Today we spent a day tour together with Californian wildlife all-rounders Bill and Wendy. The morning visit was spent in Le Rougier and the afternoon on the western edge of the Larzac plateau.

The morning started overcast and with an uncharacteristic coolness in the air for early June. Le Rougier is a predominantly agricultural landscape with poplar trees lining the watercourses and small oaklands. This patchwork which overlies an unusual bedrock of Permian red sandstone provides excellent habitat for a variety of farmland specialists which are becoming rare throughout much of Europe. At our first stop we were welcomed by Corn Bunting calling from low perches and Skylark singing from high in the sky. A female Stonechat was perched on wheat interlaced with poppy and cornflower. A group of about a dozen Black Kite languished in the bare branches of a poplar and in the field below waiting for the morning air to warm before setting out for foraging. Throughout the morning Nightingale could be easily heard exercising their full repertoire without allowing themselves to be seen from their scrub cover. Moving on we soon encountered Jay, Magpie, Carrion Crow and Starling, with House Sparrow being present around farm dwellings which scatter Le Rougier freely.

Just before our morning coffee break a Hoopoe dandered along the track in front of us, a Red-legged Partridge perched proudly aloft a muckheap and Goldfinch teased thistle heads. We drank our coffee with some ‘flaune’, a local speciality which resembles a cheesecake and is made of “recuie” - a cheesy-like substance formed from heating whey from ewe’s milk, a by-product of the renowned Roquefort cheese industry. This is delicately flavoured with orange essence and creates the type of cake of which one slice is never enough! All the while a Whitethroat demonstrated its song-flight to perfection, while Quail and Melodious Warbler could be heard as well as a distant Cuckoo and Blackbird. A little further down the track a Woodlark showed well and treated us to its falling song notes.

As the morning progressed Buzzard and Kestrel lifted and joined the ever present Black Kites. Recently fledged Swallows lined a fallen branch by a small reservoir and Cirl Bunting disappeared behind bushes. We then arrived in a small village where Little Owl can be seen but they evaded us, however 2 Rock Sparrow gave us good views and we also noted White Wagtail, Collared Dove and Black Redstart. Moving on we encountered more raptors with a Hobby perched on a pylon and a male Hen Harrier rising high over the red landscape. Contact calls alerted us to the presence of a pair of Red-backed Shrike – an honorary mini-raptor! - in a nearby hedgerow, the male successfully catching a large insect which he duly presented to his female. A hunting Short-toed Eagle then gave us excellent views before we made a halt for lunchtime provisions at a local charcuterie.

Lunch by the Dourdou River gave two Turtle Dove and a singing Wren, we then saw a Little Egret fishing its backwaters. Along the poplar-lined riverbanks we encountered a family group of Long-tailed Tit and got a brief glimpse of a Green Woodpecker. A little further downstream and the colour
settings were turned up to full with Bee-Eater and Kingfisher encountered almost side by side, and then we finished our Rougier circuit on a more sober note with views of Grey Heron, Mallard, House Martin and Swift. A probable Montagu’s Harrier was seen on the road to Saint-Affrique but didn’t show sufficiently to confirm its identity.

The destination for the rest of the afternoon was the Larzac plateau above the Cirque de Tournemire. En route we passed through Roquefort village and its caves, the only place in the world where the famous cheese can be produced. Approaching the village we saw Griffon Vulture circling over the Combalou, the cracked limestone mass where literally thousands of tons of this cheese is matured every year. Once we had attained the limestone plateau of the Larzac these carrion feeders with an impressive 2.80 metre wingspan could be seen sailing by and even beneath us in the cirque below. The natural limestone grassland with interspersed Box and Juniper here is a haven for wildflowers and we soon identified 9 orchid species including Woodcock Orchid and Burnt Orchid. A flock of 26 Chough settled in the cliffs of the Cirque de Tournemire whilst Blackcap and Chaffinch were heard singing from its slopes. The deteriorating weather brought rain which forced us back to the car. On the way back cliffs on the roadside held roosting Griffon Vultures, about a dozen Jackdaw, a pair of Crag Martin, and a Great Woodpecker was also heard. More Crag Martin and a Yellow-legged Gull were seen crossing the River Sorgues at Saint Affrique, before a Black Redstart brought the curtain down on what was a very enjoyable day of birding.

Robert Straughan
Hungry Bird Tours