

**Participants:** Debbie, Kaz, Lesley, Louise, Mike, Rob & Sarah

**Guides:** Karline Martorell (with Ron Bennett on the Saturday morning)

**Tour leader:** Philippa Benson

**Weather:** Cloudless blue skies all weekend with temps ranging from 3-4°C up to 14-15°C (it felt warmer in the sun!). A light and somewhat sharp easterly wind picked up in the afternoons.

**Highlights of the trip:** Wallcreeper, Blue rock thrush, Iberian grey shrike, Hen harrier, Purple swamphen, Bearded tit, Penduline tit and White stork.

### Day 1 Friday 25th February – Transfers to Domaine de l'Ale and settling in



Four participants arrived by car from different parts of France and were met at the delightful [Domaine de l'Ale](#) by Karline our equally delightful guide! Meanwhile, Philippa went to Carcassonne airport in the minibus to collect the other three participants arriving from Manchester arriving at the Domaine de l'Ale at around 17h30. Tawny owl was heard, together with plenty of Serin. A welcome glass of bubbly and some delicious nibbles were served at 18h30 to accompany an introduction to the weekend, shortly followed by a delicious dinner of Roasted half camembert then pork fillet medallions in a creamy mustard sauce and finished off with a home made tiramisu, all accompanied by a selection of delicious Languedoc wines. Over the three-night stay, our hosts were keen to introduce us to a range of different local wines – all much appreciated!



**Day 2 Saturday 26th February – Mourèze and its dolomitic chimneys**

After a delicious breakfast of croissants and brioche we set off under cloudless skies into the chilly morning and travelled north-east. As we headed towards our morning destination, we were halted in our tracks by the sight of a Bonelli's eagle soaring overhead and performing a display flight. What a bonus! Then it was on to the spectacular and geologically very interesting natural circus of dolomitic chimneys (see geology footnote!) at Mourèze, which provide plenty of suitable habitat for our elusive target species – the elusive Wallcreeper! These all-too discreet birds nest at very high altitude in alpine habitat but migrate to lower altitudes in the winter when their territories are snowbound. They seem to favour rocky gorges where they flit about working a particular rock face before moving on. They use their thin curved beak to pick spiders and other insects from the cracks in rock faces. It would appear that individuals may well return to the same overwintering area on a regular basis, but then every few years it is all change and we have to look for new sites!



Luckily for us, local birding expert Ron Bennett had done a reccy in advance and had spotted several individuals at this spectacular site. So we started scanning rock faces near the road - an exercise as difficult as looking for a needle in a haystack. After initially drawing a blank, Ron picked up on an individual at the same spot where he had seen it a few days earlier! So we all scrambled through the vegetation to get a better view of the rock face in question and Kaz managed to pick up on a very pale-throated Wallcreeper. And although it disappeared a couple of times around the back of that particular lump of rock, we were treated to excellent and prolonged views of this cooperative butterfly bird. It worked the cliff face, flitting about and we were all thrilled. Our target species was a lifer for a number of people in the group. And quite honestly, these were some of the best views we have ever had, staying with this bird for a good 20 minutes.



Wallcreeper © M.Barker

We moved on up into the centre of the natural circus of dolomitic columns where we searched in vain for more Wallcreeper, Alpine accentor and Blue rock thrush. but enjoyed the dramatic scenery as we checked the rock faces around us. Just as we started to come back down, Ron as usual hung back to scan a bit more, and delighted the stragglers, by spotting a pair of Bonelli's eagles with the male providing a stooping display. One of the group even managed to get a photo of the male and female in flight together. They will soon be on the nest!



After enjoying our picnic sitting on a wall in the sun, we headed back south-west to a spot near our accommodation where we normally would expect to find both [Great spotted cuckoo](#) and Iberian grey shrike. We caught a quick glimpse of the latter, but despite the presence of a number of Magpies the GSC was nowhere to be seen. Its choice of Magpies as host for its chicks is a much better size match than a warbler! We wandered down to the Cistercian grain store at Fontcalvy where we had a bit of a raptor bonanza with a pair of "shagging" kestrels (not my words... but having been dared to include the

term in the trip report, I would hate to disappoint!). Also a beautiful male Hen harrier did a fly past. Part of the group managed to see about 9 Stone curlew fly a couple of fields over and then settle again.



Our hosts put on another superb dinner: chicory salad with blue cheese and walnuts, followed by duck shepherd's pie and chocolate fondant with crème anglaise (how appropriate!).

We were all thrilled when Mike serenaded us after dinner with a truly impressive rendition of *O Sole Mio*.

### Day 3 – Sunday 27th February – Minerve and (Caunes-Minervois) Capestang



The city of [Minerve](#) sits on a rocky promontory between two gorges, offering more excellent habitat for Wallcreeper – but also known in previous years for Alpine accentor. However, like the Wallcreeper their choice of overwintering spots seems to change and we have not seen these Dunnock relatives here for a couple of years now. The Crag martins kept the photographers busy and we managed to pick up a Rock sparrow on the very tip of the catapult! However, extremely unexpectedly, it was a gorgeous male Sparrowhawk that stole the show at Minerve – perching in a tree above the river and hunting amongst the bushes and shrubs. Everyone was able to get superb views of this male and clearly see the rufus on its cheeks and breast bars.



We enjoyed a quick stop at the bookshop-café *Paroli* – a favourite of ours as it is open all year round. Then we headed on west towards Caunes-Minervois. Several further stops along the way Sarah managed to spot an adult male Blue rock thrush sitting in the sun and looking eponymously blue.



We picnicked near some open fields that were all too quiet apart from a pair of Stonechat before heading on to Caunes-Minervois, where there were just too many people for any successful birdwatching! So we headed back to the Capestang marshes near our accommodation to explore the extensive reed beds. A great choice as we managed to add stunning views of Purple swamphen out in

the open and in full sunshine – what a spectacular bird! We also had excellent views of White stork both overhead and feeding in the marshes. Reed buntings galore along the path were also added to our growing list.



White storks and Purple swamphen © K.Martorell

Drinks and the bird-list before another lovely dinner of endive salad with blue cheese and walnuts, followed by lasagne and fruit salad.

#### **Day 4 – Monday 28th February –Ouveillan and Capestang marshes**

The patchwork of open agricultural land near Ouveillan, with filtration ponds, olive groves, vineyards, some fallow land and a good smattering of almond trees (in blossom at this time of year), has traditionally been a reliable spot for both Great Spotted Cuckoo and Iberian grey shrike. But climate and other changes seem to be increasingly challenging our “reliable” spots! Serin and Corn bunting compete at this time of year to dominate the soundscape and sure enough a number of male CBs were singing away at 8h30.



We did manage distant glimpses of two different Iberian grey shrikes – one of which was quite close but behind Mike while he took a photo of the first individual we had seen. It was tempting to produce a pantomime-like shout of “look behind you” but we were just too far away! No sightings of Great spotted cuckoo today, so we headed off for another look at the Capestang marshes. Karline’s keen ears honed in onto Bearded and Penduline tit (we had good views) and Moustached warbler (it remained hidden).



Bearded tit © L. Everard

Wild boar and Greater flamingo were added to the list before we headed off for a delicious lunch in Poilhes at a restaurant called Les Platanes (run by some kiwis just to keep the birding theme going ;-). Then it was into the van for the hour’s drive back to Carcassonne airport and a general feeling of “it’s gone too quickly”! Although two will be back very soon...

What an interesting and diverse group of guests! And what fun to share some great birding and a few jokes together – a very welcome pause in our increasingly crazy world... Thank you all for coming along and we hope to see you on another Birding Languedoc trip soon!

Thanks to Karline too, for her amazing skills in hearing and finding birds for us! And to Ron for doing a number of reccies for the Wallcreeper ☺ And a “grand merci” to our hosts Claudine and Daniel Mortes at the Domaine de l’Ale for providing a high standard of accommodation, meals, attention to our needs and a very warm welcome!

**Note on the geology at Mourèze**

The spectacular dolomitic chimneys of Mouréze are thought to be of Lower Jurassic age (some 205 million years old). The dolomite ( $\text{CaMg}(\text{CO}_3)_2$ ) was formed by the alteration of a pre-existing limestone where magnesium ions (Mg) have replaced up to 50% of the calcium ions (Ca). The smaller Mg ions gives the rock a porosity of up to 13% giving ample purchase for Wallcreepers. The chimneys formed by differential erosion after emplacement when the Pyrenees were formed and the rocks exposed to weathering. Where the rock is fractured by vertical cracks (joints) and/or of varying hardness, the chimneys are the result.      M.Barker



**Bird list:**

English Name	French Name	Scientific Name	F	S	S	M
Mallard	Canard colvert	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		X	X	X
Northern Shoveler	Canard souchet	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			X	
Common Shelduck	Tadorne de Belon	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		X	X	X
Red-legged Partridge	Perdrix rouge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		X		H
Little Grebe	Grèbe castagneux	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		X	X	
Great Crested Grebe	Grèbe huppé	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		X	X	
Great Cormorant	Grand Cormoran	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		X	X	
Great white egret	Grande Aigrette	<i>Ardea alba</i>		X	X	
Grey Heron	Héron cendré	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	X			
White Stork	Cigogne blanche	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		X	X	
Greater Flamingo	Flamant rose	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			X	
Bonelli's Eagle	Aigle de Bonelli	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		X		
Western Marsh Harrier	Busard des roseaux	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		X	X	
Hen Harrier	Busard Saint-Martin	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	X			
Common Buzzard	Buse variable	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	X	X	X	X
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Épervier d'Europe	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	X		X	
Common Kestrel	Faucon crécerelle	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		X	X	X
Eurasian Coot	Foulque macroule	<i>Fulica atra</i>		X	X	
Water Rail	Râle d'eau	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			H	
Purple Swamphen	Talève sultane	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>			X	
Eurasian Stone-curlew	OEdicnème criard	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		X		
Northern Lapwing	Vanneau huppé	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		X	X	
Green Sandpiper	Chevalier cul-blanc	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		X	X	
Yellow-legged Gull	Goéland leucophée	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		X	X	X
Black-headed Gull	Mouette rieuse	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		X	X	X
Common Wood Pigeon	Pigeon ramier	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	X	X		X
Stock Dove	Pigeon colombin	<i>Columba oenas</i>		X	X	
Eurasian Collared Dove	Tourterelle turque	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		X	X	X
Tawny Owl	Chouette hulotte	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H			
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Pic épeichette	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>			H	
European Green Woodpecker	Pic vert	<i>Picus viridis</i>			H	H
Woodlark	Alouette lulu	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			H	H
Crested Lark	Cochevis huppé	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		X		X
Eurasian Crag Martin	Hirondelle de rochers	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		X	X	
Grey Wagtail	Bergeronnette des ruisseaux	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			X	
White Wagtail	Bergeronnette grise	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		X	X	X
Meadow Pipit	Pipit farlouse	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		X		X
Dunnock	Accenteur mouchet	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				X
Mistle Thrush	Grive draine	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				X
Common Blackbird	Merle noir	<i>Turdus merula</i>	X	X	X	X
Blue Rock Thrush	Monticole bleu	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		X	X	
European Robin	Rougegorge familier	<i>Erythacus rubecula</i>	X	X	X	X
Black Redstart	Rougequeue noir	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	X	X	X	X
European Stonechat	Tarier pâtre	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			X	X
Cetti's Warbler	Bouscarle de Cetti	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H	H
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticole des joncs	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		X	X	X
Eurasian Blackcap	Fauvette à tête noire	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		X	X	X
Sardinian Warbler	Fauvette mélanocéphale	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		X	X	X
Moustached Warbler	Lusciniole à moustaches	<i>Acrocephalus melanopogon</i>			H	H

Bird list ctd:

English Name	French Name	Scientific Name	F	S	S	M
Common Chiffchaff	Pouillot véloce	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H	H	X
Common Firecrest	Roitelet à triple bandeau	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		H		
Eurasian Wren	Troglodyte mignon	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H	
Eurasian Blue Tit	Mésange bleue	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		X	X	X
Great Tit	Mésange charbonnière	<i>Parus major</i>	X	X	X	X
Long-tailed Tit	Mésange à longue queue	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		H		
Bearded Tit	Panure à moustaches	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>			H	X
Eurasian Penduline Tit	Rémiz penduline	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>			H	X
Wallcreeper	Tichodrome échelette	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		X		
Iberian Grey Shrike	Pie-grièche méridionale	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		X		X
Western Jackdaw	Choucas des tours	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	X	X	X	X
Carrión Crow	Corneille noire	<i>Corvus corone</i>				X
Northern Raven	Grand Corbeau	<i>Corvus corax</i>				X
Eurasian Magpie	Pie bavarde	<i>Pica pica</i>	X	X	X	X
Common Starling	Étourneau sansonnet	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	X	X	X	X
House Sparrow	Moineau domestique	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		X	X	X
Rock Sparrow	Moineau soulcie	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				X
European Goldfinch	Chardonneret élégant	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	X	X	X	X
Common Linnet	Linotte mélodieuse	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		X		X
Common Chaffinch	Pinson des arbres	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	X	X	X	X
Brambling	Pinson du Nord	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		X		
European Serin	Serin cini	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	X	X	X	X
European Greenfinch	Verdier d'Europe	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				X
Common Reed Bunting	Bruant des roseaux	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			X	X
Corn Bunting	Bruant proyer	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		X		X
Cirl Bunting	Bruant zizi	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		H	X	
Total species per day			14	47	54	49
<b>Total species for the week-end</b>			<b>76 species</b>			

**Other species**

Hare	Lièvre d'Europe	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	X
Squirrel	Ecureuil roux	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	X
Wild boar	Sanglier	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	X