

French Trip: December 24th – 29th 2004.

We left on the Eurostar at 7.40pm on Christmas Eve – arriving in Calais 35 minutes later. An experience all on its own I can tell you. We were heading for the Lac du Der Chantecoq two and a half hours east of Paris in the hope of catching up with all the local Cranes/Wildfowl/Woodpeckers etc plus the exciting prospect of seeing a few White-tailed Eagles. We intended to spend 3 days there before checking out a few of the sites on the Normandy/Channel coast for 2 days on the way home. We had pre-booked a room in Saint Dizier for the second and third nights of the trip – we decided to rough it in the car for the first night at the lake after the overnight drive.

The weather was raining when we left Ramsgate and slightly windy. This did nothing however to prepare us for what was going on in France – it was appalling! Gale force winds and driving, torrential rain slowed us down for the first half of the drive. The rain was so heavy at times on the motorway that we were forced to drive at about 40 mph! We could hardly see at all. After a couple of hours the weather abated – it stopped raining and I saw my first French bird – a Tawny Owl which flew across one of the wooded minor roads about an hour away from “Du Der”. After a few stops on the way, successfully getting through two toll roads (15 and 2.5 euros respectively) and a quick drive around Saint Dizier we pulled up in the car park of the “Site De Chantecoq/Observatoire” at 2.30am French time. (1.30am English time) We tried to get our heads down for some kip but it proved more or less impossible. Trying to sleep in the front seat of a Peugeot 205 when your 6’5” is no mean feat. At some time before dawn the rain/sleet started to pour down the wind picked up again and there was no way I was going to be able to sleep. I tried having a read by torchlight to pass the time – then I remember thinking its only about one and a half hours to daylight (about 6.30) then before I knew it a shotgun going off in the distance woke me up with a start and it was daylight! I hurriedly jumped out of the car and tried to change my training shoes for my walking boots, set up my telescope etc which was extremely hard as there was so much going on. The weather was now flat calm and it had stopped raining, which was a bonus. Literally 1000’s of Cranes and lots of Geese were either flying about or sitting around off the edges of the lake. I dashed up to a viewpoint (talking to myself continually!) where there were as well as the Cranes/Geese lots of Ducks (mainly Teal/Shoveler/Mallard) and Cormorants. Too much for me to take in really. A Lesser Spotted Woodpecker called in the distance and 100s of Corvids, Pied Wagtails and Finches started to leave the lake to feed in the surrounding area. 4 Bean Geese flew over with a big group of Greylags, a Water Pipit flew overhead calling and the first of many Great White Egrets flapped into view and landed close by. An amazing spectacle for someone like me whose never been birding abroad. Amongst the hordes of Wildfowl there were quite a few Goosander and Smew plus a Female type Eider Duck!! I wasn’t expecting to see Eider 100’s of miles inland. A male Hen harrier, 2+ Peregrine and a few Common Buzzards could be seen in the distance and 3 Yellow-Legged Gulls were picking at a carcass on one of the islands. After a while I calmed down and we headed for one of the other sites heading north.

We stopped off at “The Digue” – a roadway that stretches along quite a decent section of the Lake giving good views. The Cranes where everywhere – in the sky and feeding along the muddy edges of the lake. Indescribable. Behind us there was a stretch of woodland where I could make out the odd Woodpecker – mainly Black and white Woodpeckers by the looks of it though views were poor. I could hear what sounded like Great Spotted Woodpeckers but I was fairly sure I saw at least one

Middle-Spotted here. As I say – views from this point were quite poor for the Woodpeckers. A big flock of Meadow Pipits flew over while we were there and a few Lapwings were flying towards the lake from the direction of the woods behind us. We had a bite to eat and a coffee and moved on.

Next stop – the “Pres’quile de Lazicourt” a small area of woodland with a view of a small shallow bay on the n/west corner of the lake. Good numbers of birds could be seen in the wooded area including Short-toed Treecreeper (common) probably Treecreeper too? Lots of Nuthatches were there plus a few Willow Tits buzzed in the trees. At the lake 5 Whooper Swans, 40+ Goosander, a few Goldeneye plus lots of dabbling Duck showed at reasonably close range. On the way back to the car park I noticed a big group of diving ducks in a bay about 400 yards to the north. On closer inspection they were mainly Tufted Duck, Pochard, Goldeneye, Goosander and 100’s of Coot but there in the middle of the bay was what looked like a Ferruginous Duck? I walked closer but couldn’t see it – then it re-appeared and was in fact a female/juv Ferruginous Duck – an immense surprise and a new bird for me. Fantastic stuff. I walked closer and closer for better and better views. It turned out that Ferruginous Duck does turn up at the lake but I think they are commoner on passage?

On the way to our next stop at “Port Nuisement” we spotted a Rough-Legged Buzzard sitting in a tree on the side of the road. Many of the plentiful Common Buzzards are really pale (some almost pure white) so you have to be careful with Rough-Leg identification but when we flushed it – the bird showed a fully white tail and that kinked wing that Rough-Legs have. I would say it was an adult as I failed to see any pale bases to the primaries and it was only 20 yards off the side of the road when we spotted it! It didn’t even fly until we stopped the car opposite it. Even my nephew (Joshua a complete non-birder) was impressed.

The Port was an impressive sight overlooking huge areas of the lake. Lots of Duck there (diving and dabbling) also 30 Berwick’s Swans in two groups on one of the shallower bays. On the drive around 7 Whooper Swans flew over and I had decent views of a Middle-Spotted Woodpecker at last. I was getting twitchy about getting an Eagle but none could be seen. It was getting on in the afternoon by this time so we shot off back around the lake back to the first stop where we started in the morning at the “Observatoire” where we stayed until dusk. An immense Wild Boar ran out onto the mud where a few Roe Deer were feeding and 1000’s of Cranes came back to roost after feeding in the surrounding fields all day. A few more Smew could be seen – perhaps a dozen but perhaps the most impressive sight was the amount of roosting Cormorants. I counted 1050 in a few trees to my left and there were many more heading off in different directions away from this roosting area. I was quite surprised by how many Great-white Egrets were seen on the surrounding flooded/wet fields with odd singles here there and everywhere with up to 3 birds together on occasion. We went into Saint Dizier for something to eat then back to our room for a decent night’s kip.

Day Two:

Up before light and headed for “La Cornee du Der” a patch of ancient woodland jutting out into the north bank of the lake. The area is good for Woodpeckers and other woodland species – 6 species of Woodpecker breed around the lake plus all the birds so hard to find in the Kent woodland are all quite common. We arrived at dawn and I headed west off the main path. The area was alive with Nuthatches – I’ve never seen so many not even in Scotland or Wales. Willow Tit is common and both species

of Treecreepers, Goldcrest, Firecrest and Woodpeckers are easy to find. I couldn't find any Crested Tit here – though there is very little Conifers at this site and although I heard the “pitchou” call of Marsh Tit I didn't see any. I stayed all morning wandering up and down the wooded glades and gazing out over the lake whenever it came into view. About mid morning I had the most amazing views of two Black Woodpeckers – flying overhead and one showed every feather through the telescope at about 50 yards in the perfect light. I also saw a third bird over near the lake later on that morning. Brilliant things. Middle Spotted Woodpecker were reasonably common though most of the “Peckers” I saw were Great Spotted. I probably saw Grey-Headed Woodpecker here though views were poor as it flew off into the sun. That said I was sure I heard Grey-Headed at first light in the same area? I saw definite Grey-Headed Woodpecker at another site on day 4 of the trip and still would say this was what the bird was. I flushed a Woodcock and heard but yet again didn't see Lesser-Spotted Woodpecker. The most fantastic mornings birding I've ever had in my life – a mini adventure to me. In the afternoon we drove around the lake looking for White-Tailed Eagle – which I was getting manic about seeing by this point. For the last decade between 2 and 5 White-tails have been wintering on the lake and I was expecting to see one at any minute all day but it didn't happen. We stopped off at many sites around the lake in search of the “Pygargue” seeing Velvet Scoter (inland!) a fair few Great White Egrets and lots of stuff I had already seen. In the late afternoon I decided to call it a day and stop off at the 3 small lakes across the road from “Le Observatoire”. I knew I had no chance of an Eagle there but thought it would be good to have a change of scenery. The lakes are natural lakes – and the feel of things was similar to birding at some of the Stour Valley lakes. (Except there were some birds here) A nice area where I saw more Short-Toed Treecreeper (I was getting used to the call by now) 3 more Great-White Egrets, I heard Bearded Tit/Water Rail in the reed beds and at last I got the bins on some Willow Tits. The best thing was on the middle lake where there was a large fringe of exposed mud where the water level had dropped. 100's of White Wagtails, 6 Water Pipits and 3 Green Sandpiper were feeding on the muddy stuff opposite the rather makeshift and wind damaged hide on offer there. Another day was over.

Day 3:

Although I was desperate for White-Tailed Eagle I decided to have a couple of hours from first light back where I had seen the Woodpeckers yesterday before spending the last hours of the day with the sole intention of doing a focussed White-tailed Eagle hunt! We decided to book in for a third night where we were staying so I had another full day after this day to see my Eagle. Back at “Cornee du Der” I saw most the stuff I had seen on the previous morning plus a decent amount of Hawfinches which somehow I had missed on day 2. I had incredible views of Hawfinch, Lesser-Spotted and Middle-Spotted Woodpecker also Bullfinch, Brambling, 50 Siskin and a few Redpoll, lots of Fieldfare/Redwing and stunning views of a male Goshawk which landed in full view in a tree about 80 yards way. After this we started the Eagle vigil – stopping off at all the likely spots around the lake. At “Port and Presque'ile de Nemours – a fantastic part of the lake on the east bank there were lots of birds but unfortunately no Eagle's. In amongst 100's of Great Crested Grebes there was a single Red-Necked, displaying Goldeyes – odd Smew/Goosander etc and 10 Great-White Egrets. Pride of place went to the enormous female Goshawk that flew across the road on the approach to the bay. 2 Goshawks in the same day – was I dreaming?

Awesome creatures. I ended the day back at the “Observatoire” and still no Eagle. 13 Wild Boar, 100’s of Linnets and Goldfinch plus all the normal stuff on view and the wind had picked up from the north and it was getting very very cold. Luckily Johnny Websper had prepared me for the climate but even though I was walking around like a Michelin man (Fat with clothes) it was still hard to bear it in the wind. I even tried sitting in the hide (the biggest hide you’ve ever seen) but gave up early. I made the decision to try for an Eagle at the lakes in the “Foret D’orient” on day 4 ... things were getting desperate. After dark we tried a dummy run down to “Troyes” which is the nearest big Town to “D’Orient” in preparation for day 4 - seeing Barn Owl on the side of the road both on the way down and return journey back to Saint Dizier.

Day 4:

Up 2 hours before first light – got ready and went out to the car, which was completely iced up. The temperature must have been very low as when we poured warm water over the windscreen to de-ice it – it started to refreeze! Anyway – we cleared it as best we could and left seeing one of yesterdays Barn Owls hunting near the roadside in the same area. Also a few Roe Deer and most annoyingly, a dead Badger and a freshly killed fox. We left at 6.40 and arrived at 8.00am after getting lost a few times. Immediately it started to snow and it got heavier and heavier and things started to get serious. We parked in the “Route forestie’re de Temple” and area of mixed ancient, new and coniferous Forest. The best bit of woodland I’ve ever been to by far and the easiest place to get Grey-Headed Woodpecker. Straight away I started seeing birds – a few Hawfinch and 2 Crossbill flew over the car park and nearby I started finding Crested Tit, Coal Tit, lots of Crests, Willow/Marsh Tit plus some Reed Buntings and Yellowhammer amongst the throngs of Chaffinches all these woods seen to be full of. It was by now snowing really hard and I couldn’t hear a single Woodpecker. I was hoping to see Great-Grey Shrike here too, which are resident breeding birds in the wood but missed out unfortunately. I wondered if the Woodpeckers had even left their roost such was the weather. The wood looked absolutely beautiful – real Christmas card stuff – stunning. A surreal experience, walking around in 2-3 inches of freshly fallen snow in such an awesome place. Eventually I heard a Great-Spotted Woodpecker, which gave me fresh hope. Later I heard Grey-Headed but didn’t see it. In the end I got half reasonable views of Grey-Headed as it perched in a tall tree – though my bins kept on steaming up which didn’t help as Grey-Headed seem very hard to pin down it seems. Really elusive things. 100’s of Fieldfare and Redwing showed and I got very lost. I got in a bit of a panic – I couldn’t get any signal on my phone and all the markers I had scraped into the mud to help me find my way back were under two inches of snow! Eventually I found Joshua – kipping in the car in the car park. We left as we started to think if we didn’t get out of the place we might get stranded! The weather was that bad. We drove into Troyes (pronounced “twar”) where the roads were quite a bit better and later on it stopped snowing so we decided to try the wood again for better views of Grey-Headed Woodpecker. The road had the odd car off the side of the road in a ditch and you could see tyre marks in the snow covered fields where the French drivers had driven too fast in the skiddy roads (French drivers driving too fast – perish the thought!) – so we drove very carefully back to “D’Orient” I can tell you. On arrival I tried a few sites but couldn’t find any Grey Headeds unfortunately. I did get stunning views of Middle-Spot and 20+ Hawfinches in the wood but couldn’t find any Eagles on the lake. I only tried 1 spot – on the biggest of the 3 “D Orient” lakes – the “observatoire

at lake Orient” where there is a hide and it didn’t look very good out there. The water was low and the birds that were there were very distant. The visibility wasn’t exactly brilliant either so another Eagle dip! We (or rather Joshua who has a smattering of French) did have a chat with a “D Orient” local and it appears you really have to search there for Eagles. There are quite a few Cranes there (I only saw 1) and there are good numbers of Bean Geese in the surrounding farm fields but I had my heart set on a White-Tailed Eagle with Great-Grey Shrike bringing up the rear so ignored the Bean Goose site. As we had to be in Saint Dizier to meet some people there in the evening we decided on the spur of the moment to call it a day at “D Orient” and end the afternoon off at the “Observatoire” back at Lac du Der. On arrival about an hours drive later the lake looked absolutely beautiful – the islands and muddy margins all covered in snow – stunning. Not very many birds on show there though – a few hundred Cranes/Geese, Hen Harrier etc – a few Wild Boar out across on the mud. A massive one run out in front of the car on the way back to du Der – luckily it was running at break-neck speed and easily cleared the car. At one point all the Greylag went nuts in one bay of the lake as if someone had walked up to them. I saw a similar reaction when an airplane flew over nearby. About a minute later as I scanned across the lake I saw a BIG THING. It was VERY BIG and surprisingly flappy ... it was an Eagle! At last the hoped for Pigargue a’ Queue Blanc!!! It was about a mile away (?) and still looked immense. It flew around onto the west side of the lake and disappeared out of view. I must admit to punching the air – its still giving me goose bumps writing about it. I’ve seen one before and I’ve seen this one – and I want to see them again and again. I saw Joshua pulling up in the car park about 200 yards way and I put my arm up to him like I had scored the winning goal in the cup final for Liverpool. I went and told him “I saw my Pigargue” – grinning like a demented Cheshire cat no doubt? “Did ya – I saw 5 on the way down to the lake” and carried on telling me about what he had been doing whilst he had been away from the lake. He just didn’t get it at all! We went into Saint Dizier where Joshua went to his meeting whilst I sat in the car for 2 plus hours – we had a weird French Keebab and started driving back towards our destination on the channel coast which ended up being Dunkerque. I did intend on doing the aptly titled “Tour de France” an itinerary for the channel/Normandy coast that Johnny Websper had so kindly written out for me. He’s a good bloke but very old. I tried to sleep in the car overnight (we stopped about 3 times) but every time I fell asleep I woke up feeling like death. I was absolutely exhausted. In one of the lorry parks we stopped off at we parked next to two lorries loaded up with Ferraris and a couple of Aston Martins. Each one had 7 cars on it!! I hate to think how much dosh all those cars were worth – well over a million squid! By pure coincidence we saw the same pair of lorries stick in a traffic jam at Calais the following day. I went to sleep later thinking about all those amazing cars.

Day 5:

We drove into Dunkerque about half an hour before first light – surely the most pig stinking hole I’ve ever seen in the whole of my life! It makes Dungeness look like a flippin beauty spot! Yuk! We drove up onto the clippon jetty – one of the weirdest places ever. I waited for it to get light and started looking for a Crested lark around the rough grass and dunes. But soon got bored with that as I saw very little. A stiff onshore breeze had picked up and there were loads of birds piling through out at sea. I must have seen 100’ of Kittiwakes plus a few Little Gulls and a bonus Great Northern Diver plus some Auks, Divers, Eider, Scoter etc. After a while the thought of a

Crested lark got the better of me and I tried a concerted effort at finding one. I was very tired – the past five days had really got on top of me and checking the area proved to be very hard work. I started to find a few birds on the second try – 2 Lapland Buntings then few finches and Thrushes started to appear. I ended up walking all the way up to near the end of the Digue and by then I was so tired I didn't care whether I was going to get a Crested lark or not! I had really overdone it. Walking through all those dunes and rough ground for a couple of hours had finished me off so I made my way back to the car with a occasional sit down for a look at the sea where birds were still moving. I saw a distant Long-Tailed Duck plus a few more Scoter plus the Kittiwakes were still piling through. During one of my brief excursions off the approach road I flushed a Crested Lark – it flew up and landed on top of a bit of high rough ground. Excellent – this gave me a second wind and I carried on looking but apart from a flock of 13 Twite plus a few Chaffinches and Grey Partridge it was reasonably quiet away from the sea. I even saw a Stonechat, which I thought, was lucky to still be alive with all the hunters that were around. Lets face it a perched Stonechat must be an easy shot? I was frightened to flush any Partridges so every time I stood still when a car went past just in case they got spotted and the hunters started blasting at them! We did intend to go down to Boulogne to try out John's intinery but we didn't fancy the drive and ended up sticking around the Calais area for the rest of the day. On the way down we checked out the digue and the east dock where I came across a Black-Necked Grebe, 1-2 Slavonians, Little Grebe, 7 Red-Breasted Merganser and 3 Snow Bunting. There was also a Shag in the East dock. After we left Dunkerque the stiff wind dropped and the sun came out and the rest of the afternoon was spent in fantastic sunshine. We popped up to "Cap Blanc-Nez" to take a photo of the fantastic view. It was glorious up there. There were lots of birds in the farm field up there – a flock of c100 Corn Buntings plus 100's of Skylarks. In one flock there were at least 2 Lapland Buntings right off the side of the road. Better still when we left I saw what looked like a couple of Waxwing on the side of the road. They flew out of view then I spotted a flock of about 20 Waxwing sitting in the top of a tree right along the side of the car! Fantastic birds in fantastic light – I didn't even have to get out of the car!

To finish off the trip we went to "Oye-Plague" as I knew they had a hide and I thought I could just have a lazy hour or two sitting around in there. The reserve was disappointing with nothing of any interest out on the scrape so I decided to have a walk around on the beach to try and find some Shore Larks – which as it happened I couldn't find. No Snow Bunts or Twite either – which I was expecting. That said – the sea more than made up for the lack of passerines – 100's of Great-Crested Grebes lined the near shore plus there were lots of Divers/Auks, some Gannets and a fair few Little Gulls moving through – I must have seen about 100 or so in the next hour as I made my way along the beach on the circular walk.

Back down Pegwell this morning – back to the routine. Still I think the trip did me good, as it's the first time I've been out of Kent in many years. I hope to go back later on next year.

(Phil Milton)