

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX

Telephone: 01603 300552

www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: chris@honeyguide.co.uk



Flowers and Birds in the Lot
13-20 May 2000

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Participants

John Snape

Ann Ambrose

Guy Daniel
Liz Daniel

Leslie Baker
Hazel Wells

David Nind
Shevaun Mendelsohn

Margaret Cox
Edward Cox
Helen Cox

Julie Gayner

Leader

Chris Durdin

Our host at Maison Meulet, Galoubet: Lynn Todd

This was the tenth year and 17th Honeyguide group to visit this quiet corner of rural France and, as ever, everyone leaves wanting more and captivated by the area. Indeed for Liz and Guy it was a return visit and they aren't the first, nor will they be last, to make a return visit.

Good food & wine is a big factor, and they contribute to the happy group atmosphere which Lynn presides over in his inimitable style. The visual display includes orchids, which steal the show for many: military, lady, monkey, woodcock, lizard and pyramidal orchids in the small field outside the back door, and a dozen others a short walk away. The assault on the senses is completed by the sounds of woodlark and golden oriole by day, and nightingale, scops owl and nightjar by night. In truth these things are not easily divisible: it's the whole package that makes it work.

This holiday, as for every *Honeyguide* holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. The conservation contribution this year of £25 per person in the Lot was this year supplemented by a group in the Camargue, leading to a total of £625 sent to La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO, the French Bird Protection League). This brings the total given to LPO to £4,700 since 1991, and to various conservation projects in Europe to £20,180. A thank-you letter from LPO is at the end of the report (not this web version). Also missing from the web report is the full plant list, which was printed on a separate Excel file.

The holiday report starts with the daily log, then continue with various lists, including our regular eccentricity of listing the cheeses. I hope this makes a good souvenir and *aide memoire* for those on the holidays and gives a good taste of the area for anyone thinking of going to Galoubet in the future.

Chris Durdin

Illustrations by Rob Hume. Front cover: Maison Meulet, Galoubet.

Saturday 13 May – Gatwick to Galoubet

After a straightforward flight, all bags were collected and we met Jean-Claude and walked around the corner to the coach from *Guy Transports*. We were soon on the motorway heading north and noting our first black kites and the only yellow-legged gulls of the holiday. The motorway seems to nudge a few miles further north every year and we were soon admiring a stunning view of Cahors to the right of the bus and then into the limestone country heading into the Causse de Gramat. The northern part of the journey is the prettiest, despite the road works as the RN20 is progressively widened. A right turn at the *moulin* (windmill) took us to the last leg to Galoubet; the whole journey in a little under two hours. We were greeted by Lynn Todd, our host at Maison Meulet, Malcolm the chef and housekeepers Leisah and Fiona. In no time at all we were all in our rooms and assembled for the first of many wonderful suppers. Tonight's kicked off with hot *vichychoise* – we started with lovely soups every day – followed by *coq au vin*, then the cheese course (see list at end) and dessert – *tarte aux pommes* with crème fraîche. As ever there were two wonderful wines – white and red – with every meal, and different just about every night.

We've all heard of the dawn chorus but this evening we stepped out by the swimming pool to hear dusk chorus of scops owls, the screeching of a barn owl and nightjars in the distance. Just beside the pool a glow-worm shone.

Sunday 14 May – local walks

Breakfast at Maison Meulet is at 9am so there is time for a pre-breakfast walk to concentrate on birds when they tend to be at their best. This week's routine was to start off at 7.30, and this morning a well-attended walk went up the road towards and beyond the house of Maurice, who is both the local farmer and mayor of the commune of Beaumat. In the woods the flutey sounds of golden orioles surrounded us with the birds, typically, out of view. They remained out of view all week. A short-toed treecreeper and great spotted woodpecker were found in the wood. We do our best to ignore flowers and butterflies on the pre-breakfast bird walk but it's never easy on the first morning and we were pleased to find both wall brown and large wall brown already warming themselves. On posts around here there is an eclectic collection of tins and plastic pots on fence posts, put there to stop the posts from rotting. They also make fine homes for paper wasps, but to my great surprise a tin I lifted here had a small bat roosting under it. It was carefully put back. I hopped over the electric fence (it was off) to mark with white stones a violet helleborine pushing up through the woodland floor.

It was a hot day, reaching 30°C. After breakfast we started by exploring Maison Meulet's meadows. Roughly five paces into the meadow, almost literally outside the back door, there were several woodcock orchids to the right of the path, then a monkey orchid to the left. Through the gap in the hedge of Montpellier and field maples you are into the next meadow where, as well as the washing line, were the best early spider orchids of the week. In this meadow, and the third meadow just around the corner, there were dozens of military orchids, carefully fenced so the sheep in the lower part of the big meadow left them alone. If that wasn't enough, through the big hedge into the juniper scrub of the final Maison Meulet field there is a corner just stuffed with enormous spikes of lady orchids. In the old well just beyond the swimming pool we noted three fern species, common polypody, rustyback and the black-stemmed maidenhair spleenwort.

As it was so warm loads of butterflies were on the wing including the stunning southern white admiral, swallowtails and the brightest and most distinctive of the fritillaries, spotted fritillary. There were many paleish clouded yellows fluttering around which almost certainly would all have been Berger's clouded yellows which prefer limestone meadows, whereas the true pale clouded yellow is more often seen flying strongly over fields of lucerne. Down the road there was the rich warble of a blackcap in song in the walnut tree on the corner. We turned right and this was replaced by the scratchy, unmelodious song of a melodious warbler calling us to a halt. It was a particularly bright yellow individual sitting still at the top of a tree so everyone had great views in the telescope. One of many roadside plants was chalk milkwort, in which the leaves are broader about the middle, compared with common milkwort (seen elsewhere later in the week), broader below the middle. Pretty black and red shield bugs on cow parsley are so regular here I could even remember their name – *Graphosoma italicum*. Then back for a wonderful buffet lunch outside Maison Meulet.

Officially we had a group of 13 on this holiday but there was an unofficial 14th on most of the local walks, Gibus the dog. He belongs to the house down the road and not to Maison Meulet but he adopts every group

and everyone falls for his big dark eyes and soppy personality. On a cool morning the warm body of Gibus leaning against you for comfort is most welcome.

This afternoon we walked past Gibus's house and down the track alongside a flower filled meadow. As the track bore right we went straight on into the welcome shade of a track that runs along the woodland edge. I had swapped the telescope for a butterfly net and soon caught glanville fritillary, small blue, adonis blue and small heath. All the hedgerows have dogwood, with white flowers in May, but an examination of the *Cornus* shrubs in the wood revealed the hanging berries of Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*). Also found were pairs of white flowers on fly honeysuckle. A quick scan with binoculars along the damper meadows to our right led us off the beaten track to look at loose-flowered orchids, a single early marsh orchid and one late-flowering cuckoo flower.

Back on the main track we were logging various new orchids: limodor, fly orchid, scores of narrow-leaved helleborines and others. Towards the end of this track a brief diversion to the left was made for wild candytuft and then to the right for green-winged orchids. The end point for this walk is a damp meadow with more loose-flowered orchids, sweet-scented poet's narcissi and many fleshy leaves of the autumn-flowering meadow saffron. We paused for breath in the shade and were entertained by a beautiful green hairstreak butterfly before retracing our steps back to Maison Meulet.



Following supper we walked to the steep limestone scarp by the D22. Standing by the road we had wonderful views of two, perhaps three, nightjars on the wing, close to the junction which John nicknamed 'churring cross'.

Monday 15 May – St Cirq Lapopie and Pech Merle

Another well-attended pre-breakfast walk that went past Gibus's house found a family of long-tailed tits; parents with long tails and recently fledged youngsters with short tails. We saw a firecrest, though not very well and down the bottom saw another melodious warbler very well, this one much less yellow than yesterday's. Walking across the gravel as we ate breakfast outside was an enormous caterpillar of goat moth.

Heading south, Jean-Claude kindly stopped in the wood after I spotted some lesser butterfly orchids, and we piled out to look at them. We added long-stalked cranesbill to the growing list of geraniums and were able to compare it with cut-leaved cranesbill including some with white instead of the usual pink flowers. Also found were rockrose, the spotty leaves of long-leaved lungwort and blue bugle – the last with stems hairy all round rather than the two lines of hairs on bugle.

It was another roasting day as we walked down the hill from the car park into St Cirq. Some went shopping but most made their way to the top of the old castle from where we watched alpine swifts. Flowers here included French figwort and vipers bugloss. We then dispersed around the village for cool drinks and to enjoy the tastefully renovated clifftop village before the rendez-vous with the bus at 1.00 pm below the village. With the large minibus rather than the usual coach Jean-Claude recommended a special scenic drive taking us over a bridge far too narrow for a coach and on to Pech Merle. We all found places in the shade to picnic as swallowtail butterflies alighted around us. Liz, Guy, Ann and Julie pottered, botanised, sketched and drank tea in the shade while the rest of us did the tour, lasting just over an hour of the caves. Many caves have fine stalactites and stalagmites; here also are prehistoric cave paintings of auroch, bison and mammoth, a child's footprint preserved in petrified mud, evidence of bears from long ago and an astonishing subterranean column of tree roots. The explanation is in French, today by a little Frenchman described memorably by one of the group last year as a troglodyte. With a little careful listening and reference to the English translation, it's not too difficult to get a good feel for it all.

We still had a little time for some botanising on the rich limestone banks by the road here. Poisonous swallow-wort, sticky Nottingham catchfly, common milkwort and crested cow-wheat – incredibly rare in the UK – were found before a new driver, Roger, arrived to take us back to base.

Tuesday 16 May – Gourdon, and walk from Vaillac

Pre-breakfast we failed to locate golden oriole or a good view of a cirl bunting but we did see two melodious warblers and an excellent view of a tree pipit.

We visit Gourdon because it is a pretty town but today's market day was marked by a *manifestation* – demonstration – by farmers burning tyres to campaign to keep the local abattoir open and get a new bigger, better one built. Some saw the mayor as she spoke with microphones from the steps of the *mairie*. Most of us escaped the smoke of the burning tyres by heading to the top of the town around the church where there is a splendid viewpoint over the surrounding countryside, today alive with butterflies. There was the odd tractor still around but otherwise calm restored as we gathered for coffee at the Hotel Divan. As in other years, we found our favourite waiter with a long curly moustache to make even Hercules Poirot envious. Jean-Claude met us too and took us to where he parked the minibus. We were dropped at the pretty village of Vaillac where we had to walk at least three yards to a picnic table conveniently in the shade for our lunch. We admired a large old tree stump, cleverly converted into both flower pot and waste paper bin. Bang on cue Lynn appeared to take Liz, Guy and Ann together with empty picnic boxes and shopping back to Maison Meulet.

The long walk back started with serins and black redstarts in the village, a honey buzzard and dame's violet by the river through the village. Just outside the village we turned left at the yellow mark by the cross and headed up the hill into the wood. From here looking back there was a fine view over Vaillac's small chateau. The next stretch is on the flat, mostly in shade but the men diverted into a sunny field and came back having seen woodlark and tree pipit. Soon after we all saw a tree pipit with its wonderful parachuting display flight. A flick of the wrist and a pearly heath was in the butterfly net and then transferred into a pot, admired and released. A right turn and then down, steeply down, past red helleborines to the ford at the bottom of the hill. The weather had been so dry and warm that finding the water close to knee height was a surprise but everyone gamely waded through here or the adjacent wet, boggy meadow where we found round-headed rampion.

The steep downward descent to the ford had to be followed, as night follows day, with a steep uphill climb to the village of Beaumat. With timing equal to that of a good comic, Lynn turned up to offer a lift to anyone who had walked far enough, which was no-one. The next stage of this walk, which is only four miles from Vaillac to Galoubet but always feels longer, took us across farmland where we saw our first corn bunting. Then a wiggle through the hamlet of Merle and then the last leg on the D22. Somewhat above head height on the right hand side were our first man orchids. Then, on rather drier slopes, and the dry edge to the road, were four species from the Mediterranean zone: cone knapweed, another prostrate knapweed called *Carduncellus monspelliensium*, the elegant pea-flowered argyrobium and curry plant. The edge was going out of the heat and there were a few spots of rain that came to nothing so, as on the last two nights, several swam in the outdoor swimming pool at Maison Meulet.

Tonight was the best night yet for nightlife. Guy had noted the barn owl leaving from the top of the pigeonier and we all gathered to see it exit at 9.50 pm. Scops owls can be drawn in by a well-pitched whistle and they were seen flying between the roof tops and nearby trees. Nightjars churred in the distance, a glow worm glowed under a shrub and, no surprises here, the nightingale sang.

Wednesday 17 May – local walks

It rained heavily overnight and that was the end of the hot weather and with today notably cooler with showers. This morning's walk took us where the bird watchers went on the first morning south past Maurice's house. There was much discussion of trees on the way out and looking at the leaves of the local oaks we could see the hairy stems of downy oak as well as sessile oak. The soft apple smell of some rose leaves meant there was downy rose as well as dog rose. The bat wasn't in its tin in the wood but the violet helleborine was where the birdwatchers had marked it on Sunday. The end of this track is marked by the new motorway under construction and it's amazing how quickly the disturbed ground had been colonised by interesting plants. As well as crucifers, by tradition largely ignored, there were lots of corn buttercups, now an exceptionally rare arable weed in the UK. One bellflower was found, but never finally identified; Pyrenean bellflower *Campanula speciosa* was the likeliest. A skylark was heard and seen and a woodlark also sang and eventually flew from an oak tree and showed us all its short tail and bat like flight. A few yards further on we turned left through the Combe de Cayrès. There were more woodlarks and tree pipits singing on the home leg and masses of orchids both left and right of the path.

In view of the earlier rain everywhere with long grass was out of the question so the afternoon walk was along the D22 towards Frayssinet. As the day dried and warmed it was amazing how many butterflies and, especially, ascalaphids could be seen drying on bits of grass. We several times heard the distinctive trill of Bonelli's warbler but it was elusive. We found bee orchids and our first lizard orchid in flower. Both honey buzzards and buzzards were seen and a fine male cirr bunting on fallen dead branches. Spiked star-of-Bethlehem and pitch trefoil were found.

The staff at Maison Meulet have an evening off from domestic duties on a Wednesday so Guy of Guy Transports arrived in his minibus to take us to Labastide-Murat. I've known Guy for ten years now and in that time have taught him to count in English to ten though he still struggles with 'nine'. Seeing birds from a moving minibus is usually quite tricky but the hoopoe that flew alongside the bus between La Croix Blanche and Bel-Air was seen and cheered by all. We took a brief spin around this pretty market town, the birthplace of Joachim Murat, Napoleon's brother-in-law, before an excellent meal in the Hotel Climat. Do we dare mention Shevaun's ecstasy on eating the spirit-soaked prunes?

Thursday 18 May – Rocamadour and the Causse de Gramat

Pre-breakfast we at last managed to see Bonelli's warbler and walked back to show Hazel yesterday's man orchids. Rather bizarrely there was a nightjar churring in broad daylight.

Rocamadour is renowned as France's second most visited tourist spectacle after Mont St Michel. Despite the tourism it remains an astonishing sight, part perched on, part hewn from the cliffs above the river Alzou. With the minibus we were able to take a route opposite Rocamadour that a coach cannot get through and Jean-Claude stopped for photographs. There was blue lettuce by the side of the road. We were dropped at the bottom of Rocamadour and walked into the main shopping street and dispersed and several stopped for coffee. The shopping street is not without its natural history interest as there were several alpine swifts and crag martins around the rocks above. However the two griffon vultures would have been from the bird of prey collection on the cliff top. Emerging from the Chapel of the Black Virgin there was a track with muddy pools where a dozen or so house martins and one crag martin were collecting mud in between being disturbed by passers-by. Guy and Liz caught the *ascenseur* while the rest of us walked past the 14 stations of the cross (proper pilgrims – not us – are supposed to do it on their knees) to the top. Leslie correctly pointed out that the pea-flowered shrub is scorpion vetch after I'd foolishly called it bladder senna.

Jean-Claude then took us to the limestone plateau or *causse* (misheard by a puzzled Shevaun as coast). We picnicked near to a patch of St Bernard's lily. It was cool enough for Edward to catch by hand both five-spot and six-spot burnet moths and later in the same place was a black-veined white, a butterfly now extinct in the UK. On the plateau itself were false vetch, Pyrenean flax, lizard orchids in flower, grass-leaved buttercup and Pyrenean spurge. We spent five minutes dissecting a broomrape and still failed to identify it. I picked a small piece of bastard toadflax to present later to Guy in exchange for the piece of bastard cabbage he had given me earlier in the week – not to mention the bloody cranesbill and bastard balm. This being Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays several followed the signs for *miel* (honey) for sale. If the little boy at the farm had been for sale I think Helen would have taken him home as well. And on the road to the bus there were pink convolvulus, Pyrenean toadflax and Pyrenean angelica – completing the set of the four Pyrenean flowers. The new English-speaking driver took us back via the Huit-à-Huit supermarket in Labastide-Murat.

Several looked at the adder's-tongue fern at Maison Meulet and the barn and scops owls were seen again at nightfall.

Friday 19 May – Local walk

There was a family party of about eight firecrests in the trees outside Maison Meulet before today's local walk started. It was cool and showery as we headed through the wood on the limestone scarp at Pisserate. We were mainly recapping on wild flowers as it was a bit cool for butterflies; woodlark and corn bunting were notable birds. The rain disappeared for lunch and it was quite warm as we settled on the wall by the pond at La Croix Blanche. Under our feet were two additions to the plant list: knotted bur parsley and probably Europe's dullest plant, the moss-like procumbent pearlwort. The next pond produced broad-bodied chasers, both male (powder blue) and female (yellowish).

The route eventually took us to the top of the 'runner's track' which wasn't quite as wet in the first stretch as I had feared. Two new speedwells, brooklime and water speedwell, were found but these were overshadowed (metaphorically not literally) by the wild gladioli in the centre of the track about a third of the

way down. A real surprise was a violet helleborine already in flower farther along; the flower book gives its flowering time as August and September. Lynn, still in his shorts, was mowing the grass as we returned. There was time enough for some quiet pottering and a final checklist, including nominations for wildlife of the week noted below.

Our last supper featured the final soup of the week – or rather three soups cleverly unmixed in the one bowl. Nigel Spring, leading next week's wildlife group, joined us for coffee and limericks. Then the benches were lined up outside for the barn owls, both of which left the pigeonier at 9.45 pm. We had a final nightjar walk and again the scops owls were calling and a nightingale sang.

Saturday 20 May – Galoubet, Toulouse and home

A rather ill-looking bloody-nose beetle was outside the upstairs pigeonier this morning, a final addition to the collection of bad language wildlife and the checklist. An 8.30 departure took as smoothly to Toulouse and the flight home.

* * * * *

I asked for nominations for the wildlife experience of the week at the last wildlife log, which made an interesting collection of favourites. Here they are.

John: short-toed eagle
Ann: narrow-leaved helleborine
Hazel: orchids
Leslie: lady and military orchids
Liz: green hairstreak
Shevaun: bat in a tin
Edward: fields full of flowers and butterflies
David: same as Edward and nightingale keeping him awake at night
Guy: waking up with nightingale (a better sleeper, presumably!)
Margaret: nightjar
Helen: yellow crab spider
Julie: orchids
Chris: variety of lady orchid colours

CHEESE AND WINE

Our usual bit of fun for the report is to list the cheeses in addition to the birds, butterflies and so on. They were served, traditional French style, between the main course and pudding, and every evening there were at least three – one hard (H), one soft (S) and one blue (B).

SATURDAY

Forme d'Ambert
Comté (H)
Munster-Géromé, Alsace-Lorraine (S)

SUNDAY

Reblechon (S)
Bleu de Bresse, Alps
Cantal entre d'eux

MONDAY

Bleu d'Auvergne
Petit Pont L'Evêque (S)
Tomme de la Montagne (H)

TUESDAY

Roquefort
Coeur de Romance (H)
Vigny, from Gourdon (S)
Bleu d'Auvergne

WEDNESDAY – meal at the Hotel Climat,
Labastide-Murat (see menu below)

THURSDAY

Bleu de Causse
Munster-Géromé, Alsace-Lorraine (S)
Tomme de Savoie (H)

FRIDAY

St Agur (blue)
Cantal d'eux
Vieux panné

BUTTERFLIES AND OTHER INVERTEBRATES

Grizzled skipper
Dingy skipper

Scarce swallowtail
Common swallowtail

Black-veined white
Orange tip
Berger's clouded yellow
Cleopatra
Brimstone
Wood white

Southern white admiral
Red admiral

Other invertebrates noted:

Day-flying moths:

Latticed heath
Burnet companion moth
5-spot burnet moth
6-spot burnet moth
Other burnet moths probably:
 Slender Scottish burnet
 Zygaena fausta

Moths

Buff ermine moth
Hummingbird hawkmoth
Goat moth caterpillar

Glanville fritillary
Spotted fritillary

Small heath
Pearly heath
Speckled wood
Large wall brown
Wall brown

Duke of Burgundy
Green hairstreak
Small copper
Sooty copper
Small (little) blue
Adonis blue

Others

Graphosoma italicum – black and red shield bugs
Ascapalus libelluloides – something between a lacewing and an ant-lion
Carpenter bee
Paper wasp
Broad-bodied chaser dragonfly
Roman snail
Glow-worm
Millipede
Yellow crab spider (female) *Misumena vatia*
Bloody-nose beetle
Cockchafer

ORCHIDS

Lizard orchid
Violet birdsnest orchid (limodor)
Birdsnest orchid
Common twayblade
Early marsh orchid
Woodcock orchid
Bee orchid
Fly orchid
Early spider orchid
Loose-flowered orchid
Early purple orchid
Military orchid

Lady orchid
Monkey orchid
Burnt-tip orchid
Man orchid
Pyramidal orchid
Green-winged orchid
Violet helleborine
Red helleborine
Narrow-leaved helleborine
Broad-leaved helleborine (leaves)
Lesser butterfly orchid

Twenty three species of orchids is a reminder of how rich this area is. For completeness, the following species of orchid have been found in previous years: white helleborine, dark red helleborine, southern marsh orchid, common spotted orchid, robust marsh orchid.

Reptiles and amphibians

Green lizard
Wall lizard
Marsh frog (heard)
Midwife toad (heard)

Mammals

Rabbit
Red squirrel
Roe deer
Bats, unidentified

BIRDS

Grey heron
Mallard
Honey buzzard
Black kite
Sparrowhawk
Short toed-eagle
Buzzard
Kestrel
Red-legged partridge H
Pheasant
Yellow-legged gull
Rock dove/feral pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared dove
Turtle dove
Cuckoo
Barn owl
Scops owl
Tawny owl H
Nightjar
Swift
Alpine Swift
Hoopoe
Green woodpecker H
Great spotted woodpecker
Woodlark
Skylark
Crag martin
Swallow
House martin
Tree pipit
White wagtail
Wren
Robin
Nightingale
Black redstart
Redstart
Stonechat
Blackbird
Song thrush H
Mistle thrush H
Melodious warbler
Blackcap
Bonelli's warbler
Chiffchaff H
Firecrest
Spotted flycatcher
Long-tailed tit
Blue tit
Great tit
Nuthatch
Short-toed treecreeper
Golden oriole H
Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Carrion crow
Starling

House sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Cirl bunting
Corn bunting

H = heard only

