

Les Cévennes

Saturday 31 May – Saturday 7 June 2008

Trip Report

Leader:

Mike Lockwood

A wonderful trip whose highlights were undoubtedly the orchids and the food at the two hotels, which reached new heights of excellence. In all we found a total of 31 species of orchid, three more than the previous year (and we would have had 32 but for the bad weather on the first day).

The birds were good and abundant, and there were new records of Booted Eagle, Short-toed Lark, Great Grey Shrike and Orphean Warbler for the trip. The only real disappointment was the butterflies, which were hampered by the damp and cool weather that had made the whole area so green and wonderful for orchids.

The Beavers and lady-slipper orchids were again a highlight, as were the five-course meals at both hotels. A personal favourite moment was the first stop in an orchid-rich field on the afternoon of the first day, when everyone realised just how many orchids of so many shapes and colours there were.

Saturday 31 May:

Nîmes Airport – Florac

Weather: Overcast

In all a rather uneventful journey from the airport (as it should be), with just a number of Black Kites and a Hoopoe from the bus to wake up the slumberers. After a brief halt for snacks, we arrived in Florac at about 5.30, which gave us enough time for a wander around the park behind the chateau and National Park headquarters.

Owing to the rather overcast and cool afternoon, few birds were on display in the park. Our first sighting of interest, though, was a couple of twayblade orchids in the shade of the pines next to the path – the first of what was to be a momentous week for orchids.

We continued up the path as far as ‘Source du Pêcher’, a huge emergence of subterranean waters that had been vastly swollen by the recent rains. All of the water that falls on the limestone Causse Méjean emerges through these *sources* at the base of the limestone cliffs that ring the Causse. The noise of the water was deafening and rather prevented us from hearing any bird song.

A little further along the path we looked back up at the woods above the *source* and noted a number of Grey Heron nests. From here, via a couple of lizard orchids still to flower and a military orchid or two we made our way back into Florac (past the trout farm and cow-shoeing contraption) for our restorative dinner.

Sunday 1 June

Causse Sauvaterre – Les Bondons – Pont de Briançon – Castelbouc – Saint Enimie – Mas de Sant Chely - Florac

Weather: damp but dry after lunch

For our first full day our weather fears were somewhat fulfilled and we had a slightly frustration morning dodging showers in the area of Les Bondons (the result of Gargantua emptying his clogs). However, it was clear that the previous week's rains had left the area as green as our valleys used to be.

First stop was a bend on the road up from Ispagnac to the Causse Sauveterre, where we found two violet limodores *Limodorum arbortivum* in flower, along with lots of meadow clary *Salvia pratensis* and rock soapwort *Saponaria ocymoides*, two of the commonest flowers on the *causses*. A Bonelli's Warbler sang from a nearby oak.

Next stop was a site where a few of the wonderful yellow flowers of *Adonis vernalis* usually hang on into June. But as we parked, our first sighting under the pines were a couple of low-growing red pasque flowers *Pulsatilla rubra*, perfectly in flower. And then poking around a little more in the same pines, Sharon came across a couple of one-flowered wintergreens *Moneses uniflora*, one of a number of wintergreens found in the area.

We crossed the road and found a number of adonises (adoni?) still in flower, although rather rain-beaten and not at their best. In the same area we found for the first time many of the typical limestone flowers that were to become so familiar over the following days – Montpellier milk-vetch *Astragalus monspessulanus*, mountain kidney-vetch *Anthyllis montana* and *Coronilla minima*. In the woods burnt-tip orchid *Orchis ustulata* and white helleborine *Cephalanthera damasonium* fell under our gaze, along with more red pasque flowers.

Despite the poor weather we decided to carry on towards the Bondons along the road linking the Causse Sauveterre and Col de Miramat. Unfortunately, we soon ran into low cloud and mist and not a lot was to be seen until we got nearer Los Bondons. The weather was not very inviting and so we decided to head first for the nearby granite uplands with their wonderful grazing meadows. We had a brief stop so that Vernon could nip out of the van to photograph a collection of red and yellow elder-flowered orchids *Dactylorhiza sambucina*. Our transition from the calcareous area around Los Bondons onto the granite substratum was clear as the former permits crops, while the latter only supports grazing and is partially covered by heather and broom scrub.

Around the hamlet of Les Faux the pastures were dotted white with pheasant's-eye narcissus *Narcissus poeticus*, heath-spotted orchids *Orchis maculata*, the tall flower spikes of great yellow gentian *Gentiana lutea* (sadly not yet quite in flower) and in the wettest parts, aconite-leaved buttercup *Ranunculus aconitifolus*. In the road-side verge there were a couple of early purple orchids *Orchis mascula* that at this altitude and in this wonderful plant season were still very much in flower.

The weather wasn't improving to any great extent (no birds or butterflies as yet) and so we decided to head back down towards Florac and then along the wonderful gorge of the river Tarn, hoping that we would find a bit more shelter there.

We picked up the road to road down towards Florac, stopping only at a bridge over the river Briançon where there is an interesting small schist cliff (the third rock type of the day) with interesting flora – the southern French endemic mignonette *Reseda jacquinii*, forked spleenwort *Asplenium septentrionale*, daisy-leaved toadflax *Anarrhinum bellifolium*, rock cinquefoil *Potentilla rupestre*, the large leaves of orphine *Sedum telephium* and Nottingham catchfly *Silene nutans*. A little further up the road there were groups of bastard balm *Melittis melissophyllum*, scented Solomon's seal *Polygonatum odoratum* as well as numbers of the first of many greater butterfly orchid *Platanthera chlorantha*. We photographed a mystery thistle on the rock face.

Lunch was calling and so we drove off down to the Tarn valley and stopped just over the river Tarn at the village of Castelbouc, where another (but much smaller) *source* appears from between the rocks. After lunch with the Crag Martins flying low around and Nightingales singing from the nearby bushes, we went for a wander around the village itself nestling under huge vertical cliffs topped off with a ruined castle. First stop was to admire one of the region's very special plants – *Saxifraga cebennensis* - which in this year of bounty was even growing on the street walls and on the massive bread oven in the midst of the group of houses. Other flowers on the limestone cliffs here included *Chaenorhinum origanifolium* and harebell, with its long narrow leaves giving lie to its Latin name of *Campanula rotundifolia*. After a short walk out of the village with a profusion of pyramidal orchids *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and spindle trees *Euonimus europaeus* infested by the cocoons of the spindle ermine moth *Yponomeuta cagnagella*, we returned to the village and spotted two Red-billed Choughs and a Black Restart on the ruins of the old castle.

Coffee was calling and so we drove off to the slightly touristy town of Saint Eminié, where we gave the clouds a chance to lift before we started our return journey to Florac via the great orchid-rich plateau of the Causse Méjean.

After this postcard and wine-buying stop, we picked up the main road that crosses the Causse Méjean with the hope of orchids and birds in mind - and we were not to be disappointed. Just after turning off the 'main road' and on towards Mas Saint Chely, we stopped for a very obliging male Red-backed Shrike on a dead tree on our right, and then came across our first large patches of orchids, mainly smart military orchids *Orchis militaris* and then a number of monkey orchids *O. simia*. We halted the van and started to walk along the road through an area that had been burnt a few years ago. This has allowed for a growth of willow herb, which in turn must have been responsible for the presence of willowherb hawkmoth *Prosperina proserpinus*, a species of sphinx moth that is becoming very rare in Europe. Other wayside flowers here included our only lesser butterfly orchids *Cephalanthera bifolia*, swallowwort *Vincetoxicum hirundinaria*, white rock rose *Helianthemum apenninum*, burnt candytuft *Aethionema saxitalis*, a small crucifer that is the food plant of the rare mountain small white butterfly, everlasting flower *Helichrysum stoechas*, the attractive blue flowers of false sainfoin *Vicia onobrychioides*, a large orange mullein *Verbascum phlomoides*, *Cynoglossum* spp., and dame's violet *Hesperis matronalis*. On the wires above us Wood Larks sat and Quails called from the fields.

We pushed on towards the village of Mas Saint Chely, where a group of orchids caught our eye. Once out of the van we wandered through the open pines finding literally hundreds of military orchids, mixed in with more monkey orchids and the odd lady orchid *Orchis purpurea*, the latter an early flowerer and slightly past its best: a strange sight were some obvious hybrids between military and lady orchids. As well there were good numbers of the local endemic *Ophrys aymoninii*, very similar to the fly orchid, early purple *Orchis mascula*, green-winged *O. morio* and elder-flowered orchids *O. sambucina*. Adele spotted a butterfly resting in a military orchid, which turned out to be a rare Green-underside Blue and a Common Blue provided us with our second butterfly of the day.

En route home, we stopped by a cornfield to photograph the corn flowers *Centaurea cyanus* and conical catchfly *Silene conica*, before entering a more open patch of the *causse* where we spotted two Great Grey Shrikes near the road, giving us all fine views of an uncommon bird for the region, a Short-toed Lark and a Northern Wheatear.

And with that we headed down the steep road into Florac after a day in which the rain had only mildly dampened our spirits despite our initial misgivings.

Monday 2 June

Mont Lozère

Weather: Overcast, but with the odd blue patch in the morning and then a deluge in the late afternoon.

We awoke to find that the clouds were low and so rather than rush up Mont Lozère, we decided to stay near to Florac initially and hunt for the *Serapias* that our friend David had pointed out to Mike and Didier a few days before. Alas, the first species, which should have been *Serapias vomeracea*, was nowhere to be seen and was probably lying crushed under a tyre track. However, up another grassy path we did find a group of 10-12 *Serapias lingua*, a new species for Mike and Didier for the region. Elsewhere along the track we noted *Rorippia pyrenaica*, winged greenweed, more infested spindle trees, bastard balm, the massive leaves and fruit from last year's autumn crocus *Colchicum autumnale* and, amongst the orchids, greater butterfly and early purple. The only butterfly was a Wood White at rest on a vetch.

As the clouds were lifting, we decided to head up to Mont Lozère, the highest peak in the region and explore the grassy granite meadows there. First stop was on the road just outside the town of Pont de Montvert – historically famous as the site of the beginning of the revolt of the Camisards in 1702 and a stopping-off place for Robert Louis Stevenson on his travels through the Cévennes on a donkey – where Vernon jumped out of the van to photograph creeping snapdragon *Asarina procumbens* on a roadside wall. Once in Pont de Montvert, and ignoring all hints for a coffee stop, we headed south a little way and parked at the edge of the beech forest for a wander in the forest and meadows.

We could hear Short-toed Treecreeper and Firecrest calling, while Martin, just ahead, came back with news of a quick sighting of a Black Woodpecker. Standing and listening we heard the cries of this impressive bird in the distance. Closer at home were the clumps of large-flowered sandwort *Arenaria grandiflora*, the large umbellifer molopospermum *Molopospermum peloponnesiacum*, a couple of elder-flowered orchids and large numbers of Pyrenean leek *Allium victorialis* lining the river below. A quick burst of birds brought us Coal, Long-tailed and Great Tits, whilst moth-wise, a number of Spotted Yellows were on the wing.

We walked a little way down the road seeing a few butterflies brought out by the timid sun – Small Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Common and Adonis Blues, a Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Green Hairstreak. A solitary Honey Buzzard cruised out from the woods, circled and was then lost behind a hill. The meadows below were not very advanced and the great yellow gentians *Gentiana lutea*, which here are usually more advanced than anywhere else, were still in bud. Flowerwise, Carthusian pink *Dianthus carthusianorum*, the bright red sticky catchfly *Silene viscaria*, pheasant's-eye daffodil, heart's ease *Viola tricolour* all decorated the meadows. Vernon and Sharon entered the meadows for a wander and were surprised by a Western Whipsnake, which even reared up and hissed at them. No wonder they were so quiet for the rest of the morning!

By now it was time for lunch, so we drove back through Pont de Montvert, not stopping again for coffee, and headed up a narrow road into the granite wastes of Mont Lozère. Just as Mike was speculating about Short-toed Eagles, lo and behold! - one appeared in the sky ahead and landed in an ash tree. We all then had excellent views through the 'scope of its owl-like head. We stopped a little further on just below the village of Villeneuve for our picnic, half in, half outside the van. Those outside the van, i.e. Mike, had excellent views of a male Whinchat through the scope, whilst those inside chose the comforts of their three-course picnics over the views of this smart bird. After lunch, we wandered up towards the village, admiring the meadows packed with heath spotted orchids, more daffodils and marsh marigolds *Caltha palustris*. Mike had a conversation with a chatty local, who explained how they used the daffodils for making perfume and how it had rained so much already that year that the cows couldn't get into the wettest pastures.

After lunch we moved on up the road to the next village, noting both red and yellow forms of the elder-flowered orchid. Mike, Adele and Martin had a quick wander with a fine male Yellowhammer in the scope before a rain squall sent them scuttling for the van. On the way down we noted a fine patch of wild tulips *Tulipa australis* next to the road in the semi-abandoned village of L'Hôpital, a site once occupied by the Knight Templars. Back in Villeneuve a stunning male Rock Thrush provided the

sighting of the day: spotted on a pylon, it flew even closer and regaled us with splendid views in the scope from a fence post. The bird of the day!

Just to delay the coffee even more, Mike decided we had time to beat the rain and to drive up to Coll de Finiels, a pass at 1,541 m that crosses Mont Lozère and provides an interesting subalpine habitat. Alas, we had little time to enjoy the rolling moorland as the rain was threatening. However, we did manage to find a few wild daffodils *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* still in flower, along with an understorey dominated by bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* with patches of wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* and a few catsfoot *Antennaria dioica* in flower. Birdwise, the rain gave us no chance to look for Citril Finch, but the compensation came in the form of a family of Ring Ouzels – the just-fledged youngster allowed Vernon and Sharon to get a photograph, the male sang from a spruce and the female flew off with a beakful of food for its other prole.

Now it was time for coffee, which was taken finally in Pont de Montvert amidst a downpour of biblical proportions. During a break in the deluge we returned to the van and headed for home, being prevented from stopping at Didier's Beaver site by another heavy shower. However, the gods were smiling and as we were nearing Florac, Mike looked down into the Tarn to see a Beaver swimming upstream. We stopped and piled out and all had views of an adult Beaver swimming towards us with a branch in its ample mouth. Almost as spectacular as the Rock Thrush!

Tuesday 3 June

Roc des Hourtous – Gorges du Tarn– River Tarn

Weather: dry with sunny spells.

We got away from Florac smartly at around 9.15 and climbed up out of the Tarn valley and up onto the limestone plateau of Le Causse Méjean, stopping briefly for a perfect lady orchid *Orchis purpurea* and then our first Griffon Vultures. Past the airport (sic), we stopped for a wander in the woods, where Didier showed the group more one-flowered wintergreens, our only nodding wintergreen *Pyrola secunda* and a single fly orchid *Ophrys insectifera*.

Soon we pressed onto our main stop of the day, Roc des Hourtous, an excellent viewing platform over the Tarn Valley. Unfortunately, the coffee shop was closed so we headed off straight away into a nearby meadow with an immense profusion of orchids: monkey, man *Aceras antropopum*, burnt tip, green-winged, military, fragrant, greater butterfly common spotted *Orchis fuchsii* orchids, white *Cephalanthera damasonium* and sword-leaved *C. longifolia* helleborines. Under a tree we found good numbers of bird's-nest orchids *Neottia nidus-avis* and the local endemic fly orchid *Ophrys aymoninii* was also present in profusion. Non-orchids here included Genevan bugle *Ajuga genevensis*, alpine aster *Aster alpinus*, red pasque flowers, false sainfoin, tassled hyacinth *Muscari comosum*, scented Solomon's seal and good numbers of crested lousewort *Pedicularis comosa* in the shade. A few butterflies were on the wing – Small Heath, Berger's Clouded Yellow and Common and Osiris Blues. Wood Larks and Red-billed Choughs called from overhead.

Soon it was time to head down to see the lady slipper orchids *Cypripedium calceolus*. Mike stayed with Cynthia, while the rest of the group negotiated the rather tricky path but were rewarded by a stunning group of around 100 perfectly in flower lady slipper orchids. As well, there was lots of lily-in-the-valley *Convallaria majalis*, pale-green wintergreens *Pyrola chlorantha* and the yellow flax *Linum campanulatum* in flower in the understorey. Didier, Sharon and Vernon continued a little further down the path and found *Gentiana clusii* subsp. *costei*, sadly not open given the overcast conditions.

Once reunited on top, we all peered carefully over the cliff edge and found more gentians as well as long-leaved butterwort *Pinguicula longifolia* subsp. *caussensis*.

We had our picnic on the tables next to café, with Red-billed Choughs and Griffon Vultures at eye level. Eventually the somewhat belligerent owner of the bar and picnic site arrived, and demanded that we order drinks and pay the entrance money. However, after a few calming words from Didier all was well and she'll let us return next year! We had a quick look down into the Tarn gorge from the look-out point and had views of Kestrel and two young Peregrines chasing each other around a cliff buttress.

On our way to our next stop, we halted by the roadside to admire a group of four Pyrenean bellflowers *Campanula affinis*, with truly huge flowers. In this sunny spot the blue lily-grass *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis* was abundant by the wayside, where we also photographed two perfect violet limodores and a Scarce Swallowtail. Up on the cliffs above us, we got the scope on three Griffon Vultures on a nearby ledge and were able to admire these huge birds from close range.

Next stop was a site that had in fact been kindly suggested by our friends David and Mary, who had dined with us the night before. A short path up to a rocky outcrop took most of the group up to see the flowers of another local speciality, *Aquilegia viscosa* subsp. *viscosa*, smaller and paler than its much commoner cousin columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris*. Also up there was a small bush of *Daphne alpine*, with its delightful white flowers. Adele and Cynthia stayed down with Mike and were well entertained with the only Booted Eagle of the trip, a hovering Short-toed Eagle, as well as calling Bonelli's Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Wrens. Once all reunited at the base of the rock we admired the Etruscan honeysuckle *Lonicera etrusca*, the almost-in-flower *Epipactis distans* and blue lettuce (sic) *Lactuca perennis* and Griffon Vultures on the nest.

It was by now almost home time as we had to go out for beavers after dinner. This didn't stop us from revelling in another wonderful patch of orchids on the way. Military orchids dominated – as they did over much of the Causse – but mixed in with lady, man and green-winged orchids, as well as bloody cranesbill *Geranium sanguineum*. We also found a Field Cricket, Small Heath and Mother Shipton and Chimney Sweeper moths.

Back towards Florac we stopped for our only Black Kite (other than on the way to and from the airport), Corn Buntings at the airport (sic) in the sun and Red-backed Shrikes on the rose bushes.

After dinner, we bundled into the van to head for the dam with Didier's Beavers. We arrived in daylight and success was immediate, for there was a Beaver swimming in the river to our left. Soon we spotted another on the other side of the river, which climbed out of the water and broke off a branch. It then swam towards the weir, and seemed almost accidentally to be swept over before swimming back up and heading for its lodge. We also spotted a couple of Dippers on the river, a Little Egret perched in a tree and a Grey Heron.

Didier got his bat detector out and soon was detecting the first bats – over the water we could see clearly a large bat that was almost certainly Daubenton's Bat. Five other species were recorded by his detector. As night fell, we headed for home and bed.

Wednesday 4 June

Coll de Perjuret –Causse Noir – Le Rozier

Weather: the best day, with light clouds and sun!!.

After the exertions of the day before, we decided to take things easy and have a quick wander around Florac before pushing on to Meyrueis. First stop was at Coll de Perjuret, the only break in the cliffs that surround the Causse Méjean. Here we found a familiar mixture of military, greater butterfly, early purple and burnt tip orchids, as well as the little yellow pea dragon's teeth *Tetragonolobus maritimus*. Woodlarks sang overhead.

We dropped down a little way from the Col and picked up a track heading into a lower valley. Here we could park the van safely (loaded with all our worldly goods) and rummage around. Vultures were flying and ere we had our only sighting of the trip of Black Vulture – one bird mixed in with all the Griffons.

The sun at last brought out a few fritillaries – Pearl-bordered and Knapweed, supported by Green-underside and Adonis Blues. The sessile oak *Quercus petraea* woodland was mixed in with Italian maples *Acer opalus* and wayfarer's tree *Viburnum lantana*, and had an understorey of *Genista hispanica* and *Coronilla minima*, along with many bastard balms, St. Bernard's lilies, greater butterfly and military orchids, purple limodores and twayblades. Further down the track in the open pastures we came across our first woodcock *O. scolopax* and bug *Orchis coriophora* orchids. Also in the pastures we found salsify *Tragopogon porrifolius* and goat's-beard *T. pratensis*. Here too we had our first sighting of the curious aesculipid insect *Libelloides coccajus*, an aerial carnivore that inhabits sunny meadows.

Lunch was calling and so we set off for a *lavogne*, a water-hole that Mike knows on the Causse Noir near Meyrueis. Here we finally had a chance to sit in the sun and relax on the rocks dotted with fairy foxglove *Erinus alpinus* and a sandwort, *Arenaria aggregata*, sleep or just wander. Over the *lavogne* we found the trip's only dragonflies – at least 6 male Broad-bodied Chasers disputing the females that came their way, a large presence of Western Willow Spreadwing damselflies (*Lestes viridis*) and the odd Common Blue Damselfly. By now we were getting a bit blasé about the orchids – more military, a few monkeys and a *Ophrys aymononii*. Birdwise, Nightingales, Bonelli's Warblers and a Whitethroat sung, whilst just as we were leaving a group of four Honey Buzzards came over low and started settling in the trees just behind the pool, surely having detected a bee or wasp's nest. A Knapweed Fritillary was found, along with another Mother Shipton moth and an attractive brown and yellow female of the Arctiidae moth *Hyphoraia testudinaria*.

It was time to head into Meyrueis to leave our bags (and sit out in the sun in the hotel garden next to the swimming pool) before the afternoon's excursion that was to take us downhill from Meyrueis to the lowest point of the area, the confluence of the rivers Tarn and Jonte.

Driving down the colourful Gorge du Jonte we noted the pine and beech forests on our left on the north-facing slopes and the lighter scrub and oak on our right on the south-facing side of the valley. We drove up from Le Rozier towards the ruined village of Capluc. Here we parked and started a steep climb up the track towards the cliffs. At last we found our first lizard orchids *Himantoglossum hircinum* in full flower after having seen so many spikes the previous weeks. As well, we found our first bee orchids *Ophrys apifera*. The walk was decorated by more thermophile Mediterranean shrubs such as turpentine tree *Pistacia terebinthus*, Etruscan honeysuckle, Mediterranean buckthorn *Rhamnus alaternus*, Saint Lucie's cherry *Prunus mahaleb*, Montpellier maple *Acer monspessulanum*, the pink flowers of crown vetch *Coronilla varia*, osyris *Osyris alba* and *Dorycnium pentaphilum*. Other flowers included the tall spikes of rampion bellflower *Campanula rapunculus*, yellow woundwort *Stachys recta*, *Convulvulus lineatus* and the flowers of burnt candytuft all but over.

Once up at Capluc, we headed off on a narrower path hoping to find a small meadow where we could all sit and cliff-watch. Unfortunately, it had clouded over rather and so the only butterflies on display were a male Cleopatra that zoomed past and a Large Wall Brown. From our meadow we studied the cliffs behind and had views through the scope of a male Blue Rock Thrush. The odd Griffon drifted over, along with groups of Red-billed Choughs and Jackdaws.

As there was still time, we nipped over the river from Le Rozier and up a small valley into an area of sessile oak woodland with red helleborine *Cephalanthera rubra*. And from here, it was back to our hotel after a somewhat more relaxing day.

Thursday 5 June

Mont Aigoual – Vallé de Breze

Weather: rather disappointedly after the sun on the previous day, the day dawned overcast with drizzle and remained cool all day long.

The other great granite mountain of the region is Mont Aigoual, which rises up to over 1,500 m south of the Causse Méjean and is generally reckoned to be one of the windiest places on Earth and one of the wettest in France!! We set off in sun with hopes that we might be lucky, although by the time we reached our first meadow the sky had rather clouded over and there were almost no butterflies on the wing. We walked into an attractive meadows surrounded by mature spruces hoping to find the frog orchid, the only species that had so far eluded us (we should have seen it on the first day). However, to no avail and the only highlights were a single Small Copper photographed by Vernon, more pheasant-eye daffodils, and the first May lilies *Maiathemum bifolium* just coming into flower.

We moved on uphill to the classic site for Clouded Apollo, but with the wind and low temperatures we were not to find this intriguing species. Fortunately in the neighbouring National Park information point there was an excellent exhibition of photographs of the orchids of the region, most of which we were able to identify on the basis of our recent observations. Some brought local produce – fig jam!!!!

Up top it was time for a coffee (and brandy, Peter!) stop whilst Mike went to see how the tulips were doing. He came back with good news and so we stopped just beyond the summit for a good display of both red and yellow forms of the elder-flowered orchid. There were also plenty of wild tulips, but only Vernon and Sharon found one fully open.

We decided to head downhill for lunch, despite being (just) able to see the sea from the top, although the views of the Pyrenees and Alps will have to wait for another day. Lunch was taken just below Col de Perjuret in an orchid-rich meadow (just for a change) and afterwards we had a little wander and found chamois ragwort *Senecio doronicum* and a Knapweed Fritillary motionless (like most butterflies during the week) on a flower head. Green-winged and the ubiquitous military orchids completed the picture.

After lunch, we decided it was time to go and look for a last habitat that we really hadn't explored yet – a calcareous flush. Mike's favourite flush near Florac had been built upon (National Park??) and so it was back up to Col de Perjuret to look for marsh orchids of the genera *Dactorhiza*. After a first false stop, we found a couple in a ditch by the road side that keyed out as robust marsh orchid *Dactorhiza elata*, but which on further study with more books turned out to be broad-leaved marsh orchid *D. majalis*. Orchid number 31!!! Elsewhere here there were bug, military, and green-winged orchids.

From here it was downhill again to a quiet schist valley just behind the hotel in Meyrueis. This dead-end road leads up the valley of the Brèze towards the hamlet of Campis and travels through a beautiful succession of forest, pastures and small cliffs. However, the sun was well and truly hidden and so there were no butterflies worth talking about. We parked just past Campis and proceeded to walk up the road, enjoying the views (forest to the south, scrub to the right). Our first little schist cliff provided much the same species as the other cliffs of this rock we had already seen, while the waysides and meadows had spiked rampion *Phyteuma spicata*, ragged robin *Lychnis flor-cuculi*, crimson clover *Trifolium incarnatum* subsp. *molinerii*, mountain sheep's bit *Jasione montana*, maiden pink *Dianthus deltoides* and a common thrift, *Armeria arenaria*. Mike ran up a side path but no one had the energy to follow, and so they missed out on mats of knawel *Scleranthus perennis* growing on the rocks and sesamoides *Sesamoides clusii* (= *Reseda sesamoides*), as well as a Rock Bunting calling from a bush.

Elsewhere we came across familiar plants such as both white *Silene latifolia* and bladder *S. vulgaris* champions, cut-leaved geranium *Geranium dissectum*, heartsease and lady's mantle *Alchemilla saxatilis*. However, those who were ahead did get excellent views of two Short-toed (not 'toad'!!)

eagle that drifted low overhead and a couple of Common Buzzards. Birdwise, not much else was moving in the cool afternoon.

So it was back to the hotel to prepare for our evening Stone Curlew hunt, but not before Vernon got out at an excellent patch of bug orchids and clambered up a waterfall to get the best picture ... and almost getting left behind!.

After another wonderful five-course dinner, we re-assembled outside still in the light to go up onto the Causse Méjean to hunt for Stone Curlews. We drove up the main road from Meyrueis on the Causse (past a pretty clump of *Saxifraga cebennensis* on a cliff by the tunnel) and up into the driest, dustiest part of the whole area. A female roe deer crossed the road just ahead of the van. Then, we stopped by the roadside and listened: Quails and still lots of Skylarks. Eventually, however, we heard our first Stone Curlew, still some way off. We approached along the road and then could here one calling (wailing?) from very close to the road. No sign of it though.

We continued on to near the village of Driges and stopped once more: again, a close call, but then just a quick glimpse of a Stone Curlew against the night sky. Satisfied, we moved onto a *lavogne* near the village, where with the torches we searched fruitlessly for amphibians. There were none in the water, but we could hear a male Midwife Toad calling from nearby. We decided against searching too hard for it was now rather late. So we all climbed back into the vans and headed back to our hotel

Friday 6 June

Causse- Méjean - Nîmes le Vieux

Weather: Our final day was not much brighter than the previous day and in fact it was decidedly chilly up on the Causse Méjean, although this didn't stop it being a good day for the birds.

First off, we went in search of the Prezwelski's horses that roam semi-free in the centre of the *causse*. Alas, they were not there, and the information centre looked just a tiny bit run down, as if the whole project was ending. Still, to keep us busy and entertained there were Rock Sparrows, Hoopoe, a cruising Marsh Harrier and Corn Bunting around the village. We stopped a little way further on along the road and had excellent views of a male Rock Thrush on his favourite electricity pylon, smartly patriotic (British or French) in his red, white and blue plumage. At the same site we also heard our only Ortolan singing – if Haydn was inspired by the skylark, might not Beethoven have been likewise inspired by an Ortolan Bunting? I guess somebody would have to check the distribution of said bunting in and around Vienna at the beginning of the nineteenth century ... Martin? Adele? There's a learned thesis there somewhere.

Soon it was time to move on towards our principal objective for the day – the rock chaos of Nîmes le Vieux. On the way, however, along the narrow back roads we stopped for Tawny Pipits, a Short-toed Eagle, Jackdaws and Red-billed Chough, as well as both Montagu's and Hen Harriers. Orchid-wise we were limited to 'just' greater butterfly, man, burnt-tip and pyramidal, as well as a few more of the yellow flowers of the adonis we had seen on the first morning, crested lousewort and alpine aster.

Once parked up at Nîmes le Vieux at the little hamlet of L'Hom, we had a quick early lunch before heading for the rock pinnacles we could see ahead of us. The main interest was in the flowers that were sprouting out of the rocks as it was too cool for any butterflies (apart from one Glanville Fritillary). Amongst the rocks we found both alpine mezereon *Daphne alpine* and garland flower *Daphne cneorum*, as well as lots of crested lousewort, fairy foxglove, amelanchier *Amelanchier ovalis*, lots of the white crucifer kerneria *Kerneria saxatilis* and a solitary flower of three-leaved valerian *Valeriana tripteris*. Birdwise there was nothing remarkable to add except for lots of Skylarks and a new bird for Mike for the trip and for the area, an Orphean Warbler. At the car-park we had met an English birder (with last year's trip-report!) who said that he'd heard one such warbler. And lo and

behold! Just as we were returning, Mike heard its quite distinctive song and got quick views with Martin and Adele.

From here it was off for a final walk across the *cause* towards the cliffs. By now we were all rather 'orchided out', but we all really enjoyed the pleasant stroll to the cliff edge through the thriving grassland. Vernon spotted straight away a couple flowers of cupidone *Catanache caerulea*, an attractive blue-flowered daisy. Otherwise, we saw little else of note (it was still quite cool) and cut short our sit-down by the cliff edge to get back home so as to pack.

We took the long way home along the edge of the *cause* and enjoyed the fine views south towards Mont Aiguol, where we had been the previous day.

Saturday 7 June

Meyrueis – Nîmes Airport

Weather: pleasant

And so it was time to part, this time from 'Nîmes le Moderne', and its wonderful airport – i.e., you park right outside the departure lounge and there is very little to hassle you at all. On the way, however, as we drove between Meyrueis and Le Rozier, we still had time to spot a Short-toed Eagle plunge down onto the hillside just above us and then fly off with what looked like a lizard's tail dangling from its beak!!

Once at the airport, we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways, happy in the knowledge that you (the group) and us (the guides) had enjoyed a wonderful week in one of the best all-round wildlife 'hotspots' in Western Europe!!

BIRDS, LES CÉVENNES, JUNE 2008

Species	31/5	1/6	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	Comments
Grey Heron	X	X	X	X	X				Along river Gardon; breeding colony in woods behind Florac
Little Egret				X					On river Tarn at Beaver stake-out
Mallard							X		On river Tarn
European Honey Buzzard			X	X	X				On <i>cause</i> : good views at lunch on 4th
Common Buzzard	X			X	X	X	X		Common
Black Vulture					X				One overhead along cliffs near Col de Perjuret
Eurasian Griffon Vulture				X	X		X		Large groups when there was some sun
Short-toed Eagle			X				X	X	Excellent views on Mt. Lozère
Black Kite	X			X					Along road from Nîmes; one on Causse Méjean
Sparrowhawk			X						One bird on Mt. Lozère
Hen Harrier							X		One male near Drigas on Causse Méjean
Montagu's Harrier							X		One male near Drigas on Causse Méjean
Common Kestrel		X	X	X		X	X		Regular in open areas
Common Quail		H		H	H	H	H		Heard most days
Stone Curlew						X			3-4 heard in evening near Drigas.
Yellow-legged Gull	X								On way from airport
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Wood Pigeon	X		X	X	X		X		Common
Eurasian Collared Dove	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Common Cuckoo		H	H	H	H	H	H		Heard almost every day
Alpine Swift									The great absentee!!
Common Swift	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Everywhere
Eurasian Hoopoe	X			X	H		X		One seen on way from airport and occasionally elsewhere
Great Spotted Woodpecker					H				One heard near Roc des Hourtous
Green Woodpecker				X					One seen on <i>cause</i>
Black Woodpecker			X						One seen near Pont de Montvert
Woodlark		X		X	X		X		Common in upland open areas
Eurasian Skylark		H		X		H	X		Very common in upland open areas
Short-toed Lark		X							On <i>cause</i> near airstrip
European Crag Martin		X	X	X	X		X		In Florac and elsewhere
Common House Martin		X	X	X	X		X		Everywhere
Barn Swallow		X	X	X	X	X	X		Everywhere
White Wagtail	X	X	X	X		X			Common
Grey Wagtail		X	X	X	X	X			On rivers, including Tarn near Florac
Tree Pipit			X			X	X		In open areas with trees on <i>causses</i>
Tawny Pipit							X		Nîmes le Vieux
Red-backed Shrike		X		X	X		X		Everywhere with bushes and open

									areas, <i>causses</i> and Lozère
Great Grey Shrike		X							2 birds on <i>cause</i> near airstrip
White-throated Dipper			X	X		X			On river in Florac and elsewhere
Wren		H		X	X				Heard occasionally
Rock Thrush			X				X		Excellent views of males near Villeneuve (2 nd) and at Nîmes le Vieux
Ring Ouzel			X						Male singing, and female and young bird at Finiels on 2 nd
Common Blackbird	X	X		X	H		X		Seen almost daily
Mistle Thrush				H		X			Seen occasionally
Song Thrush			X	X					Seen occasionally
European Robin	X	H		X	X				Heard or seen almost daily
Common Nightingale		H		X		H			Commonly heard, but only seen once
Black Redstart	X	X	X	X		X	X		Heard or seen daily –common around villages
Common Stonechat				X					Only seen on <i>cause</i> on 3 rd
Whinchat			X						Seen at lunch near village of Villeneuve on 2 nd
Northern Wheatear		X	X				X		Common in open areas
Orphean Warbler							X		One singing and seen on 6 th at Nîmes le Vieux
Blackcap				X	X	X			Common
Common Whitethroat					X				Seen around <i>lavogne</i> on 4 th
Western Bonelli's Warbler		H		X	X				In almost any forest type
Chiffchaff				X	X	X	X		Common in almost any forest type
Firecrest			X	H	X	H			Generally in conifers -Florac and elsewhere
Coal Tit			X			X			In conifers
Crested Tit				X					In conifers near Roc des Hourtous on 3 rd
Great Tit			X	X		X	X		Common
Blue Tit		X	X						Reasonably common
Long-tailed Tit			X						Near Pont de Montvert on 2 nd
Short-toed Treecreeper	H		H				H		Heard in park in Florac and elsewhere
Eurasian Jay	X	X	X	X	X				Common
Black-billed Magpie	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	Abundant
Red-billed Chough		X		X	X		X		Near Le Rozier and Nîmes le Vieux, at Castelbouc
Jackdaw	X			X	X		X		Common on <i>causses</i>
Carrion Crow		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Common Raven				X	X		X		Not rare on <i>causses</i>
Common Starling			X	X	X		X		Common
Yellowhammer		X	X	X	X		X		Common in upland areas
Rock Bunting			X			X			One on Mt. Lozère on 2 nd and near Meyrueis on 5 th
Ortolan Bunting							X		Heard near Drigas
Corn Bunting				X			X		Common on <i>cause</i>
Common Chaffinch	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		Everywhere
Eurasian Serin				X					Only noted at Roc des Hourtous
European Goldfinch							X	X	Not rare

Common Linnet		X	X	X	X		X		Fairly common in upland areas
House Sparrow			X	X	X		X		Abundant
Rock Sparrow							X		Well seen at near Drigas on 6th

OTHER VERTEBRATES, LES CÉVENNES, JUNE 2008

Species	31/5	1/6	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	Comments
MAMMALS									
Daubenton's Bat				X					Over river Tarn on 3 rd , along with another 5/6 species
European Beaver			X	X					On river Tarn on 2 nd and 3 rd
Hare		X							On road to Beaver stake-out and on Causse Méjean
Roe Deer						X			On Causse Méjean n Stone Curlew evening
Red Fox							X		Near Drigas on 6 th
REPTILES									
Green Lizard				X	X				On <i>causses</i>
Common Wall Lizard				X	X				On dry days
Western Whipsnake			X						Near Pont de Montvert on 2 nd
AMPHIBIANS									
Midwife Toad					H	H			Heard calling at <i>lavogne</i> near Drigas

BUTTERFLY AND OTHER INVERTEBRATES, LES CÉVENNES, JUNE 2008

Species	31/5	1/6	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	Comments
Scarce swallowtail				X	X				1 near Blanquefort and 1 at Le Rozier
Large white			X						Surprisingly scarce
Orange-tip						X			Mont Aigoual
Clouded yellow					X	X			
Berger's clouded yellow				X	X	X			
Cleopatra					X				1 at Le Rozier
Wood white			X						1 near sale Privat
Green hairstreak			X		X				
Small copper						X			1 on Mt Aigoual
Osiris blue				X					1 at Roc des Hourtous
Green-underside blue		X		X	X				Relatively common despite being scarce species
Adonis blue			X	X	X	X			Common
Common blue		X	X	X	X		X		Common
Red admiral					X				1 sighting
Painted lady				X	X				Sighted twice on migration
Small tortoiseshell				X					
Pearl-bordered fritillary					X				One near Pont de Montvert
Glanville fritillary							X		Nîmes le Vieux
Knapweed fritillary					X	X			Twice found at rest
Small heath				X	X	X			Here and there
Wall brown				X	X				Occasional
Large wall brown					X				
Grizzled skipper					X				
Dingy skipper				X					

Species	31/ 5	1/6	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	Comments
ODONATA									
Western Willow Spreadwing					X				Dozens at <i>lavogne</i> on Causse Noir
Common Blue Damselfly					X				6+ males and a few females <i>lavogne</i> on Causse Noir
Broad-bodied Chaser					X				A few at <i>lavogne</i> on Causse Noir

Additional invertebrates

Moths

Callistege mi Mother Shipton: 1 on 3rd and 4th.

Euclidia glyphica Burnet Companion 06/04 09:53

Odezia atrata Chimney Sweeper: in grassy areas on 3rd, 4th and 5th.

Pseudopanthera macularia: Speckled Yellow: 1 on 2nd.

Prosperina proserpinus Willowherb Hawkmoth: 1 on 1st near Mas St Chely.

Hyphoraia testudinaria: at *lavogne* at lunch on 4th.

Others

Libelluloides coccajus (*Ascalaphus libelluloides*): ant-lion type, yellow and black aerial predator in meadows

Xylocopa violacea Violet Carpenter Bee: fairly common

Gryllus campestris Field cricket: near Blanquefort on 3rd

Misumena vatia (?). Yellow crab-spider: female on fragrant orchid near Roc des Hourtous on 3rd.

ORCHIDS, LES CÉVENNES, JUNE 2008

Species	31/1	1/6	2/6	3/6	4/6	5/6	6/6	7/6	Comments
Lady slipper orchid				X					Roc des Hortous
<i>Epipactis distans</i>				X					Roc des Hortous, but only in bud
White helleborine		X		X	X		X		Mostly well gone-over
Sword-leaved helleborine		X		X	X		X		Most in fairly good condition
Red helleborine					X				In woods near Le Rozier
Greater butterfly orchid		X		X	X	X	X		Common
Lesser butterfly orchid		X							Road to Mas St Chely
Common twayblade		X		X	X	X	X		Common
Lizard orchid	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Very common; fully in flower at lower altitude
Violet limodore		X		X					Roc des Hortous, Blanquefort
Pyramidal orchid		X		X		X	X		Very common on limestone
Burnt-tip orchid		X		X		X			Very common
Green-winged orchid		X		X		X			On limestone
Early purple orchid		X		X					Mt Lozere
Lady orchid		X		X	X		X		On <i>causse</i> , but the majority going over. Hybridises with military orchid
Bug orchid					X	X			Below Col Perjuret on 4 th and Vallee de Breze on 5 th .
Monkey orchid		X		X	X				On <i>causses</i>
Military orchid	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Very abundant on limestone
Broad-leaved marsh orchid						X			One below Col du Perjuret
Elder-flowered orchid		X	X			X			Both colours on Mont Lozere and Mt. Aigoual
Heath spotted orchid		X		X	X		X		Common on limestone
Common spotted orchid		X	X			X			Common on acid
Fragrant orchid		X	X	X	X	X	X		Common
Bird's-nest orchid		X		X	X				Groups of up to 30 on Causse Noir
Man orchid		X	X	X	X	X	X		Fairly common
Fly orchid				X					In woods past airstrip
Yellow-lipped orchid		X		X	X		X		Common on <i>causse</i>
<i>Ophrys</i> sp. (prob. <i>O. aveyronensis</i>)				X					Almost gone over near Roc des Hortous
Bee orchid					X		X		Below Col de Perjuret
Woodcock orchid					X		X		Below Col de Perjuret
Common tongue orchid			X						Salle Privat

Mike Lockwood, July 2008

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