

It is a constant wonder to me that Brittany as a bird watching destination especially for a weekend is so overlooked by British birders. Apart from anything else it's a short 40 minute flight from the UK to Rennes, Nantes or three other airports or you can take the car on the ferry to make it even more accessible and do a bit of sea watching at the same time.



Birds that we would jump up and down at seeing that only pop here during migration or as accidentals are relatively easy to spot in Brittany. Indeed the Fatbirder website says that the Ile d'Ouessant is possibly better than the Scillies! If you see a Lombardy Poplar grove, and there are lots of them, then it's more than likely you'll see Golden Orioles in the vicinity. Hoopoes fly over the roads, Egrets and Black Winged Stilts stroll nonchalantly along the shore, Choughs run along the cliff tops and Crested Tits hop around the hedges and fields.

Birdwatching in Brittany is not as easy as you think however but the rewards are immense. For a start the area it covers is huge, roughly equal in size to Devon, Cornwall and Somerset combined. However the excellent French road system does allow you to move around quickly to get to some of the best spots.

Looking back we were unfortunate in some ways staying in the south east part of the region some thirty miles south of Rennes. We had gone to house sit for friends but I would recommend to anyone seriously wanting to birdwatch in Brittany to stay in at least two venues scattered around the peninsula to cover the marvellous options on offer here. Mind you we did get Honey Buzzard and Serin whilst sitting in the back garden.

Southern Brittany covers the department of Loire-Atlantique and contains some superb gems for birdwatchers. The first of these is The National Park of Grande Briere a huge reed bed of nearly 100,000 acres. The Park has a road running around it so you can call in at different places or stand at the side of the road. We got Purple Heron, Cattle Egret, Bearded Reedling, Glossy Ibis, Black Kite and Cormorant within ten minutes of pulling into a picnic area on the eastern side of the marsh.



There are tracks that can lead you into marsh but the best way to see this place is either the excellent hides on the eastern side or to take a traditional punt boat and silently glide in and out of the reeds. This will allow you to savour Marsh Harriers, White Stork, Whiskered Tern, Night Heron and Kingfishers going about their daily business undisturbed by the noise of an engine.

The best place to do this is Brecca on the western shore of the marsh where there is also an observation tower giving you extensive views of the reeds. Do look out for Bluethroat about a mile south of here on the road to St Nazaire. In short there are many roads leading down to the shore of the marsh so it pays to spend at least a whole day here from dawn until dusk.

Brittany has superb forests and you are never more than twenty miles from one with all they have to offer. We went to explore la Forêt du Gavre, just north of Nantes. The area between the forest and the city is also a prime spot offering Red-backed Shrikes and Corncrakes plus I thought Buzzards were common in Northumberland until I came to Brittany. Le Gâvre is a superb forest, think Thetford Forest and multiply it by three, to spend a dawn to dusk birding day with many roads and parking spots to explore deep inside the trees. The central junction slap in the middle is probably the best place to start with its car parks and information boards.

The trees are incredibly thick here so do it right and you won't see another person for hours. We had Black, Middle Spotted, Great Spotted, Lesser Spotted, and Green Woodpeckers, Melodius Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper and Nightjar in one day as well as a host of 'normal' species.

Above all else Brittany is renowned for its sea watching with some of the most rewarding and underwatched stretches of coast in Europe. An hours drive away was the Gulf of Morbihan more than 12 mile wide it has a host of islands an can be explored by boat from Vannes and other towns. It also has the major Séné nature reserve which everyone raves about being old salt pans with hides and superb birds.

I was desperate to go here which probably explains why "She who must be obeyed" decided we were going somewhere else instead. Getting up early we drove up to St Malo on the north coast. The plan had been to seawatch from the town's medieval walls and I did pick up a couple of Roseate Turns who apparently breed in the estuary. Try and time your visit here to high tide as there are often ducks close in and waders on the rocks below.

It didn't turn out to badly though because if you drive eastwards along the coast road towards Mont St Michel you go past some very good spots. The road passes dunes, heath lands and cliffs and you can pick up Dartford Warbler and Black Redstart relatively easily. After Cancale , where fan tailed Warblers tried to join us for lunch we headed back south and were rewarded with a honey buzzard sitting on a post by the motorway.

If you are going to visit Brittany, if only for a long weekend, do take a copy of Stephanie Cochlan's excellent book "A Birdwatching Guide to Brittany." It is invaluable. Finally remember this, if you are impressed by the species rattled off here you must realise we didn't even visit half of this amazing region. The main peninsula itself jutting out in the Atlantic we never visited at all. I intend to remedy that over another weekend very shortly.

