



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Languedoc recce 23 – 27 January 2013

These are some notes and pictures from a short recce in Languedoc, to meet the hotel's owners and to see much of the itinerary with local leader Derek Moore. We didn't keep full species lists as these were rather limited in this cold January visit.

Chris Durdin, February 2013

23 January – Stansted to Carcassonne

Rob Macklin and I were met at Carcassonne airport by Derek Moore. He first took us to the village of Oupia to meet Canadians Susan and Tim Wallis, whose holiday let we stayed in, called L'Ancien Pressoir – see www.lourecantou.com – and very good it was, too.

Then a short drive in the Parc naturel régional du Haut-Languedoc, which oozes potential in the scrub, limestone grassland and rocky outcrops. That included a look at a *curiosité* – but I can't reveal more, you'll have to visit ... Evening meal with Derek and Beryl Moore.



24 January – Minerve and Siran

Rob and I had a local walk outside Oupia after breakfast. All very cold and wintry, rather like the UK at the time: the snow had not long melted. There was still plenty of snow on the distant mountains, the Pyrenees to the west and the Cévennes to the east. Local birds included woodlark, curl bunting, serin, black redstart and Sardinian warbler.

Derek collected us and took to the wonderful old Cathar town of Minerve (*above*), into which two gorges lead, the Cesse and the Brian. The delightful scenery and buildings contrast with the chilling history of the suppression by the Catholics under Simon de Montfort of the Cathar "heresy", as a guide book in English I bought at a supermarket still pejoratively describes the then local beliefs. The gorge had a wintering hen harrier overhead, a fine male blue rock thrush and scores of wintering blackcaps, attracted by berries on ivy and Mediterranean buckthorn.



Minerve; stone commemorating the Cathars; Rob and Derek in Minerve; Château de Siran.

In the afternoon we met Gérard et Nadège at our hotel for the holiday, the Château de Siran. Gérard's English is much the same as my French: a fairly good understanding, but conversation proves slow. Happily we were saved from a stumbling meeting by the effervescent Nadège: she speaks excellent English and will be a first-class hostess. The hotel is unusual, as the brochure says, 'a recently renovated 16th century country house built on a wall dating from the Middle Ages, built into a wall.' The breakfast room, sitting room (ideal for a meeting for a wildlife log) and dining room are all downstairs, the bedrooms all on the first floor. I am optimistic that this will work well and be a Honeyguide destination for some years.

25 January – Bessan and marshes near Gruissan

Another very cold morning, on which we couldn't find the little bustards in what's usually a reliable area. Lots of corn buntings and a few curlew buntings. This area will be combined on the holiday itinerary with a town where there's thriving population of lesser kestrels, but as they are a migrant and time was short, we went to the coast instead. We saw several promising looking wetlands today, freshwater and salt, with flamingos, three species of egrets – great white egrets were especially noticeable – and marsh harriers. Inevitably there is coastal development, too, including marinas.



Three coastal wetland views and some greater flamingos.

26 January – Leucate

Another coastal day, an hour or so from base. No spotless starlings had yet returned to their usual haunt in the fish market at Leucate – they've crept round the corner from Spain into this part of France. Then to the lighthouse at the Cap of Leucate, where there was an offshore gannet. The open, coastal garrigue looks to have great botanical potential, though in mid-winter it was mostly shrubs like kermes oak and lentisc that you could safely identify, with just sweet Alison *Lobularia maritima* in flower.

Then lots more coastal wetlands of various types, with large numbers of flamingos, egrets, waders, Sandwich terns and a 'lifer' for Rob when a group of slender-billed gulls settled in front of us. There was a little party of wintering black-necked grebes in a harbour. Back for an excellent meal with Derek, Beryl, Susan and Tim in a family-friendly restaurant, the Asphodèle, in Oupia.



Slender-billed gulls, with one black-headed gull (far left); Aleppo pine cones.

Botanical mysteries

In farmland and vineyards everywhere, sometimes in thick carpets, was a white crucifer, sometimes with a weak purplish tinge and very occasionally strongly purple. It wasn't in the Mediterranean flora, nor the northern European flower book (Fitter, Blamey & Fitter). It was sometimes growing with field marigold *Calendula arvensis* (as in the picture below), which was also in flower.

With a little digging around on my return, the ID is white wall rocket *Diplotaxis eruroides*. One book says: "A mainly Mediterranean species that has become a troublesome weed in parts of Europe, especially in the south," so why it's not in the Mediterranean flora is puzzling.



White wall rocket *Diplotaxis eruroides*.

It's roquette des vignes in French, and the plants in this photo are, aptly, under vines.

There was another species in flower that also was in neither of the two standard floras. In the farmland/vineyards around Oupia and in the Mediterranean scrub at Minerve was a knee-high, bushy ragwort with slender leaves. At Minerve it was mingled with plants like large Mediterranean spurge and spiny broom *Calycotome spinosa*, giving the impression of a garrigue species. But it was the invasive alien *Senecio inaequidens*, also a new one on me.



Senecio inaequidens: Sénéçon du Cap in French, as it originates in the high plateaus of South Africa.

27 January – around Oupia and home

Our an early afternoon flight gave Derek time at home to prepare for his return to Wales on the following day, so Rob and I had a morning walking near our base at Oupia. As well as local birds, the delightfully scruffy farmland and vineyards had a lot of wintering birds from northern Europe, such as song thrushes, robins and finches.

We walked to the next village of Beaufort where there is a semi-derelict chateau (*right, in the snow, just before we arrived*). It looks fabulous from a distance but close to it seems to have little hope for a practical conversion. White henbane was in flower, growing out of sheltered walls.



Derek took us back Carcassonne airport via a short stretch of *péage*, to allow a stop at an *aire* (viewpoint) overlooking Carcassonne. I was keen to get a photo, partly for its own sake but also as it's in the film 'Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves' when a view of Carcassonne is described as Nottingham Castle by Kevin Costner. Apparently the town's restoration was much helped by money from the film. Then back to Stansted and home.



Carcassonne from a viewpoint on the *péage*.

Photos by Chris Durdin, except slender-billed gulls (Derek Moore), Beaufort Château (Susan Wallis) and *Senecio inaequidens* from Wikipedia.