



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



The Camargue
22 – 29 May 2018

Some adventure, that was...

My Camargue holiday – inspired and enabled by Honeyguide.

Written by and illustrated with the photogrids of Honeyguider Jenny Loring.

Cover: 'classic Camargue'.



The nearest we get to a group picture on this holiday ... Jenny in Arles.

DAILY DIARY

Tuesday 22 May – to France

Mid-afternoon I landed in Montpellier alone from Newcastle via Amsterdam to find that the flight from Gatwick was cancelled due to an air traffic control strike. My intended holiday companions, including Rachel and Robin our tour leaders, all had to go home. I soon found that France had also just started two days of public transport strikes ... "*les grèves*".

I spoke to Chris and to Rachel and Robin who, after helping the group back from departures at Gatwick, were heading home. They were letting Chris, the French car hire and our hotel know the situation and leaving me a voice mail. I then went to the hire car building. Unfortunately all the companies needed my paper driving licence to rent a car. In the UK we can now get a code from DVLA and give that to a car hire company who then access our licence on line. It seems not so in France. So no car hire for me. I had to rapidly upgrade my school-days' French with help from the Google translator app on my phone.

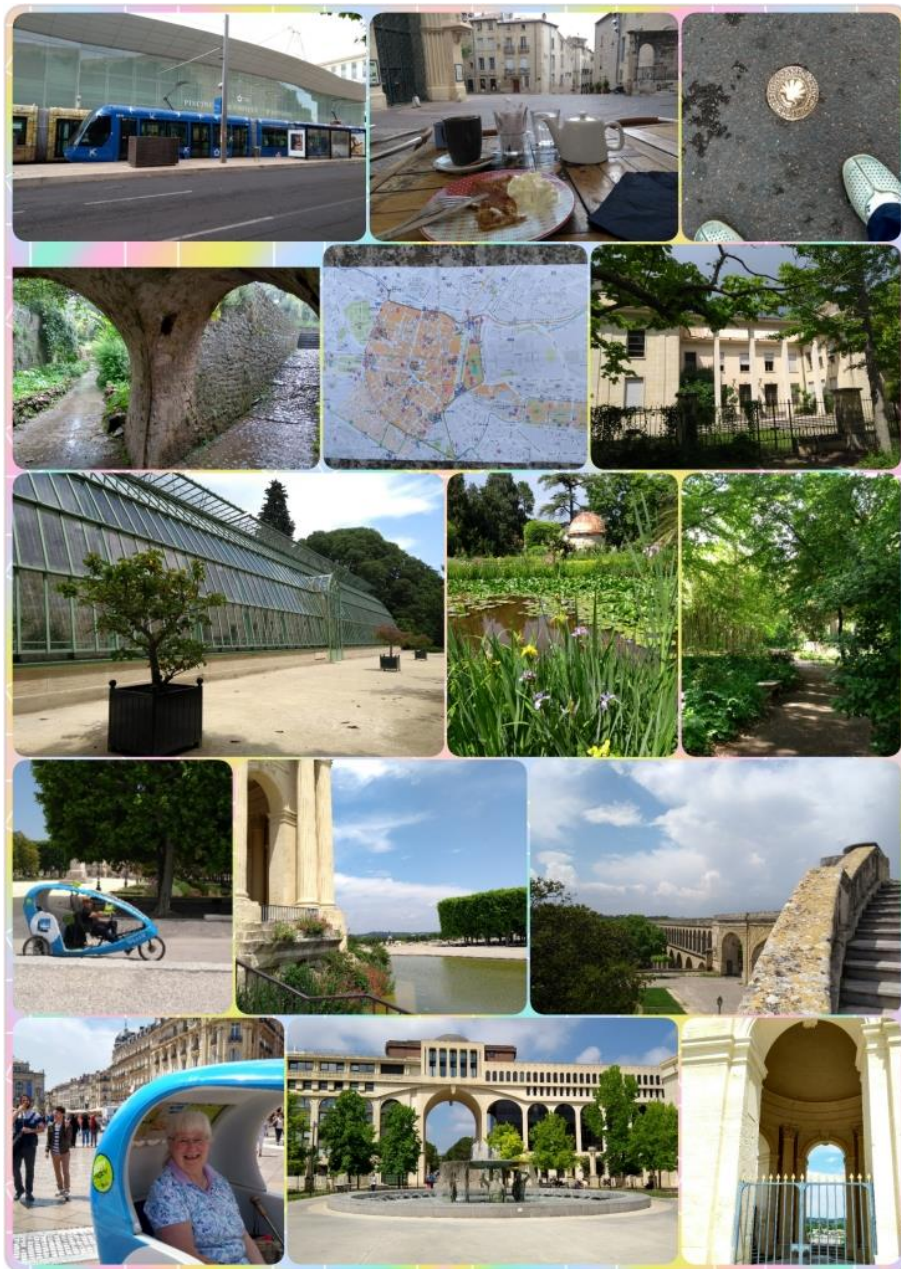
A helpful man in Airport Information advised me that as a national rail strike had just started there was no certainty about trains for two days. He tried to get me a hotel near the railway station, to catch any available train, but no rooms were to be had in the city. But – joy! – there was one room at the Aeroport Hotel about 200 yards away so I had a bed and food.

I let everyone, including Bruno at Hotel des Granges, know that I was OK for the night, but I didn't get much sleep as by then I knew there were also to be air control and rail strikes again next week on the Monday and the Tuesday when my flight was due to return.

Wednesday 23 May – Montpellier the city, and on to Hotel des Grange

In the morning I got very good news from Chris – his son Jim was working in Montpellier! I was given his number to call. He could take me to our booked Honeyguide hotel in Arles after work. This proved invaluable as I then found out that the Aeroport Hotel was fully booked for the rest of week.

Knowing I now had an address I spoke to a friend, explaining how to find my driving licence and asking them to get it couriered out so I could hire a car. I left my bags at the hotel for the day and got a bus and tram (not on strike) from the airport to spend the day in Montpellier, an interesting mix of ancient and modern.



Exploring Montpellier.

The temperature was in the upper twenties centigrade, or more, so I did wilt. In the afternoon I hired a vélotaxi, a pedal-powered tricycle taxi, for a guided tour of the old city and to get me to the Institute Botanique garden, which has its place in botanical history. Many plants, and even some animals, have Montpellier in their scientific name, recognising the work done there.

Thunderstorms had been rumbling around the garden for an hour or more and there was a brief but torrential downpour while I sheltered first under a Montpellier maple then in a grotto tunnel.

I found a nice crepe shop in the old city for quick snack before returning by bus and tram to the Aeroport Hotel to await Jim. We arrived at Hotel des Granges, a few miles north of Arles, at 9:30pm. Bruno welcomed us and with Marie-Jo, his wife, prepared us a meal before Jim returned and I settled in.

Thursday 24 May – Arles

After my breakfast, in an otherwise empty dining room, Bruno kindly drove me into Arles and arranged where to collect me at 6pm.

Arles is an old walled town and was briefly home to the artist Van Gogh and his friends. So there was lots to see during another very hot day; the Roman arena, where my visit coincided with a brief gladiatorial display for a school party, and amphitheatre, little streets with buildings of all ages to explore, the River Rhône, and the locations of several Van Gogh paintings including a courtyard garden where I had a crepe lunch, and the more famous street café painted with its yellow awning beneath a starry night sky. The 'yellow house', where I think he lived, is now demolished and green space but marked and the building behind can still be recognised from the painting.

Back at the hotel a nightingale was singing from the hedge by the front door and later I watched from my balcony as bats quartered the garden.

Friday 25 May – Avignon

My second day waking at Hotel des Granges; which is just north of Arles on the road to Avignon famed for the bridge in the song learnt in my school French classes. Still waiting for my driving licence, which I knew was on its way, I started to investigate getting there. At breakfast Bruno offered to take me as he was going for the morning and returning midday. A German lady on the next table overheard our conversation and offered to bring me back at 4 o'clock giving me a day in the city; everyone I met was very kind and helpful. I made part of my continental breakfast into sandwiches so as not to delay and we were off.



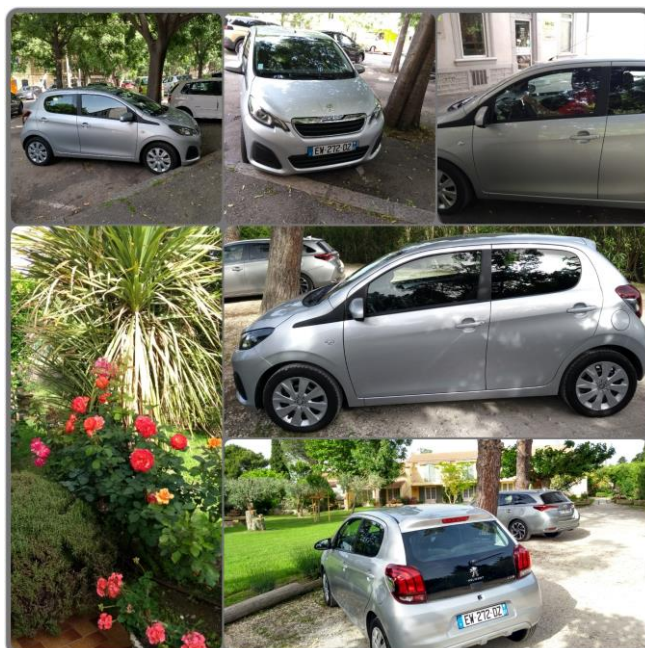
Avignon ... *sur le pont* and elsewhere.

I was dropped by the bridge, near the coach park, so lots tourists. I'd not thought beyond the bridge but found myself below a city built around and onto a cliff cut by the wide river Rhône – this flowed either side of a low island with a castle on the far bank. With early crowds leaving the coaches and streaming through the arch in the wall below, then up onto the bridge, I decided to walk along the riverside where I spotted the first wildflowers, on the river and its banks. I found a free ferry crossing to and from the island starting later in the morning. I entered the city through a quiet arched gate in the city walls and found myself in winding cobbled residential streets and headed off toward the centre. I soon found a little café for a cool drink and pastry and as I moved on, a massive statue of Christ in gold appeared above the rooftops. I learnt that Avignon had been home to the Pope during troubles in Rome in medieval times and the centre is dominated by the massive *Palais des Papes* which seems to grow out of the rocks.

I continued on and found a civic building with a bell tower, where the chimes rang by a mechanical knight and lady, overlooking a square with entertainers and a beautiful two-tier carousel. I realised these seemed to be everywhere as I had already photo'd others in Montpellier and Arles.

I found a cool park to eat my sandwiches and received a text just after noon that my driving licence had arrived at the Hotel - relief...

I walked back toward the Palais through old streets; one building with great silver studs beneath the roof joists, another with a giant gold coin over the imposing door. Buying an ice cream in a little cobbled square, I set off down a winding lane to find I passed under a massive buttress supporting the Palais built onto the rock that the lane cut through.



A car, at last.

I emerged into the Palais square and crossed, below the statue of Christ, to the gardens overlooking the river. A cool shaded stroll, I enjoyed views of the bridge and distant hills and then took steps down to the ferry. I was just crossing to the island when I got a text that my lift was leaving earlier than planned, in an hour, so it was photos and then return. I just had time to go onto the bridge itself now that the crowds were gone and to meet my lift back to our hotel.

Driving licence in hand, I was whisked to Europcar hire. Everyone was most concerned; they only had very large automatics available. Much discussion in French that I could not follow, then Bruno, announcing himself as "Proprietor of Hotel des Granges" made a phone call and we were off round the town.

Hertz had a small manual Peugeot. I hired it with minutes to spare before they closed for the weekend and followed Bruno back to the hotel. Big relief, especially knowing I could now get back to the airport on Tuesday regardless of planned train strikes. I slept well that night ... A good day.

Saturday 26 May – Rousty and Saintes Maries de la Mer

Rachel kindly phoned after my breakfast with recommendations for places to visit now I had a car. As an introduction I chose the Camargue Museum at Rousty, with a nature trail attached, and then on to the coast at Saintes Maries de la Mer. Driving on the 'wrong' side of the road was not so bad with a local car so I concentrated on where to go. I had made a route list and remembered the road numbers, but the journey was made easier as, from the second roundabout, Saintes Maries de la Mer was clearly signed so I just had to watch for the museum turn along the way and was soon there.



Invertebrates at Rousty: black-tailed skimmer, painted lady, large skipper, small white, mystery blue (small blue?)

The Musée was interesting, all about the history and culture of the people of the Camargue. I set off on the nature trail, by then getting hot after an early rain shower. The start of the trail into the reserve went over an interpretive structure-cum-viewing platform built of wood to resemble a ship under construction, or in decay. It had a nice wide railing to rest my camera on so I took the opportunity to take the traditional Honeyguide 'group photo'!

First I spotted a small bird with undulating flight and *zzzt - zzzt* call that I recognised from previous holidays as 'zitting cisticola' or fan-tailed warbler. Further along the track I recognised another call, as colourful bee-eaters were flying across and along the path. Passing along an avenue of trees I was surrounded by birdsong, so I stopped to record on my camera's video. Then, not sure who was more nervous, I spotted a rather long snake which retreated back into the verge. The route turned into a footpath, passing Camargue cattle in a field and some good plants to look at.

I first noticed a couple of puzzling black and white, maybe thrush-sized, birds flying just above the hedge line, then several small groups flew back and forth. I was at a viewing platform watching a kestrel hunting when a flock of about 40 of these black and white birds flew over and I just managed a photo. Best guess, confirmed with help when I got back to work, was rosy starlings, an eastern bird; a web search found there was an irruption just moving across Europe that week, even reaching the UK a week later.

A little farther along I had great views of more bee-eaters flying around me and sitting in pairs along a scrub-fringed ditch. There were also several dragonflies and damselflies. I headed for a hide which I found was frequented by tree sparrows, with a great reed warbler singing outside and good views of flamingos, egrets and glossy ibises in the water.

I made my way along a boardwalk through the reedbeds, finding a reed bunting singing from a perch among the reed heads, and I managed to snap a couple of pictures of a passing, rather long-tailed, falcon, which when it settled in a tree turned out to be a young greater spotted cuckoo, known locally as a cuckoo jay, which I followed along a hedge-lined track for half an hour, getting some great pictures. There were more dragonflies, damselflies and butterflies along the way as well as some flowers.



The young great spotted cuckoo.

I passed a traditional shelter, this one used as a chapel, unfortunately closed so no shelter from the sun today, and I kept heading back. By the time I returned to the Musée I had been out for over four hours, and glad I had taken water and some fruit for the '90 minute' walk!

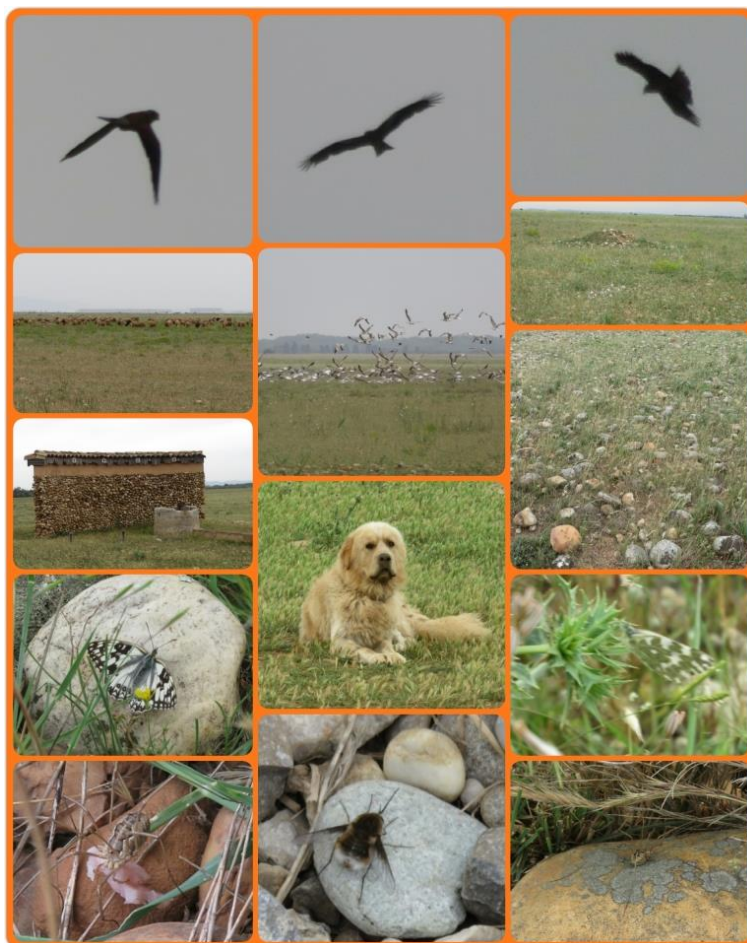
I then drove to Saintes Maries, past flooded paddy fields and several white horse riding establishments. I found parking by the canal, behind the coastal town which was busy with visitors. A horse display with riders in local costume was at the arena. I saw the riders off-stage, riding round outside between stage doors, and I treated myself to a refreshing sorbet ice-cream. Realising I needed to set off soon for dinner I took the back road through the saltmarshes. If I'd had time I'm sure I would have found many new birds, probably waders and ducks. As it was, I saw more flamingos, ibises, egrets, various gulls, terns and a few lapwings as I drove, and several black kites over the roads as I got nearer to Arles.

I made it back in time for dinner, then after watching a colourful sunset and finding geckos at home on the building, I had another good night's sleep.

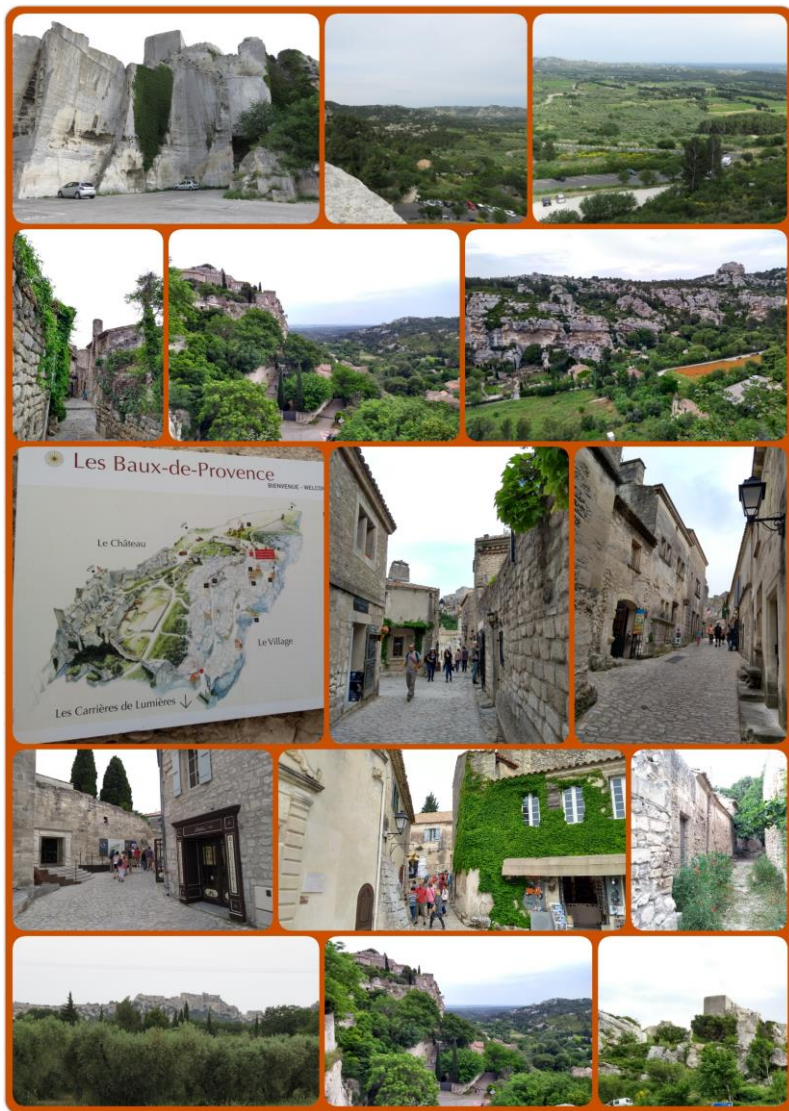
Sunday 27 May – La Crau and Les Baux

Sunday morning and choices to make from the places we were due to visit and Rachel's recommendations. With wifi at the hotel I checked visitor centres etc. online and found that the Ecocentre at St Martin de la Crau was open today and closed tomorrow, so that topped the list. I planned to head on to La Crau nature reserve afterwards and, if time, return via Les Baux in the limestone hills.

Getting confident I took the scenic rather than main road to St Martin and found myself driving along avenues of tall plane trees. Just as I was nearing St M the road was closed by police and marshals for 'les velos', a cycling event. I followed the ring road but couldn't find access into the town and so made my way toward La Crau, an area of stony semi-desert cum steppe, contrasting with the wetlands of the nearby Camargue. I'd put a marker on my Google map where I guessed Honeyguide had previously visited and parked at a car park a-flutter with Cleopatra butterflies and various 'blues' and 'browns' which I didn't get a chance to identify in a steadily increasing wind. Looking at the notice board I saw I was at the start of a nature trail through the open landscape to the south.



La Crau scenes and wildlife.



Scenic Les Baux.

With dark clouds approaching, I took my rain jacket. I spotted white storks flying along the north edge of the area and black kites crossing. Trying to photo plants and insects for later ID I was soon joined by four French birdwatchers who, unprepared, rapidly returned to their car in the face of a sudden squall. I was jacketed and enjoyed the refreshing cool, and as I walked along the track I flushed out Bath whites and marbled white-type butterflies which were sheltering on some of the little plants along the track, later identified as western marbled whites. The rain soon stopped and the temperature rose again. Birds began singing so I recorded with video. There were a lot of jackdaws and crows flying in front of the trees to the south, reminding me of a favourite Van Gogh painting I'd once seen in the Amsterdam museum. A line of gulls were set into flight by, I think, a short-toed eagle overhead. I photo'd the interpretive panels along the way – will I ever translate the text? The drawings gave an impression of the local ecology, economy, history and culture including shepherding. Approaching a large building I was greeted by a number of assorted sheepdogs. They soon calmed but I was less favourably impressed by the seemingly angry shepherd who came out of the building to shout at them, so I decided against stopping there for my lunch.

A falcon, perhaps a lesser kestrel known to be found in La Crau, searched the area, buffeted by the strengthening wind and crying a piercing '*biis-kit*' call. I passed a water pump and a strange curved wall – later I learned this was an artificial wall built for lesser kestrels to nest in – and chose a mound of stones to sit on. I knocked with my stick to check for residents and got comfy, to be joined by a harvestman – with eight legs it is slightly related to spiders. I dropped a small piece of ham and watched as this was claimed and steadily eaten.

I had been looking out for birds typical of this dry area – without telescope or any elevation I had no success, but I have pictures of several dry land flowers and grasses to ID. Nearly completing the circle, the route followed a ditch back to the car park. This section was constantly quartered by black kites, giving some amazing close views. Several dragon- and damselflies were over the water, with its contrasting lush vegetation and fish sheltering in the water weeds, while across the dry track I spotted some more coppery/brown butterflies – spotted fritillary was the later ID. I was caught up by the French birdwatchers who had found a public observation hide upstairs in what I'd thought was the shepherd's building, and spotted some birds, but I didn't sort out what – aah well.

Returning to the car I headed back north. St Martin was still closed to traffic for *les vélos* so I followed signs to Les Baux and soon saw the massive castle settlement built onto the limestone ridge across the horizon. Approaching 5pm, I looked out for parking near the town. Parked cars stretched for a mile, maybe more, along the roadside; I think it had been a very busy sunny Sunday. Luckily I got a just-vacated space right by the pedestrian entrance. Les Baux is an amazing old stone town, with houses built of and into the limestone. There are shops everywhere to tempt visitors and I succumbed to an ice-cream and took more photos of the winding streets, of wild flowers growing out of the rocks, of views of the limestone hills and out across the Camargue to the Mediterranean. I got perhaps the best of the day here; most visitors had gone, it was not so hot and I left just in time to take the short drive back to the hotel, refresh and enjoy my evening meal.

Monday 28 May – La Capelière, en route and Salines

As today was my final full day I wanted to see more of the Camargue, its fresh- and salt-water marshes, lagoons (*étangs*) and salt pans so I headed to La Capelière. I stopped briefly at a layby east of the Étang de Vaccarès where there were flamingos feeding in the water and a tree with several nesting cormorants but it was rather too windy and choppy, with a drizzle coming in, to find more birds about.

The entrance to La Capelière is through an interesting information centre then out to the compact nature trail running through several different habitats: woodland, marsh, heath, grassland and beside water bodies. A couple of white horses were grazing the marsh, the light rain cleared, a cuckoo seemed to follow me round settling on trees and pylons, black-winged stilts were squabbling and nesting on an island in a small lagoon.

I lunched on the picnic bench with a retired Dutch couple, about to cycle home over several weeks having been dropped off on the coast, with their bikes, by a cyclist's bus. They had cycled across the track from Saintes Maries and enjoyed watching the flamingos all morning.

I headed south close to the Étang de Vaccarès and found flower rich road verges with wild gladioli, blue iris and agrimony; so eye-catching that I stopped the car to explore, finding centaury, orobanche, sea aster and variety of saltmarsh plants by a saline lagoon.

I carried on until I came to the end of the track from St Maries and parked; walking out on the track between lagoon and marsh I had close up views of flamingos, a little egret and avocets with terns, insects and various saltmarsh plants to see. Heading round to the salines I had good views near a bridge of flying bee-eaters and a little tern when I stopped to admire a herd of Camargue cattle.

When I reached the viewing platform on a salt mound, out beyond the town of Salin de Girauld, there was quite a strong wind blowing. One copse of willow trees was full of the sound of warblers I couldn't identify. On the mound a pair of spectacled warblers landed in front of me, I photographed the female and some much better equipped Belgian birdwatchers the male. We spotted a weary bee-eater grounded on the sand below, also a pair of Kentish plovers and roosting gull flocks. It was interesting to look out over the various stages of evaporation in the surrounding salt pans.



Camargue central: little tern, spectacled warbler, wild gladioli and more.

Then I drove on to the end of the road where it reached Piémanson beach. It seemed a popular overnight stop for touring motor homes. Along with a lot of flying flamingos, I saw shelduck, more gulls, terns, avocets, egrets and several small brown birds buffeted by the wind.

Time for me to return to the hotel if I wanted dinner! I think I had made the most of my time.

Tuesday 29 May – Homeward bound

All packed and, with farewell and many thanks to Bruno for all his help and kindness, I set off.

I found I had time to visit 'Van Gogh's bridge' before taking the road back to Montpellier airport. I filled up the tank with petrol and brought a salad and pastry at the service station by the Aeroport Hotel, returning the car to Hertz just on time at midday.

I was able to check in my luggage straight away and found a little area outside with wooden sun loungers to lunch and rest for a while before I needed to go to departures. I noticed massive concrete terraces planted up with trees and shrubs forming the front wall, this could soon camouflage the airport building façade.

I went through to departures in time to find my flight was delayed a couple of times, announcements said for air control strikes. Once on board we learnt the delay was actually due to very heavy thunder storms over Amsterdam and the flight had to wait for them to clear. No worry as I had 4hrs between my flights at AMS. When I arrived there the departure boards showed about 200 flights; most delayed and some cancelled.

They worked hard to clear the backlog, my Newcastle flight was almost the very last scheduled departure for the day and got away about 2am (Wednesday), instead of 10pm, leaving the airport itself in darkness as the public areas finally closed for the night. Anyway with the hour difference I was home and in my own bed in next to no time!

I do remember the sky to the north as my flight approached Newcastle, it was a very pale light turquoise grading to the deep black-blue in the west, I was looking at the skies over the land (and sea) of the midnight sun!



Camargue birds: short-toed eagle, greater flamingo, rosy starlings, kestrel, bee-eater, tree sparrow, corn bunting, reed bunting, barn swallow, crested lark, cuckoo, glossy ibises.

WILDLIFE LISTS

BIRDS H = heard			
Cormorant		Cattle egret	Little egret
Great white egret		Grey heron	White stork
Glossy ibis		Greater flamingo	Mute swan
Shelduck		Mallard	Black kite
Short-toed eagle		Marsh harrier	Common buzzard
Lesser kestrel		Common kestrel	Pheasant H
Moorhen		Coot	Black-winged stilt
Avocet		Kentish plover	Lapwing
Black-headed gull		Yellow-legged gull	Gull-billed tern
Common tern		Little tern	Rock dove/feral pigeon
Woodpigeon		Collared dove	Cuckoo
Great spotted cuckoo		Swift	Bee-eater
Hoopoe		Crested lark	Skylark
Barn swallow		House martin	Tawny pipit ?
Yellow wagtail ?		White wagtail	Nightingale
Black redstart		Blackbird	Cetti's warbler
Fan-tailed warbler		Great reed warbler	Spectacled warbler
Blackcap		Blue tit	Magpie
Jackdaw		Carrion crow	Rook
Starling		Rosy starling	House sparrow
Tree sparrow		Chaffinch	Linnet
Goldfinch		Reed bunting	Corn bunting
MAMMALS, REPTILES, AMPHIBIANS			
Coypu (spraint)		Green lizard	Ladder snake
Wall lizard		Moorish gecko	Pool frog
BUTTERFLIES			
Large skipper	Cleopatra	Western marbled white	Small copper
Bath white	Painted lady	Wall brown	Small blue?
Small white	Spotted fritillary	Speckled wood	
DRAGONFLIES AND DAMSELFLIES			
Black-tailed skimmer		Scarce chaser	Western demoiselle