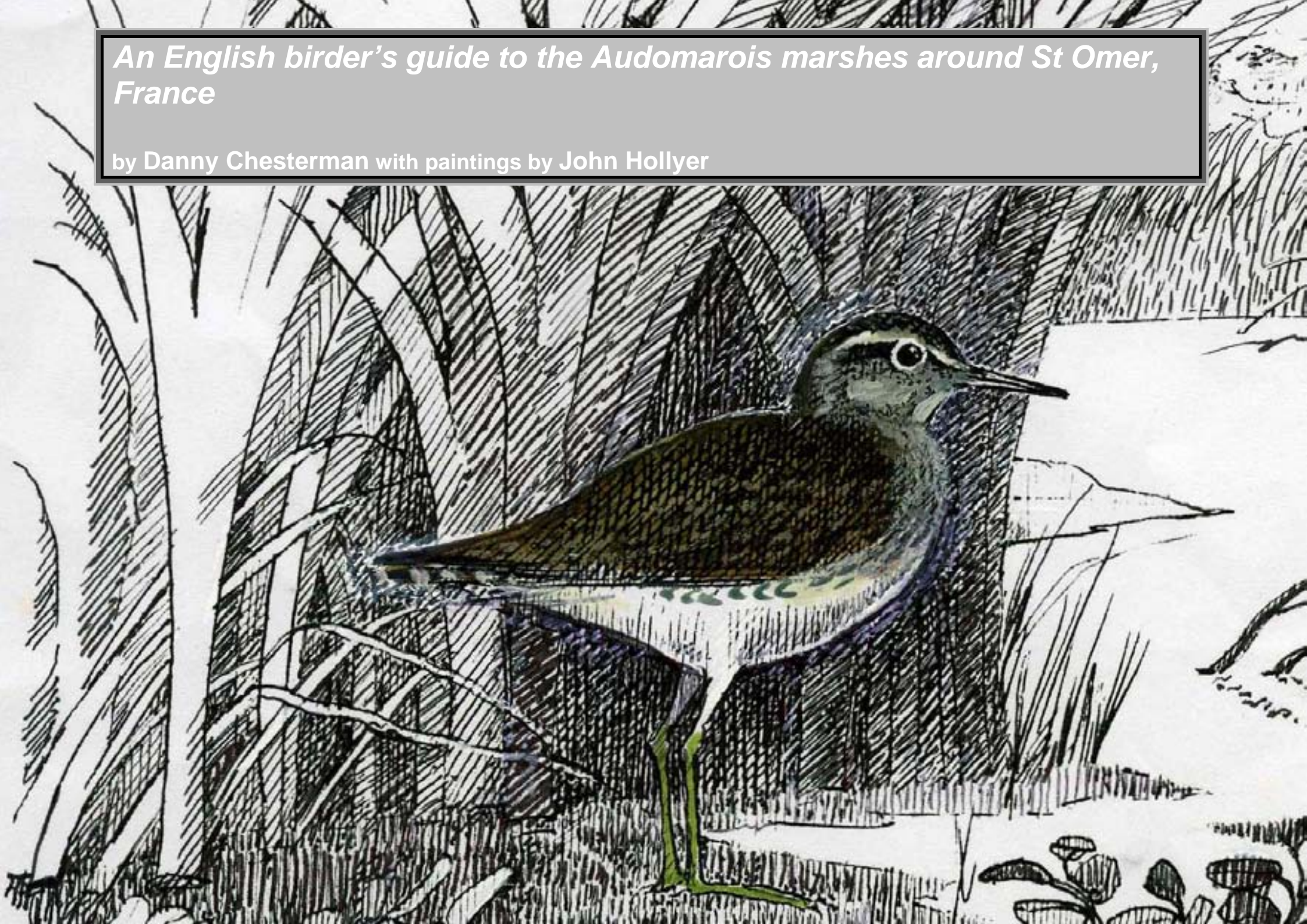


*An English birder's guide to the Audomarois marshes around St Omer,
France*

by Danny Chesterman with paintings by John Hollyer



Introduction to the area

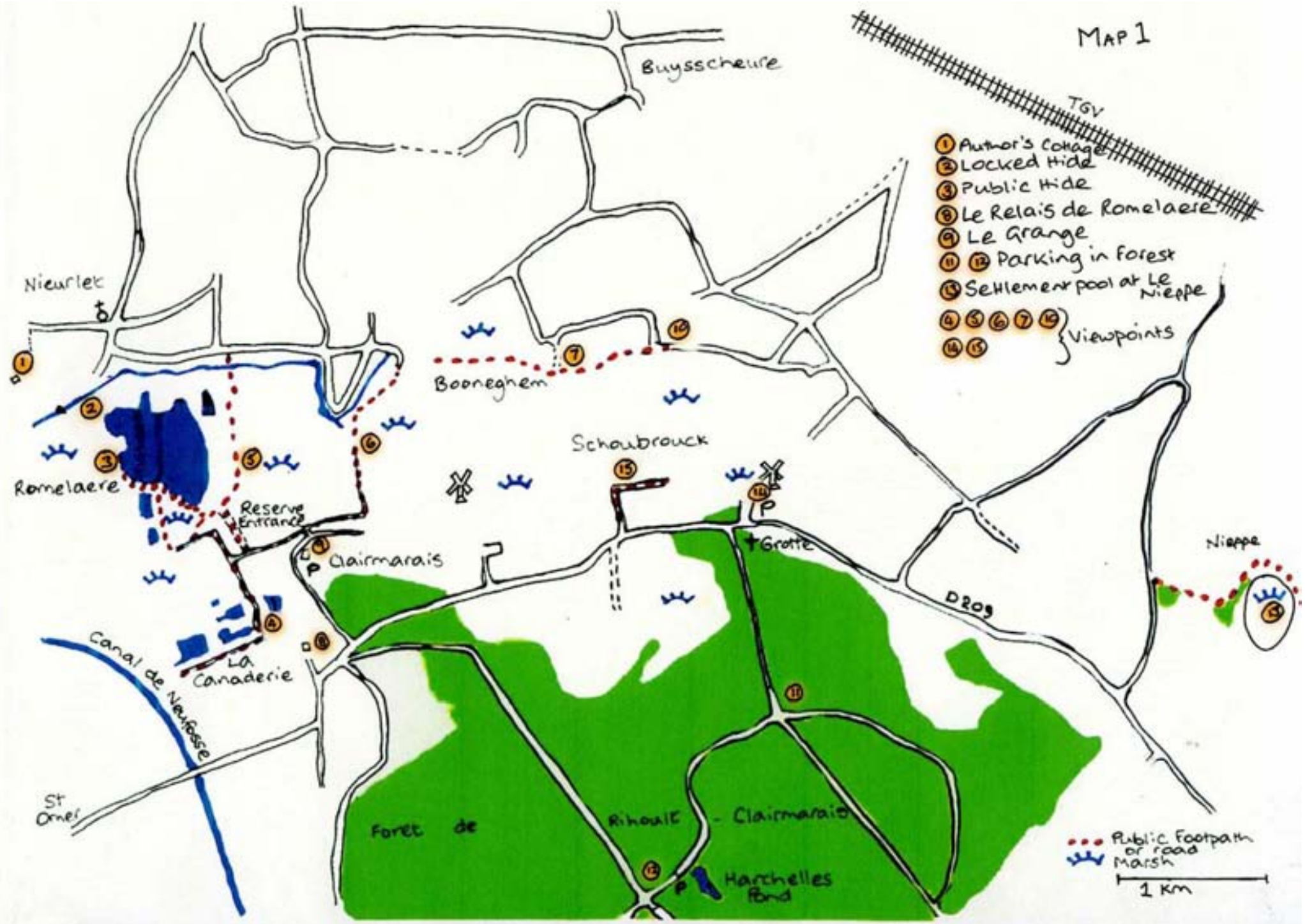
The Audomarois is the name given to the marshlands of the River Aa, named after Saint-Omer's patron saint. The area was originally a salt-water estuary, and in the 7th century monks started to reclaim it from the sea - organised by the monasteries that Bishop Omer founded. Later in the 15th century Dutch engineers came to work on 'polders'. They drained the marshlands using windmills to drive pumps, and left the marshlands criss-crossed by drainage ditches called "*watergangs*".

Peat extraction left large areas to be flooded. Now the three arms of the marsh have very different characters. The north west arm west of the railway line is mainly given over to tourism. East of the railway line is a communal area with intensive market gardening. Various vegetables are grown, most notably cauliflowers, which are loaded onto wooden boats called 'bacoves' and taken to market at St Omer. The eastern arm is mainly preserved for shooting interests. Sandwiched between the two is the Reserve de Romelaere which lies midway between Clairmarais and Nieurlet.

Within ten miles of the marsh are three significant woodland areas. To the west is the Forêt de Tournehem, which is more or less totally open to public access. To the north is the Forêt d'Eperlecques, including the famous Bloc-house, from which Hitler sent V2 rockets to England. To the south west is the Forêt de Rihoult-Clairmarais, also open to public. To these sites we can now add the northern edge of the Bois du Ham, just east of Watten, where there is a brand new green space and paths (including a board walk through the flooded clay pit).

Due south of the marsh at St Omer is an escarpment running from Helfaut to Baudringhen, containing some fragments of heathland at Le Bibrou and more or less continuous woodland. There is a small reserve at les Landes at Helfaut, with birch woodland and small pools.

MAP 1



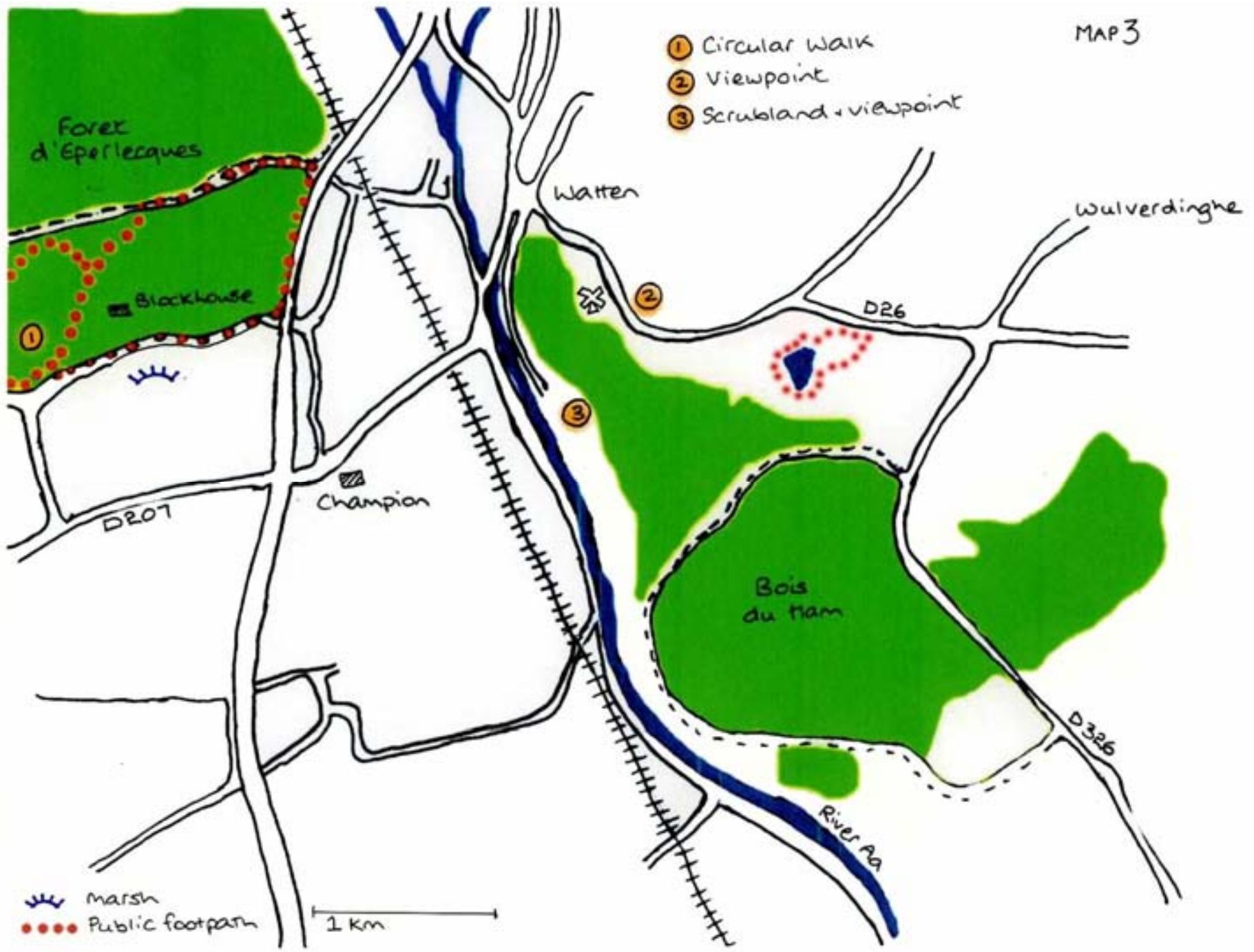
- ① Author's Cottage
- ② Locked Hide
- ③ Public Hide
- ④ Le Relais de Romelaere
- ⑨ Le Grange
- ⑪ ⑫ Parking in Forest
- ⑬ Settlement pool at Le Nieppe
- ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑮ } Viewpoints
- ⑭ ⑯

... Public Footpath
 or road
 Marsh
 1 Km

- ① Viewpoint (raptors)
- ② Viewpoint



- ① Circular walk
- ② Viewpoint
- ③ Scrubland + viewpoint



marsh
Public footpath

1 km



Parc
naturel
régional
des Caps et
Marais d'Opale

Sentier de découverte de la Réserve du Romelaère



Map of the Romelaère reserve showing the main access path, reproduced by kind permission of the Parc Naturel Régional de Nord/Pas de Calais

March

March is perhaps my favourite month in the marsh. The pussy willow is in full bud and catkins already out. Chiffchaffs, some of which have stayed on the marsh all winter, start to increase and sing. On March 18 2000, in a biting northerly wind, I saw my first Swallow of the year on the reserve, with 20 Sand Martins. But the earliest returning migrant is Garganey. I recorded a pair on 11 March 2004, in the marshes near Booneghem, although the third week of March is a little more normal. Check the sides of the lakes in and around the reserve de Romelaere, a pair can sometimes be found with careful searching at this time of year.



Water Pipits are just starting to come into summer plumage, although it's April before they are usually at their very best. Depending on the weather, Marsh Harriers start to return towards the end of the month and pair up straight away. On a fine day, it's an uplifting experience to watch the males and females in their tumbling and noisy display flights, looking and sounding a bit like giant Lapwings, I always think. Great White Egrets have turned up with increasing regularity and particularly favour the marshes at Schoubrouck. A large Heronry (about 100 pairs) is on the south west corner of the wood between Clairmarais and Malhove and is in full swing.

By mid month the Hen Harriers are back at their traditional sites around the woods at Tournehem. On 19 March 2005 I counted 10 in a morning's birding. You may be very lucky and see a Goshawk in the same area. Watch from the top of the Rue d'Amont that leaves Mentque Nortbecourt (point 1 on Map 2).

Black necked Grebes assume their summer plumage this month and return to their breeding pools. Try the pool next to the road at Le Nieppe (which you can view, somewhat distantly, from the D55). They over summered there in 2003 and nested successfully in 2005.

Black tailed Godwits regularly put in an appearance at the beginning of March, as can Ruff, soon followed by Avocets. Old records suggest numbers of Black tailed Godwits could be spectacular....1,458 apparently on 16 March 1996! Little Ringed Plovers arrive at any suitable site (including flooded fields) in the third week of the month, and Bar tailed Godwits can sometimes be seen flying over (they never seem to land) towards the end of the month.

A walk in the town park at St Omer can be excellent at any time of year but March is especially rewarding. On 19 March 2003 a short walk produced two Hawfinches, a Blackcap, singing Firecrest, and Serin. On 4 March 2002 I found a Northern Long tailed Tit at Blendeques, in the small woodland/heath reserve called Les Landes, which is peppered with small pools. On a warm day Brimstones and Red Admirals will be flying.

March is also the time to start looking and listening for Bluethroats. My earliest recorded is 19 March 2005, when I arrived at my cottage near Nieurlet to find one singing in the garden! The place to look for them is not the reed beds but in the dykes surrounding the small vegetable plots that cover the marsh. They like open ground, and just need a few song posts like Phragmites or a Hawthorn bush from which to sing. Early morning and evening is the best time to look out for them.



At the very end of the month, depending on the weather, Sedge and Willow Warblers start to appear. Anywhere where the reeds have been cut back keep an eye open for Bitterns. A favourite place is the flooded fields at the entrance of the main reserve, west of the little lane that leads up the Canarderie.

The gradual increase in the population of Mediterranean Gulls on the coast is resulting in more frequent sightings in the Audomarois. The railings alongside the river at Watten produced two on 19 March 2003. Two more appeared over Romelaere in their magnificent 'pas de deux' synchronised flying, and three followed a plough on 20 March 2006. In fact check out any pair of Gulls that you see flying over at this time of year and you may find they are Meds.

White Wagtails may still flock up at this time of year when the ploughs are tilling the fields and rich pickings are available. 40 were on the Dambricourt (west of Romelaere) on 20 March 2006. It's worth checking such flocks because whilst the vast majority will be White Wagtails there may be an odd British Pied Wagtail amongst them which joins in the fun.

Check the lake at Malhove as shooting has finished and the ducks can sometimes be interesting. Two male Red Crested Pochards on 19/20 March 2006 looked very wild (one still present in April 2006 ...there was also one there April 1996, so maybe they turn up every ten years!).



April

Egyptian Geese can be seen on or near the reserve at any time of year. No less than 14 were on the marshes at Schoubrouck in March 2006. In the first week of April, I have recorded my earliest Yellow/Blue headed Wagtails and heard the first Nightingales sing. In 2001 I found the first Reed Warblers and a Common Whitehroat on the 3 April, and at Tournehem the first Grasshopper Warbler on 5 April 2001. The slightly deeper tone of Savis warblers can be heard from mid April...either on the reserve or in the larger reedbeds at Clairmarais or Booneghem. Garganey numbers start to build up a bit, and the occasional oddity can turn up....witness a Little Tern that flew over the marsh at Booneghem on 3 April 2002 , and the drake Scaup that graced the main lake at Romelaere on 12 April 2004. This was the same day that, as I walked the path across the marsh from Nieurlet to Clairmarais (point 5 on map 1), a Spoonbill got up and rose higher and

higher into the air, eventually lost to view. I imagined it had carried on its migration....only to see either it (or another bird?) elsewhere in the marsh two hours later.

If its warm or still , or preferably both, Bluethroats will be at full throttle, and will sing deep into the night. I've heard them singing at midnight at my cottage. Check the car park at the Grotte for Redstart. They have nested here in the past.

Ospreys pass through every year and if you are lucky you may catch one, usually on or near the reserve. In 2005, for example, individuals were seen on 10, 11 April and 3, 11,12 May, with a couple on 24 and 25 May. Hobbies start to arrive from the third week onwards. A favourite spot is over the poplar plantation at Booneghem. My earliest Swift was 25 April 2003. Wader migration overhead often includes Godwits, Greenshank, and the one I love to hear, Whimbrel (from about the third week).



Bitterns boom on the reserve from the big reed bed adjacent to Nieurlet. Depending on the state of the pools at Le Nieppe, waders can be variable. Ruff, Avocet, Redshank, Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, Black tailed Godwits, Green Sandpipers, Little Ringed Plovers and Dunlin are all likely. Later in the month, from about the third week, Wood and Common Sandpipers start passing through, and I have also recorded Knot.

The Cormorant colony on the reserve is in full swing in april. Look carefully at the nests and you can usually turn up a few Stock Doves, which nest within the colony.

Raptor watching over the Tournehem woods from the Rue D'Amont at Mentque Nortbecourt can be great at this time of year. The Hen Harriers will be displaying and I've seen Goshawks displaying on three occasions in April and May. (A Goshawk was also seen in the Foret de Clairmarais on 16 May 2005). Hawfinches are easier to pick up from their song.

My earliest Swallowtail Butterfly was the 25 April 2003, at Nieurlet.

May

Like most places, May can be the time when the marsh is at its best. Golden Orioles start arriving in the first week of May, and can be heard, and occasionally seen, in the woods at Clairmarais and Eperleques. They are also partial to poplar plantations, which are numerous in the marsh, so they are worth checking. The winding avenue of polars that leads towards the river from the Watten to St Omer road is a favourite spot to see them. Nobody seems to object if you wander down this path, and the advantage is the birds are easier to see. Another good place to watch and listen for them is the little lane that runs along the south-eastern edge of the edge of the Foret d'Eperlecques, opposite which are several small poplar plantations.

Melodious Warblers and Wood Warblers arrive in May. The former can be found quite commonly in open scrub.....the old clay pit at Watten on the other side of the River canal has them every year (point 3 on Map 3). They are also fairly common in the scrub in Forets de Clairmarais and Tournehem. Wood Warblers are regular but not that common. The picnic area in the centre of Clairmarais always has one or two, and the Foret d'Eperleques is good for them.

Serins are common, and easily picked up once you know the song. They like gardens and parkland. Whinchats can pass through in small numbers.



At Le Nieppe, both Little and Temminck's Stints are likely to put in an appearance (no less than 6 of the latter were present on 7 May 2004). Sanderling are possible (I had three on 15 May 2005). Sometimes waders arrive or depart 'en masse' overnight. On the 26 May 2003 there was a flock of 50 plus Ringed Plovers at Le Nieppe.....as well as the usual Little Ringed Plovers. By the 28 May there were only three Ringed Plovers left! Black Terns are regular, and can turn up either at Le Nieppe or on the lakes on or near the reserve. The lake at Malhove is a good spot for them. (The best access is down Rue de Savoie, on the left just after you pass under the railway bridge as you are coming from Arques. Park at the end and you can walk right round the lake if you want to.

In 2000, a small pool on the marshes at Schoubrouck held four pairs of nesting Black winged Stilts, and odd ones have turned up since at Le Nieppe, but it all depends on the state of the water level. At least one pair was seen nesting at Le Nieppe in May 2006, with another three or four pairs prospecting, although later in the season they had gone, and I suspect any nests were flooded out.

By the end of the first week of May, figures, often congregating over the can be viewed from either side of are the best points. Honey Buzzards week of May. Probably one of the Watten. You can view raptors from on map 3), or alternatively drive up windmill. In the dark it is beautifully on map 3) is an excellent watch point, hundred yards further on up the hill Kite turned up, almost exactly two also saw one drifting over the Previous records of this species are April 2005 and 19 May 2005,



numbers of Hobbies are often in double poplar plantation at Booneghem. This the marsh, but points 7 or 15 on map 1 don't seem to arrive before the second best spots for them is the old clay pit at the rough ground at the bottom (point 3 to the top of the hill and park at the lit, as is the adjacent abbey. This (point 2 as is the new woodland park just a few on the right. On 22 May 2005 a Black years after a group of English birders woods at Tournehem (28 May 2003), listed as 20 April 1996, April 1998, 26 so they may well be almost annual.

By the third week of May the first brood of Bluethroats is already on the wing....and very confusing they can appear if what you are expecting to see is nice blue and red chested adults! Also, this is the time of year that Crossbills can turn up, after breeding. The larches and firs at Foret de Clairmarais are worth checking. Both times I've recorded them (25 May 04 and 18 June 06) they've been flying overhead, calling loudly. And if you are prepared to stay out late, you may hear a Nightjar churring in the younger plantations. (One bird which I am amazed never to have seen in the area is Woodcock, but they have been recorded).

In some ways, the wood at Foret d'Eperlecques can be more rewarding than Clairmarais, where the birds can be rather spread out. On 25 May 2004 I was astonished to find a female Wood Duck sitting on the nest that had been allegedly originally hollowed out by a Black Woodpecker! With patience and a bit of luck you should be able to find Crested Tit and Hawfinch.

May is the peak time for Swallowtail Butterflies....and look out for them anywhere, not necessarily close to the reeds. Map butterflies, surely one of the most beautiful, can also be seen at this time of year, either in the woods at Clairmarais or in the poplar plantations. Green Hairstreaks are also fairly common and at Watten, Dingy and Grizzled Skippers.

My earliest record of Little Bittern is the 8 May (2002). See the table below for the accumulated first and last records every year from 1995 to 2004.

Table : Distribution of first and last sightings of Little Bittern from 1995 to 2004

Date d'arrivée	Date de Départ	Jours de présence
1995 8 mai	3 octobre	149
1996 11 mai	7 octobre	147
1997 30 Avril	5 octobre	158
1998 10 mai	28 octobre	172
1999 10 mai	4 octobre	148
2000 3 mai	22 septembre	143
2001 8 mai	14 septembre	130
2002 8 mai	4 septembre	120
2003 14 mai	27 Août	106
2004 3 mai	12 septembre	138

From: Records of observations of Little Bittern *IXOBRYCHUS MINUTUS* in the Audomarois marsh in 2004, by N. Delelis/ L Barbier, April 2005

The Canarderie or the heart of the reserve are the best areas to check for them. At this time of year it's best to try early morning when the sun starts to get some strength and the males seem to like coming out to sun themselves. By the third week, the males are more evident as they display for territory. On the 20 May 2002 I saw two males in a willow tree on the reserve, doing the most extraordinary creeping and staring display to each other....as if each was trying to out stare the other. Records suggest that up to 12 pairs probably breed annually on various sites across the marshes, which local expert Luc Barbier, in the Bulletin Gedena (2000) suggests represents between 2 and 3 % of the total French breeding population.



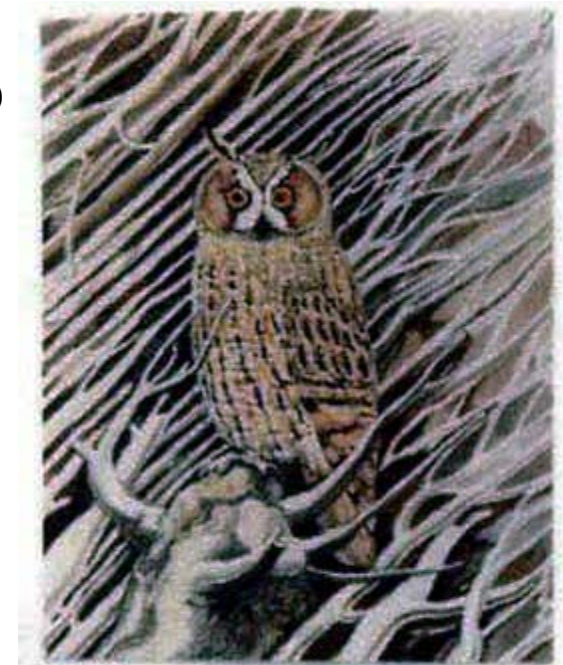
Marsh Warblers start to arrive from the second week of May. They favour the areas of nettle or elder scrub alongside the river banks, and only occasionally set up territories in the reed beds.

A few Great White Egrets now regularly summer so there must be a chance that one year they will be enticed to nest with the big Heronry in the Foret de Clairmarais. Apparently the first one spotted had a ring which indicated that it had originated from le Lac de Grand Lieu.

Long eared Owls will have young in May and can sometimes be seen hunting for food on the evening. A friend of mine found a nest in his garden at Volckerincove, from which the young fledged on 22 May 2005, and another pair raised 5 young at Le Relais de Romelaere. A pair hunted the fields adjacent to our cottage on 10 May 2001. I've also seen a pair hunting in broad daylight in the fields on either side of the D600, just outside Watten (10 March 2004), and single birds again flying at dusk in June and July.

I've never seen Short eared (although they have occasionally been recorded) or Barn Owls in the marsh, and only one record of Little Owl, although earlier records suggest that Little Owls in particular were quite common around Clairmarais, and Barn Owls have nested at Ferme de la Clochette. Looks like the Tawnies and Long eareds have it all sown up!

Black Redstarts can turn up at any time of the year, but pairs breed at Nieurlet, the farm at Schoubrouck, and the farm on the way up Rue d'Amont at Mentque Nortbecourt. I've also seen them around the cathedral in St Omer, and at the back of 'leaning church' on the way into St Omer from Watten.



On 23 May 2004 I was surprised to arrive at my cottage and find two singing Fan tailed Warblers in the fields next door. I can't imagine they can have done particularly well, as the fields are cut for silage twice a year. The next year, in 2005, they were recorded on the reserve during July and August. Away from the coast, where they are now common, they are nevertheless scarce.

June



Bluethroats carry on singing until the middle of the month, when they are raising their second broods. After that, I've found them almost impossible to see, at any time of the day. On a good day in the marsh, you should be able to track down Savis, Grasshopper and Marsh Warblers, Hobbies, Honey Buzzard, Bluethroat, and maybe a Long eared Owl or a fleeting Golden Oriole. June is a good month for the occasional pair of Mediterranean Gulls.

By mid month the first young Marsh Harriers are on the wing in the marsh, and the first Hen Harriers on the wing in the woods at Tournehem. In the woods, you can find White Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries quite easily. Map butterflies are also possible, while Marbled Whites can be found at Watten. Depending on the water levels at Nieppe, there may be Avocets with full grown young, Little Ringed Plovers and maybe an odd Blackwinged Stilt, Wood Sandpiper, and maybe Black tailed Godwits or Ruff. By the end of the month returning Green Sandpipers can already be quite numerous....I had 7 on 28 June 2003, and 5 on 17 June 2006.

June is a quite time for the Little Bitterns but as soon as the lily pads are fully formed at the Canarderie it is worth checking them. The adults will often use the pads as their fishing platforms, and will stalk across them looking quite comical, as if they believe they cannot be seen. This isn't as daft as it sounds though, they often stand so still it is easy to miss one, and dismiss it as a stray twig or leaf. On 26 June 2004 I came across an adult with a brood of 5 young which had just fledged from the nest on the reserve. They were all creeping about amongst a dead Hawthorn on the edge of one of the smaller pools.

Careful searching in the woods at Foret d'Eperleques or Clairmarais will reveal Crested Tits, Marsh Tits, and maybe a Redstart or Wood Warbler. In the scrubby areas Melodious Warbler, Tree Pipit and Yellowhammer can be found. A good place to while away some time on a hot afternoon in June is to wander round the new green space at northern edge of Bois du Ham, just east of Watten. This, like the reserve at Romelaere, is also suitable for wheelchairs. The area abounds with Common Spotted Orchids and the views over the Bois du Ham and beyond to the western arm of the marsh are spectacular. This is one of the best spots to see Honey Buzzards.

July

It was a while before I realised that July is your best chance for a Bittern. By this time of year the vegetation in the dykes has grown up but they are heaving with frogs. The Bitterns, maybe young ones, venture forth from the reed beds and can be seen in the surrounding dykes.



At Le Nieppe, wader numbers can build up quite dramatically: over 100 Ruff on 14 July 2001; 10 Common Sandpipers and 12 Little Ringed Plovers on 21 July 2002, and unusual species can start to turn up...like Temmincks Stint on 21 July 2002.

There is small Sand Martin colony which nest in the holes in the river bank below the bridge at St Momelin. Crossbills may be on the move 15 were recorded on 7 July at Bibrou, the hilly area just south of the marsh.

In the woods second hatching of Map butterflies, which look quite different from the first hatchings, and Purple Hairstreaks may be found. The eastern end of the sentier du soldat tue in the Foret de Clairmarais is a good spot for them. Honey Buzzards and Buzzards are around.

The local LPO branch newsletter reports that about 450 Mute Swans reside in the marsh. Most of these are to be seen on the lakes at Malhove. A very curious feature of the population is that they have young of two colour forms...some the usual grey and others snow white...often mixed in the same brood. Interestingly, there seems to be some evidence, reported in the newsletter, that several pairs have infertile clutches, and question if this may be a sign of a population at saturation point?

August

Second generation Map butterflies are out and about. I've seen them in Poplar copses, and in the woods at Tournehem and Clairmarais. They like the sunny glades. In more open areas Clouded Yellows are sometimes relatively common

Bluethroats are apparently invisible now. In six years of visiting the marsh in every month of the year, I've never seen them later than July. I've also been surprised that the adult Marsh Harriers have already started to move out, and Hen Harriers dispersed from their breeding sites around the Tournehem.

But there are some superb compensations. August is one of the best months to see Little Bitterns, especially at their hot spot at the Canarderie. By this time of year the lily pads cover large areas of the pools, and careful scanning will often yield one or more birds, including free flying young, slowly creeping over the pads and picking off the young fishes that shelter underneath. They don't appear to me to be particularly crepuscular. I've seen them at all times during the day, even in the middle of the afternoon when most other stuff is having a siesta.



I've noticed that the local Honey Buzzards are particularly vocal in August, often attracting attention with their whistling yodel. If you are lucky, they'll grace the skies with a synchronised fly past, reminding me of the way Mediterranean Gulls do in the Spring. At this time of year the Honey Buzzards often have young in the nest, while Common Buzzards have long since finished, so a Buzzard with prey in its talons is almost certainly Honey. You're as likely to see one in the middle of the marsh as in the woods. I've seen them perched in the reserve at Romelaere, and recorded them over the cottage on three occasions in August. (Once was a family group).

A possible speciality in August is Ruddy (March 2004), comments on the annual Holland, where no less than 271 birds that the pattern of occurrences in the UK I've seen a flock of 13 at a pool near at Le Nieppe on 5 August 2005. They area but for them to turn up suddenly in surely an indication that some at least Europe.

Early August can sometimes produce move. Listen for the soft 'kerr' call, recalling their presence. Black Terns can pass through, for the marsh (28 August 2001) in this month.

At Le Nieppe, you may get lucky. On 14 August 2004, a flock of no less than 26 Wood Sandpipers (with 25 Green Sandpipers) stopped off. Spotted Redshanks, Greenshanks and the common waders may be seen if water levels are right.

If you are really fortunate you may come across a Purple Heron dropping in on its way south. My records have come from the marshes near Booneghem (9 August 2003), Nieurlet (22 August 2000) and from the fields near the Canarderie (6 September 2002). A friend recorded one on 29 August 2005. Previous records have come in May (1999) and August and September (also 1999).



Shelduck. Keith Vinnicombe, writing in Birdwatch moult migration of Ruddy Shelducks to Eemmeer in were recorded on 30 July 2003. He strongly argues is consistent with wild birds on moult migration. Dunkirk on 15 August 2004, and a pair turned up are kept commonly in wildfowl collections in the August and never at any other time of the year is are wild birds on the move from Eastern

family parties of Golden Orioles on the Jay but not so harsh, that can alert you to and I recorded my only Montague's Harrier

September

Little bitterns have been recorded as late as 28 October but generally they are harder to find from the beginning of September. Sometimes late broods emerge....in 2005 some friends and I saw a male with two recently fledged young at the Canarderie on 16 September. Around the marsh it can often be a very quiet month. Turtle Doves are quite a speciality in August and September, when up to 40 seen in a single day. The odd Whinchat or Pied Flycatcher drops in on passage. Firecrests can turn up in the Tit flocks. In the reserve itself Willow Tit is a breeding species and quite easy to see. I've seen them nesting in the one of the trees in the Cormorant colony, but perhaps the best area is just around the reserve entrance. Jays are often on the move, although whether they are on serious migration or just foraging out in the open, I've not been able to establish. In September 24/26 2005 there was a visible Coal Tit passage.

The scrubland on the north side of the River Aa at Watten is an excellent raptor watch point, no doubt because it is the highest point around. You can also look from the top of the hill, by the restored windmill, which offers a super view over the western end of the marsh. Kestrels, Buzzards, Sparrowhawks are guaranteed at any time of year, while both Hobby and Honey Buzzard nest in the private woodland and can soar above the trees.

At this time of year a large flock of Mallard and Teal starts to build up at Le Nieppe, and Little Stints start passing through.

Given the right weather conditions, Redwings sometimes arrive early. I saw a small group on 24 September 2001. Weather conditions also affect the hirundines.....but in a counter intuitive way! In gloriously sunny weather and a southerly breeze at the end of September in 2005 there were hardly any. In much cooler weather they often gather in large numbers over the lakes.

Small parties of Curlew can turn up in September. In the outlying fields there can already be large concentrations of Golden Plover, and where there are cows, you will often find family parties of Blue Headed Wagtail.



Flocks of Goldfinches, Linnets and other mixed Finches are now building up in areas like the Dambricourt, where there is a lot of cover left for pheasant shoots. It is in September and October that I have most often recorded Merlin, although they are not common here. Sparrowhawks, on the other hand, seem plentiful, especially in September, with up to 4 seen daily at this time of year.

October

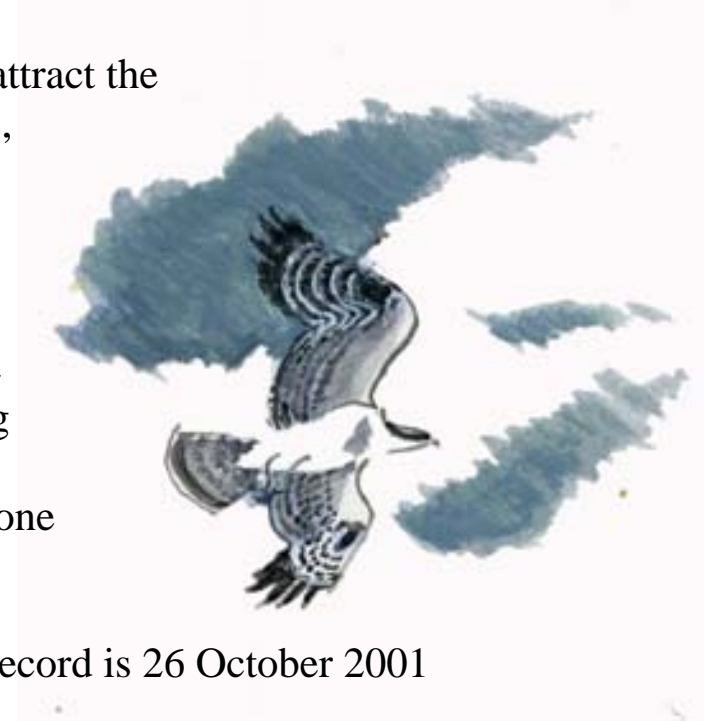
The Water Pipits arrive at the beginning of the month and disperse amongst the damp cultivated fields in loose flocks. They are common all over the marsh and are one of the winter specialities. It was while before I noticed that they roost communally in the reedbeds, in flocks of around 20, gathering in a suitable tree before dropping into the reeds. I've not seen that behaviour in the UK, but maybe they are more sparsely distributed.



It's always been a puzzle to me why the marsh, and other apparently suitable areas in the Nord/Pas de Calais, does not have Bearded Tits. My only record to date is of one calling from the reeds near Nieurlet on October 200. In 1997, a pair was seen in June, but sadly didn't linger.

As autumn progresses the detritus left in the fields after harvesting starts to attract the migrating chaffinches and Bramblings, with Reed Buntings, White Wagtails, Goldfinches mixed in. Siskins appear in the alders, and Water Rails sharm i n the reeds.

Visible migration can always turn up the unusual. Twice in recent years a lucky observer has seen a Black Woodpecker migrating through a gap in the neighbouring hills. Some years ago Black Woodpecker was recorded during the nesting season at the wood at Eperlecques, and earlier still in 1995 there were records at Tournehem. It's hopefully just a matter of time before someone tracks down a nesting pair!



I once had a Woodlark fly over. Ospreys can occasionally linger, my latest record is 26 October 2001

November

From November through to March is the best time to see Hen Harriers cruising around in the marsh. I'm quite curious to know whether these are the same birds that you can see on the nesting grounds in summer around (and even in) the woods Tournehem, or whether they represent an immigrant population from wider afield. One of the best spots to watch from is the car park next to the abandoned monastery opposite the Grotte de Notre Dame, on the road from Clairmarais towards Le Nieppe (point 14 on Map 1).

One of the most wonderful sights is to wrap up warm and watch the Hen Harriers come into roost on a cold winter's evening. The roost I know of is on the north -west side of the reserve, near Nieurlet, where I have watched them from the little (dead end) road that runs along the western fringe of the reserve. They glide in across the fields just as it is getting dusk and then often circle the reed bed in a continuous figure of eight until they are ready to drop in. I was amazed to discover that they make a soft clucking noise when assembling for their evening roost. Bittern is a possibility here too.

Once the leaves are off the trees is the best time to go hunting for Hawfinches. They can be found in the St Omer park, and in the wood at Clairmarais, often associating with Hornbeam. But the biggest flock I've seen to date was 20 plus feeding in the small woodland reserve at Esqueredes, in the valley of the River Aa. This site has Grey Wagtails, and very occasionally, a wintering Dipper.

Both Willow Tits and Marsh Tits can be seen relatively easily. Marsh Tits are commonest in the Foret de Clairmarais (try the area around the lake), but pay attention because the boggy area also has the odd pair of Willow Tits! The latter can more easily be seen at the entrance to the reserve at Romelaere or in the surrounding marshes.



December through to February

The coldest months can still provide some great birding opportunities. On a bright sunny day you can choose between looking for Hawfinches in the woods or Harriers in the fields. In January 2002 there was a huge wintering flock of mixed finches in the Dambricourt. The majority were Chaffinches, Bramblings and Greenfinches (many hundred each) with smaller numbers of Linnets and Goldfinches. During a wonderful bright sunny day on the 4 January 2002, I sat and watched this flock and chalked up 3 Hen Harriers, 4 Sparrowhawks, 2 Kestrels, 4 Buzzards and a Merlin hunting in and out of the flocks. Sadly this has not been repeated on this scale since, but this area of the marsh is used mainly for Pheasant rearing and it all depends on what is left in the fields over the winter.

Flocks of Tree Sparrows will be wherever the seeds are. In February 2005 there was a flock of 70 plus down the public track that leads past the settlement pools at Le Nieppe.

Nine times out of ten, a good scan from the car park opposite the Grotte de Notre Dame will produce a quartering Hen Harrier. If you are lucky, it will be a male, like the one I watched in a snow storm on 30 December 2005...and since the sun will typically be behind you at this look out point, you can get stunning views.



During a big freeze up, when there isn't much around, the water cress beds by the road between Salperwick and Tilques are worth a visit. They are signposted as a tourist attraction (La Cresserie) anyway, as the spring water here is renown for its clarity, and, apparently some plants that specialise in very clear water. I have seen Chiffchaff here in mid winter, feeding along the banks. If you then park at the Church in Tilques and walk down the little lane back towards St Omer, you will cross a tiny stream and then there is a slight wiggle in the road, just in the dip. Off to the left is a track that leads along some more water cress beds. Water Pipit, Grey Wagtail and Kingfisher are all regular, and during cold weather Snipe and maybe a Green Sandpiper will come and feed on the beds.

One of the unexpected things I learned about the Marsh Harriers of the Audomarois is that by and large they leave for the winter. One or two birds only remain. I wonder if the slightly colder temperatures associated with mainland Europe mean that the prospects are less attractive than in South east England?



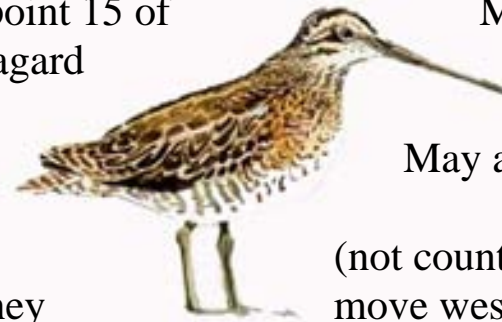
The colder it gets, the more likely you are to see Water Rails in and Bitterns coming out into the open, or where there is running water. During freezing weather on 15 January 2001 I flushed a Bittern from the path running parallel to and south of the railway line, in the area called Le Bachelin. On other occasions at around 4pm you may see one lifting up from the reserve reed beds and flying a few yards before dropping out of view again.

A remarkable record involves 20 Woodlarks in a field just south of the marsh at Bibrou on 24 January 2005

In early February on a fine day the Buzzards start to display and pair up. I saw no less than 12 over the hills at Watten on 3 Feb 2003. The odd Stonechat winters on the marsh although they are more often seen on the drier margins in Spring. A few Chiffchaffs overwinter. If there are shallow pools around, keep an eye open for Green Sandpipers. On 18 Feb 2005, there were 8 in the lagoons temporarily prepared to receive mud dredged from the River Aa at St Momelin.

The circular walk in the woods at Eperlecques (point 1 on map 3) is a delight at any time of the year but in the winter you perhaps have the best chance of seeing the Crested Tits and Hawfinches. On 18 January 2004 I put up a Jack Snipe from one of the boggy young plantations in the heart of the woods at Clairmarais.

A regular feature of the winter recently has been the presence of one to four Great White Egrets overwintering on the eastern arm of the marsh. The best places to scan the marsh for them are either at the car park opposite the grotte, or down the little lane (point 15 of Clairmarais). On 4 Feb 2006 there were not just two also a Cattle Egret (the latter was also recorded in



Map 1) which runs down (when travelling from Great White Egrets but May and August 2005.

Wild Geese are not a common sight in the marsh but if it freezes up in Holland flocks can turn up as they a flock of 140 plus Whitefronted Geese were seen feeding quietly on the area of marshes known as Schoubrouck. (Similar sized flocks were also seen near Dunkirk and in the Slack valley near Ambleteuse on the coast at the same time, indicating quite an influx). On the same day, a family party of 5 Bean Geese was found feeding with Mute Swans in the grassy fields opposite the River Aa at St Momelin. A day later, this flock had been joined by 3 very wild looking Barnacle Geese. Looking back at earlier records, a small party of Bean Geese was present in March 1996. A bird strangely absent from the whole area is Canada Goose!



Access

The reserve is open throughout the year except from 15 December to 15 March. Even at this time it is possible to do a short circuit, as far as the first bridge. The woods at Clairmarais and Eperlecques are both public access, but occasionally Clairmarais can be closed off for a wild boar hunt.

The marsh is surrounded by narrow lanes, a lot of them dead end, just leading to someone's house or farm. In my experience the locals are a friendly bunch and interested in the wildlife, so if you're in doubt about whether to walk down a lane, just ask and you'll often be told its ok if you are a genuine birder.

The marsh is heavily shot over from September to February and it's easy to feel antipathy for the shooters. However, I've come to respect them and appreciate them in a way, because without them, the marsh would not have been conserved as it is today. Many of them rear ducks for shooting.

If you are looking for a place to stay then an ideal locality is the Relais de Romelaere, which provides friendly hospitality and a traditional Flemish cuisine. It's situated only a few yards from the Canarderie area, from where you can walk to the reserve. The owners are very friendly and used to birders who like to get up at strange times of the night! Contact details are on www.relais-romelaere.com (tel 00 33 (0)321 38 95 95)

Other records

Other birds recorded in the area by birdwatchers include Night Heron (June 2005) Slavonian Grebe (1996), Goosander (1996), Smew (April 1997) Crane (March and May 1999), White Stork (summer 1999), Black Stork (Aug 1998), Corncrake (May 1996), Spotted Crake, Quail (July 2005), Great Snipe (March 1999), Woodcock, Stone Curlew (April 1996) Kittiwake (March 1996), Whiskered Tern (19 May 2005), Arctic Tern (4 May 2005) Peregrine (November 1999), Red Kite (March 2005) Rough legged Buzzard (Oct to Dec 1999), Barn Owl, Shorteared Owl, Icterine Warbler (1996, 2005), Great Reed Warbler (2000), Aquatic Warbler (2000), Penduline Tit (1995), Waxwing (November 1999), Great Grey Shrike (Oct 1997), Ring Ousel (March 1996 and April 1999) Dipper (1997/8), Hoopoe (August 2005), Black Woodpecker (March 2005 at Helfaut)

Other wildlife to look out for are Water Voles and Musk Rats, both of which are quite common, roe deer, hares, and there are Salamanders in the woods. I've never seen a fox there yet. Wild Boar are often seen in the woods at Clairmarais, especially on summer evenings, and there are several species of Bat.

In the 1997 GEDENA report Francine Ricouart and Stephanie Fiolet list the Butterfly species that have been recorded in the Clairmarais forest:

Gatekeeper, Orange Tip, Painted Lady, Map, Brimstone, Meadow Brown, Peacock, White Admiral, Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Small White, Large White, Green veined White, Marbled White, Small Heath, Comma, Wall Brown, Large Skipper, Small Skipper, Lulworth Skipper, Silverwashed Fritillary, Speckled Wood, Ringlet, Purple Hairstreak, and Woodland Brown.

The fact that no Blues are listed is curious. But also significant is the mention of Woodland Brown, a butterfly that the books say is very rare (and tends to fly off when approached!)

The author is always keen to hear of any records from your visits, so please do send them to danny.chesterman@dial.pipex.com

For details of John's wonderful paintings contact John Hollyer on 00 44 1304 612565

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Author's bird list from the Romelaere marsh and the surrounding Audomarois, Northern France

* Seen or heard from the house 77 Route de St Momelin, Nieurlet

Red-throated Diver		Plongeon catmarin	Winter vagrant		
Great crested Grebe	*	Grebe huppe	Resident		
Black-necked Grebe		Grebe a cou noir	Summer visitor	Little grebe	* Grebe castagneux
Resident					
Cormorant	*	Grand cormoran	Resident		
Grey heron	*	Heron cendre	Resident		
Purple Heron	*	Heron pourpre	Summer visitor		
Little Egret		Aigrette garzette	Resident		
Cattle Egret		Heron garde-boeuf	Winter vagrant?		
Great White Egret		Grande Aigrette	Resident		
Little bittern		Blongios nain	Summer visitor		
Bittern	*	Butor etoile	Resident		
Spoonbill		Spatule blanche	Passage migrant		
Mallard	*	Canard col-vert	Resident		
Teal	*	Sarcelle d'hiver	Winter visitor		
Garganey	*	Sarcelle d'ete	Summer visitor		
Gadwall		Canard chipeau	Winter visitor		
Wigeon	*	Canard siffleur	Winter visitor		
Pintail		Canard pilet	Winter visitor		
Shoveler	*	Canard souchet	Resident		
Tufted Duck	*	Canard morillon	Resident		
Scaup		Fuligule milouinan	Passage vagrant		
Ruddy Duck		Erismature a tete noire	Resident		
Wood Duck			Resident		
Pochard		Canard milouin	Winter visitor		
Shelduck	*	Tadorne de belon	Resident		
Ruddy Shelduck		Tadorne casarca	Passage vagrant		
Grey Lag Goose	*	Oie cendree	Resident		
Egyptian Goose		Oie d'Egypte	Resident		

Bean Goose		Oie des moissons	Winter visitor
White fronted Goose		Oie rieuse	Winter visitor
Barnacle Goose		Bernache nonnette	Winter visitor
Mute Swan	*	Cygne muet	Resident
Black Swan		Cygne noir	Resident
Buzzard	*	Buse variable	Resident
Sparrow Hawk	*	Epervier d'Europe	Resident
Goshawk		Autour des palombes	Resident
Honey Buzzard	*	Bondree apivore	Summer visitor
Marsh Harrier	*	Busard de roseaux	Mainly summer visitor
Montagues Harrier		Busard cendree	Summer visitor
Hen Harrier	*	Busard St-Martin	Resident/winter visitor
Black Kite		Milan noir	Passage migrant
Osprey	*	Balbusard pecheur	Passage migrant
Hobby	*	Faucon hobereau	Summer visitor
Merlin	*	Faucon emerillon	Winter visitor
Kestrel	*	Faucon crecerelle	Resident
Grey Partridge	*	Perdix grise	Resident
Red legged Partridge		Perdix rouge	Resident
Pheasant		Faisan de chasse	Resident
Water Rail	*	Rale d'eau	Resident/winter visitor
Moorhen	*	Poule d'eau	Resident
Coot	*	Foulque macroule	Resident
Oystercatcher	*	Huitrier-pie	Resident
Lapwing	*	Vanneau huppe	Resident
Little Ringed Plover	*	Petit gravelot	Summer visitor
Ringed Plover		Grand gravelot	Passage Migrant
Grey Plover		Pluvier argente	Passage Migrant
Golden Plover	*	Pluvier dore	Winter visitor
Avocet	*	Avocette	Summer visitor
Snipe	*	Becassine des marais	Resident
Jack Snipe		Becassine sourde	Winter visitor
Black tailed Godwit		Barge a queue noire	Passage migrant
Bar tailed Godwit	*	Barge rousse	Passage migrant
Curlew		Courlis cendre	Passage migrant
Whimbrel	*	Courlis corlieu	Passage migrant
Green Sandpiper	*	Chevalier cul-blanc	Passage migrant
Wood Sandpiper	*	Chevalier sylvain	Passage migrant
Common Sandpiper	*	Chevalier guignette	Summer visitor
Redshank		Chevalier gambette	Passage migrant
Spotted Redshank		Chevalier arlequin	Passage migrant

Greenshank	*	Chevalier a pattes verts	Passage migrant
Sanderling		Becasseau sanderling	Passage migrant
Little Stint		Becasseau minute	Passage migrant
Temmincks Stint		Becasseau de Temminck	Passage migrant
Dunlin	*	Becasseau variable	Passage migrant
Ruff		Chevalier combatant	Passage migrant
Knot		Becasseau maubeche	Passage migrant
Black-winged Stilt		Echasse blanche	Summer visitor
Great black-backed Gull	*	Goeland marin	Resident
Lesser black-backed Gull	*	Goeland brun	Resident
Herring Gull	*	Goeland argente	Resident
Common Gull	*	Goeland cendre	Resident
Black headed Gull	*	Mouette rieuse	Resident
Mediterranean Gull		Mouette melanocephale	Summer visitor
Black Tern		Guifette noir	Passage migrant
Common Tern		Sterne Pierre-Garin	Summer visitor
Little Tern		Stern naine	Passage migrant
Tawny Owl	*	Chouette hulotte	Resident
Long eared Owl	*	Hibou moyen-duc	Resident
Little Owl		Chouette cheveche	Resident
Stock Dove		Pigeon colombin	Resident
Wood Pigeon	*	Pigeon ramier	Resident
Turtle Dove	*	Tourterelle des bois	Summer visitor
Collared Dove		Tourterelle turque	Resident
Cuckoo	*	Coucou gris	Summer visitor
Swift	*	Martinet noir	Summer visitor
Nightjar		Engoulevent d'Europe	Summer visitor
Kingfisher	*	Martin-pecheur	Resident
Green Woodpecker	*	Pic vert	Resident
Great Spotted Woodpecker	*	Pic epeiche	Resident
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker		Pic epeichette	Resident
Woodlark	*	Alouette lulu	Passage migrant
Skylark	*	Alouette des champs	Resident
Swallow	*	Hirondelle de cheminee	Summer visitor
House Martin	*	Hirondelle de fenetre	Summer visitor
Sand Martin	*	Hirondelle de rivage	Summer visitor
Golden Oriole	*	Loriot d'Europe	Summer visitor
Carrion Crow	*	Grand corbeau	Resident
Rook		Corbeau freux	Resident
Jackdaw	*	Choucas des tours	Resident
Magpie	*	Pie bavarde	Resident

Jay	*	Geai des chenes	Resident
Great Tit	*	Mesange charbonniere	Resident
Blue Tit	*	Mesange bleue	Resident
Coal Tit	*	Mesange noire	Resident
Crested Tit		Mesange huppee	Resident
Marsh Tit		Mesange nonnette	Resident
Willow Tit	*	Mesange boreale	Resident
Long tailed Tit	*	Mesange a longue-queue	Resident
Bearded Tit		Mesange a moustaches	Passage migrant
Nuthatch		Sittelle torchebot	Resident
Tree creeper		Grimpereau des bois	Resident
Short-toed Tree creeper		Grimpereau des jardins	Resident
Wren	*	Troglodyte mignon	Resident
Mistle Thrush	*	Grive draine	Resident
Fieldfare	*	Grive litorne	Winter visitor
Song Thrush	*	Grive musicienne	Resident
Redwing	*	Grive mauvis	Winter visitor
Blackbird	*	Merle noir	Resident
Wheatear		Traquet motteux	Passge migrant
Stonechat	*	Tarier patre	Resident
Whinchat		Traquet tarier	Passage migrant
Redstart		Rougequeue a front blanc	Summer visitor
Black redstart	*	Rouge-queue noir	Summer visitor
Nightingale	*	Rossignol philomele	Summer visitor
Buethroat	*	Gorge-bleue	Summer visitor
Robin	*	Rouge-gorge	Resident
Cettis Warbler	*	Bouscarle de Cetti	Resident
Grasshopper Warbler	*	Locustelle tachetee	Summer visitor
Savi's Warbler		Locustelle lusciniolde	Summer visitor
Reed Warbler	*	Rouserolle effarvate	Summer visitor
Marsh Warbler	*	Rouserolle verderolle	Summer visitor
Sedge Warbler	*	Phragmite des joncs	Summer visitor
Melodious Warbler		Hypolais polyglotte	Summer visitor
Icterine Warbler		Hypolais icterine	Summer visitor
Blackcap	*	Fauvette a tete noire	Summer visitor
Garden Warbler		Fauvette des jardins	Summer visitor
Whitethroat	*	Fauvette grisette	Summer visitor
Lesser Whitethroat		Fauvette babillarde	Summer visitor
Willow Warbler	*	Pouillot fitis	Summer visitor
Chiffchaff	*	Pouillot veloce	Mainly summer visitor
Wood Warbler		Pouillot siffleur	Summer visitor

Fan-tailed Warbler	*	Cisticole des joncs	Summer visitor
Goldcrest		Roitelet huppe	Resident
Firecrest		Roitelet a triple bandeau	Summer visitor
Spotted Flycatcher	*	Gobe-mouche gris	Summer visitor
Pied Flycatcher		Gobe-mouche noir	Passage migrant
Dunnock	*	Accenteur mouchet	Resident
Meadow Pipit	*	Pipit des pres	Resident
Tree Pipit		Pipit des arbres	Summer visitor
Water Pipit	*	Pipit spioncelle	Winter visitor
White Wagtail	*	Bergeronnette grise	Resident
Pied Wagtail		Bergonnerette de Yarrel	Passage migrant
Grey Wagtail		Bergonnerette des ruisseaux	Resident
Yellow Wagtail	*	Bergonnerette flaveole	Summer visitor
Blue-headed Wagtail		Bergonnerette printaniere	Summer visitor
Starling	*	Etourneau sansonnet	Resident
Hawfinch		Gros-bec casse-noyaux	Resident
Greenfinch	*	Verdier d'Europe	Resident
Goldfinch	*	Chardonneret elegant	Resident
Siskin	*	Tarin des aulnes	Winter visitor
Serin	*	Serin cini	Summer visitor
Linnet	*	Linotte melodieuse	Resident
Redpoll	*	Sizerin flamme	Resident
Crossbill		Bec-croise des sapins	Vagrant
Bullfinch	*	Bouvreuil pivoine	Resident
Chaffinch	*	Pinson des arbres	Resident
Brambling	*	Pinson du nord	Winter visitor
Yellowhammer	*	Bruant jaune	Resident
Corn Bunting		Bruant proyer	Resident
Reed Bunting	*	Bruant des roseaux	Resident
House Sparrow	*	Moineau domestique	Resident
Tree Sparrow	*	Moineau friquet	Resident



Aerial view of the reserve at Romelaere, reproduced by kind permission of the Parc Naturel Regional du Nord/Pas de Calais