



Spring Time in France

by Mick Austin

In the second of our two-part look at the region's Spring wildlife, we give you another tiny taste of what's out there. Reading about it is pretty good, but there's nothing like getting out and sampling it for yourself. Springtime in France. Enjoy.

INSECTS

European honey bee (1) (*Apis mellifera*, Abeille domestique). These are 'social bees' that live as a colony containing a queen, workers (sterile females) and drones (males). Generally, as winter draws to a close the queen bee starts to increase egg/brood production and from mid-April to the end of May the colony should be at full strength – sometimes as many as 70,000 bees.

European hornet (3) (*Vespa crabro*, Frelon, Guêpe frelon or Guichard). The largest European 'wasp' with females growing up to 3.5cms long. Nests, normally built in tree hollows and cavities in stone walls, are started around mid-April by fertilised queens that have over-wintered. Feeds on a variety of insects including bees and other wasps.

Butterflies. Poitou-Charentes has almost half of the known species to be found in France, so there's a great choice to be had this time of year. Watch out for the **Lesser Purple Emperor (15)** (*Apatura ilia*) especially in the Marais Poitevin, the **Spotted Fritillary (2)** (*Melitaea didyma*), the **Large Chequered Skipper** (*Heteropterus Morpheus*) and **Berger's Clouded Yellow** (*Colias alfacariensis*).

Pine processionary moth (*Thaumetopoea pityocampa*, Processionnaire du pin). Widespread in southern France but now spreading to north of the Loire. The moth is small, greyish brown, mainly nocturnal and only lives for one night – so it needs to get things done quickly! In Spring – any time between February and May – the caterpillars leave their nests (made in most species of pine trees) and go down to the ground. This is where they form their

long, nose-to-tail procession as they find somewhere in the soil to pupate. They actually touch each other to make the chain, whereas some other caterpillars follow each other in lines but don't touch. A word of warning. The caterpillars have 'hairs' growing from them which in humans can cause anything from mild itching to anaphylactic shock - so don't touch!

BIRDS

Honey buzzard (7) (*Pernis apivorus*, Bondrée apivore). Spends the winter in Africa with a return migration through France in April/May. Easily confused with the Common buzzard but the Honey buzzard's wings are longer and narrower. Seen mostly in woodland areas.

European bee-eater (4) (*Merops apiaster*, Guêpier d'Europe). Arrives in mid-May from over-wintering in either West or South Africa. About the size of a thrush and one of the most colourful birds you are likely to see on these shores. They nest close to water in tunnels in sandy soil up to two metres long and feed mainly on bees, wasps, hornets and grasshoppers caught on the wing. These are then held sideways in their beak and hit against a branch to kill them.

Ortolan bunting (6) (*Emberiza hortulana*, Ortolan). Famous for being a coveted, but supposedly illegal delicacy in France, when it is caught, fattened on millet, drowned in Armagnac and then cooked. Costs anything up to €150 in restaurants. Arriving in Poitou-Charentes from Africa in mid-April, the Ortolan is a bit bigger than a sparrow and looks a little like a yellowhammer without the bright colouring. The head is grey/green instead of bright yellow.

Hoopoe (5) (*Upupa epops*, Huppe). It looks a bit like a jay, sounds a bit like a cuckoo and flies thousands of miles to feed on a dung heap.



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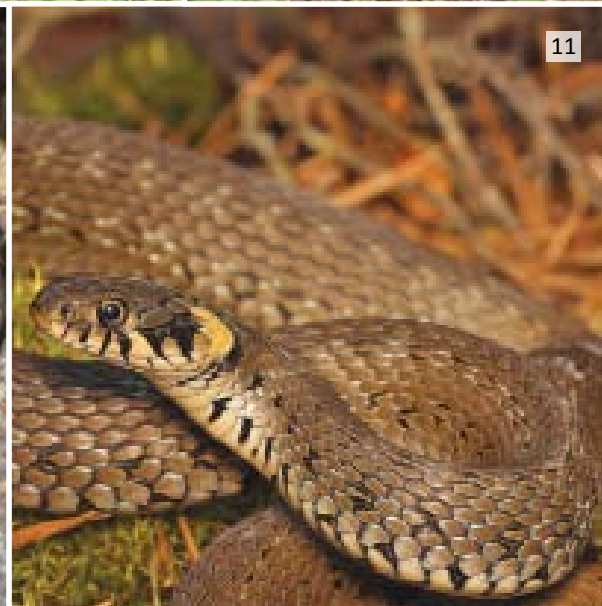
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It really is a mixed up bird! It has a crest like a cockatoo, a beak like a curlew and can fire a jet of foul-smelling liquid at anything - or anyone - threatening its nest. Spot it in a field near you between April and September, when it arrives from its wintering grounds in Africa.

MAMMALS

Genet (17) (*Genetta-genetta*, Genette). Related to the civet, they can be found in most of western France – though you can consider yourself very lucky if you spot one as they are extremely wary of humans and are rarely seen outside of captivity. The young are normally born during April and May. A useful indication of their presence is that they tend to use a toilet area, where faeces can be found in heaps.

Eurasian otter (8) (*Lutra lutra*, La Loutre). Can be found in all departments of Poitou-Charentes and at any time of the year. Everyone knows what they are but very few of us have seen one. Keep a look out for their faeces (spraints) on rocks, flat surfaces and under bridges in rivers and streams.

REPTILES

Grass snake (11) (*Natrix natrix*, Couleuvre à collier). Gets its French name from its characteristic collar of two half-moon bands behind its head. Wide variation in colour, from shades of grey/green to all dark grey or black. Females can grow up to two metres long. Found all over France in all types of habitat but often where water is present. It doesn't have any venom fangs so is completely harmless, but it can still hiss loudly, puff up its head and strike. It can emit an unpleasant smell from its anal glands and can also 'play dead'

- laying on its back with its head twisted, mouth open and tongue hanging out! It hibernates until March or April in compost piles or under rocks and coupling takes place almost immediately. That coupling period can bring together a large group of grass snakes - more males than females.

Western whip snake (*Hierophis viridiflavus*, Couleuvre verte et jaune). You're not likely to confuse this with any other snake in France. It's mainly dark green with yellow dashes or bands, though various forms exist depending on its age. It grows up to two metres long and has prominent eyes with round pupils. It eats small mammals, small birds, lizards, frogs etc and has been known to eat adders and even its own species. It is non-venomous but can be aggressive, hissing and beating the ground with its tail. Comes out of hibernation (in holes in the ground, trees or stone walls) around April. Mating starts in May and can lead to fights between males for females. During mating the sexes twist themselves around each other while keep their heads in the air.

Common wall lizard (9) (*Podarcis Muralis*, Lézard des Murailles). France's most common lizard, it grows up to 20cms long and varies widely in colouring depending on the region. Can be found around old stone walls and close to houses. Good swimmer and climber. Hibernation ends around March/April with up to ten eggs laid under rocks or in soft soil.

Viviparous lizard (14) (*Lacerta Vivipara*, Lézard Vivipare). Common in France, it prefers a damp or wet habitat but is also partial to a bit of sunbathing. Feeds on worms, grubs and various insects. Hibernates from October to March and reproduces between April and June. The young are able to fend for themselves immediately after birth.