
FLOWERS AND BIRDS IN THE LOT

23-30 May 1992



Flowers and Birds in the Lot
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List of participants

James Pollok-Morris
Margaret Pollok-Morris

Helensburgh

Alan Greengo

Ipswich

Jill Kendrick

Bingham, Nottingham

Ian Rowarth

Watton, Norfolk

Jennie Le Huquer
Douglas Le Huquer

Guernsey

Manfred Gorlin
Margaret Gorlin

Sudbury, Suffolk

Leader: David Brewster

Our hosts: Lynn and Doreen Todd

Illustrations by Rob Hume

Front cover: Maison Meulet, Galoubet

Report written by David Brewster

Saturday 23 May - Toulouse to Galoubet

Flight Dan Air 912 was carrying a number of expectant groups embarking upon holidays requiring varying degrees of energy. The most active were walking over 120 miles in the week and they looked the most apprehensive, while the *Honeyguide* group was the most relaxed, contemplating a more tranquil meander through the French countryside. One fellow traveller described us as the most 'interesting' on the 'plane and she expressed a wish to come with us.

There was an early test of the good humour of the group at Toulouse Airport for as each of the other groups were contacted by their coach drivers, *Honeyguide's* driver, Guy, was conspicuous by his absence. Hurried 'phone calls ascertained that he was having his lunch 100 miles away. The collective good humour stood the test however and this could not be put down solely to the black kite flying over the car park. Perhaps it was due to the fact that the bill at the airport restaurant included 44 Carlsbergs.

All the trials of the day melted away upon our arrival as we fell under the spell of Maison Meulet and its environs. Even the news that the cook had departed for the week failed to dampen spirits, in fact following Doreen's first delicious creation the comment was made that perhaps it was a good thing. A nightingale joined the chorus of welcome.

Sunday 24 May: local walks

Despite the hour, 6.30 am, seven of us set off towards Frayssinet, initially a coherent group but eventually straggling over half a mile as the botanists among the group slowed to a crawl. Violet birdsnest orchid, globularia, Nottingham catchfly and tassel hyacinth were all greeted by cries of joy and it was only with reluctance that we returned for breakfast.

After breakfast we climbed through hayfields, decked with the pink and blue of sainfoin and meadow clary, past some elegant Limousin cattle and on to the track that leads to the farmstead of Girou. As the sun warmed the meadows the butterflies took to the air in numbers that are rarely seen in Britain. Pale clouded yellow, scarce swallowtail, Glanville fritillary and southern white admiral were all noted, with pride of place going to the most inconspicuous one, spotted by Jennie, the wood white, which had not been recorded the previous year. As we returned down the slope to Galoubet, Bonelli's warblers could be seen flitting among the oak trees and woodlarks calling and flying with their characteristic short tail and bat-like flight very evident.

The clouds thickened through lunch at Maison Meulet and we only went half a mile in the afternoon before the rain started. The first gentle drops were ignored as the bank that we were admiring was studded with pyramidal and fly orchids. As it became steadier we retreated under the oaks and found numerous helleborines including red, narrow-leaved and broad-leaved. Stumps were drawn however as the rain became torrential and we scuttled back through the sodden hay to the fence by the road. Dougie reached it first only to find that the water had short-circuited the fence to the

adjacent electric fence; with a cry he staggered over ripping his overtrousers. Your leader's concern for his welfare was soon forgotten as he received the next shock. The transformer was soon found and switched off so that every one else negotiated it safely.

The clouds passed over before dinner and a short stroll was taken past the Mayor's house. The golden orioles' calls became incessant and suddenly there it was, a male, in full view in a dead tree. Unfortunately only two of us saw it before it was off, not to be seen in full glory again for the rest of the holiday. Those who failed to see gained consolation from another of Doreen's superb meals and then it was out into the evening to look for the crepuscular nightjar (Jim and Manfred knew what it meant!). However it was heard but not seen, though an orbiting satellite was seen passing across the sky close to Jupiter.

Monday 25 May: Labastide-Murat to Galoubet

The early morning walk took us past the Mayor's house to what was becoming known as 'golden oriole alley' and sure enough we were tantalised by a calling male, getting closer and closer until we were underneath the tree from which it was calling. It is surprising that such a striking bird is so difficult to pick up but none of us did until it flew. A few yards further on the track we passed a small farm pond with the most enormous tadpoles in it. While scanning the margins for these Leviathans' parents the air was rent by a staccato belching. When located, the originator of the sound, an edible frog, was blowing out his cheeks for a repetition. Poor imitations of the sound were heard around the breakfast table as the late risers were acquainted with the latest edition to the faunal list.

Then off to Labastide-Murat for market day. French farmers are obviously early risers for the livestock market was finishing as we arrived; however the other stalls continued with a wide array of local produce and at last there was a chance to buy some cherries which had been much evidence along the roadside.

When the last postcards had been sent we started the walk back from Labastide-Murat to Galoubet past the chateau built by Napoleon's brother-in-law who gave his name to the town. The hedgerows and banks were alive with flowers including the first lizard orchids fully out, smelling particularly offensive in their effort to attract flies. A couple of unidentified plants were handed to your leader for later identification; however these were somehow lost in the excitement of Jill's sighting of a hobby. Comments that they were lost deliberately to save embarrassment were uncalled for; however the fringes of meadow clary and wild gladioli to an adjacent field soon diverted everyone.

Lunch was taken beside the track opposite a particularly flower-rich field and swallowtail, scarce swallowtail, clouded yellow and adonis blues were all netted for closer examination. Particularly attractive to insect life were the clumps of tufted vetch that lined the track further on and gave it an audible hum. Among this haze of insects were several hummingbird hawk moths. On past meadows full of the large fleshy leaves of meadow saffron that turn to glorious pink in mid-September. A less attractive discovery

was a pile of dung, canine variety, that had attracted over 30 adonis blues which obscured its surface.

As the track ascended, the group became more strung out and the back markers welcomed the sight of a clump of monkey orchids which gave an excuse for a spell in the shade. As Galoubet hove into sight, the pace quickened as the thought of a dip in Maison Meulet's swimming pool before dinner put energy into tired limbs.

The weather held for the evening and dinner was therefore outdoors for the first time. The anecdotes and laughter continued until the first glowworm was seen beneath adjacent shrubs and a nightjar churred from across the valley. Unfortunately the Scottish contingent not only failed to see the glowworm but refused to believe that it was anything other than a collective hoax.

Tuesday 26 May: St Cirq Lapopie and the caves of Pech-Merle

The early morning walks seemed to be getting longer in an effort to see golden orioles but to no avail. Over three miles were walked over dew laden byways but only an adjacent raptor-like screech raised adrenalin.

The drive to St Cirq Lapopie with Guy and Lynn took an hour with the tributary valleys to the river Lot getting narrower and narrower and the limestone cliffs more spectacular until the famous hilltop village was sighted over the meandering Lot. It appears to have changed little since the English and French battled for its possession in the Hundred Years War.

As the majority admired the architecture and shopped, the keen birders, Alan to the fore, watched the crag martins and the speedy alpine swifts among the hosts of swifts hunting for insects in the updraft by the cliffs. As the thermals built up in the heat of the day the raptors rose with them until over a dozen buzzards and honey buzzards could be seen soaring. One black kite started its climb immediately above the village, affording excellent views.



We then headed north up the Célé valley to the Grotte du Pech-Merle where we ate lunch. We then substituted the heat of the afternoon for the cool of the caves. Fortunately the natural wonders of the caves and the spectacular cave paintings spoke for themselves for the French guide's

commentary was completely incomprehensible. A young baby accompanying a couple from Northern Ireland took grave exception to the whole procedure and gave vent to her feelings, suitably amplified by the caves, until quietened by your leader, pleased that he had at last been able to show a talent in one direction.

The sun was welcome after the spell underground as we walked leisurely back to the village past numerous plants of bastard balm and bloody cranesbill, a combination that caused amusement to one or two members of the group. On the edge of the village the group split, with a majority seeking immediate refreshment while the minority of enthusiasts explored a small stream which proved to be well worth the effort. In a pool by the roadside, a viviparous snake hunted tadpoles among the water weeds while the trout sought out mayflies. As we neared the village, indigo damselflies fluttered among fringing vegetation and a dipper shot past us and promptly disappeared under someone's house.

Upon arrival back at Maison Meulet, we celebrated Jennie's birthday with verse and bubbly. The verse theme continued through dinner with disjointed renderings of Edward Lear and when the glowworm failed to perform, candles were bought out to complete the scene.

Wednesday 27 May: local walks

After admiring the military orchids in the Todd's meadow, our next stop on the morning walk was opposite the Mayor's house where a semi-derelict cottage was attracting considerable attention. Wild guesses as to its purchase and restoration costs were made and talk of 'time share' was heard. Next stop the pond, where newts and water beetles were observed in this rather unprepossessing hollow. The frog however failed to welcome us despite the chorus of belches and croaks that greeted him. He was spotted among the stoneworks and Jennie thought she detected a "minor inflation" and sure enough a modest sound was emitted. This was caught on tape and when played back triggered a machine gun like response. Most satisfied by this we duly walked on. However Jim wanted more and his increasingly maniacal belches gradually became lost in the general chorus of crickets. We concluded with much laughter that he had been wasted at ICI.

The stragglers caught up with us at the main road as we lolled among the pyramidal and man orchids, eating Jill's refreshers. Rests became increasingly frequent on the return journey down the track above Combe de Cayres and we were soon seated on the trunks of felled oak trees. Our resident timber expert, Manfred, was not impressed by their quality regarding them as little better than firewood. They did however provide a comfortable seat to watch honey buzzards and the delightful parachute-like flight of the tree pipit. The green woodpecker which had earlier startled Dougie and Jennie at close quarters continued to be amused by the joke and its call echoed around the valley below.

The group became increasingly reluctant to move on and an observant leader would have detected the first signs of the mutiny. It gathered strength and after lunch at Galoubet all were firmly anchored poolside claiming that it was going to rain soon. This meant the missed sight of a buzzard

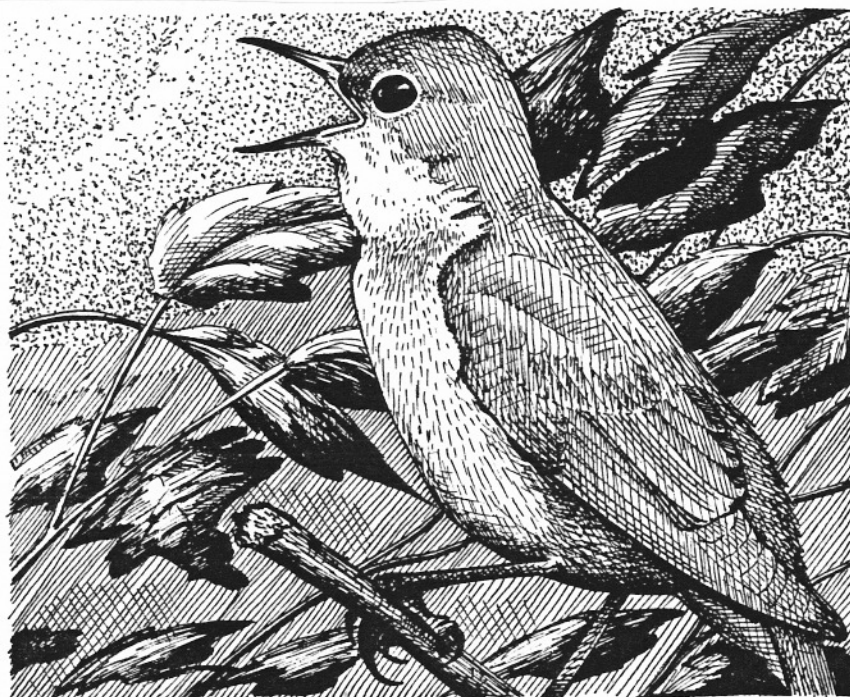
drinking from a trackside pool while a pair of increasingly frenetic middle spotted woodpeckers complained about the intrusion into their territory. In addition a pair of ortolan buntings, melodious warblers and stonechats were all seen while a quail was exhorting the listener to 'wet-my-lips' from the adjoining barley.

The rain arrived at five o'clock and prevented further arguments about glowworms and an enormous dinner had to be taken indoors.

Thursday 28 May: Rocamadour

Enthusiasm for the 6.30 start to the early morning walk was dwindling with only the Scottish contingent braving the cool. In order to warm up we went straight up the scarp slope to Merle and on the return journey were rewarded by excellent views of the elusive and unmusical melodious warbler. Meanwhile, on the opposite slope, Manfred and Margaret maintained their vigil for the golden oriole.

At breakfast we listened to Jill's hushed tones on the tape indicating that it was 3 am at Gaioubet and that this was a nightingale. I don't think Jill would have minded being kept awake if she had been able to get a decent view of the culprit.



As we travelled north to Rocamadour there were more tantalising glimpses of exotic plants and stunning fields of poppies. However the botanists had to make do with a brief exploration of a quarry site above Rocamadour where purple milk-vetch, dodder and white rock rose were all added to the list.

It is easy to understand why Rocamadour is described as *Le Deuxième Premier* site in France. This extraordinary mediaeval village appears to actually have grown out of the spectacular rock face that forms part of the gorge through which the puzzlingly small Alzou river runs. As the weather forecast for the afternoon was poor, we decided to forego the delights of the village and plunged off into the tangled oakwoods on the opposite sides of the valley. The stunted lichen-covered oaks and carpets of moss gave the impression of the western woodlands of Wales or Scotland. However the humidity belied that, as did the lesser butterfly orchid, Solomon's seal, lily of the valley and wild candytuft. On the plateau above we searched unsuccessfully for hoopoes among the maze of abandoned fields. We had to make do with a possible quail and an assortment of raptors tantalisingly high in the sky.

Back in Rocamadour the bird list started to grow impressively; red kite, raven, booted eagle...booted eagle!!! When a vulture was seen all these records were thrown in doubt as it became obvious that the bird of prey collection was performing above. Ian's spotted flycatcher was however felt to be sufficiently authentic to be counted. We all visited the Black Virgin, although later inspection of knees revealed that none had climbed the stone steps in the appropriate style. Some went on to climb past the Twelve Stations of the Cross to the top, while others resorted to the *ascenseur*. Then back for drinks and some rather nice cakes that Dougie had bought.

The rain which had threatened all afternoon descended on the way home but it did nothing to dampen our enthusiasm for we had exceeded last year's total for birds with the short-eared owl by the roadside. The rain kept us in again for dinner and the pool was for once empty.

Friday 29 May: local walks

With our departure imminent, enthusiasm for the early start revived and over half the party set off at a brisk pace down the road to Le Plaget. The more sensible among us returned to Galoubet when the first drops of rain fell from a leaden sky. The optimists however continued and reached Le Plaget in a brief respite. The return of the rain necessitated using Jim's short cut through the woods where the path disappeared into drenching knee high grass; still the upper clothing soon became as wet as the steady rain became a deluge requiring a complete change of clothing on return.

The clouds parted for the main walk and friendly farewells from the frog encouraged us at the start of the five mile stint. Descending through the oak woods in Combe de Font-Neuve, shouts of "red kite" were heard. Had we seen one at last? Alas no, it was wishful thinking. The buzzards, for that was what they proved to be, attracted the attention of a crow which mobbed one of them unmercifully. A passing kestrel briefly refereed the contest before deciding that the fellow raptor was getting a trouncing and joined in on its side. Resuming the steep descent through a rich array of orchids and helleborines, Jill nearly trod on a newly emerged spurge hawk moth which was much admired for its red and blue underwings. The normal scepticism greeted this identification but the showy green flowers of the nearby wood spurge silenced most doubters.

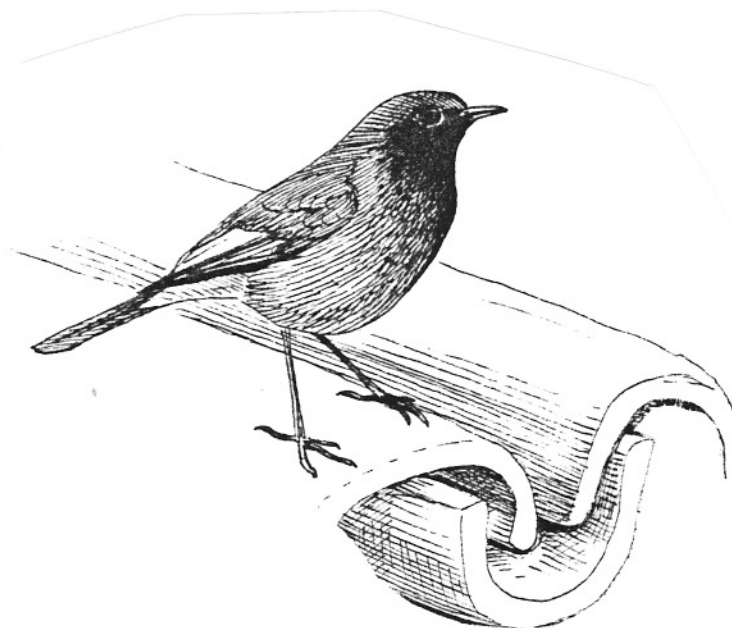
Lunch was taken sprawled amongst the tufted vetch and hay rattle of a typical French haymeadow. In the warm sun sleep beckoned, and it was only the promise of middle spotted woodpeckers that got everyone on their feet again and started up the steep track to Murat. As we headed back down the track to Combe de Font-Neuve we discovered an old fire site which had attracted at least a hundred adonis blues which rose in a glorious blue cloud when disturbed.

The return up the scarp sapped everyone's energy but the anticipated invigorating dip had to be curtailed by the onset of rain.

At dinner we were joined by Maurice Pages, the Mayor, his wife Brigitte, their daughter Celine and their young son Pierre. The French speakers in the group excelled themselves and we soon ascertained that the Mayor's derelict house would set us back £60,000 plus a similar amount to restore - not quite the snip we had envisaged. Manfred's French was good enough to discuss the local bird life but the golden oriole, which had frustrated him all week, was a complete mystery to Maurice. We also learned about the environmentally friendly farming that gave rise to the mosaic of different habitats with its wealth of wildlife that we had been appreciating all week.

Saturday 30 May

A somber group gathered by the bus to say fond farewells to Lynn, Doreen, Guy, Maison Meulet and Galoubet. The luxury coach which Guy had provided for the return trip looked incongruous in the narrow lane but gave marvellous views of the valley as we left. A few half-hearted attempts were made to increase the size of the bird list but only a heron obliged. Then it was Toulouse, Gatwick and home.



BIRDS

A total of 66 species of birds was seen or heard on the trip. Highlights included the much talked about golden oriole; the tree pipit that responded to a tape recording of its song; the irate middle spotted woodpeckers defending their territory; the ever-present and vocal nightingale. Marked in **bold**, however, are 15 birds that a UK-based birdwatcher might consider to be the most special.

Grey heron	Black redstart
Honey buzzard	Stonechat
Black kite	Blackbird
Buzzard	Song thrush
Kestrel	Mistle thrush
Hobby	Melodious warbler
Red-legged partridge	Blackcap
Quail (heard only)	Chiff-chaff
Pheasant	Bonelli's warbler
Woodpigeon	Spotted flycatcher
Collared dove	Pied flycatcher
Turtle dove	Blue tit
Cuckoo	Great tit
Tawny owl (heard)	Long-tailed tit
Short-eared owl	Nuthatch
Nightjar	Short-toed treecreeper
Swift	Golden oriole
Alpine swift	Jay
Green woodpecker	Magpie
Great spotted woodpecker	Jackdaw
Middle spotted woodpecker	Carriion crow
Woodlark	Rook
Skylark	Raven
Swallow	Starling
House martin	House sparrow
Crag martin	Chaffinch
Tree pipit	Serin
Grey wagtail	Greenfinch
White wagtail	Goldfinch
Dipper	Linnet
Wren	Cirl bunting
Robin	Ortolan bunting
Nightingale	Corn bunting

BUTTERFLIES

An impressive 23 species were seen, including 6 that are not found in Britain and a further 4 - Glanville Fritillary, Pale Clouded Yellow, Adonis Blue and Swallowtail - that are rarities in the UK.

Large Wall Brown
Pearly Heath
Wall Brown
Pearl-bordered Fritillary
Meadow Fritillary
Glanville Fritillary
Spotted Fritillary
Red Admiral
Comma
Small Tortoiseshell
Southern White Admiral
Small Blue
Adonis Blue
Common Blue
Swallowtail
Scarce Swallowtail
Wood White
Small White
Large White
Black-veined White
Clouded Yellow
Pale Clouded Yellow
Orange Tip



Other insects

Although no systematic attempt to identify other insects was made, several of the more distinctive ones were named. Pride of place went to the striking spurge hawk-moth, emerged from its pupa, and the praying mantises were much admired. In the air the graceful black and yellow lacewing-like insects *Ascalaphus libelluloides* were a delight while on the ground the sheer volume of sound emerging from the wing-rubbing of the field crickets was only matched by nightingales. In the frog pool, pond skaters, diving beetles and water boatmen all performed energetically and with a variety of styles reminiscent of the group in the swimming pool. Lastly, there were the lovely black and red striped shieldbugs sitting on top of the cow parsley flowers; they were *Graphosoma italicum* - well no-one believed me at the time so I suppose there's no chance now!

PLANTS

In 1991, nearly 300 species were recorded, but with the rich diversity of habitats - limestone grassland, scree, woodland, scrub and valley meadow - it was always anticipated that a good botanist would add more. That good botanist was Jennie, and with her skill we added another 90 species this year, including dark red helleborine, narrow-leaved bellflower, cupidone and ivy broomrape.

Even for those whose main interest was birds, the sheer splendour of the orchids kept pulling one's gaze downwards and by the end of the week even Jim was able to identify at least half a dozen species. Pyramidal orchids graced every patch of rough grass and close inspection usually unearthed the more delicate flowers of fly and bee orchids. Oak woodlands drowned in helleborines and the exotic spikes of the violet birdsnest orchid. The small meadow next to Maison Meulet, although not particularly noteworthy for the locality, featured 12 orchids and would have warranted National Nature Reserve status in the UK where no site has military and monkey orchids growing together.

18 orchid species were found:

Bee orchid	Man orchid
Early spider orchid	Lizard orchid
Fly orchid	Twayblade
Early purple orchid	Lesser butterfly orchid
Lady orchid	Red helleborine
Military orchid	Narrow-leaved helleborine
Burnt-tip orchid	Broad-leaved helleborine
Monkey orchid	Dark red helleborine
Violet birdsnest orchid	Pyramidal orchid

Other species of interest included a member of the umbellifer family, a group not renowned for exciting much interest; however *Tordylium apulum* with its distinctive single white petal on each flower was a most attractive addition to the list. [Dear David, you might like to know that *ivory-fruited hartwort* is abundant in the Karst in the Trieste area of north-east Italy. Best wishes, Chris Durdin.] Similarly attractive for its simplicity was *brown vetch* with its single crimson flower, set among the grass-like leaves that are unusual for members of the pea family. [David - common in the Spanish Pyrenees! Chris]

Other species were showier, such as bastard balm with its large, handsome pink flowers; tassel hyacinth, with its unusual top knot of bright purple flowers; sainfoin, that coloured whole hay meadows pink; and of course the field gladioli. A number still went unidentified, however, so there is still a challenge for future years.

David Brewster