

BLGT01-20 28 Feb to 2 March - Looking for wallcreeper et al in the Minervois

[Download the Bird list here](#)

Day 1 - Friday 28th February - Transfers and settling in

After loading the van it's off to Toulouse airport to pick up Judy - who is travelling extremely light with just a largeish day pack!

We pick up a sandwich and set off for Carcassonne train station to pick up Steve - Judy is constantly scanning the skies, keen not to miss anything as we drive east along the motorway.

Steve has very nobly come by train adding a day at either end of the 4 day trip to enjoy the French scenery on the way and doing a loop - southwards via Paris and Bordeaux and heading back north via Montpellier and Lille. We manage to make our way down to the banks of the river Aude (high flood marks still showing from the torrential rain at the end of January), where we find a bench and sit and eat our lunch as we watch a Black redstart, a White wagtail, and some Mallard all along the edge of the river. Then Steve spots a **Red kite** - and I get excited as we don't see that many (whereas Black kites come through in their hundreds and have nested locally for the past few years, Red kites are always a good find for us in the Languedoc!).

Then it's off to collect four more team members flying into Carcassonne. They are through passport control quite quickly and the sun is shining, so wanting to make the best of the good weather we decide to head directly for a birdwatching spot on the way to our accommodation. The area of open agricultural land near the ruined abbey of Fontcalvy is a patchwork of olive groves, vineyards, fallow land with long grass and a well known spot for species such as Iberian shrike, Great spotted cuckoo, Little bustard and Stone curlew. In fact, these birds were all hiding and we saw only **Corn bunting, Reed bunting, Stonechat, Whinchat, Kestrel...** before heading on to the delightful **Domaine de l'Ale - a typical Languedoc wine estate** whose tastefully renovated stone buildings with charming hosts are to be our base for the weekend.

After dispatching everyone to their rooms for a rest, we reconvene for an apéritif and a short briefing at 7pm. A welcome glass of bubbly, a brief introduction, a quick birdlist and then it's through to the dining room for a truly scrumptious dinner - French home cooking at its best - with a baked camembert and salad starter, lamb and flageolet main and home-made crème caramel (or flan in French) for pudding - all washed down by several glasses of very smooth local red wine (we are in the world's largest wine-growing area after all, so it

would be rude not to!).

Then it is straight to bed (except for those of us who have decided that the only way to keep up with the trip report is to type it up day by day...). Our group have travelled from far and wide, Ullapool to Pool, Kent to Kendal, and West Yorkshire to East Lancashire, not forgetting Ian who is a local resident, so I hope they all sleep as well as I'm hoping to! A demain si vous le voulez bien ☐



Day 2 - Saturday 29th February - Heading east

After a delicious breakfast of numerous kinds of croissants, brioche and other sweet, eggy breads (beware if you get the “fève” or lucky charm – often a ceramic shape of some sort – it can chip a tooth...).

With a bank of foggy cloud ahead of us as we set off in a north-easterly direction this morning, it wasn't looking very hopeful to see raptors of any kind hunting let alone the Bonelli's eagle known to nest locally. But as we headed north-east we got a glimpse of a **Bonelli** in the distance. At our first stopping point we hooked up with resident birder Ron Bennett – you can never have too much local expertise. This spot was the first of many rock faces we were to scan during the morning, but as the sun was having difficulty breaking through the low cloud, we decided that our insectivorous target species and bogey bird – namely the Wallcreeper – might not yet be out hunting for spiders and insects in the fissures of the rock face with its long curved beak. The cool breeze had us in the mood for a coffee and a pit stop to break our drive through to Mourèze, which has historically been a good spot for Wallcreeper... but perhaps because the winter has been mild, fewer seem to have been recorded in France this year than previously.

Rocks, rocks everywhere, but ne'er a Wallcreeper to spot!

At Mourèze, we started with 15 – 20 minutes scrutinising the tall cliffs along the main street (to no avail) and then set off through woods along the bottom of the cliffs to make our way to the main view point. Great excitement when we heard and then saw a **Lesser spotted woodpecker**, which very kindly perched in a leafless tree allowing all members of the group to get really good views. **Firecrest** was also seen, and the soundscape was a **Serenade** (groan). On up into the main viewing area of this spectacular circus, surrounded by Dolomitic chimneys. These were formed from marine sediment 165,000,000 years ago with the sandy softer bits being washed away to leave the harder rock still standing in spectacular chimneys. All this makes great Wallcreeper country.... but could we see one? No! Apart from alarming **Sardinian warblers** we neither heard nor saw hardly any feathered creatures at all, seeing more butterflies than birds – but we all enjoyed the spectacular scenery! Back down through the village for a final attempt at the cliff face (scanning with scopes not climbing!) – but all in vain, so we threw in the towel and decided it was lunch time! Our delicious picnic-lunch of a couscous salad with cheese and charcuterie, followed by pancakes was a welcome reward for our hard work. Finding Wallcreeper really is like looking for a needle in a haystack!



Great-spotted reward

Time to give up on Wallcreeper for today and head back south to the open agricultural land around Ouveillan. Gary had a feeling that we were indeed going to see **Great spotted cuckoo and Iberian shrike** and he wasn't wrong! No sooner had we arrived than he was out of the van, and within seconds he spotted a GSC in a leafless tree squawking just 30m away with its comical

tuft of vertical pale grey head feathers making it look slightly punky. But that was only number one! We saw four on and off over nearly an hour, moving all around us, from one perch to another and then back again. No sooner had we got over the general excitement of getting truly excellent views of GSC in the bins and through the scope – a lifer for several members of the group – up went the cry from Karline that she had found us an Iberian grey shrike in the top of a bush beyond the vineyard below us! That bird moved around and ended up in an almond tree quite near us and we saw at least two more – getting excellent views!

What a change in pace from earlier in the day! We felt rewarded for all our diligent scanning of rock faces!!! Calling **Stone curlew** teased us constantly, with one showing briefly. A short walk back along the road and we saw **dozens of Chaffinch** in the vineyard, one of “our” Iberian shrike, a very red Linnet or two and slightly less than a charm of **Goldfinch**. With a van full of smiling faces we set off back to our accommodation arriving in time for a short break before another delicious apéritif over the bird list. Dinner was a delicious salad of chicory, blue cheese, croutons, walnuts and the magic dressing, followed by Guinea fowl, dauphinoise potatoes and ratatouille, cheese for those who wanted it and then flambéed bananas in rum – yum-yum!



Day 3 - Sunday 1st March - Heading west

Before we left our accommodation, Gary had been deep in thought and decided that we were going to see three Wallcreeper... a notion that was met with considerable if polite scepticism.

After checking the weather forecast we decided to swap the day around, to start further west at a new site where Wallcreeper have been spotted recently. This old quarry gave us sightings of **Blackcap**, **Mistle thrush**, **Crag martin** and **Black redstart**, an overflying **Grey heron** and a **couple of Raven** plus various butterflies, but no butterfly birds...

Success!

So it was straight on to a site where we saw Wallcreeper on last year's trip just outside Caunes-Minervois (or My Ner Voice as the irritating woman on Google maps insists on calling it!). We hadn't even left the car park when Karline found us a sub-adult **Ocellated lizard** sunning itself on a wall. Having not yet shed its winter skin the colours were quite muted, but a great find and a new species for many of the group. A **Short-toed tree creeper** was also spotted by the group before we set off down the hill and across the stream to our main spot.

Here, in a stunning setting and glorious sunshine we set about scanning the steep sides of a narrow gorge - and quite quickly **all our hard work was rewarded and we enjoyed following a Wallcreeper for nearly half an hour**, working its way along a rock face, in and out of the fissures, recesses and mini-caves to seek out spiders and small insects with its long curved beak. Finally it flitted off behind a buttress of rock and out of sight. But no sooner had it gone than two more appeared from the opposite direction and flew past almost overhead. The original individual then reappeared and the pair gave us a second fly past! Well what excitement... not one Wallcreeper but THREE! So Gary was right! Everyone in the group was able to get excellent views both in our bins and through the scope. Big grins all round and a quick Wallcreeper wiggle was in order. On arrival at this beautiful site we had heard a woodpecker drumming and there was quite a discussion as to what type of woodpecker it might be.. And although unaware that **Black woodpecker** were a possibility at this spot, we were all thrilled to get a fly over by this impressively large species of woodpecker, yaffling loudly! Another lifer for several members of the group ☐







Unlucky in Minerve

A well deserved coffee in Caunes before setting off for the picturesque village of Minerve perched on a rocky outcrop at the confluence of the Briant and Cesse river gorges. On arrival we enjoyed our picnic in more bright sunshine, looking south across the valley. During our picnic break we saw a small group of **Griffon vulture** and a **Red kite** flying north. On down into the village where apart from **a large number of Hummingbird hawkmoths** on the stone tiles of the church roof we saw few birds. No Rock sparrow unlike the previous Saturday, and unusually no Alpine accentor either ☐ The sun disappeared and spots of rain turned into an increasingly persistent drizzle. So we followed the path along the river, back up into the village and on back to our vehicles. Somewhat frustratingly, as we pulled out of the car park the rain cleared and the sun came back out. Never have we seen so little in Minerve – and never previously at this time of year had we missed Alpine

accentor – but you can't win them all!

More GSC and Iberian grey shrike

Returning to our **Great spotted cuckoo** haunt, sure enough we were greeted by their noisy calls, but this time we also managed to get excellent views of **Stone curlew** out on the edge of a field (9 in total). An **Iberian shrike** put in an appearance as did a **Yellow-legged gull** and a **Sardinian warbler**. A **harrier (probaby Hen)** flew past in the background and we enjoyed listening to the **Woodlark** singing.

Finally, it was back to our accommodation to do the birdlist so that Karline could head off. A welcome rest then drinks and yet another delicious dinner: warm gizzard salad; duck parmentier; cheese for those who could manage it and then fondant au chocolat with a crème anglaise. all washed down with more delicious local wine! Que demande le peuple ! (What more could one want).





Day 4 - Monday 1st March - a few bonus species before we say goodbye!

Despite a few misleading rays of sunshine, temps had dropped and heavy rain squalls moved in as per the forecast! However, breaks quickly appeared in the clouds and after saying our goodbyes to our delightful hosts we set off for a quick look down at some nearby marshes. With the van serving as a bit of a windbreak we managed to chalk up quite a decent list in under an hour, with several team members managing to spot **Purple swamphen**. Other ticks for this spot included **White stork**, **Green woodpecker** in a nearby tree, **Great-crested grebe**, **Marsh harrier**, **Hen harrier**, **Grey heron**.

Having seen Flamingo in the distance from the motorway on Friday, we decided to head down to the coast to see if we could get a closer look. But first a quick nip down to the beach provided **Crested lark** and the chance to investigate a group of **Starling** on the off chance there might be a Spotless one amongst them, but unfortunately not. A fishing boat was on its way back in and Steve managed to spot a **Balearic shearwater** amongst the myriad **Yellow-legged gulls** trailing behind. We looped back to Narbonne across the lagoons and were able to get a mid-distance views of some **Flamingo** and plenty of **Black-headed gull** trying to hunker down out of the wind. Across the canal de la Robine (emptied for repairs) and past the regional park boat repair yard, then into Narbonne for lunch at the covered market, sadly not its usual bustling self, as it is Monday. Then it was onto the motorway to battle strong winds and at times heavy rain to get everyone back to their departure points. It's a good thing the weather had held off until now!

I think I can safely say that a good time was had by all! The accommodation and food were both of a high standard, with our hosts proving to be extremely welcome and accommodating. As far as the birding is concerned, I think the team would agree that **Wallcreeper**, **Lesser spotted woodpecker**, **Black woodpecker**, **Great spotted cuckoo**

and Iberian grey shrike were the highlights of the trip, and each of these were “lifers” for various members of the group.

Oh dear... the pressure will now be on for next year ☐

[Winter Wallcreeper Weekend 2020 Bird list](#)

For more information about the next edition of this trip, see the **[Trip page for Winter Wallcreeper Weekend 2021](#)**.

Pre-bookings are now open for 2021 on the **[Booking request form](#)**.