



**FRANCE: 10-DAY WINGS AND WINE OF THE MIDI-
PYRENEES / LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON**

18 - 27 MAY 2018



Vineyard in the Languedoc

This trip takes us through the southern lowlands, foothills, Mediterranean shoreline, high Pyrenees, and forest woodlands of southern France. We'll get to grips with several classic species as well as some more sought-after species. We'll also have a chance to enjoy some fantastic food, wine and culture along the way.

Please note that the detailed itinerary below cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Itinerary (10 days/9 nights)

Day 1. Toulouse to Brugairolles

After we arrive in Toulouse and collect our vehicle, we will travel south to the town of Tarascon-sur-Ariège for a lunch stop. Here we can look up at the huge massif of Sinsat that overlooks the town. We may catch sight of our target here, **Griffon Vulture**, circling overhead.

After lunch we will walk along the river, looking for **White-throated Dipper**, **Grey** and **White Wagtail** along the rocky banks, and in the surrounding trees we might find **Spotted Flycatcher**, **Black Redstart**, and **Common Nightingale**. After our walk we will check the cliff face for **Griffon Vulture** and **Bearded Vulture**, along with **Alpine** and **European Swifts**. There is a chance for **Crag Martin**, **Red Kite**, **Red-billed Chough**, and **Egyptian Vulture** too.

From here we will continue northeast to the Domaine Gayda, where we stay among the vines and vineyards of this winery for most of our trip.

Overnight: Domaine Gayda, Brugairolles

Day 2. Domaine du Rey

We'll travel to our hosts' home this morning to bird the huge forests that surround their home. We'll enjoy the Pyrenees over breakfast, and from the garden we can enjoy **European Goldfinch**, **Common Greenfinch**, **Common Whitethroat**, **Red-backed Shrike**, and **Eurasian Skylark** in song flights, **Tree Pipit** and **Common Cuckoo** doing their clock song, and if lucky maybe a flyby of the elusive, though vocal **Eurasian Golden Oriole**.

Once fully awake and sated with the birds around us, we will walk the west side of the property along a paved road looking for **Common Chaffinch**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** in the oak woodland. We follow a trail to open, briery woodland that allows us a chance for **Melodious Warbler**, whose melodic, fast-phrased song will be a regular accompaniment to us. Along with this songster **Eurasian Blackcaps** will also chime in, with the cooing of **Common Wood Pigeon**, **European Turtle Dove**, and **Eurasian Collared Dove**. We may luck into other songsters in the pine woods at the end of this open area in the form of **Mistle** and **Song Thrushes**. These pine woods are also good for **European Robin**, **Common Firecrest**, **Common Blackbird**, and **Long-tailed Tit**. We will return to the house for lunch.

After lunch we'll take some time to lounge around the gardens and hope for a **Eurasian Hoopoe** or several different raptors to float by; we've had **Griffon Vulture**, **Montagu's Harrier**, **Golden Eagle**, and **Short-toed Snake Eagle** all fly over us on past tours. There is also a chance for **European Bee-eaters**, which rest on the wires waiting for their next meal to fly past.

In the late afternoon we will take a walk along a deciduous wood path to the lower fields and check along here for **Eurasian Golden Oriole**, whose charismatic song is often heard, but seldom is the bird seen sitting patiently in the tops of the green-leaved trees. We have a chance here for **Common Nightingale** and **Western Bonelli's Warbler**, and for **Wood** and **Willow Warblers** in the bushes lining the pathway as well.

After dinner at Domaine du Rey we will take a stroll at dusk to look for displaying **European Nightjar**, and, once dark, we will walk down to the forest to listen for **Tawny Owls** and possibly **Little Owl** before returning to Domaine Gayda for the night.

Overnight: Domaine Gayda, Brugairolles

Day 3. Pyrenees, L'Étang Soulcem

This morning we rise early to be up in the mountains with the first rays of morning sunshine. As we begin the steep climb towards our destination we will stop at a few pull-offs to check the mature woods for **Black Woodpecker** – though rare, they prefer this mature forest habitat.

We stop at the barrage lake, Soulcem, and hike the alpine pathway leading to Andorra. We park at the gates and walk along this track, hoping to see **Dunnock**, **Northern Wheatear**, and **Water Pipit** along with our main target, **Common Rock Thrush**. This is a popular place on weekends with local French hikers, and you can see why. The scenery overlooking the small lake here is stunning, being surrounded on both sides by snowcapped peaks and boulder-strewn fields. We may also find **Red-billed** and **Alpine Chough** here, circling in the brisk air above us, or a **Griffon Vulture** or two; we've also had **Bearded Vulture** here. We will have lunch here among the cool breezes and fresh mountain air before driving back slowly along this alpine road, checking for other species along the way, including **White-throated Dippers** in the fast-flowing stream that follows the road down to the valley below.

We then drive to Lannemezan for the night.

Overnight: Lannemezan

Day 4. Pyrenees

Our birding continues in the Pyrenees this morning, while driving up to Lac d'Oredon. The surrounding woodland, alpine meadows, and lake shores are great high-altitude areas to bird for species like **Golden Eagle**, **Bearded Vulture**, **Western Capercaillie**, **Grey Wagtail**, **Water Pipit**, **Black Redstart**, **Alpine Accentor**, and **Dunnock**. There is also a chance for **White-winged Snow Finch** – though rare, they are encountered here. In the pines we can check for **Coal Tit**, **European Crested Tit**, **Goldcrest**, **Red Crossbill**, **Eurasian Siskin**, **Citril Finch**, and others, while the skies above us are good for raptors like **Short-toed Snake Eagle**, **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, **European Honey Buzzard**, **Bearded Vulture**, and **Griffon Vulture**.

We drive back to Lannemezan for the night.

Overnight: Lannemezan

Day 5. Pyrenees: Plateau de Beille, transfer to the coast

Today we head up one of the mountain passes to Plateau de Beille, a ski resort, where we hope to do some high-altitude, pine forest birding, looking for our main target, **Ring Ouzel**. This bird can be elusive, so we will spend some time looking for it, but along with that we will hope to find **European Crested Tit**, **Citril Finch**, **Willow Ptarmigan**, vultures, **Short-toed Snake Eagle**, **Yellowhammer**, **Black Redstart**, **Mistle Thrush**, **Alpine** and **Red-billed Choughs**, **Alpine Accentor**, **Goldcrest**, and **Water** and **Tree Pipits**. Again the scenery is stunning here, and we have ample open spaces, as this is a ski resort with very few visitors during the spring months. This also means the trails are seldom traveled, allowing us

good opportunities to get close to the birds. It can be windy up at this altitude, so a windbreaker is a good idea. We have a packed lunch here, before we drive down and head for the coast.

We have about a three-hour drive with some stops along the way to check for birds, before we arrive in the late afternoon in Béziers. Here we will check the airport for our main target, **Little Bustard**. This family is confined to Africa and Eurasia and in decline across most of its range, with most species threatened with hunting and habitat destruction. We will spend about an hour checking for this bird, before we drive south toward Gruissan.

Once we arrive, we go to Port-la-Nouvelle to check from the jetty for **Yellow-legged** and **Mediterranean Gulls**. There is also opportunity for several tern species too.

We'll have dinner in Gruissan, where we will stay overnight along the coast.

Overnight: Gruissan

Day 6. Étang du Campagnol

The Étang du Campagnol is a brackish freshwater lake that supports reed beds and open water. We will start to the south, though, at the Étang de l'Ayrolle, which opens to the ocean and provides more looks at gulls and terns and also is the feeding grounds for **Grey Plover**, **Dunlin**, stints, and other shorebirds, including **Pied Avocet** and breeding **Kentish Plover**.

We move from here across the peninsula to check around the car park at Château-Bel-Evêque, where there are two lagoons providing feeding grounds for more shorebirds and possibly **Slender-billed Gull**. We check the garrigue (brush) for species like **Great Spotted Cuckoo** and **Eurasian Hoopoe**, along with warbler species like **Dartford**, **Subalpine** and **Sardinian Warblers**.

We then return to the entrance of the peninsula and check the open lagoons and marshes for **Grey** and **Purple Herons**, **Greater Flamingo**, and possibly **Eurasian Bittern**. The reed beds to the south of here are also a good place to check for **Bearded Reedling** and **Eurasian Penduline Tit**, plus **Moustached**, **Eurasian Reed**, **Great Reed**, and other reed-dwelling **Warblers** and a possible **Common Reed Bunting**. This area is also a haven for dragonflies and damselflies.

From the étang we head south to Cap Leucate, where there is a small population of **Spotless Starlings**; though not common, they are moving into the area from Morocco and Spain. The fish market is a good spot for them. There is also a small population of **Thekla Lark** just inland from the cliff face over the ocean to the north of town. This is the only population in France, so we will spend some time trying to sort them from the more common **Crested Lark**.

We will have lunch in either Gruissan or Port Leucate, depending on how the birding is going. We can check the waterfront in town for more seabirds while there.

We then retrace our steps back to Domaine Gayda and a leisurely evening dinner and rest.

Overnight: Domaine Gayda, Brugairolles

Day 7. Domaine des Oiseaux

Today we go to Le Domaine des Oiseaux. We head out early to the local wetlands to look for wetland and waterbirds like **Black-winged Stilt**, rails, bitterns and herons. We get a chance for **Western Marsh Harrier** and possibly a **Montagu's Harrier**. There is a chance for several marsh **Warblers** here too, like **Savi's**, **Sedge**, **Cetti's**, and **Moustached**, and **Eurasian** and **Great Reed Warblers**. We have a chance to see **White Storks** here too, and in the grassy verges next to the pond we hopefully can find **Cirl Bunting**.

We drive to Château de Camon, where we will have dinner. This converted castle in the French countryside has a lovely garden, where we might see **Common Blackbird**, **Eurasian Blue Tit**, and **European Serin**, along with some **Common Swifts**.

After dinner we head back to Domaine Gayda.

Overnight: Domaine Gayda, Brugairolles

Day 8. Black Mountains

Today we head to a different set of mountains, this time more open and planted with vineyards. Among the vines we hope to find **Woodchat Shrike, Woodlark, Blue Rock Thrush, Meadow Pipit**, finches, **Red-legged Partridge**, and passing raptors. The scenery is also fantastic here, presenting panoramas of the surrounding French countryside. A local expert will join us to talk to us about the organic farming he does up here and all the wildflowers that live in his vineyards, along with many butterflies and other insects. **Western Orphean Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, and Ortolan Bunting** have all been seen here.

We arrive back at Domaine Gayda in the late afternoon and can enjoy a glass of wine on the veranda, while taking in the evening birds around the winery.

Overnight: Domaine Gayda, Brugairolles

Day 9. Carcassonne

We head out early to bird along a river course, looking for **Cetti's, Sedge, and Savi's Warblers**, along with **Eurasian Wryneck** in a local orchard.

After birding here we continue to the castle town of Carcassonne. This ancient walled city was the site of many battles with Moors, English, and other foreign invaders. There are plenty of places to shop, and we'll delight in the local fare and quaint shops among the high walls and ancient buildings. We have lunch here and enjoy some afternoon shopping, before retracing our steps back to Domaine Gayda and the winery for our farewell dinner.

Overnight: Domaine Gayda, Brugairolles

Day 10. Departure

We will drive from Domaine Gayda early in the morning to catch our flights home from Toulouse.

Duration:	10 days
Group Size:	6
Date:	18 – 27 May 2018
Start:	Toulouse
End:	Toulouse
Price:	€3029 per person sharing
Single supplement:	€378

Price includes:

All meals
Lodging in gites (furnished cottages) and hotels
Transportation in a 9-passenger van

Price excludes:

International flights
Drinks (except at meals)
Alcoholic beverages
Personal and travel insurance
Personal expenses such as gifts