tractor give up his ploughing as he got into the wet bit of the field? A walk across the road found Mediterranean coriaria then both downy and sessile oak.

St Léon-sur-Vézère was the final scheduled stop. Another pretty village, a visit to the church and an ice cream. An unscheduled stop was made by a goose farm as we drove south. Some went inside to see the force-feeding that gives the geese their distended livers made into *foie gras*. Our own group’s farmer, Mike, discussed farming matters with the man with the goose-feeding nozzle. Finally, after returning to Castang, three of us drove to the shop in Coux.

Brenda and Delphine reported a red squirrel down the road as we did the final checklist. We then assembled on the terrace for the long-promoted performance of black beret-wearing Norman and Olivia, the latter appearing under her stage name of Hermione (borrowed from Harry Potter’s

wizarding friend). The build up to this had kept us in suspense; the poster, the equity card (Olivia H Parker), the various announcements. We already knew the two Goon show jokes, but it didn't detract from the fun. Bob Gibbons and Nigel Spring joined us for our final evening meal.

Saturday 19 May – Castang to Toulouse

An early breakfast was followed by a smooth journey back to Toulouse.

* * * * *

Wildlife of the week: a quick straw poll revealed the following favourites.

Brenda	orchids
Delphine	orchids, especially three new species
Stephanie	orchids
Norman	hobby, black kite and buzzard seen together. And lentil soup.
Maureen	flower-filled meadows. And pork with mustard sauce.
Yvonne	to be back in the Dordogne after so many year, and especially pyramidal orchids
Betty	phone calls from fiancé Ray
Beryl	tassel hyacinth
Anne R	flower-filled meadows
Mike	hoopoe he kept missing
Anne	exuberance of orchids
Vic	exuberance of orchids
Chris	sombre bee orchids

WILDLIFE CHECKLISTS

BIRDS

Grey heron	Blackbird
Mallard	Song thrush (heard)
Black kite	Mistle thrush
Buzzard	Cetti's warbler (heard)
Kestrel	Fan-tailed warbler
Hobby	Melodious warbler
Rock dove/feral pigeon	Whitethroat
Collared dove	Blackcap
Turtle dove	Bonelli's warbler
Cuckoo (heard)	Chiffchaff
Barn owl (Chris heard only)	Firecrest
Tawny owl (Chris heard only)	Long-tailed tit
Nightjar (heard)	Blue tit
Swift	Great tit
Hoopoe	Nuthatch
Wryneck	Short-toed treecreeper
Green woodpecker	Golden oriole
Great spotted woodpecker	Red-backed shrike
Woodlark	Jay
Skylark	Magpie
Sand martin	Jackdaw
Crag martin	Carrion crow
Swallow	Raven
House martin	Starling
Yellow (blue-headed) wagtail	House sparrow
White wagtail	Tree sparrow
Wren	Chaffinch
Dunnock	Serin
Robin	Greenfinch
Nightingale	Goldfinch
Black redstart	Cirl bunting
Stonechat	Corn bunting

BUTTERFLIES

Grizzled skipper

Scarce swallowtail
Common swallowtail

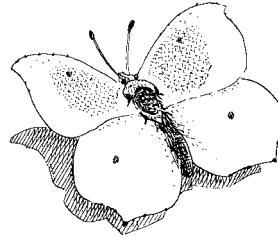
Small white
Black-veined white
Orange tip
Cleopatra
Brimstone
Wood white

Small tortoiseshell
Painted lady
Red admiral

Glanville fritillary

Meadow brown
Small heath
Speckled wood

Duke of Burgundy
Green hairstreak
Small (little) blue
Adonis blue



cleopatra

Day-flying moths:

5-spot burnet moth
6-spot burnet moth
Speckled yellow

Hummingbird hawkmoth

Others

Graphosoma italicum – black and red shield bugs
Ascapalus libelluloides – something between a lacewing and an ant-lion
Violet carpenter bee
Glow-worm (Chris only)
Millipede sp
Scorpion fly sp
A red & black soldier beetle *Trichodes apiarius*
Field cricket
Mole cricket (heard - like a nightjar)

Reptiles and amphibians

Grass snake
Wall lizard
Marsh frog
Midwife toad (heard)

Mammals

Roe deer
Rabbit
Hare
Red squirrel
Vole sp – common vole?
Wood mouse
Plus unidentified bat and wild boar rootings

