

A Spring in Provence

Mariposa Nature Tours trip report

10th-17th April 2024



Tour leader David Fairhurst

Trip report by David Fairhurst

Images kindly shared by our guests

(Images above, clockwise from top left, all © Gillian: Owlfly *Ascalaphidae* sp, Whiskered Tern, Provence Hairstreak, Greater Flamingo)



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Introduction

This tour covered a range of sites including the Camargue, La Crau, Les Alpilles and Mont Ventoux in search of birds, butterflies, and more besides, taking in some of the best locations for spring wildlife in this south-eastern region of France.

Joining us for the tour were Gillian & Steve, Linda & Alan, Diana, and Robin.

What follows is a daily diary for the week, followed by species list, and gallery.

Day 1 Wednesday 10th April

Arrival day

Those that arrived early had a short visit to the wetland at Les Salins du Lion, conveniently adjacent to the airport. Here we were treated to our first taste of the Camargue, with Greater Flamingo, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt and Red-crested Pochard all to be readily seen, along with our first butterflies of the week in the welcome form of a Small Copper and a Brown Argus.

By mid-afternoon the whole group had assembled, and we travelled the fifty or so miles to our lovely hotel nestled amongst the pine-trees on the edge of Les Alpilles.



Black-winged Stilt © Gillian

Day 2 Thursday 11th April

With the remains of the mistral still blowing we headed south for a full day in the Camargue. The morning was spent exploring the trails, boardwalks and hides at Reserve Scamandre. The freshwater pools here held plenty of Greater Flamingo, both Purple and Grey Heron, Great Crested Grebe, and many (many) Glossy Ibis. The receding water-levels were creating muddy edges and margins, and Arctic-bound passage waders were much in evidence, the highlight of which were in excess of 50 elegant Wood Sandpiper. Several Green Sandpiper were mixed in with them, providing a nice opportunity to be able to compare the two species side by side. The muddy edge was also great for Black-winged Stilt, with many seen.



Greater Flamingo © Gillian

As the temperature rose it brought out a few insects and, as we wandered, dragonflies seen included Red-veined Darter, Vagrant Emperor and Black-tailed Skimmer. Butterflies here were represented with Wall Brown and Speckled Wood.

By midday the wind had stopped, and it was starting to get warm. We lunched on the picnic tables at the reserve centre and were treated

to a White Stork change-over at the nest. The scrub nearby held singing Common Nightingale and Sardinian Warbler.

After lunch we headed south and spent the afternoon amongst the saline lagoons and saltmarshes around Saintes Maries de la Mer. Good numbers of Greater Flamingo were present in the roadside pools and amongst them we located a local rarity in the form of moulting Grey Phalarope - it should have been bobbing around in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean! Quite what it was doing here was beyond us, but it was a welcome find nonetheless.

Several male Ashy-headed Wagtail were spotted perched on top of the saltmarsh bushes, and one stop rewarded us with both Ashy-headed *and* Blue-headed Wagtails together, superb birds!

Other wading birds on the salty lagoons included Grey Plover, lots more Black-winged Stilt, and some very smart Kentish Plover. The trackside tamarisk bushes contained Spectacled Warbler, and some sharp eyes spotted a northbound male Whinchat.

Day 3 - Friday 12th April

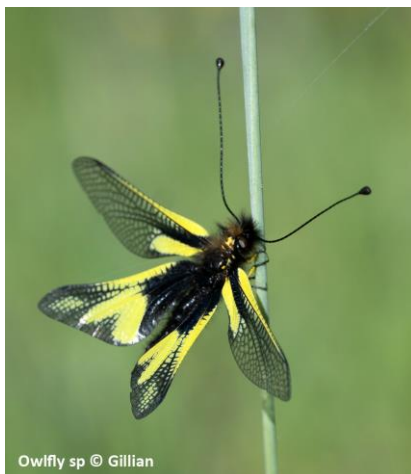
Our first stop this morning was at Vergieres, and a look out onto La Crau. The small stream on the edge of the parking area held a couple of species of *Odonata*, and we had wonderful views of Banded Demoiselle. Bath White butterflies were incredibly abundant here.

Birds sighted included a pair of Stone Curlew, excellent views of a singing male Short-toed Lark, and brief views of both Little Bustard and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse.

From here we headed up into Les Alpilles, and the rock fortress town of Les Baux. A short walk around the bottom of the cliff below town saw us rewarded with excellent views of a pair of Blue Rock Thrush. Plenty of butterflies were evident and included Scarce Swallowtail, Orange Tip, and our first Cleopatra.



Overhead were several swirling Alpine Swift and Crag Martin, and in the bushes Serin and Western Subalpine Warbler.



We lunched in glorious sunshine on the picnic benches under the pine trees here with several Cleopatra fluttering by. After lunch, we meandered along the track toward La Caume. This stroll was wonderful with masses of flowers, butterflies and birds to look at, and we were able to spend several hours pottering along the trail.

Bath White and Cleopatra were the commonest two species of butterfly, but other highlights included Baton and Black-eyed Blue, Provence Orange Tip, Clouded Yellow, and Green Hairstreak. Another insect that we saw lots of were Owl Flies (*Ascalaphid*), these amazing creatures were also enjoying the lovely sunshine.

Flowers were much in evidence and some of the most notable were Grey-leaved Cistus (everywhere!), Early Spider Orchid, stunning blue *Linum* flowers, *Globularia* and Blue Astragalus.

Day 4 - Saturday 13th April

We returned to La Crau this morning, but this time entered from Mas Chauvet. The weather remained glorious with unbroken sunshine and lovely warm temperatures.

The recent rains had put a bit of colour on what is a normally bare and stony-looking habitat with lots of flowers out including the spectacular Hollow-leaved Asphodel.

Bath White butterflies numbered into their thousands as we strolled out on this unique area.



Early Spider Orchid © Dave



Short-toed Eagle © Gillian

Several male Tawny Pipit performed well, and we were treated to a few nice fly-by Little Bustards, their white wings looking very distinctive. A calling Quail was quite unexpected. Up to 30 hunting Lesser Kestrel were quite a sight, and it was great seeing them sharing airspace with many Black Kite and a couple of Short-toed Eagle. Up to five Common Nightingales sang in the bushes and scrub around the minibus, barely pausing for breath!

Mas d'Agon was our next stop, and this occasionally flooded freshwater wetland turned out to be our favourite location in the Camargue. We got off to a good start with a roadside Black Stork as we took the scenic route...

The short stretch of road that overlooks the reedbed and pools at Mas d'Agon is only a few hundred metres long, but it took us several hours to complete as there was so much see. There were masses of waterbirds - herons (mostly Purple), egrets (a full house of Cattle, Little, and Great White), Greater Flamingo, Spoonbill, and many hundreds of Glossy Ibis.

Several Western Swamphen performed wonderfully along the reed edge, whilst a herd of horned cattle grazed the banks with several Ashy and Blue-headed Wagtail in close attendance hoping for disturbed insects. A particularly impressive sight was a large flock of hundreds of passage waders, almost exclusively Ruff and Wood Sandpiper.

Hawking above this throng of birds were twenty of so Whiskered Tern and, amongst them, a stonking summer plumaged White-winged Black Tern.



Tawny Pipit © Gillian

The last stop of the day was the small reserve at La Capeliere. We had a pleasant stroll around the reserve seeing several White Storks on their nests, a pair of patrolling Gull-billed Tern, and a smart European Pond Terrapin.



Provence Hairstreak © Gillian

Day 5 - Sunday 14th April

Today we headed east and into the neighbouring department of Var.

Our first stop was a forest ride north of the town of Taradeau. Here we spent the morning along just a few hundred metres section of the ride. The numbers and species of butterflies seen were incredible. Our main target was Provence Hairstreak, of which we found two individuals. Other butterfly species included Baton Blue, Nettle-tree Butterfly, Marsh Fritillary, Cleopatra, many Provence Orange Tip, Mallow and Grizzled Skippers. Two particular highlights were Spanish Festoon and a wonderful pair of courting Green-underside Blue.

After lunch we travelled north to an area upland area near the town of Trigance. Our aim here was to catch up with Spring Ringlet, one of Europe's scarcer *Erebia* ringlet species. Good numbers of Spring Ringlet were on the wing, and it didn't take long to see half a dozen buzzing about back and forth over the rough slopes – seeing one on the ground took a wee bit longer! Our perseverance paid off, and we eventually got super views of a resting female. Two other species of fritillary were seen here – Queen of Spain and Weaver's. The scrub here also held a lovely singing male Western Subalpine Warbler.



Green-underside Blue © Gillian



Slender-billed Gull © Gillian

Day 6 - Monday 15th April

We returned to the Camargue today and started out by heading to the salt pans at Piemanson. We got distracted *en route* by a wonderful group of stunning Slender-billed Gulls, and they turned out to be bird of the trip for several guests!

Toward the end of the road at Plage de Piemanson we took a stroll along the final

half mile of road and were rewarded with plenty of wading birds including Little Stint, Grey Plover, plenty of Greater Flamingo, and two cracking Caspian Tern. A small island in the salt pans had a nice colony of Spoonbills. The saltmarsh scrubby areas were again great song posts for male Ashy-headed Wagtails, and we saw several.

In the late morning we took the road out to Phare de la Gacholle and stopped several times, enjoying great views of a Short-toed Eagle whilst listening to purring Turtle Dove and singing Common Nightingale. We enjoyed our lunch out in the middle of the lagoons surrounded by hundreds of flamingos.



Whiskered Tern © Gillian

Returning around the eastern edge of Etang de

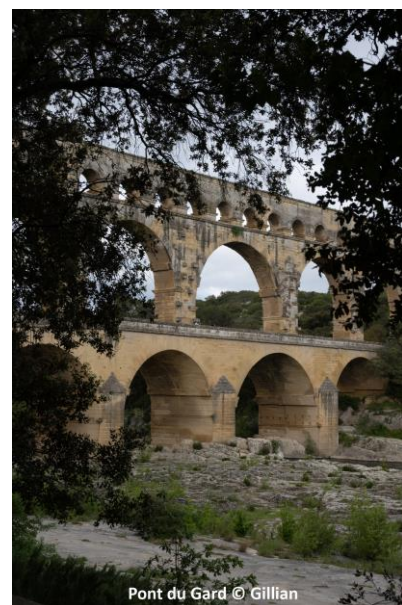
Vaccares we stopped at a few roadside pools and enjoyed several groups of summer plumaged Spotted Redshank and Greenshank. The roadside verges had at least two species of broomrape (*Orobanche*) growing – Common and Yarrow.

Our final stop of the day was back at Mas d'Agon. It was so good last time we returned! Some 50 Whiskered Tern hawked over the freshwater pools which held over 500 Ruff and 200 Wood Sandpiper – incredible numbers! Overhead Collared Pratincoles glided back and forth. The pools were alive with herons, egrets, flamingos and Spoonbill.



Day 7 - Tuesday 16th April

The warm sunny weather had finally gone and the temperature had taken a tumble and cloud had arrived. Our morning was spent at the world heritage Roman aqueduct at Pont du Gard. As well as being a spectacular archaeological feature the structure is also home to quite a few birds. There is a thriving colony of Alpine Swift here and it was amazing to watch (and listen!) as groups of the birds whizzed through the huge archways, chattering away to themselves. Crag Martin were much in evidence as they also breed here. The trees and bushes alongside held Short-toed Treecreeper, singing Common Redstart, and a very smart Firecrest.



Pont du Gard © Gillian



Cleopatra © Gillian

With the Mistral now blowing it was decided to spend the afternoon in Les Alpilles back on the trail to La Caume. While the wind was in evidence, the track was very sheltered in places, and in certain spots plenty of butterflies were on the wing. Black-eyed Blues became the afternoon favourite, but once again there were lots of Provence Orange Tip, Cleopatra and Scarce Swallowtail. Birds were represented with a wonderful singing Western Bonelli's Warbler, and it showed surprisingly well at times.

Day 8 – Wednesday 17th April

Departure day is always a bittersweet occasion. We said our reluctant goodbyes and made our respective ways home after a week that had been packed with wildlife of all shapes, sizes, colours and kinds.

Footnote and acknowledgements

Mariposa would like to thank all of our guests who joined us in Provence this year not only for their good company, but also for their sharp eyes and good wildlife finds – everyone spotted something that was to the communal benefit of the group as a whole. We made an excellent team!

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A SPRING IN PROVENCE 10-17 APRIL 2024	
Species recorded during the course of the week as a whole	
	Species name
	Butterflies
1	Mallow Skipper
2	Southern Grizzled Skipper
3	Brown Argus
4	Holly Blue
5	Green-underside Blue
6	Black-eyed Blue
7	Common Blue
8	Baton Blue
9	Small Copper
10	Provence Hairstreak
11	Green Hairstreak
12	Weaver's Fritillary
13	Queen of Spain Fritillary
14	Marsh Fritillary
15	Glanville Fritillary
16	Nettle-tree Butterfly
17	Southern White Admiral
18	Peacock
19	Red Admiral
20	Painted Lady
21	Scarce Swallowtail
22	Swallowtail
23	Spanish Festoon
24	Orange Tip
25	Provence Orange Tip
26	Clouded Yellow
27	Cleopatra
28	Brimstone
29	Large White
30	Small White
31	Bath White
32	Small Heath
33	Wall
34	Speckled Wood
35	Spring Ringlet
	Dragonflies
1	Banded Demoiselle
2	Azure Damselfly
3	Red-veined Darter
4	Black-tailed Skimmer
5	Vagrant Emperor

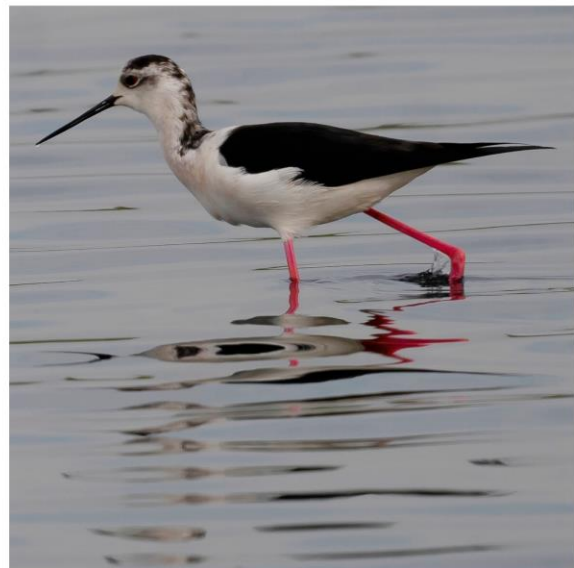
	Birds
1	Great Crested Grebe
2	Little Grebe
3	Great Cormorant
4	Great Bittern
5	Grey Heron
6	Purple Heron
7	Little Egret
8	Great Egret
9	Cattle Egret
10	Black Stork
11	White Stork
12	Glossy Ibis
13	Greater Flamingo
14	Eurasian Spoonbill
15	Mute Swan
16	Common Shelduck
17	Mallard
18	Gadwall
19	Common Teal
20	Northern Shoveler
21	Red-crested Pochard
22	Tufted Duck
23	Red-breasted Merganser
24	Black Kite
25	Short-toed Eagle
26	Montagu's Harrier
27	Eurasian Marsh Harrier
28	Eurasian Sparrowhawk
29	Goshawk
30	Common Buzzard
31	Kestrel
32	Lesser Kestrel
33	Red-legged Partridge
34	Common Pheasant
35	Western Swamphen
36	Common Moorhen
37	Common Coot
38	Little Bustard
39	Pied Avocet
40	Black-winged Stilt
41	Stone Curlew
42	Oystercatcher
43	Collared Pratincole
44	Grey Plover
45	Kentish Plover
46	Dunlin
47	Little stint
48	Ruff
49	Greenshank

50	Common Redshank
51	Spotted Redshank
52	Green Sandpiper
53	Wood Sandpiper
54	Common Sandpiper
55	Eurasian Curlew
56	Ruddy Turnstone
57	Slender-billed Gull
58	Black-headed Gull
59	Mediterranean Gull
60	Yellow-legged Gull
61	Sandwich Tern
62	Caspian Tern
63	Common Tern
64	Gull-billed Tern
65	Whiskered Tern
66	White-winged Black Tern
67	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
68	Feral Pigeon
69	Wood Pigeon
70	Collared Dove
71	Turtle Dove
72	Common Swift
73	Alpine Swift
74	European Bee-eater
75	Common Kingfisher
76	Eurasian Hoopoe
77	Great-spotted Woodpecker
78	Lesser-spotted Woodpecker
79	Green Woodpecker
80	Skylark
81	Calandra Lark
82	Crested Lark
83	Short-toed Lark
84	Crag Martin
85	House Martin
86	Barn Swallow
87	Sand Martin
88	Tawny Pipit
89	Ashy-headed Wagtail
90	Blue-headed Wagtail
91	White Wagtail
92	Grey Wagtail
93	Common Nightingale
94	European Stonechat
95	Whinchat
96	European Robin
97	Black Redstart
98	Common Redstart
99	Blue Rock Thrush

100	Common Blackbird
101	Mistle Thrush
102	Cetti's Warbler
103	Great Reed Warbler
104	Reed Warbler
105	Common Chiffchaff
106	Bonelli's Warbler
107	Willow Warbler
108	Blackcap
109	Sardinian Warbler
110	Subalpine Warbler
111	Spectacled Warbler
112	Fan-tailed Warbler
113	Firecrest
114	Crested Tit
115	Blue Tit
116	Great Tit.
117	Long-tailed Tit
118	Short-toed Treecreeper
119	Eurasian Jay
120	Eurasian Magpie.
121	Common Raven
122	Rook
123	Carrion Crow
124	Eurasian Jackdaw
125	Common Starling
126	House Sparrow
127	Eurasian Tree Sparrow
128	Chaffinch
129	Greenfinch
130	European Goldfinch
131	Eurasian Linnet
132	European Serin
133	Corn Bunting
134	Cirl Bunting

Guests' Galleries

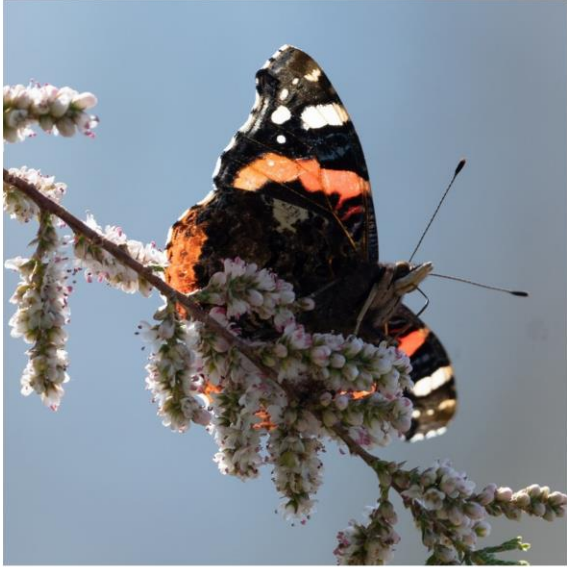
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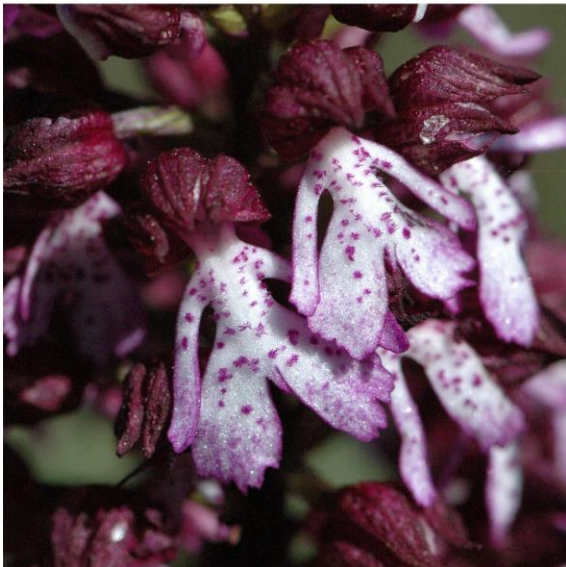
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