

Holiday with Wildlife Provincale late March 2010- Highlights

I chose this time of year hoping to see last of winter birds and some spring passage – weather was more like winter I am afraid – and be back in time for passage on the Solway.

Day 1 spent pottering about locally looking at Vulture feeding station and seeing many Griffons- some very close- several Black (with their more droopy wings) but not Egyptian as it was a bit early for them. There were several Short Toed Eagles about both local and passage birds hunting on the scrubby hillsides although weather wasn't really warm enough to get their prey – reptiles – up and moving about.

On a distant hillside in a small green field amongst the lavender, box and thyme shrubs were 14 Chamois – mainly females fattening up before calving; one the largest groups Andrew had seen in one place. There were other Chamois – males- dotted about on the hillsides and one could see their “paths” criss-crossing almost any hillside you looked at.

Had picnic with all these birds around plus Black Redstarts and 3 Black Kites and a Marsh Harrier migrating east high above.

Back to the village via a col with Golden Eagles sitting about on the cliffs but not yet apparently sitting on eggs. On outskirts of the village a good look at about 10 Rock Sparrows – rather nondescript but still a bit brighter than the dozen or so Corn Buntings with them. Suddenly everything was up and a ring tail Hen Harrier appeared as if from no where, hunted across the fields and away again almost as suddenly as it had appeared.

Day 2 Carmargue - a small lake amongst farmland where they bred bulls – Little and Great White Egrets , many Garganey, breeding White Stork, Black winged Stilt, Ruff and about 25 Med. Gulls – a great little place .

- bridge over looking huge reed beds- Marsh Harriers everywhere- as there were all day both passage and resident- more Stilts, Green Sandpipers (and possible Wood) and excellent views of Sardinian Warbler. A flock of Med. Gulls flew over making their whinging calls – why does a fine looking bird like that have such a lousy call!

-Bearded Tits in reeds alongside road – we also heard Penduline Tit (wintering birds) but didn't manage to see them well.

- lunch overlooking pools with Marsh Harriers, Black Kite, 20 Ruff (including 2 white headed males) with Cetti's, Bittern and Water rail calling .

On way to the lagoons nearer the sea we had a good look a Short Toed Eagle sitting in a tree close to the road looking very large headed. Tracks alongside the lagoons were very rough and the water levels very high but we did see Greater Flamingoes in good numbers as well as Avocets , a flock of 40 Little Stint , 16 Garganey together, 2 Black Necked Grebe , Kentish, Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers as well as a fly by Hoopoe.

Day 3 Went to a Col at head of a valley bringing migrants up from SW and over into Rhone Valley; we got there at 9.30 (after 2 hour drive from Andrew's) to find an almost continuous passage of birds over our heads and down into the valley to north – we had missed c20k Chaffinches which had gone through by about 8.00am but we sat and watched till late afternoon with flock after flock appearing out of the trees below – mainly Chaffinch but also many White Wagtails ,Serin, Siskin, Hawfinch etc – hard to “call” as they suddenly appeared and were away over your head . We also saw a flock of Mistle Thrush and Wood Pigeons – the latter were very very wary and some turned back when they saw us- Andrew (holiday leader) and I and 4 observatory staff who count all day each day in migration period. The site is a controversial one with hunters wanting to shoot as many pigeons as they can and conservationists obviously wanting to restrict this bearing in mind the decline in numbers of Pigeons going through. There has been conflict in the past with a site to be used for a family day to publicize the passage from the conservation point of view, being sprayed with slurry by the hunters and on another occasion the hunters holding local police hostage neither incidents really furthering their cause! The wildlife police visited the site whilst we were there.

Raptors were also moving and we saw 10 Sparrow Hawks, 48 Black Kite,1 Osprey, 4 Marsh harriers , 1 Red Kite and 15 Common Buzzard going through some of the latter almost at ground level as the wind was against them .

Closest bird was Firecrest and a few worked up through the bushes to the ones we were sitting next to giving great views and away over into the next valley.

There were also “local” Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier and Shore Toed Eagle about on and off.

I recognized at least two of the counters from Orgabedexka two years ago

One of Andrews many skills is to know when to go to each site ,choosing to go to that particular col that day because he knew the wind would be against the migrants keeping them low down and slow moving – with a following wind they would have probably been too high up to see.

Day 4 was spent at another site on the Rhone – wind still in the north but lighter and we were watching from the top of a hill next to the river; the usual line taken by migrants was close to the site with birds below watchers following the river but the day we went birds were striking off NE at some distance but we did see 22 common Buzzard, 251 Pigeons ,21 White Stork , 11 Black kite , 2 Marsh Harrier and 147 Cormorants most of the latter being away to the east across the Valley, all this with Alpine Swifts tearing abut over the town below - on the way home we heard Lesser Sp. Woodpecker and saw an Osprey on its way north as well as migrant Black Headed Gulls . One suggestion was that the birds passing that day had been pushed further west than they wanted by easterly winds and were making there way back north east to compensate.

Day 5 A pair of Southern Grey Shrike seen well with morning sun emphasizing the pink tinge to their breasts on a local SSSI along with Cirl Bunting and then on

to a deserted garden/orchard beneath a low limestone cliff with Red Billed Chough, male Black Redstarts, the first Wryneck of the year , Raven, Stonechat ; a brilliant little place.

We worked our way back to base via several passes with Golden Eagle territories visited and it being clear that birds were now starting to sit; there was one cliff that had held eagles in the past but a Black Vulture had tried to take over a nest and the eagle had been seen to physically drag the vulture out of nest site at one stage.

Black Kites were still on the move east. We saw another S Grey Shrike and Alpine Swifts again.

Day 6 was spent locally - seeing local Golden Eagles and Short Toed Eagles as well as male migrant Marsh Harriers

Another highlight was the train travel – on the way back the train (TGV) left Valence

(well south of Lyon) at 9,40 , I was in London by 2.30 (the hour change helps) and home by 8.30 pm – it could have been much earlier if I had booked a seat on 3.00pm train . All trains were fast and on time. Wildlife Provencale holidays are based on train travel from London but many get there by plane.

Andrew (definitely a birder rather than just a tour guide) has lived in the area for many years and has therefore a lot of local knowledge and is heavily involved in the conservation scene there and is able to give an in depth insight into what is going on and Ruth's food is as good as ever – this is the third holiday I have had with Wildlife Provencale which speaks for itself. Andrew is also into bats if that is your sphere of interest!

Wildlife Provencale has its own web site.

Bob Jones