



Trip report for Thursday 2nd June 2016

AM: Le Rougier PM: The Larzac Plateau

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 "recuite" - 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