

Tour Report

France – The Dordogne in Early Spring

8 – 12 March 2017

Grey heron



Wallcreeper



Black woodpecker



Dartford warbler



Tour Leader: David Simpson

Day 1: Tuesday 8 March 2017

After a fairly mild, dry and sunny winter in the Dordogne, the first day of the trip was drizzly though warm. Fortunately for us the weather improved consistently through the week with almost no rain and sunny warm weather by Thursday with a high of 22°C.

Two of the group, had driven down to Dordogne and I met them at the Barrage Hotel in Mauzac around mid-afternoon. As I had to pick up the other members of the group from Bordeaux Airport, I left them to relax and settle in and perhaps make a short walk to the dam for a little birding if the rain eased off. I was soon heading off to Bordeaux; the one birding highlight of the drive was around 100 cattle egrets in a small field near Montcaret – half way to Bordeaux. At the airport, it wasn't too long before the remaining members of the group had negotiated customs and collected their baggage. We walked the short distance to the minibus and then drove back east along the valley in the dark, chatting about the week ahead. Around Libourne I saw a rabbit by the roadside, a fairly scarce mammal locally. At Mauzac Amanda was again there to greet us and to sort out a brief hotel check-in. I helped some members of the group with their bags before saying goodnight and hoping for better weather tomorrow!

Day 2: Wednesday 9 March 2017

The day started with low cloud and occasional light drizzle. The group had been out birding early and had a nice haul including cattle egret, Cetti's warbler, long-tailed tit, grey and white wagtails, blackcap, firecrest and common sandpiper – most of these fairly regular here - and one of the group found a red kite. As we needed fine weather for the farmland and woodland birds on the following days, we stuck to the programme with a visit today to the cliffs along the Dordogne and Vézère valleys – hoping to see improving weather. On route near Lalinde we saw the regular semi-feral flock of grey-lag geese to add to our tally and en route one or two kestrels. Jays regularly flew across the road as they did each day. Our first stop was Beynac Castle, an imposing medieval fortress standing high above the River Dordogne on craggy cliffs and dating back to the 12th century. We parked up in the car park and went straight to the ticket office at the entrance. The lady there has become a friend and I recently presented her with a book of mountain birds – including wallcreeper, Alpine accentor, raven and crag martin. She told us that she hadn't seen a wallcreeper recently (she sees them from her office on the wall opposite) but wished us well. The weather was dry if cloudy so we were fairly optimistic. Unfortunately this winter they seem to be undertaking major restoration works to the walls and roof of the castle and this brings with it a lot of workers and disturbance. Occasional black redstarts kept popping up on the turrets, one of the last looking suspiciously like an Alpine accentor before it showed itself clearly. Up to three crag martins cruised around the castle, occasionally resting on ledges. A serin appeared on a pile of cut branches singing and later we saw up to three. Out on the fields south of the river a great white egret was hunting, whilst downstream grey herons were active on their herony as we watched them from high above in the top towers - giving a spectacular panorama all around.

Wallcreeper was proving elusive despite our careful searches. Eventually on a return visit to the main viewpoint near the entrance I disturbed one around the corner of a wall and it flew a little further away. I called to the group but unfortunately it flew off before they arrived. Thereafter we made three quick return visits into and outside the castle to try to re-find the bird. One member of the group thought he saw it briefly but could not confirm it. We decided to move on but before getting back into the van we had great views of two firecrest in a leafless tree by the car park.

Next we drove along the valley to a quarry where eagle owls nest. We parked up and got our scopes out to check the cliffs. Happily the incubating/brooding bird was on the nest site and we had good views albeit from long distance. It was pleasing to see the bird present as last year heavy rain washed the pair out and eggs were chilled. In the trees nearby short-toed treecreeper and marsh tit sang and stonechat was seen in

the fields. By now it was lunchtime so we made our way to the Vézère valley, Les Eyzies and the Chateaubriant restaurant for lunch.

After our first very pleasant French lunch together we scanned the main street cliffs for wallcreeper but to no avail. From here it was a short run in the minibus to the church at Tayac and on cue we found our wallcreeper. It gave great views both on the old stonewalls and mossy roof both for photography and even video! At 60x through the scope it was breath-taking. Fantastic to watch it searching out every nook and cranny for lurking (and unsuspecting) invertebrates. A touch of black on the chin suggested it was coming into summer plumage. A nuthatch briefly appeared high on the wall at the opposite end of the church pretending to be a wallcreeper and even trying to upstage it by walking upside down! When we could take our eyes off the wallcreeper there was also several crag martins about and our first few swallows. Finally a raven flew across the valley towards Grand Roc (our next point of call).

At Grand Roc we drew up in the car park and soon heard the peregrines calling high above us. It was the big female and she gave great views through the scope. After a while the smaller male flew past also calling and landed by the female when they mated briefly. A walk under the cliffs produced a few crag martins and some blackcap and firecrest song, a dunnock feeding under a hedge and chiffchaffs by the river. We decided to return to Tayac Church where we had further views of the wallcreeper plus three black kites drifting overhead and a fine flock of around 50 cormorants flying high up the valley.

We took a slow return route down the valley and called in at some cliffs towards Le Bugue where stonechat was the only notable bird. At Limeuil, the confluence of the Vézère and Dordogne rivers, I attempted to drive across to the arable fields but flooding by the river forced us to turn back. However this was not before we had found a large (probable) red-eared slider terrapin hauled out on a log in a roadside pond as we drove towards the flooding. We tried to spot it as we retraced our route but it had slid off. So we drove on to Trémolat and the wonderful viewpoint high above the River Dordogne. Across the river in the fields far below were a small mixed group of cattle and great white egrets. As a moorhen called from the river, we found a flock of 20 black-headed gulls (a scarce bird here) flying downstream to roost. Also coming in to roost below us was a small flock of eight stoock doves – also scarce here. Just as we got into the minibus I heard what I thought was a cirl bunting – though rather high pitched (and so yellowhammer-like but without the ‘cheese’). So everyone got back out of the minibus but we couldn’t find the bird – frustrating. As we left the site I saw what I thought was the bird in a leafless tree – and it was! We disembarked again and had great views through the scope of a lovely singing male. A nice way to end the day.

Day 3: Thursday 10 March 2017

With improving weather we hoped for a good forest day looking for woodpeckers and other woodland birds. A couple of group members had already seen quite a few species by the dam including serin and a few more black-headed gulls. We went on route to my house to provide one of the team members a bottle of water as I had a few spare. On route we saw a male roe deer with horns and a possible orange-tip female fluttered by. At Saint Meyme I noticed a hawfinch fly up into a tree in front of the van, so I parked up so that we could get out and search for it. Unfortunately it was rather lost in all the branches and so we never saw it again. A little further on we drove to my house in the forest where I stopped in the car park and went off to get the water leaving the group by the vehicle. We immediately heard hawfinches and soon found five birds in the tree tops nearby - looking good through the scope. Further away a mistle thrush sang for us. A good and unexpected start to the day!

We drove north and on route we noticed a common pheasant (a ‘ring-neck’) in a nearby field. Within half an hour or so we were at the wood where we were to spend the morning. As we emerged from the minibus there was plenty of bird activity, notably song. In the last year the track has been re-surfaced making the walk very easy. The commoner tits, short-toed treecreeper, nuthatch and green woodpecker could be heard nearby. Middle spotted woodpecker sang its strange raptor-like song and called clucking

away – but we couldn't see them well – just movement in the trees. After struggling to see starlings they suddenly seemed to return to Dordogne as there were several about.

We walked up the main track and then down a side track where we studied a 'palombière' from which wood pigeon hunting is undertaken in the autumn. A central hide was sited high up in the canopy for the shooters and a system of wires and pulleys ran out to other trees where decoy birds would be hoisted up in to the canopy to attract down migrant pigeons. The decoy birds (mostly feral pigeons) were in an aviary below and sounded like they were expecting their breakfast! We walked to a viewpoint but nothing much was showing bird-wise.

Returning to the main track we first heard and then saw a firecrest in the pines and soon after a crested tit which we all saw well through binoculars. We returned to the centre of the wood where our luck changed as regards woodpeckers. Finally the middle spotted woodpeckers emerged. Four birds flew out into the open and settled briefly on trees giving good views before flying off. Soon afterwards a group member picked up a lesser spotted woodpecker, followed by its mate as it flew across the clearing – landing in the trees briefly giving reasonable views before disappearing once more. For his hat-trick the same group member then found us a great spotted woodpecker flying over – previously we had just heard calls and drumming.

After all this excitement we moved back to the road and walked through the woodland to the fields - the amount of dead and dying wood on each side of the road showing just why this is such a great place for woodpeckers. The fields were fairly quiet but five distant birds I had previously thought were starlings turned out to be redwings under the eagle eye of our telescope. We retraced our steps to the minibus and then entered the wood once where after a while a male black woodpecker appeared flying nearby before landing in a tree where it was studied in detail by five enthusiastic birdwatchers! At the same time one of the group noticed a pair of marsh tits nearby. Soon the woodpecker flew off again but later we heard its terrific drumming – sounding more like a pneumatic drill – and repeated every couple of minutes. Quite a way to finish our stop at 'woodpecker wood'.

By now it was time to return to the Barrage Hotel for lunch - which was most enjoyable. As we had had such a successful morning in the woods I suggested we tried not only Bessède Forest after lunch but also the arable fields across the river at Calès. We drove out southwards noting a grey wagtail by the canal and crossed the river at Lalinde from where we drove up onto the sandstone plateau near Cadouin with its ancient abbey. In a heathland area we searched for Dartford warbler and were rewarded with a beautiful male which posed nicely for us on some heather in perfect light. One of the group picked up a large raptor – a goshawk - rising on thermals north of us, a great record for this area and another very localised species in Dordogne. Nearby a cirl bunting sang from the forest edge. All the while little flocks of migrating chaffinches regularly past over us heading north. We returned along the road to Cadouin and stopped at a couple of likely-looking spots, the first was quiet but the second had a pair of stonechats showing well. Along the roads to the forest we saw a good number of bright yellow male brimstones flying along the roadside banks. A brownish butterfly seen by a group member could have been a large tortoiseshell but as on the previous day we couldn't be certain.

With some time left we headed for the riverside but on the opposite side to Mauzac near Calès. Here an old mixed farm and cereal fields are attractive to a mixture of birds. First we found another stonechat near the track we were walking down and then several black kites flew over. A group member saw a distant peregrine flying by the cliffs – this species nests just upstream towards Trémolat. Two skylarks flew together and one of them rose up on a song flight. We past two or three peacock butterflies as we walked along the track. Soon afterwards we became aware of a couple of crested larks which showed well through the scopes and finally another two joined them flying nearby calling all the while. A group of eight linnets feeding in the top of a group of high Lombardy poplars proved difficult to observe but were our first of the trip. As we got back to the minibus a distant corn bunting sang briefly – another new bird for the week. Driving back along the valley we noted a dead hedgehog in the road – always a sad sight and not a

particularly common species here. Back at Mauzac a couple of the group reported there were now up to four crag martins around the railway bridge - where they nest.

Day 4: Friday 11 March 2017

The final day was spent south of the river around the arable plateau at Faux. Our first stop was planned at a little parking area north of Naussannes but the local council were undertaking road works so we had to move further on. We noticed small birds in the fields east of the road and stopped to check them out. There was a mixture of larks and buntings feeding in a ploughed field with birds constantly disappearing behind clods of earth! There were several skylarks together with a corn bunting and several black redstarts, plus curlew buntings with a particularly nice male of the latter species showing well in the scopes. The first buzzards appeared and a great spotted woodpecker drummed nearby. One or two brown hares were active in the fields and in fact we saw them at most sites on the plateau during the day. We drove on to our next stop south of the village. As we got out of the van I was scanning the fields and found a pair of stone curlews nearby showing well – they seemed to be paired up and not bothered by us. With the sun out in a cloudless morning the temperatures were rising and raptors started to get more active. More and more buzzards rose up above local woods, a member of the group found us a sparrowhawk and to cap it all another drew our attention to a distant large raptor coming our way – an osprey – providing us with great views as it made its way north. After hearing woodlarks singing we finally found our bird 'hiding' in a tree and eventually had good views. This was the first of several during the day.

We returned to the minibus and set off for Faux. We stopped near a large scrubby patch amongst the open fields. It was pretty quiet bird-wise but a local dog made up for that with almost constant barking! A small group of meadow pipits were feeding in a field amongst which one of the group found us our first and only reed bunting of the week. More skylarks were noted including a flock of 20 or 30 birds. We continued in the minibus a kilometre or so along the road when we noticed a few lapwings go up in the field to the left of the road. We found a place to stop and got the scopes out to see if there was anything else about. With careful checking one of the group picked out a golden plover amongst the lapwings. A brief check confirmed it wasn't a Dotterel though the bird had a strong pale supercilium.

A little further on we checked some small fields but little was showing so we continued on to the big silo at La Micalie. We walked along a nearby track noting a Small White and later a kestrel on a pylon found by one of the group. In the scrubby hillside to our left a sparrowhawk briefly broke cover and then as quickly disappeared. There were a few stonechats and black redstarts about but it seemed generally quiet. A small bird with the stonechats had a very cocked tail and could have been a fan-tailed warbler but as soon as we were on to it – it flew off! One of the group thought he'd seen a shrike on the bushes further along the track but it had flown off. Luckily another group member had picked it up in the distance low down on an electricity pylon. It looked very like a 'great grey' type. It kept doing disappearing tricks – re-appearing on the pylon and soon after a tree across the track and finally on the ridge to our left on a little hedge. This time fortunately it was facing us and we could see the pink/grey breast and belly contrasting with the white lower face, chin and throat. The crown, mantle and rump were darker grey than a great grey shrike. What a great find! Around the same time we saw another three lapwings and a second pair of stone curlews.

By now it was lunchtime so we returned to the minibus and drove to Issigeac. Just outside the village I noticed a familiar silhouette in a tree across a field so I thought we'd better check it. And yes it was a black-winged kite, posing nicely for us to admire it and looking particularly good through the scopes. Finally we reached Issigeac for a nice lunch after an exciting morning in the field. A couple of the group members walked over to the minibus a bit before the rest of us and found a red squirrel sunbathing in a tree! Although it moved around a bit when the rest of us arrived it gave great views and photo opportunities.

After lunch we made a short drive to the local reservoir. A green frog briefly called whilst a common wall lizard showed on the dam and as usual there were coot, moorhen and several great crested grebes but relatively little else - so we made a tour of the plateau in the minibus. Nothing notable to report apart from

a stripeless tree-frog calling near Bardou - but we continued to see small flocks of chaffinches heading north as we had the day before. With the plateau quietening down bird-wise I thought we should try some other sites on the way back to the hotel. First stop was the lake next to Lanquais Chateau. We saw more coot, moorhen and mallard – and then a very exotic-looking male red-crested pochard. Probably a wild bird and so another great find for the day. In the island a coypu lay asleep by a hole enjoying the sunshine. As we drove back towards Lalinde a long-tailed tit flew across the road and we finally saw a green woodpecker, a very common bird in Dordogne which we had only heard during the week. Quite a few brimstone were on the wing again and we also saw peacock and a possible small tortoiseshell.

Next we moved on to Couze where the little stream, famed for its paper mills, has nesting dipper. Unfortunately the stream was in spate after recent rain although there was a singing grey wagtail. We made a short tour by a water mill where they still make artist-grade paper and take guided tours. The old buildings and low cliffs made for a very charming spot by the water.

Finally we called in at Lalinde for a short walk around the attractive ‘bastide’ (a village founded during the Hundred Years War: 13th-14th century) – ostensibly to look for tree sparrow. Black redstarts flitted about the rooftops with the occasional singing male. However this time the only sparrows we saw were house sparrow, but we saw a number of swallows recently arrived, plus four crag martins around the church and we finished with three red kites which flew high above the village migrating northwards.

We had our last meal together as a group at the hotel in the evening to celebrate the weeks birding highlights and to say our goodbyes as some of the group including myself had to leave very early the following morning for Bordeaux airport. The rest of the group were heading out on to the coast the following morning for some birdwatching at Le Teich nature reserve on the Sunday, before driving back home through France. Despite bad weather at Le Teich they later reported several new species for the week including two male garganey.

Day 5: Saturday 12 March 2017

Those who had flights back to UK and myself left the hotel in the dark at 5am and as we approached Bordeaux in the dawn light we noticed a large dead animal on the side of the motorway – a wild boar. With little traffic we were soon at the airport and having a last coffee together before saying ‘bon voyage’. As I drove home I added three more species to my week’s list: white stork and pochard in Libourne, and rook at Bergerac – the latter a species which has only colonised Dordogne in the last five years.

Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name
	BIRD SPECIES RECORDED	
1	Greylag goose (feral)	<i>Anser anser</i>
2	Mute swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
4	Red-crested pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>
5	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
6	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
7	Western cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
8	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
9	Great egret	<i>Casmerodius alba</i>
10	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
11	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
12	Western osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
13	Black-winged kite	<i>Elanoides forficatus</i>
14	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
15	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
16	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
17	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
18	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
19	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
20	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
21	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
22	Eurasian stone curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>



23	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
24	European golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apicaria</i>
25	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
26	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
27	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
28	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>
29	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
30	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
31	Eurasian eagle owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>
32	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
33	Lesser spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>
34	Middle spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
35	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
36	Black woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
37	European green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>
38	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
39	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
40	Southern grey shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
41	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
42	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
43	Western jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
44	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
45	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
46	European crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
47	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>
48	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>
49	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>

50	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
51	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
52	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
53	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
54	Eurasian crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
55	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
56	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
57	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
58	Eurasian blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
59	Dartford warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>
60	Common firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
61	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
62	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
63	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>
64	Short-toed treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
65	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
66	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
67	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
68	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
69	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
70	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
71	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
72	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
73	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
74	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
75	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
76	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>

77	Water pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
78	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
79	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
80	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
81	European greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
82	Common linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
83	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
84	European serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
85	Corn bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>
86	Cirl bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
87	Common reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>