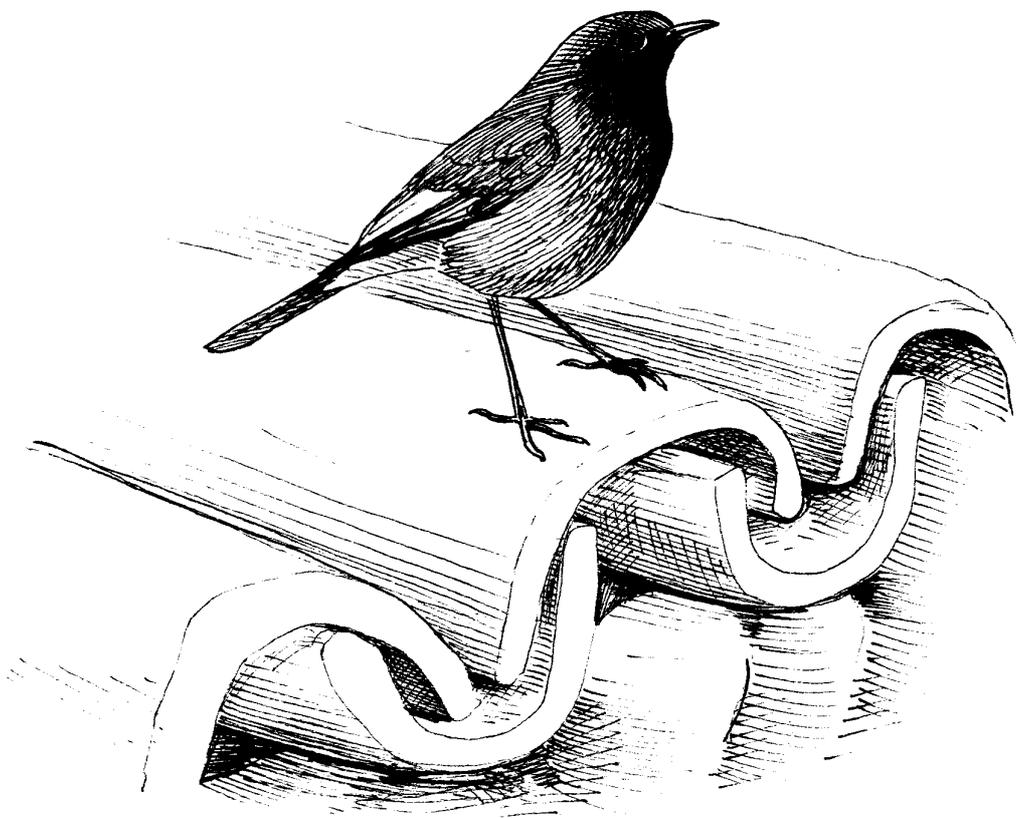


Honeyguide

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**Flowers and birds in the Dordogne
Cambridge RSPB local group
8 – 15 May 2004**

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Participants

Audrey Meaney
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Dorothy Aylett

Dennise Butler
Sandra Clarke

Barbara Hughes

Mick Best
Dorothy Best

Christine Sansom
Roger Sansom

Melvyn Smith
Brenda Smith

Andrew Camps

Leaders

Robin and Rachel Hamilton

Suffolk

Illustrations by Rob Hume, except field cricket by Maureen Gibson. Front cover: black redstart

Report written by Robin & 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 two groups in Dordogne for the 'Refuge LPO' campaign was supplemented by a contribution from the group in the French Pyrenees towards lammergeier protection, leading to a total of £675 given to La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO, the French Bird Protection League).

This brings the total given to LPO to £7,600 since 1991, and to various conservation projects in Europe to £33,330. A thank-you letter from LPO is at the end of this holiday report.

Note for web version of this report: there is also a plant list available on request from the Honeyguide office.

Flowers and birds in the Dordogne

8 – 15 May 2004

Saturday May 8: Arrival at Bergerac and the journey to Castang

Bright afternoon sunshine greeted the group of new arrivals at Bergerac airport and the wheeling black kites overhead assured us that Stansted was a long way away. More black kites punctuated our journey along the Dordogne valley and the concentrations in places above the wooded hillsides beside the river enabled us to locate some of their breeding colonies. Gilles, our knowledgeable and convivial driver for the week, pointed out some of the historical and architectural sights along the valley and, as we drove through Lalinde and admired the spectacular church, we noticed a little party of tree sparrows feeding on crumbs outside the bakery.

Our smooth coach drive to Castang was interrupted about 15 minutes before we were due to arrive by a very unwelcome puncture. Gilles managed the situation with great competence and then summoned reinforcements with a swift phone call, so the last few miles were taken in relays in a minibus. However, while we waited, no opportunity was lost and some of the group had good views of golden oriole through the coach windows.

Keith, our host at Castang, went to the assistance of the coach and we were given the warmest of welcomes by Cathy, his wife, and their daughter Olivia. We were soon established in our rooms, and then supplied with a very welcome aperitif on the terrace. When everyone was ready we were invited into the dining room for our first taste of Cathy's wonderful cooking, an amazing dinner of tomato and basil soup followed by a cheese and herb omelette, then guinea-fowl with green beans, a cheese board and finally apple flan and either coffee or a selection of teas, all accompanied by plentiful supplies of the smooth and light local wines.

The group needed no introduction to one another as everyone belonged to the Cambridge RSPB local group but as we relaxed at the end of the meal, we had a welcoming and entertaining introduction to Castang from Keith and Cathy. Then local maps were spread out and Robin and Rachel outlined the programme for the week.

The wind had got up a little from the northwest and, though it was a clear night, it felt unsettled and we wondered what weather the next day would bring.

Sunday May 9: Around Castang

For the early risers the air was cool with high cloud, but there was some blue sky and no wind, so we were hopeful of a fine day.

For our early walk we set off southwards, towards the little wood, to the accompanying songs of black redstart, blackcap and blackbird. Golden oriole calls taunted us from all around and some of the group caught a tantalising glimpse of yellow and black, flashing through the treetops.

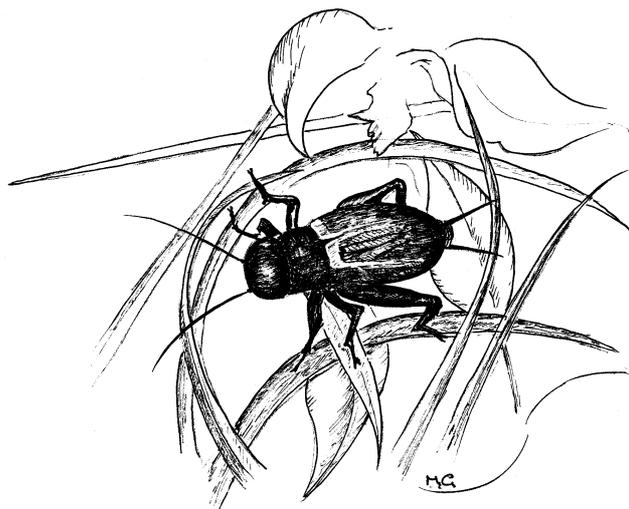
Breakfast was very welcome, especially for those to whom the early walk had given an appetite: fruit juices, yoghurt and cereals, eggs, fresh bread from the village and Cathy's wonderful home-made jams, all accompanied by *ad lib* tea and fresh coffee.

As we set off after breakfast on the track northwards from Castang, we could again hear a golden oriole singing in the valley and as we scanned for it, we watched a kestrel hovering and casting backwards and forwards, searching for its next meal and listened to a male blackcap singing from high in a cherry tree. A family of stonechats was busy on the fence posts; we saw two young at first, then a third, and then the parents appeared and fed them. Serins were singing and flitting about on the roofs of the houses at the end of the track and a wren was holding territory around the barn. We turned downhill and Brenda quickly alerted us to the week's first swallowtail butterfly, fluttering over the long grass of an orchard. Across the valley, seven black kites were soaring together as the day warmed up and thermals developed. The curious scratchy song of a melodious warbler attracted our attention, high above us in a walnut tree, and with perseverance, nearly everyone managed to get a good view of this surprisingly named warbler. From the corner, we watched a stonechat, perched high on a bush, struggling with some prey. Through the telescope, we could identify the victim as a field cricket.

A little further on, we came to the ancient stone communal washing area, the *laverie*, constructed at a spring and consisting of a number of interconnecting tanks, some of which are permanently water-filled. Peering into the clear water, we could distinctly see a number of palmate newts, creeping across the bottom and the water surface was broken in several places by the absolutely still pairs of bulging eyes of marsh frogs.

Across the road, some fine spikes of lady orchid had escaped the road-verge mowing regime and the roadside brambles and hazels were glittering with the bright orange and brown of the continental race of speckled wood butterflies. There was a dead mole on the roadside – evidence of another wildlife group ‘for the record’ and, attached to a goosegrass stem, we found a curious bloated greenish-black maggot-like creature – the larva of a bloody-nosed beetle, on its food plant.

This morning’s walk was a round trip and we soon reached the end of the Castang drive and the edge of the meadow. Here we were able to have a close look at a field cricket (*right*), like the one seen at the mercy of the stonechat a little earlier. This one ventured out into open ground and allowed itself to be caught, by humans this time, for a brief examination.



The Castang meadow was at its best, full of flowers but a nightmare for hay-fever sufferers. Amongst the profusion of meadow flowers and grasses we very quickly found six species of orchid: early spider, green-winged, burnt-tip, tongue, lax-flowered and pyramidal. There were plenty of insects too; we found the beautifully constructed nest of a paper wasp *Pollistes gallicus*, a flower chafer *Oxythyrea funesta* lurking among the knapweed flowers, a sooty copper, small heaths, meadow browns and swallowtails. And the golden orioles could still be heard from time to time, in the treetops in the valley.

Lunch was ready when we arrived back at Castang: delicious homemade quiches, pâtés and salads, wines and fruit juices, all laid out under the horse-chestnut trees.

After lunch we set off eastwards, up the lane towards the village of Lagrave. A young male black redstart, not yet in his sooty-black adult plumage was nevertheless singing from a high perch at the top of the chestnut tree. His song was ill-formed and lacked the variation of the adult bird; we got to know him very well during the week. Two mistle thrushes were feeding in the vineyard and we watched a male ciril bunting on one of the posts. On the verge, there were red and black froghoppers *Cercopis vulnerata*. Serins were much in evidence in the village and marsh frogs bobbed idly in the pond. Leaving the houses behind, we paused to look over the valley where three buzzards were soaring in the hot afternoon thermals. We turned off the road, into the shade of the track by the wood but in the afternoon heat the birds were quiet and we watched fire-bugs mating on the hogweed heads. Turning down through the orchard, Roger was delighted to encounter an ancient tractor and, in the neighbouring farmer, a fellow tractor enthusiast!

After a welcome cup of tea on the terrace we all had a break, then reconvened for an aperitif and to discuss the day’s highlights. Then there was supper, as delicious as ever: fresh vegetable soup, smoked salmon with celeriac *julienne*, pork steaks in a creamy mustard sauce, a selection of cheeses and finally, chocolate gâteau, all accompanied by plentiful supplies of wine and with choices of coffees and teas to complete the meal.

As we went to our rooms, the night chorus of crickets surrounded us and the distant, bell-like calls of midwife toads floated across the fields.

Monday May 10: Woodland Walk and Limeuil

We woke to a windless morning with high broken cloud. There was a picturesque band of mist in valley, picking out the line of the river.

The early risers took the track northwards, towards the garden where last night's toads were calling. The young black redstart that we encountered yesterday was singing from his high tree again and, from the wood above the houses, a turtle dove was calling. We were peering into the high branches at the edge of the wood when a brief movement and a flash of colour in the early morning sunshine alerted us to a red squirrel, moving furtively among the leaves. We were a little late for breakfast that morning!

Gilles drove us through the picturesque village of Bigarogue, on a quiet backwater of the Dordogne. Swifts were wheeling around the houses and both grey and white wagtails were feeding beside the water. As we left the coach and set off up the lane, a red kite was soaring smoothly above the ridge on our right.

The scree slope beside us was rich in lime-loving plants: the blue of globularia and milkwort, the yellow of crosswort and goat's-beard, the pink of herb robert and little robin. A fine specimen of woodcock orchid stood beside the ditch. Every so often, the bank was gouged out by the tracks of mammals; we found deer slots, probably roe, and slides that could have been made by badgers.

The commonest butterflies to be seen out in the bright sunshine were dingy skippers; they were everywhere, and far from dingy on close inspection. There were adonis blues, a pale clouded yellow, swallowtails, a green-veined white, a brimstone, wood whites, holly blues, a red admiral and grizzled skippers. The high spot was a very fine first generation map butterfly which allowed itself to be examined closely and carefully both on the upper and lower wing surfaces. Dennise was quick to spot the bright green iridescence of a rose chafer high on a hawthorn bush and the abundant hogweed plants were decorated by the even more abundant red and black striped shield bugs – known within Honeyguide as Millwall bugs.

In the woodland shade, narrow-leaved helleborines were abundant and spectacular, and speckled woods kept catching our attention in the sunlight. A Cetti's warbler called explosively from some willow scrub as we passed. Bonelli's warblers were singing from some of the isolated scrubby trees and, with a considerable amount of patient searching, most of us managed to catch sight of one. Firecrests were singing from deep within the wood but proved much more elusive. As the road took us alongside a meadow, we had an excellent view of a hobby circling overhead and a buzzard passing over the hilltop.

As we turned off the lane onto a rocky track, we were drawn to a pair of fine spikes of violet limodore – a spectacular purple-flowered saprophytic orchid – just beginning to open. Along the track there were clumps of narrow-leaved helleborines, well worth some photographs.

Gilles had met us in the meadow with our lunch, so we sat in the shade of pine and oak trees and listened to a hoopoe calling tantalisingly from not far away, to a cuckoo duetting with it and to golden orioles singing from all around us. At last Christine, who had missed out on the Bonelli's warbler earlier, was honoured with the arrival of a singing male in the tree just above her head.

After lunch there were two more treats for us: the edge of the field was spectacular with arable weeds and the bottom corner so densely packed with orchids, mostly burnt-tip and small tongue orchids, that it was hardly possible to avoid walking on them. Finally, across the road, in a slightly damper field we found a profusion of tiny adder's-tongue ferns.

We all rejoined the coach and Gilles drove us to the little fortified town of Limeuil, perched strategically high overlooking the confluence of the Dordogne and its sister river, the Vézère. Gilles dropped us at the top of the town and we walked down, through the narrow twisting lanes and courtyards, to be met again down beside the river.

The air was full of screaming swifts, flying in and out of nesting holes under the pantiles of the ancient buildings and swallows and house martins were feeding around us and visiting nests under the eaves. In the shady alleyways between the houses ferns, rusty-back fern and maidenhair spleenwort, flourished.

We stopped in the square to look out over the parapet across the fertile flood plain of the river. We were at eye level with a group of mature trees and spent several minutes watching a short-toed treecreeper, a dunnock and a spotted flycatcher about their business. A little farther on, we found

ourselves level with the canopy of a plane tree with serins singing and feeding and a violet carpenter bee dodging from leaf to leaf. Out across a side valley, a black kite gave us excellent views as we looked down on it in the late afternoon light.

The bottom of the village, beside the river, provided us with a number of welcome facilities: beer, ice cream, postcards and souvenirs, and a loo. The loo is in a very special stone building with large crevices between the stones and provides home for a colony of tree sparrows. Several of them were busy at their nest holes, carrying nesting materials, taking over from their partners on the nest or just standing sentry-like at their entrance holes. Sand martins, too, take advantage of the village's building style and a breeding colony is established in the walls of the main street. Their aerobatics as they found their way to their nest entrances was remarkable. We paused to contemplate the inscriptions on the stone archway, telling the terrifying tale of past flood levels.

Some of us took advantage of the shaded café-tables beside the river for welcome refreshment while we watched the dipping and swooping of the swallows and martins over the river but Brenda and Melvyn went for a walk along the river bank and found us a common sandpiper which was scurrying along the shoreline on the far bank.

Gilles was ready for us and a few drops of rain began to fall as we got into the coach. The rain did not last though and drinks were served for us on the terrace while we completed our records for the day. Dinner was as spectacular as ever: pumpkin soup, melon with port, braised lamb steaks with flageolet beans, cheese and then ice cream with raspberry coulis, and wine of course.

Tuesday May 11: Le Bugue and the Cave Walk

The early walk started under a clear sky with the sun quickly warming the air and dispersing the mist in the valley. The young black redstart was performing as usual, in chorus with blackbirds and a blackcap. The first red-backed shrike had arrived and was showing himself on the hedge down the drive, and a distant nightingale was singing from the wood. As usual we could hear distant orioles too, and a cuckoo calling. A fine male ciril bunting sang from telegraph wires along the drive and at the cross roads we watched a great spotted woodpecker and a nuthatch working the old oak tree. On our way back for breakfast, a male melodious warbler was singing in full view from a song post on a dead bush in the hedge.

Tuesday is market day in Le Bugue and no French Honeyguide holiday is complete without a visit to a market. Gilles dropped some of us off at the market and then took the rest of the group up to the top of a footpath that leads to the Bara Bahau cave above the town and they walked down from there. The woodland edge was rich with flowers: columbine, lungwort, spotted cat's-ear and globularia, and Bonelli's warblers were singing from within the wood.

Everyone then dispersed into the market, a very useful source of treasures to take home. A walk along the riverbank, where again sand martins were nesting in holes in the dry stone retaining wall, brought us to the coach and our lunches which Gilles had laid out for us in the picnic area.

After lunch, Gilles drove us back across the river so that we could take the winding track up to the Gouffre de Proumeyssac. We parked in a roadside quarry and at our feet began to find orchids. There were man, pyramidal and lizard orchids all by the parking place (the lizard orchids not yet flowering) and within a few paces, twayblade, early spider and fly orchids. Much enthusiastic photography took place.

The birds were quiet but there were plenty of exciting insects to interest us. Dorothy A found a field cricket purposefully crossing the lane. We had the best views so far of a pale clouded yellow. There were a lot of Glanville fritillaries about and some lingered long enough for us to examine them carefully and memorise their wing pattern. In a rich meadow on our right we were treated to a magnificent display of aggressive aerobatics by large numbers of ascalaphids, insects that look like something between a lacewing and an ant-lion but with large yellow patches on the wings. A yellow crab spider *Misumena vatia* was lurking cryptically in a matching yellow hawkweed to wait for unsuspecting prey items to visit the flower and several people found magnificent green tiger beetles.

Gaining confidence with some of the more difficult orchid species, Dennise called us over to a splendid woodcock orchid beside the lane and there were increasing numbers of lady and fly orchids (with some incredibly fine spikes) and of the elegant narrow-leaved helleborine.

The route opens out at the top of the hill into an extensive area of grassland at the little settlement of Colombet. We were astonished by the density of tongue orchids among the grass and we found two species there, the small tongue orchid *Serapias lingua* and the larger and darker long-lipped serapias *Serapias vomeracea*. There were plenty of green-winged orchids too and pyramidal, and the first lesser butterfly orchids of the week. The colour range in the meadow was enhanced by a magnificent display of yellow rattle. There was a good show of butterflies as well: fritillaries, dingy skippers, commas, small heaths and a speckled yellow moth. A little farther on, the grass became less vigorous and the tassel hyacinths were looking good, with more woodcock orchids and, across the track, at the edge of the trees, some fine spikes of purple bird's nest orchid – violet limodore. The highlight though, was the extensive and abundant colony of charming little yellow sombre bee orchids.

We arrived at the Gouffre de Proumeyssac, a spectacular underground cavern, famed for its crystalline stalactites and stalagmites. The cave is open to the public and there is also a café, a loo and a gift shop. A welcome cup of tea was followed by a tour of the cave for most of the group, but those of us that stayed above ground watched a lengthy display of elegant flying by a hobby across the open sky above us and enjoyed the antics of a redstart around the café buildings. A firecrest sang from high up in the trees above the car park but it was reluctant to approach us and we only managed distant views of it.

After drinks on the terrace, we enjoyed a wonderful supper of broad bean soup, salmon *feuilletée* with sorrel sauce, *confit de canard* with cauliflower, a selection of cheeses and baked apple.

Wednesday May 12: Berbiguières, the Two Views Walk and Montalier Haut

The day began with warm sunshine and a light wind, and the young male black redstart greeted us with his enthusiastic if monotonous song from the top of the horse chestnut by the house.

For the early walk we followed the road up past the vineyard and then turned right downhill towards the wood. We had an excellent view of a green woodpecker on a dead oak tree and of a blackcap singing from the top of the hawthorn by the barn. A robin was singing from an oak and we heard distant calls of cuckoo, hoopoe and, surprisingly, a peacock. There was a fine little colony of fly orchids in the verge by the wood. On the way back we saw that a hoopoe was calling from an exposed perch high on a tall tree in the hedgerow and we watched as it bobbed its head charmingly in time to its call. We saw the first of the week's only two rabbits in the corner of a field close to Castang.



We had beautiful views of a buzzard on the way to the pretty village of Berbiguières, as we drove south of the Dordogne for the first time. Gilles dropped us in the village square and we wound our way down the tight, stepped lanes between the well cared-for houses and colourful gardens. Climbing the path up from the village we looked back and admired the village with its elegant chateau. Swifts, swallows and house martins wheeled around the chateau roof and a group of house martins peeled away to see off a sparrowhawk. The swifts were nesting in the roof of the chateau and we watched white wagtails and sparrows with trailing nesting material finding holes under the eaves. Serins sang insistently from the treetops in the chateau grounds.

We scrambled up the steep shady track, admiring the herb robert in flower and the fine display of soft shield fern and polypody. Some splendid honey-coloured cows were sheltering from the sun beside the path and posed for photographs. Near the top of the path we could hear golden oriole song and their surprisingly harsh contact calls above our heads, but frustratingly we did not manage to see them. There was a male cirl bunting and a stonechat on the telegraph wire. Out in the open, on a ridge within a great loop in the river, we looked out over the 'two views' and watched a flock of about ten black kites circling on a thermal.

Along the track, we enjoyed the birds of the open scrub: cirl buntings and stonechats again, a singing turtle dove and a tree pipit on a wire. The heat of the day brought out butterflies and other insects; there was a vigorous display of ascalaphids and we came across both a male and a female field cricket. We brought them into contact with one another and the encounter enticed the male into enthusiastic

'song'. The path-side was rich in flowers, particularly orchids, with the lizard orchids the most advanced we had seen.

We turned into the wood on our way to rendezvous with Gilles for lunch. A spectacular clump of butcher's broom, lavishly decorated with its surprising red berries caught our attention, as did a large patch of spotted cat's-ear, in good flower, familiar to several people as a garden plant.

Just before we arrived back at the coach, Mick and Dorothy B had located a vociferous firecrest singing from the branches of plane and box trees beside the track. We decided to see how he would react to a recording of a rival singing in his territory. He was, as Barbara said, 'beside himself' with outrage. He approached as close to us as he could and faced us, with his red crest fluffed out and erect and his black eye-stripe and drooping moustachial-stripe turning his face into a ferocious scowl, as he repeatedly challenged the recorded song. This response was a performance that we shall all remember for a very long time. We left him in peace to enjoy our lunch in the shade at the edge of the wood.

After lunch we drove south, into the valley of the Céou, a tributary on the south side of the Dordogne, to a hillside reserve, becoming well known for its orchids. Gilles drove us to the top, to Montalieu Haut and then took the coach down the hill ready to meet us again at the bottom of the winding downhill track. It was a very flowery walk. It began in meadows rich in orchids; all the familiar ones - pyramidal, burnt-tip, bee, lady, early spider, woodcock, all in profusion and in very fine form. As we walked downhill the path took us in and out of the open, *causse* habitat, of the type that was once widespread before the loss of grazing, and low-growing limestone woodland which is gradually increasing in the absence of sheep. A short, dry turf with lavender, rosemary, *Helichrysum*, candytuft, horseshoe vetch and kidney vetch characterised the grassland. Then, as we descended through the woodland, they gave way to Montpellier maple, downy oak, juniper, fly honeysuckle, blue columbine, long-leaved lungwort, stinking hellebore, bastard balm, viviparous meadow grass and a profusion of bracken and other ferns. Down at the bottom of the hill, the electric blue of purple gromwell stood out in the shade beside the track.

Our next stop was the riverside fortified town of Beynac, perched high on a meander in the Dordogne with vast views from its high points along the arms of the river and out across the floodplain. While the most energetic explored the village, the rest of us sought the best vantage point for birds – a riverside bar! From here, we could see the first jackdaws of the week, wheeling above their colony around the monastery at the top of the village. We were pleased to see crag martins there too, flying out across the river from their nesting sites on the cliffs and whirling around above us, together with swifts, swallows and house martins. Eagle owls nest on the cliffs there, but they are notoriously hard to find.

Back at Castang we were ready for our dinner, so after a rapid review of the day's visits we quickly went in to enjoy it: vegetable soup, a delicious layered duck and *fois gras* pâté with carrot and lamb's lettuce salad, beef with ratatouille, a selection of cheeses and crème caramel to finish. An interesting conversation was overheard during supper: "Look, there's a frog hopping about outside." "Or is it a great tit?" "Oh, it's flown away. Now we shall never know."

We had made arrangements that after supper, weather permitting, we should go and see if we could find the midwife toads that we had heard on previous evenings. We heard a barn owl on the way along the track towards the neighbouring house and we could hear the toads calling as we approached. Under the logs and in crevices in the stone walls, the little creatures peered out and called to one another, to the enchantment of everyone.

Thursday May 13: Keith's Walk

The day began dull but the early risers saw a good tally of birds: green and great spotted woodpeckers, the first song thrush of the week, the first view of a cuckoo, a cirl bunting singing on the walnut tree, an adult male black redstart in full song on the bungalow roof, goldfinches at last for Christine and a proper view of a golden oriole in the wood for Brenda.

After breakfast we set off on a walk chosen and led by Keith, to give us a more extended view of the local area with the additional interest of Keith's well informed insights into some of the social history and agricultural practices.

At the bottom of Castang drive we cut across the meadow, with two black kites soaring above us, to the medieval *pigeonnier* – dovecote – much in need of repair but still beautiful. Inside, in spite of the gloom, we found several barn owl pellets containing the remains of voles and shrews; it was clearly an important roost. We continued on the path down the hill, past a bank and ancient dry stone wall to the communal *abrevoir*, recently beautifully restored by the commune of Le Coux. Keith explained the complex structure and use of this ancient irrigation system and then led us on to another link in the chain of historical features, an old quarry. Here we searched successfully for fossils, finding some ammonites as well as several others that were harder to identify.



We carried on through the wood; firecrests and short-toed treecreepers were singing and calling around us, and we came upon a mistle thrush's nest in the fork of a tree. On a clump of bramble, a curious object attracted our attention and on investigation, it turned out to be an emperor moth clinging to a leaf, though in a dangerously exposed position. A whitethroat was singing from a tall hedgerow tree and we could watch it well through the telescope.

Farther on through the village, in the heat of the day, we found ascalaphids at rest on some grass stems, giving us a rare opportunity to look at them at close quarters. Keith talked to us about the fine traditional barns, explaining their importance in the cycle of one of the important local agricultural crops, tobacco, and we found some leaves left from last year, up on the drying racks in one of them.

Cathy's timely arrival with the Volvo enabled some of the party to take the luxury option back to Castang for lunch. The rest cut down through wood; there were narrow-leaved helleborines again, and more violet bird's-nest, fly and lady orchids. We could hear the golden oriole and we paid our respects to the frogs as we passed the *laverie*. As we walked along the lane towards the drive back to Castang for lunch, the hedgerow was alive with butterflies: wood white, speckled wood and orange tip.

Lunch was laid out for us on the terrace at Castang: chicken in breadcrumbs, quiches and pâtés, tomato salad, green salads, fruit and yoghurts.

No specific activities were scheduled for the afternoon, so that there were opportunities for everyone to please themselves. Some caught up on rest, others with postcards and others decided on a brisk walk. This was the time to make sure that everyone had had a chance to see the little colony of lesser horseshoe bats roosting in the boiler room underneath some of the bedrooms. By popular request, we played recordings of bird song of the species we had been seeing so that everyone could listen out when they went off on their own. Without a doubt it was Brenda and Melvyn who hit the jackpot with a wonderful view of a pine marten in the wood on the path down to Coux.

Another of Cathy's wonderful dinners followed our meeting to discuss the day. This time we had spinach soup (we had seen Olivia with the fresh spinach from the garden), fried goat's cheese with *salade Castang* (*lardons fumées*, lettuce, haricot beans, walnuts and hazelnuts), poached salmon in Hollandaise sauce with sautéed potatoes, cheese and to finish, an almond and hazelnut cream gâteau.

It was warm and damp after dinner so it was a good evening to have a look at the common toad that lives under the step on the terrace. She did not disappoint; she is an enormous female as is characteristic of the species in southern Europe, of considerable age and we could see that she dwarfed her normal-sized friend who shares her hole.

Friday May 14: Font de Gaume, Gorge d'Enfer and Roque St Christophe

We assembled as usual at 7.30, but Andrew was up earlier and had already had a good view of a hoopoe, again clearly enough to watch its delightful bowing action as it calls.

The usual young black redstart was singing for us from the chestnut tree. We walked up past the vineyard towards Lagrave in the direction that Andrew had recommended but were saddened to find that the flowery road verges of the beginning of the week had been freshly mown.

To our great delight we found that a pair of red-backed shrikes, which had been uncharacteristically elusive earlier in the week – perhaps late in arriving – were much in evidence. We watched them for a long time in the morning light flying to and fro and feeding among the cattle. Eventually, the friendly curiosity of the cattle got the better of them, they decided that we were an irresistible attraction and the magic was destroyed!

We walked on through Lagrave and Sandra and Dorothy B lingered and had very good views of a pair of ciril buntings and a group of serins by the road below the village.

For Friday, we had booked a morning visit to the world famous caves at Font de Gaume, near Les Eyzies on the Vézère. We had a little time in hand so stopped for a few minutes to walk beside the river or have a look at the little town. There were grey and white wagtails and common sandpipers on the riverside and swifts, swallows, house martins and crag martins all feeding over the water. In the village and under the overhanging rocks, swifts screamed overhead and swallows and martins all flew in and out of their nests under eaves and on the rock faces.

A visit to Font de Gaume is an awe-inspiring experience. The number of visitors is very strictly regulated in order to avoid damage to the wonderful prehistoric polychrome cave paintings, and it is the only such site that remains open to visitors at all. Our group was given a very well informed tour of the caves, seeing paintings and engravings of bison, horses and mammoths and the famous and touching image of a male reindeer licking a kneeling female. Everyone emerged into the warm sunshine feeling very moved by the experience and privileged to have been able to visit the caves at all, as the likelihood is that they will have to be closed in the fairly near future for their own protection.

We took the return downhill track at a leisurely pace to enjoy the flowers and the bird life. Bonelli's warblers and blackcaps were singing from the trees below us and some of the group had a good view of a goshawk moving silently away between the trees.

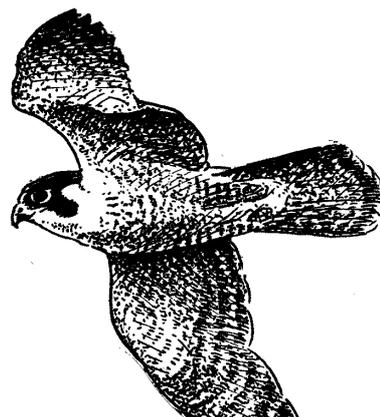
We saw several species of wild flowers that were new for the week, as the seared white limestone rock and scree habitat that flanks the path to the cave is now much less widespread than in the past. Nottingham catchfly, yellow and white rock-roses, meadow rue, sermountain, artemisia, swallow-wort, dyer's greenweed, common tormentil and its relative alpine cinquefoil, hairy rock-cress, St John's-wort, and feather grass all flourished on the sunny slopes. Where the soil was a little deeper or the shade from the Montpellier maple and holm oak more complete we found early spider and pyramidal orchids, meadow saxifrage, sanicle and butcher's broom with the ferns: wall rue, maidenhair spleenwort, black spleenwort, rusty-back fern and maidenhair fern.

Gilles drove us to our lunch stop at Le Grand Roc, beside the Vézère. Crag martins were nesting on the cliff above us and there were serins and two nuthatches in the trees above our heads. We watched spotted flycatchers feeding from an alder branch over the river and parent white wagtails feeding their three young. A family of grey wagtails was flying along the river's edge on the far bank and the distinctive blue flash of a kingfisher passed as we watched, so nearly everyone saw it! We could hear a distant firecrest and then had a good but distant view of a peregrine.

The first excursion of the afternoon was up the track towards the Gorge d'Enfer, which rises steeply up the hillside above the Vézère's north bank. There is a small man-made lake (supporting a huge shoal of goldfish) and up the track there are a number of magnificent rock overhangs known as *abris*, which, in prehistoric times, were used as dwellings. There was a kingfisher beside the lake and the *abris* provide ideal conditions for an amazing display of maidenhair fern – greatly appreciated by anyone who has tried to grow it as a houseplant!

The woodland here is largely coppiced hornbeam and reminiscent of many English woods, with herb robert, yellow archangel, wood sanicle, marsh woundwort, greater stitchwort and dog's mercury. Less familiar, we found a fine clump of Solomon's seal. There is a rich fern flora too, with particularly fine stands of hart's-tongue and soft shield fern.

We then returned to the coach for a drive north-eastwards up the Vézère valley to La Roque St Christophe. This famous site, with its honeycomb of troglodyte dwellings on the cliff face, is a very popular tourist attraction, but we were there for some special birds. We were able to watch both house and crag martins at their nests



but our attention was very quickly drawn to a large ledge, directly above our heads. We could just detect some slight movement at first and then it gradually took form, firstly as a flexing wing and eventually as the whole bird – a young peregrine on its nest ledge. Then a second young bird appeared beside it. Very soon, one of the parents flew round and perched on a tree farther along the cliff and then the other adult appeared on a dead branch. Everyone was able to have excellent views of the whole family both with the naked eye and through telescopes.

We had to tear ourselves away to avoid being late for supper. When we arrived back at Castang we had a brief review of the day's events on the terrace over drinks and then again were treated to more of Cathy's wonderful cooking. For our last evening's dinner we had vegetable soup followed by a deliciously light layered seafood pâté – egg, crab and prawn. Then chicken breast in a tarragon cream sauce followed, a selection of cheeses and, to finish, a chocolate ice cream *bombe*.

As it was our last evening together, we used the opportunity to discuss the most memorable moments of the week for everyone. The selection cut right across the range of the week's natural history though there were one or two events or sightings that occurred in several people's short-lists.

Andrew – the singing and bowing hoopoe
Audrey – the Font de Gaume caves
Barbara – the orchids; the angry firecrest; the peregrines; the Font de Gaume cave, especially the relief painting of the horse
Brenda – the cross firecrest; the peregrines; the pine marten that she and Melvyn found on their free afternoon
Christine – the flowers, especially the orchids; seeing the Bonelli's warbler singing in the tree above her
Dennise – everything, but especially being able to find out what things were
Dorothy A – seeing the male field cricket 'singing' to the female; the peregrines
Dorothy B – the golden oriole singing in the trees above us near Berbiguières; the peregrines
Melvyn – the flowers, especially the orchids; the Bonelli's and melodious warblers; serin and girl buntings; the angry firecrest; the pine marten that he and Brenda found on their free afternoon
Mick – the excellent views of the firecrest at leisure at close quarters when he and Dorothy first found it
Roger – the peregrines; the tractor and ancient 'Fergie' trailer (it was 40 years since he had last seen one like it)
Sandra – the red-backed shrikes; the peregrines; the little warblers; the horseshoe bats
Shirley – the peregrines; the Font de Gaume caves
Robin and Rachel – the angry firecrest

Saturday May 15: The Dawn Chorus and Coux

Many of us had been aware of the wonderful volume and variety of birdsong that accompanied our early mornings, so on the very last morning, at Audrey's suggestion, an intrepid band of enthusiasts (almost everyone!) set off to enjoy the dawn chorus at closer quarters. We were perhaps a little late to start as very many birds were already in full song and individual species were hard to distinguish against the enormous volume. Nightingales were singing when we first went out, but soon fell silent. Several blackbirds were dominating the sound around the house and the regular black redstarts were already singing strongly. In addition we could pick out, from all around us, robin, whitethroat, woodpigeon, golden oriole, tawny owl, cuckoo, song thrush, hoopoe, peacock (!), great tit, blue tit, carrion crow, blackcap, house sparrows, collared dove, chaffinch, greenfinch and goldfinch. Then a heron flew over as we got back to the house – to return briefly to bed, before breakfast.

A small posse appeared for the last 'early' walk and we had the very best view of the week of a melodious warbler. Its fine pale breast made it look like a green apple hanging from its song-post high on a dead tree in the hedgerow.

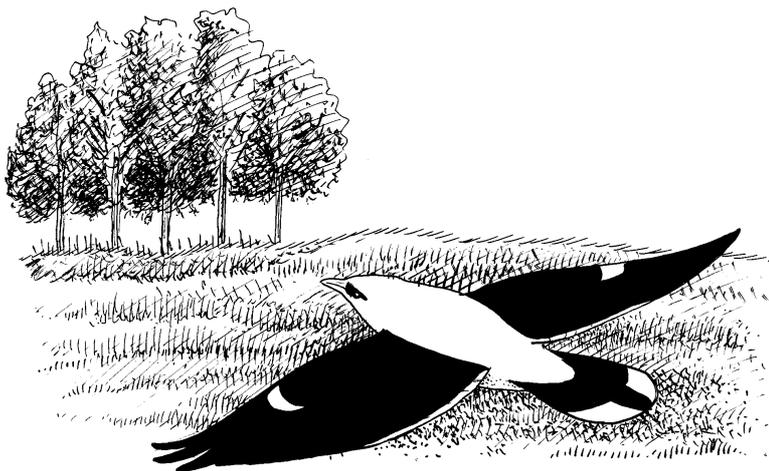
For the last morning's walk we decided to take the circular walk down through the wood to Coux and then back up to Castang via the road. It was promising to be a very hot day.

Soon after we set off, we caught a glimpse of a roe deer near the vineyard. It quickly became aware of us and ran off, down the hill and out of sight. As the day got warmer, the insects became more active; we encountered a field cricket crossing the road and a fine violet ground beetle.

There is a house at the edge of the wood, and at a corner of an outbuilding in the garden we heard the alarm call of a blue tit. The reason soon became clear: a grass snake was lying on the roof with a baby blue tit still sticking out of its mouth, as the snake tried in vain to summon the energy to crawl away. We watched it for a quarter of an hour or more until, the blue tit still only partly swallowed, it was clear that the snake had decided to sleep off its meal. Further on, below the wood, we watched another, more fortunate, pair of blue tits carrying food to their nest hole in a dead tree and a pair of stonechats clearly holding territory along the fence.

As we walked along the track we watched a wall brown by the path and then were alerted to a pair of buzzards wheeling around a big, untidy nest in a pine tree up on the hill. We watched them for a while both flying around the tree and perching in the pine and in an adjacent oak but we were never sure that there were any young.

Ahead of us along the track, Brenda spotted a female golden oriole in a false acacia tree. After a while, it was disturbed by some walkers, and we all had a good view of it as it flew across the valley. In the same group of false acacia trees, we watched for a while as a great spotted woodpecker foraged up above us then flew off in the direction of the wood.



We carried on through village, the temperature rising rapidly. We paused in the welcome shade and admired the well-rested shoeing hoist at the old smithy and then we turned back up the hill past the cemetery, towards Castang. There were many serins about, some flying around and others perching on television aerials, and the good light enabled us to see the bright yellow rump of one in particular. In one of the small gardens on the hillside, a nightingale was in full song, apparently from the heart of a laurel hedge. Some of us watched goldfinches putting the finishing touches to their nest in the top of a cypress tree.

We turned right by the medlar tree and took a short cut through the welcome shade of the wood back to Castang. The nightingales and blackcaps were still singing in the wood, we had a very obliging view of a meadow fritillary at the edge of the Castang meadow and the black redstart was singing as we arrived back for our last delicious lunch.

Gilles arrived promptly to collect us for the journey back to Bergerac. The 'goodbyes' at Castang were very appreciative, after a wonderful week of unstinting hospitality from Cathy, Keith and Olivia. Gilles' unfailingly warm and good-humoured efforts for us were also recognised when Roger, on behalf of the group, presented him with some bottles of wine and, in recognition of the events of the outward journey, and to Gilles' great amusement – a puncture repair kit. We had an uneventful return to Bergerac, the characteristic black kites accompanying us all the way, and again at the airport, then bade *au revoir* to France in the hot afternoon sunshine.

BIRDS

Grey heron
Mute swan
Mallard
Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Black kite
Red kite
Buzzard
Kestrel
Hobby
Peregrine
Common sandpiper
Rock dove/feral pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared dove
Turtle dove
Cuckoo
Barn owl
Tawny owl
Swift
Hoopoe
Kingfisher
Green woodpecker
Great spotted woodpecker
Woodlark
Skylark
Sand martin
Crag martin
Swallow
House martin
Tree pipit
Grey wagtail
White wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin

Nightingale
Redstart
Black redstart
Stonechat
Wheatear
Blackbird
Song thrush
Mistle thrush
Spotted flycatcher
Cetti's warbler
Melodious warbler
Whitethroat
Blackcap
Bonelli's warbler
Chiffchaff
Willow warbler
Firecrest
Blue tit
Great tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed treecreeper
Golden oriole
Red-backed shrike
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Carrion crow
Starling
House sparrow
Tree sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Cirl bunting

Mammals

Shrew sp
Mole
Lesser horseshoe bat
Rabbit
Hare
Red squirrel
Vole sp – common vole?
Pine Marten
Badger
Wild boar (rootings)
Roe deer

Amphibians

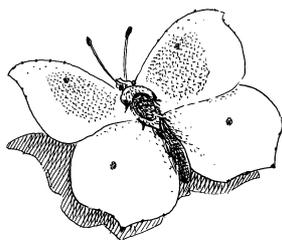
Palmate newt
Midwife toad
Common toad
Marsh frog

Reptiles

Viviparous lizard
Wall lizard
Grass snake

BUTTERFLIES

Grizzled Skipper
Oberthur's grizzled skipper
Dingy Skipper
Swallowtail
Scarce Swallowtail
Small White
Green-veined White
Orange-tip
Pale Clouded Yellow
Cleopatra (*below*)
Brimstone
Wood White
Comma
Map butterfly
Red Admiral
Glanville Fritillary
Meadow Brown
Small Heath
Speckled Wood
Wall Brown
Sooty Copper
Holly Blue
Adonis Blue
Common Blue



MOTHS – mostly day-flying

Speckled yellow
Latticed heath
Yellow shell
Burnet companion
Fox
Pine processionary (nest)
Adela reaumurella – micro-moth with very long antennae
Emperor

Other insects

Ascalaphid *Libelloides longicornis*
Violet carpenter bee
Hornet
Bee-fly sp
Green Tiger Beetle
Bloody-nosed beetle
Rose chafer
Cockchafer
Oxythyrea funesta a chafer beetle
Firebug
Graphosoma italicum – a black and red shield bug, the 'Millwall bug' (our name) or Hogweed bonking bug (official)
Field cricket
Green bush cricket
Wood ant sp
Paper wasp *Polistes gallicus*
Scorpion fly

Spiders and other invertebrates

Crab spider *Misumena vatia*
Roman (edible) snail