

THE DORDOGNE, AUGUST 2011

by Chris Harper

This is our families 5th visit to France in the last decade, but the first one that I thought I would attempt to write up as a 'bird report'. Having previously enjoyed the birding in the Vendee, Loire Valley and Languedoc, this was our first visit to the Dordogne and I was looking forward to exploring a new area, as well as chilling out for a few weeks with the family (although this rightly restricts the time for a serious wander). The birds mentioned here are ones restricted to those that are rarer in the UK, or absent altogether, but for a fuller list or more detail on the areas visited, please feel free to contact me.

We overnighted near Paris, having set out early from Stockport, at a lovely site called Bernie Riviere. The campsite had both Serin and Melodious Warbler on site, with many Spotted Flycatchers in the surrounding trees (by the bar!). A beautifully patterned Honey Buzzard drifted back to the nearby forest late afternoon and the farmland just outside the site held a confiding family of Firecrests. An evening walk by the lake was rewarded with fishing Common Terns and a Kingfisher, followed by half a bottle of red. Was I really in Offerton this morning?

The next days' journey to our campsite was split with a stop at the World War Two village of Oradour and the atmosphere was appropriately quiet apart from the singing by the many Black Redstarts of the area. The usual raptor spotting from the AutoRoute produced another Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, and a Montagu's Harrier, all before our arrival at tea time in St. Nathalie village, near Sarlat. An evening meal produced a flock of Long-tailed Tits around the camp restaurant and a nice Leffe before sunset.

The first few days were basically spent lazing by the pool and bar area (it is a holiday after all), with a small walk up a local track and around the campsite.



Above: View from campsite terrace bar



Above: Common Lizard outside the front door

The most common bird in the area by far was the Nuthatch, including on the tree outside the caravan competing for space with Common Lizards. The call of Green Woodpecker was also never far away. Tit flocks included Marsh (pretty common in the area) and often a family of Bonelli's Warblers, which seemed to circumnavigate the campsite in the morning and evening. The local track was very productive early in the morning, with Turtle Doves, Spotted Flycatchers, my first ever Orphee Warbler, together with more common species. Lazing on the terrace bar/pool area produced a dark phase Booted Eagle (with another later in the week) and the first sighting of a regular Peregrine. A Crag Martin fluttered over later in the week too, my only one from the campsite but I found they were very common in the surrounding areas (see later). It was into the second week before I heard my first Scops Owl too (at 3am). This is more likely due to sound sleeping rather than their rarity (must cut down on the Leffe).

Just down the road was the village of St. Nathalene itself. An early morning visit bought a Hobby circling over the town and a large party of Black Redstarts (up to 10), with a large mix of finches and tits. The church also held a Black Redstart family.



Above: The church in St. Nathalene

A confiding Green Woodpecker grubbed about on the farmland, flying into cover as a deer disturbed it (a small one, not sure of the species). A juvenile Nightingale showed well in bramble/knotweed scrub by a disused house near the town centre and a Serin finished off a rewarding hour or so. A small track explored on the way back to the campsite bought another Nightingale, this time an adult.

The next few paragraphs sum up some of the days out that were coerced with the family. All were within an hour of the village. As mentioned, Crag Martins were common throughout the area in the right habitat and possibly the best views we had were from Castelnaud, including being stood directly under a nest with 4 young in being regularly fed.



Above: Dordogne River from Castelnaud



Above: Crag Martin nest at Castelnaud

On a visit to the caves at Lascaux, the surrounding woods produced Short-toed Treecreeper amongst a roving flock.

A day spent canoeing on the Dordogne itself bought rewarding birding, as well as being great fun. At our start point near Grolejac there was a pair of nesting Hobby, sharing the riverside trees with up to 4 Little Egrets.



Above: Distant Little Egrets on The Dordogne

On the river itself were a few Common Sandpiper and Kingfishers, with regular flyovers of Green Woodpeckers, together with riverside Nightingales, Spotted Flycatchers and a probable Melodious Warbler. Crag Martins were common all down the river.



Above: More great habitat on the canoe trip

Another spectacular sight was the Gouffre de Padirac and we were informed of the numerous species of bat that roosted here, although I didn't spot any in the daylight. However Cirl Buntings were showing well on the surrounding farmland.

Near the end of the holiday, I bit the bullet and sneaked out of the campsite at 6.30am to give the local area a good 5 hours of detailed study. A lovely sunrise boded well and a local IGN map made sure I would find my way back to the campsite.



Above: St. Nathalene at sunrise

The first real 'hot spot' was the small hamlet of Haute Serre where the woods and farmland produced Firecrest, Raven, the first Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Golden Oriole of the trip and a roving flock of Marsh Tits and Bonelli's Warblers. Many more common birds were well represented too (Jays, Tits, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and warblers).

The more open area of Montaziel produced Cirl Bunting, Garden Warbler and a Common Buzzards nest, with the juveniles mobbing a Red Fox on the ground. Nearby Le Touran produced another Golden Oriole and a little further back towards the campsite Estiel was a great site for Spotted Flycatchers, Black Redstart, Turtle Doves and another Middle Spotted Woodpecker.

The farmland around La Croix d'Estiel signalled the end of the walk and my 3 layers had reduced to one by the time a noisy flock of Serin entertained me for a good 5 minutes. A cute statue of an owl on the farmhouse pointed me back to the pool, which was then my location for the next 5 hours.

In general I found that the higher up I went on walks and trips, the more varied the birdlife was and if in the area again these are the areas I would concentrate on. Maybe I might find birds that I hoped to see but didn't, like a shrike or two, or even a Hoopoe. I think if the bank manager will allow it, I'll be even higher next year, heading towards the Alps with a better camera.

Chris Harper, September 2011

www.manchesterbirding.com