

French Alps, Carmargue and Pyrenees trip April 26th to May 5th 2005.

Josh and I left on the Eurostar on Tuesday April 26th arriving in Calais 35 minutes later. The intention was to stay for 12 nights – an overnight stop at Dijon before heading down for a further 4 nights in Arles to explore the Carmargue/Crau/Cevvenes eventually ending off the trip in the French Pyrenees. However – this itinerary changed somewhat due to circumstances, which will be revealed in due course. This being only my second ever trip abroad and my first south of mid-France to say the experience exceeded all expectations would be an understatement of huge proportions!! I was constantly amazed by the birding and scenery on offer - something that will come across in this probably very long, boring and totally self-indulgent trip report I am about to write. If you nod off at any point I apologise in advance. If you haven't been to the places I am about to write about then make preparations to go – if you have been already as I'm sure many of you have then go again ... its fantastic.

Day 1: Calais – Dijon; Tuesday 26th April.

Arrived in France at 5.30pm French time, stopping off at Calais for the first of many fill ups of cheap French diesel. Around the surrounding grass verges and fences there were quite a few Wheatear and a single Whinchat. A second stop about an hour down the road turned up lots of bits and pieces. Blackcaps, 3 Turtle Doves, lots of White Wags and the first Common Buzzard were noted. A gleaming red Ferrari Testarossa was parked in the services ... always nice to see a Ferrari even if it's an old one. I wandered up for closer inspection ... wow they are very nice! Two hours or so down the road and the heavens opened as they always seem to do in northern France when we pass through there and didn't stop until we arrived at our digs. This horrible weather didn't stop a Kite sp. from drifting over the motorway ... pretty sure it was a Red Kite but views were quite poor even though the bird was quite close?? Not to worry as there were surely plenty more where He came from later on in the trip? We spent the night in the Formule 1 hotel in Dijon ... cheap and cheerful as ever.

Day 2: Dijon – Nice; Wednesday 27th April.

We awoke early to heavy rain though this eventually abated the further we drove south turning into the most beautiful weather imaginable – clear blue skies with white fluffy cumulous cloud. In Dijon there were lots of Nightingales singing (obviously as they are everywhere in France) plus on a slip road near the hotel about 10 Wheatears flitted down the road in front of the car. We blasted off down the motorway at top speed stopping at the odd likely looking spot after we reached Lyon which was the first spot where the weather was good enough to start spotting the odd birdie or two. It was around the big river valley that we first started picking up raptors off the side of the road – 5 circling Black Kites closely followed by many more – the odd Buzzard and Red Kite, thousands upon thousands of Swifts and Hirundines plus the first goodie of the day – a Night Heron which flew across the road between two lakes. Excellent! Soon we started picking up the odd Serin and as we neared higher ground down near the Alps – lots of Ravens, both Kites, Buzzards etc. We stopped at a likely looking spot in the Alps immediately picking up a distant Golden Eagle being continually harassed by a Raven. I don't know what was more exciting – the Eagle or the scenery as both were spectacular!! The nicest place I've ever been in my whole life. A surprise turned up in the shape of a circling Black Stork just flying around along the side of the road. What a place ... what a place!! Ever onward ... and upward for that matter the pace was unrelenting. As we neared Barcelonette we noticed a small service station on one of the higher roads. Eager to jump out of the car wherever I could by this time – I almost crippled myself when an Alpine swift flew past the car window on a very steep and stony road. Josh – not realising I had slipped off my shoes drove off towards the services leaving me to walk the 2-300 metres in my socks over what felt like a bed of nails on the old tootsies. As for the Swift ... it had disappeared leaving me furious and in agony. As I stood there in the middle of the road a Short-toed Eagle flew into view and started performing right overhead. I broke into a run (in my socks remember) hoping to get views through the telescope, which was in the back of the car 100 yards away. Josh finally noticing my furious gesticulating drove towards me – the scope was erected and we both had stunning views of the bird. Josh isn't into birds but I felt even He was slightly interested??? Well on a scale of 1 – 10 He probably reached a one and a half? Anyway – another Short-toed showed in the same area plus the Alpine swift returned with about 5 of his mates giving awesome views down to about 30-40 feet overhead! I've only ever seen one Alpine Swift before – a long-range telescope view at Pegwell. This was different class. After 10 mins of glee we moved on. Forgive me my ecstasy ... I'm not all that well

travelled and Alpine Swifts are as rare as Pete Forrests* hair locally!! (*Our lovable follically-challenged local nature warden) Down into the river valley I came across 2 Woodlark, more Alpine Swifts, 2 more Short-toed Eagles, Ravens, Alpine Chough etc plus some probable, distant Crag Martins? On a sunny slope on the side of some high ground we stopped to look at eagle specie, which flew though the deep valley below. The eagle escaped identification though in retrospect it was almost certainly another Short-toed (??) but there were some very close Ravens here and quite a few Bonelli's Warblers calling and singing in some small pines on slope above where we had parked the car. I wish I had given these birds more time as for the rest of the trip I never actually got crippling views of Bonelli's which I wrongly assumed would be a gimme in some of the other spots we were yet to visit. I did see a couple flitting in the trees but was too eager to move on ... a big mistake as it turned out. On the approach to Italy (on the mountain road to Cuneo which is just south of Turin) we stopped off – very high up on the snow line. Another Short-toed Eagle flew towards us and started hovering/hanging so close that if Short-toed's had eyelashes I would have been able to count them! On the grassy wet slopes there were lots of Water Pipits, a few Yellowhammers, a single "Alpestris" Ring Ouzel (which I flushed at close range and didn't get the views I would have wanted unfortunately) and eventually 2 stunning Rock Buntings, which gave me the run around for 5 frustrating minutes. Further round towards the Italian border there were quite a few more Rock Buntings right on the side of the road - I didn't even have to get out of the car – talk about one extreme to the other. We wasted quite a bit of time driving into Italy – we didn't have a map, don't speak the lingo and took the wrong turning 47 times!! We stopped for fuel – an episode all in itself. The rather irate pigeon English speaking Italian pump attendant nearly blew a gasket when we couldn't get it through to him how much diesel we wanted. Mamma mia!! We waved a 10-euro note in his face which shut Him up long enough for us to make our rather embarrassed escape. In Italy we saw very little – a few Serins, the occasional mid range raptor (Buzzard/Kite ... I was already ignoring them!) plus a Hooded Crow near the town centre in Cuneo! Bizarre! Then things started to go wrong. We only decided to "tick off" Italy as it's close to one of my most desired of all destinations – namely Monaco. I wanted to drive the Formula 1 circuit and see a few posh cars and the like. Unfortunately we never made it. Getting lost in Italy meant the daylight was slipping away rapidly. After arriving above Monaco (I've seen it but not been there) we started following the Monaco signs before arriving at a four-way junction with no further Monaco directions. We guessed wrongly and ended up heading towards Nice, which was where we had a reservation booked in one of the local Etap hotels. We decided to drop the stuff off in the hotel before driving back along the coast into Monaco for a night visit. This too was disastrous, as we couldn't find the hotel. Then when we saw it we couldn't find the right road to get to it. We drove around the one-way system three times until finally we found the very minor road this very large hotel was situated upon. Josh went in to book in and while I unloaded the vast amount of luggage onto the pavement outside. After what seemed like an age – Josh came walking down towards me with the infuriating news that we were at the wrong hotel!! I had forgotten there are 2 Etap Hotels in Nice and we had been unlucky once again. It was getting very late and we had been driving all day. I reloaded the mountain of luggage and we made our way to the right hotel, which as luck had it we found after only a few wrong turns. Guess what – it was shut!! We drove back to the first Hotel – with Josh just about ready to give the bloke there a piece of his mind. It transpired that you could book in by punching your hotel booking number into the locked door – so back we went through miles of bumper-to-bumper traffic, drunks and roadside prostitutes. The sight of a transvestite prostitute getting into one of the local perverts cars while we stuck in traffic right next to him almost made me vomit!! What a dump. We eventually re-found the hotel and decided to leave Monaco for another day. The room as it happened was alright – but just to put a tin hat on it there was only one bed even though we had booked a double bedded room and there was no-one around to change it. A very bad end to an otherwise spectacular day.

Day 3: Nice to the Carmargue ... hoorah! Thursday 28th April.

After the vigour of the previous day I was surprised to awake very early. It may have been due to the excitement of heading towards the Carmargue or maybe just because I wanted to get away from flippin Nice! Not exactly my cup of tea is the Cote d'Azur lets say. We had a drive around behind the town where I found a few Pallid Swifts before trying the beach in the hopes of seeing a Yelkouan Shearwater, which can be seen there during the winter months especially. Lots of vismig going on with 1000's of Hirundines pouring east along the beach and out over the Mediterranean Sea. There were also quite a lot of Common Terns, two 2nd summer Med Gulls and 100's of yellow-legged Gulls but unfortunately no Shearwaters. I watched for about three-quarters of an hour but saw naff all seabird wise. Conditions didn't look good in truth – flat calm and 27 degrees I'm afraid. We left driving

through some very interesting typical Mediterranean habitat. Lots of raptors (mainly Black Kites) plus what were obviously the odd eagle – not easy to identify at 80 mph! Mind you I did see a Woodchat Shrike plus what was almost certainly a perched pale phase Booted or a Bonelli's Eagle? We stopped a few times before we arrived at the Carmargue seeing Dartford and Sardinian Warblers around the local service stations where there were more Kites than was imaginable. Before long we arrived at the Carmargue – passing through the Crau on the way into town. Swallowtail is a garden butterfly in this part of France! A few stop offs turned up lots of Mediterranean Gulls, the occasional Fan-tailed Warbler, 20 Cattle Egrets etc but not all that much if I'm honest. I had a quick read of Croziers "A birdwatching guide to France south of the Loire" and decided to try a spot close to where we had ended up on the Petite Carmargue just south of St-Giles. Just off the main road an immature Bonelli's eagle drifted over giving stunning views as it sauntered off into the distance. I wasn't expecting to see Bonelli's here. Down towards the river – and within five minutes of getting out of the car I had seen Woodchat Shrike, quite a few Fan-tailed Warblers and there were Purple Herons flying around here there and everywhere. Around the shallow pools there were quite a few Black-winged Stilts, Greenshanks also 40+ Wood Sandpipers, Little Egrets etc plus a frustratingly brief glimpse of a Squacco Heron – a bird I particularly wanted to see. After popping back into Arles to book into the Hotel, eat etc we popped back to the same spot as earlier in the day with a view of perhaps seeing the Squacco Heron from earlier also in hope of seeing the Night Heron roost which takes place there in the evening. I picked a spot on a bridge over the river set up the scope and waited. On one of the shallower pools the (or another) Squacco Heron showed really well plus the hoped for Night Heron roost turned up about 20 birds with groups of up to 8 birds flying in. Other stuff that evening was: c20 Cattle Egret, 1 Great-white Egret, c12 Little Egret, c15 sightings of Purple Heron, c5 Marsh Harriers, 1 male Montagu's Harrier, 1 Hobby, perhaps 100 Mediterranean Gull plus there was a Tawny Owl calling in the distance when we left. That night we popped into the old city of Arles where there is a Roman amphitheatre plus other relics.

Day 4: Carmargue – The Crau; Friday 29th April.

Up first thing and headed for St-Maries De-La-Mer hoping for migrants and Spectacled Warbler. The weather was a bit frustrating early on as there was a thick mist over much of the area, which didn't clear properly until I got back in the car many hours later to leave the area. I walked out into the salt marsh and a few miles eastward along the digue. Immediately I started picking up birds – a few Crested Larks, 2 Tawny Pipit, Short-toed Lark plus quite a few Sardinian Warblers, Fan-tailed Warbler and relatively quickly the hoped for Spectacled Warbler. There were some nice "shreeping" Yellow Wagtails which to all intents and purposes looked like Grey-headed Wagtails but I still haven't sorted out exactly what race they were. The mist was causing problems in some of the more long-range places and some of the wading birds must have been overlooked. That said there were plenty of common Waders and Flamingo's on view. Further along the digue there were lots of Kentish Plovers plus 30+ Little Stints, a few Curlew Sandpipers and the scrubby bushes turned up quite a few Pied Flycatchers, the odd Spotted Flycatcher, Redstart, Black Redstart, Tree Pipit plus amongst the commoner Terns I had what must have been a Gull-billed Tern fly overhead though I heard it rather better than I could see it unfortunately. Amongst the Gulls at least 20 Slender-billed Gulls plus a stunning Bee-eater flew past at one point. Other Sardinian plus a single Spectacled Warbler were seen during the long walk back. The weather was boiling hot – we went to get some grub before heading off to St-Martin-de Crau to pick up a permit so we could visit the Peau De Meau reserve on the Crau. On the way back I saw a White Stork sitting in a nest on a tall pole outside a farmhouse plus there was a Gull-billed Tern hawking over one of the fields on the roadside – a right result, as it's a bird I've been trying to see locally for many years. Doubly enjoyable given I had a probable fly over my head earlier the same morning. After getting the 2-day permit (6 euro for 2 people) we decided to go and have a quick look so we could find the place the following day for the planned visit. This turned out to be a very good decision as it happened. On arrival I set up my telescope in the car park and had a few scans. 50 plus Kites were circling around plus there were some larger things in amongst the Kites in the distance – 2 Short-toed Eagles plus an Egyptian Vulture my first ever Vulture...very nice. There were 3 birders in the car park who at first I thought were French birders as their car had French number plates. However I was sure at one point they were speaking English? In the end I spoke to them and it turned out they were from Norfolk. They had seen Wallcreeper at Les Baux earlier in the week plus a Booted Eagle on the reserve and a Roller about half a mile down the road on the telegraph wires earlier in the day. I took directions and shot off finding the bird immediately sitting on the top of a leafless bush right along the side of the road. In a right panic I got out of the car, set up the scope when it spotted me and flew out of sight around the corner. I ran to the point that I thought it would have gone to but there was no sign and

for what seemed like ages there was no sign of it whatsoever. I ended up walking about 3-400+ yards down the road but it had hopped it. I walked back to the car and there it was – it jumped up off the floor, hovered slightly before diving into a bush before flying up onto the wires opposite us with something in its beak. I could hardly believe it ... a stunning thing. 2 Jackdaws eventually started mobbing it on its perch and they ended up chasing it off into the distance. I carried on scanning for some time but it didn't return. Whilst I was scanning I picked up what was presumably the Booted Eagle from earlier. I also heard a Hoopoe calling but couldn't see it plus what looked like an immature Lesser Kestrel – a male bird which no matter how I tried I couldn't see the blue panel on the upper wing. I was sure it was a Lesser Kestrel as it showed every other feature. The day got even better. In the evening we drove around all the shallow water spots/fields in the middle of the marsh. No new birds were seen that we hadn't had in the previous two days until we found a tall platform on the side of one of the minor roads where there were a group of Italians going absolutely berserk over a group of nearby Flamingo's. From this vantage point there were a few Wood Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilts and a pair of Red-crested Pochards but little else really. 3 French birders turned up and we started yakking (In English – my French is appalling) they told me there were 3 Collared Pratincoles seen 3 days back in an area where they had seen a Pratincole and all three Marsh Tern 2 days previous. I urgently asked for directions – and they offered to show us the spot. How decent of them. We followed them for about a mile around a road further along where we were greeted by loads of Whiskered Terns flying about in-between the 2 pools on either side of the road! Amongst the c150 Whiskered Terns were 2 Squacco plus all the normal candidates but no Pratincoles though a flock of 8 Night Herons flew overhead soon after we arrived. There was another bonus when the very helpful French lady found a White-winged Black-Tern sitting in amongst a load of Whiskered's. Unfortunately we were in a bit of a hurry as I had promised Josh we would go to Nimes in the late evening and the time was getting on so I didn't see the bird in flight. We did shoot a few hundred yards further along the road to see the 2 Stone Curlews the French birders told us were hanging about near some radio aerials (which took about 2 minutes) before heading off to Nimes. Nimes was awful – a large town with yet another Roman amphitheatre but on the way back we heard a Scop's Owl calling from some trees on an industrial estate on the outskirts of the town. What a day.

Day 5: Les Baux, La Caume and The Crau.

I fancied trying for the Wallcreeper at Les Baux though there was a bit of a problem as I had forgotten where the Norfolk birders said they had seen it such was my haste to dash off to see the Roller the day previous. What a twit. I remember they said it was at the entrance to somewhere ... but that was it! I decided to go anyway. I heard a couple of Golden Orioles calling from the car window on the drive there plus all the other usual stuff that by then I was getting used to. I also spotted a stunning male Red-backed Shrike sitting on a fence along the roadside. Les Baux is a fantastic place regardless of the birds. Lots of Black Redstarts plus Crag Martins and Alpine Swifts were flying about on arrival. We went up to the highest drivable peak after a quick look around the 2 main car parking spots. To cut a long story short in the next hour or so I came across 2 male Blue Rock Thrushes, a few Subalpine Warblers, Crested Tits etc. I decided to give up on the Wallcreeper as it was like looking for a very small needle in a very big haystack and headed off up the road towards La Caume to try for all the Les Baux stuff plus Bonelli's Eagle, Egyptian Vulture etc. It was a long walk up to the radar station where we were told is the spot to go and we saw very little on the way up there through the wooded areas other than a few Crested and Coal Tits plus some frustrating glimpses of the odd Subalpine Warbler even though they were very easy to hear. It was 30 degrees and I was extremely tired and I gave up on going up right to the top – stopping about 500 metres lower down where there were good views of one side of the valley. Quite a few Alpine Swifts and Crag Martins were dashing around overhead plus we had 3 Short-toed Eagles and brief views of adult Bonelli's Eagle during the couple of hours we were up there recovering from the heat and the walk. I also could hear Blue Rock Thrush and at last had very good views of a male Subalpine Warbler, which allowed me to scope it singing its head off on the top of a small pine opposite us. I must have heard about 20 before I had decent views of them. There were some fantastic insects up there too – I will have to do a bit of homework before I can say what many of them were. Some of the Hornets were enormous - bigger and much fatter than the British things.

I spent mid afternoon until dark at the Peau de Meau reserve on the Crau as I knew I would only have one go at the area before my permit and time in the area ran out. I was completely shot away – all the birding, lack of sleep and heat had really taken its toll on me. I really didn't fancy a long walk so I ended up walking about half a mile out into the reserve along the main path leading off from the car park. I had about 5 hours before Josh picked me up and I think if I had spent that much time wandering around too much I would have passed out! I needn't have worried, as the birding was once again,

spectacular. I hate to think just how many Kites there were in the area. There is a rubbish tip across the way and there are scavengers everywhere. I counted 70 Kites (too distant for distinction between Black and Red though the vast majority are Black's) sitting on one length of fence around the tip and there were still lots more flying around. Although I didn't see any Eagles soaring about there were 2 White Storks milling about across the reserve soon after I arrived. Other than the soaring birds for about half an hour I had the impression there wasn't much going on. Eventually I spotted a few Short-toed Larks plus a pair of Stone Curlews and for a while I was hot and a bit bored! I kept hearing this funny call seemingly coming from the short grass immediately in front of me. For about 10 minutes I would hear it every now and then before it dawned on me the wind was carrying the sound from much further away and scanning soon had the expected neck, black collar sticking out of the grass a couple of hundred yards off. That said it was still a bit unbelievable when I spotted the Little Bustard out on the plain. As the afternoon/evening wore on the bird started calling more and more and could be seen on and off for a few hours. There were either two birds or they hold quite a big territory? The bird could be seen calling and the sound didn't hit me for a millisecond after. The odd Lesser Kestrel was knocking about, plus I saw 2 Tawny Pipits, 2-3 Hoopoes, and after hearing an unbelievably weird call a Calandra Lark flew within about 20 yards right past me showing every feather. So much for a place with no birds. Next I spotted a stunning male Red-footed Falcon flying around taking insects with 2 Lesser Kestrels – it flew right across the path immediately ahead of me before loitering for a few minutes – showing every feather. Later on 4 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew in and landed in the grass to my right!! Crazy. During one of my wanders up towards the canal there were 2 Magpies mobbing something in the bushes in the distance. I hastily plonked the scope on the floor and there sitting in amongst a line of small bushes was a Great-spotted Cuckoo!! Double crazy!! It disappeared down behind the hawthorns or whatever the bushes were and I didn't see it again. The 4 Sandgrouse I had seen earlier on were in silhouette which although wasn't perfect was still quite exciting as I really didn't think I had a chance of seeing any at all. Later on perfection – 5 more in perfect light and quite a bit closer did the same thing – flew low over the grassland before landing out of sight. Just to put the tin hat on it later on I saw 2 more in good light!! As the sun started to go down I had really good views of a male Lesser Kestrel sitting reasonably close on top of one of the Crau's many piles of stones and a few Little Owls started to appear out of the derelict buildings nearby. The air was full of the calls of the many Stone Curlews that had gone unseen during the daylight and 1000+ Yellow-Legged Gulls landed out on the grassy plains – then the Stone Curlews started to show – some right out on the main path. I found a big puddle on the main path that had some pigeon sized footmarks showing in the soft mud. I was hoping this was where the Sandgrouse came to drink so I spent the rest of the session (into darkness) within scoping distance of the puddle, though nothing happened while I was there. On my way back to get picked up a Savi's Warbler was reeling away down near the car park and on the drive home we caught the reflection of an big orange pair of eyes sitting in the road ahead of us – it flew off at the last minute ... a Nightjar!! What an end to a day.

Day 6: Carmargue – Destet; Sunday 1st May.

My last day in the Carmargue – though I was tempted to give it another day I really wanted to go to see the Vultures down in the Cevenne on the way to the Pyrenees. I decided to start off at the place where I saw all the Marsh Terns 2 days back – hoping for flight views of the White-winged Black or if I was lucky a Pratincole? There was also a reliable spot for Caspian Tern on the way down. Anyway – no Caspian Terns but there were 3 stunning Collared Pratincoles hawking over the road before I got out of the car and later on similar views of a or the White-winged Black Tern! The Pratincoles were spectacular - flying around for 10 – 15 minutes as I stood in the road. Amazing things. Also while I was there – booming Bittern, flight views of Little Bittern, lots of Purple Heron, about 5 Scua Herons, a few Cattle and Little Egrets, 20-30 Red-crested Pochard (flushed by a Marsh Harrier) 100's Flamingo's, half a dozen Marsh Harrier, adult male Montagu's Harrier, 30+ Black-winged Stilts, 2 Curlew Sandpiper, 3 Green Sandpiper, 5 Wood Sandpiper, 12 Ruff, lots Med/Yellow-legged Gulls, 10 Black Tern, c30 Whiskered Tern, good flight views of Gull-billed Tern, 1 Hoopoe, 10+ Fan-tailed Warbler, 2-3 Great Reed Warblers, stunning male Golden Oriole plus half reasonable views of at least 1 Moustached Warbler – I think there was 1 singing from the reed beds too but there are so many Nightingales calling it's difficult to hear properly most of the time. There were also a few Coypu there too. We did make a trip out into the countryside the other side of St-Giles to a Cirl Bunting site, which we found within 2 minutes of turning up! At least 2 birds there on the roadside. In the late afternoon while in Arles I stated looking at some of the Kites soaring over the town seeing another White Stork flying over. In the evening we drove down to what was described as “a reliable site for eagle Owl.” Surely I couldn't end the day off with an Eagle Owl? We drove back towards Les Baux to Destet where

up to 5 birds have been seen. We arrived about half an hour before dark and after picking a spot started listening. Eagle Owls call mainly in the winter apparently so chances were seemingly slim? Not to worry I thought ... I've had a smashing few days – still wanted to see one though of course. There were Subalpine Warblers calling in the scrub probably Dartford Warbler too – but I didn't want to get distracted from the prize bird. After 10 minutes one called to our right!! I scanned furiously around the tall cliffs that surrounded us – then “there it is!!” I said. It was sitting right on top of the cliff in full view. The light was good enough to see its eyes and breast streaking (well just about) and I started trying to mimic its call – it didn't call back but every time I got the tone roughly right its head would whiz around – reminding me of when I used to call my dog when He couldn't see me but I could see him! My calls were echoing off the cliffs and not once did it look in our direction. It was slightly humerous ... but wow an Eagle Owl!! Just goes to show how much a bit of local info comes in handy. Without it I surely wouldn't have seen Roller, Pratincoles etc or this Owl? It flew at one point – landing a bit closer. We watched it until the light got too poor – while the air was full of Nightingale and Nightjar calls. I heard a bird calling, which may have been Wryneck here too? What an end to our Carmargue journey.

Day 7: Arles to the Cevenne; Monday 2nd May.

We left Arles in the morning and headed off towards the Cevenne to see the Griffon and Black Vultures that reside there. I was slightly apprehensive as the weather had cooled down quite a bit and for much of the day it was cloudy with the odd spot or two of light rain. By late morning we were deep into the area and at the first likely looking spot I saw a few Griffons overhead from the car window. We parked and I set up the scope, seeing 6-8 Griffons flying around a high plateau and off out of sight. There was also a Short-toed Eagle there, the first Honey Buzzard of the trip plus the obligatory Ravens, Kites etc. There were also a few Serins singing in the general area (we'd been seeing and hearing quite a few on the drive down) and I heard Bonelli's Warbler singing too. A French chap cycled up to me and asked me in English (presumably he's clocked the car number plate?) what I was looking at. It transpired He was one of the people instrumental in the reintroduction of the Vultures into the area many years ago. He proudly told me how He had kept the first Griffon Vulture in His cellar almost 30 years ago – also what a resounding success the whole project had been. They had tried the same with Capercaillie and Hazel Grouse in the past with limited success. He told me a good spot to see Beaver just up the road too. A very amiable bloke. We drove around to the centre of the area where they have a viewing platform and telescopes set up for the general public. (An area I obviously avoided!) There were lots of Griffons in the gorge (c100?) plus every now and then a Black Vulture would fly into view – one bird in particular flew extremely close and landed in a tree opposite, which was absolutely fantastic. On the way down we stopped off at every likely looking spot getting amazing views of Red-billed Chough, Crag Martin, Raven, Dipper, Subalpine Warbler and the like. There were a few more Short-toed Eagles seen plus probable views of a Golden Eagle? I think it was here that a Scarce Swallowtail tried a few times to land on me? The intention was to stay for a couple of night before hitting the Pyrenees but as we had not yet sorted out any accommodation and I had seen lots of Vultures which was the main reason for coming here in the first place we decided on the spur of the moment to head off to the Pyrenees in the evening. A shame really as it is a magnificent place with lots of good birds. Hopefully I will get back there one day? On the drive out we came across the new bridge just outside Pau – what a thing that is! It crosses the river valley and is higher than the Eiffel Tower. We stopped to take a few photos coming across a few Subalpine Warblers and 1 or 2 Melodious Warblers quite near to the road. We spent the night in the Premiere Classe Hotel in Albi. The following morning I saw a Night Heron fly past the hotel window!

Day 8: Albi to the Pyranees; Tuesday May 3rd.

The day dawned – another cloudy affair, not perfect conditions for mountain birding as when we got near to the Pyranees some of the higher peaks were out of sight up in thick cloud. Still lots of birds were seen on the drive down – lots of roadside raptors plus lots of singing Serins and Black Redstarts virtually all over the place. Although we were heading towards Gavarnie we decided to drive there via the Ossau Valley, which proved to be a mistake as the roads were impassable high up. Up near the snow line there we came across lots of passerines – Wheatears, Water Pipits, Black Redstarts, White Wagtails, Hirundines plus what was probably an Alpine Accentor which I only briefly glimpsed before it flew off out of view. The long, slow drive back to Gavarnie took its toll on us both and I started entertaining the idea of going home for some reason? We took the decision to give it one night then see how we both felt in the morning. We had planned to stay in France for another 5 nights you see. A few

Griffon Vultures started to appear also long-range views of Lammergeier plus singles of Short-toed and Golden Eagle - good numbers of Crag Martin, Alpine Chough etc. Near Gavarnie I saw 3 Citril Finches which flew across in front of me plus a group of what I assume were 4 migrant Honey Buzzards which disappeared out of view as I tried to set my scope up after jumping out of the car. We decided to stop at a hotel in Gavarnie village (37€ per night we were told but somehow when we received the bill the following day it had gone up to 46€ somehow??) so we booked in and had a walk around in the late afternoon/evening. A spectacular adult Lammergeier flew around from the Hotel car park landing on the cliff right behind us. We didn't see too much else birdwise other than a big group of Alpine Chough, Crag Martin, Black Redstarts, Treecreeper, Crested and Coal Tits etc so we went into the Logis Hotel to get some grub and find out if we could get access to a television for the Champion League semi final between Chelsea (boo hiss) and Liverpool F.C. (Hoorah!!) We had to wait for the Chef to turn up, which took ages - and we missed almost the entire first half of the football. The meal was superb however ... Snails, Duck (If you don't like duck - your jolly well stuck) followed by Crème Brûlée ... scrumptious. The football was both tense and hilarious. Somehow Liverpool hung on to their one goal advantage and scraped through - and the hilarity came from the banter we had with a Man Utd fan (from north Kent) who obviously wanted Liverpool out of the competition. I really don't know what the French bar staff made of it - I tried to keep cool but it just proved impossible and when after 6 minutes extra time - 6 minutes ... where did the ref get 6 minutes from??) of action filled, back to the walls action by my beloved Liverpool - we held out - the final whistle went, the Utd fan shook my hand wished me well and we left ... euphoric wouldn't have been an overstatement as to my state of mind. A surreal experience as we wandered out into the alpine night. There were lots of moths on the well light wall of our Hotel. Annoyingly they were mainly things I catch at home like Common Quaker, Hebrew Character and what I think was a Clouded Drab? (Though it looked a bit small) There was however a middle sized Geo resembling Mallow Moth? (Mallow is an autumn Moth in Britain) My nights sleep in the hotel was appalling. Firstly the excitement of the match meant I was overly awake for about 2 hours then a flippin Black Redstart started singing outside in the middle of the night and kept on waking me up!! It sounded as if it was in the room with us! They must be like our local Robins - if they are near a light they sing! I swear if I had access to a brick I would have taken a pot shot at it!

Day 9: Gavarnie; Wednesday May 4th.

After an awful nights sleep - the alarm went off at 6.00am (still dark in France) I got my gear together and wandered out in the half light for the long walk towards the Cirque-de-Gavarnie via the Bouchero pass. I felt really bad - my legs ached, I was tired and enthusiasm was generally low. I made a great effort to get to the snow covered Mountaintop in the hopes of Snow Finch and Alpine Accentor but I just ran out of energy and gave up. I walked up into the Cirque before returning via the riverbank. Very few birds about though I did see Crested Tits, lots of Coal Tits, about 10 Tree Pipits plus, a Citril Finch perched in a tall Pine plus all the normal corvids/Hirundines/raptors. There were 2 very approachable Dippers on my arduous walk back to the hotel. The weather was slightly better than the previous day - still overcast in the main so I decided to drive as high as we could go and give it a final go for some speciality birds. We ended up driving up to the Ski Station near the Hotel - we had already established that the road was still blocked with snow but went for it anyway. On the way up - a few Griffons then an adult Lammergeier flew into the valley below us then a real prize ... a male Rock Thrush right next to the car on the side of the road. What a bird! Stunning. I gingerly got out of the car and set the scope up - it flew but not too far away singing its head off. I heard that Rock Thrush has the reputation of being quite a shy creature. This one wasn't - it performed until I got fed up with looking at it. As I was watching it a funny looking Black Redstart flew out of sight behind a rock. It looked too big for a Black Redstart - it flew again and was in fact a female Rock Thrush. We carried on until we arrived at the snow line near the deserted Ski Station. There were lots of birds here - c50 Water Pipits, Black Redstarts all over the place, lots of Alpine Chough and as I walked up towards the snow line on the main road - a few Rock Buntings mingled in amongst the myriads of Black Redstarts, Wheatear etc. There were also a few Marmots here - seemingly oblivious to my presence along the side of the snow covered road. Earlier I had seen what I wrongly assumed to be a Chamois on the top of one of the gorges. They had a mounted head back in the hotel of the same species so I enquired as to exactly what it was? I was told they are Issar (exact spelling unknown) very nice things - far better wandering around on the top of the gorge than a mounted head on the wall of a hotel anyway. Apparently Chamois are only found in the Alps. On getting back to the car we made the definite decision to start making tracks home. In truth I had had enough ... it had been marvellous but I was out on my feet. As we drove out of the Pyrenees on the way home there were quite a few Griffon Vultures on the cliffs

which were not very high up and near mass human habitation which surprised me. The drive home was going well. We decided to drive as far as we could (it was well into the afternoon when we left and the roads are very slow until you get well away from the Pyrenees) hoping to find a hotel half way back towards England. Josh, who was doing all the driving – had slept long into mid morning and was now feeling fresh as a daisy. He mentioned trying to drive home in one go, which seemed a distinct possibility the longer the journey went on. We ended up driving all night – making fantastic time eventually arriving in time to just about catch the 5.38am train!! How I stayed awake was anyone's guess? We saw a rather spectacular tornado about 115km outside Calais which reached right up into the sky ... ive never seen anything like it. We put the radio on to try and see if it being reported but heard nothing. (Still haven't 2 days on) I must admit to thinking I may have imagined it as I was almost to the point of exhaustion. That said we both saw it. On the drive up we saw a few bits. During one of the fuel stops Josh went to buy 4 cups of coffee (we were drinking loads of it in a vain attempt to keep awake) and I started seeing a few Kites going over (nothing new there of course) – both Red and Black's. Anyway I spotted what appeared to be a funny looking Black Kite flying towards where we were stopped – head on views at first – then it started showing a white belly ... it banked and was in fact a Booted Eagle! Oops! Other bits included a Crested Lark and surprisingly the only Corn Buntings I saw during the whole trip at the same service station. The drive back into Calais took about 13 hours which I didn't think was too bad considering we got stuck in a couple of long contra flows during the journey and made quite a few stops. Mind you we were not hanging about – we overtook a Ferrari 355 at one point ... pulling up alongside him for a better look before we sped off into the darkness. Ferrari 355 ... pah! After the 35-minute train journey and the drive back into Ramsgate from Folkestone we had covered 2966 miles. The sight of Thanet made me feel ill ... what a horrible place it is. 14/15 hours previous we had been in Gavarnie and now we were back in concrete land. A wave of depression washed over me, which didn't go until I had woken up in bed later on in the day. Back to the daily grind folks. Over and out

Phil.