

Alpine Garden Society / Merlin Trust **French Alps tour.**

Study Tour Report.



16th – 27th June 2014.

TABLE OF CONTENTS.

1. Introduction	3
2. Objectives of the Study Tour	3
3. Organisation of the Study Tour.....	4
4. Area visits and botanising stops.....	4
4.1. La Chalp.....	4
4.2. Villar d' Arene.....	6
4.3. Lautaret Alpine Botanical Gardens.....	8
4.4. Col d'Izoard.....	9
4.5. La Chalp.....	11
4.6. Colle dell'Agnello.....	13
4.7. Colle dell'Agnello.....	15
4.8. Col du Galibier.....	17
4.9. Col du Galibier.....	19
4.10. Lac du Mont Cenis.....	21
4.11. Col du Galibier to Valloire.....	24
4.12. Col de L'iseran.....	27
4.13. La Thuille.....	30
4.14. Col du Petit St Bernard.....	32
5. Conclusion.....	35
6. References.....	36
Annexes.....	37
Annex 1: Study Tour Original Itinerary.....	37
Annex 2: List of birds identified.....	38
Annex 3: List of butterflies identified.....	39

1. INTRODUCTION.

The following document comprises the French Alps Tour Report as part of the 2014 Alpine Garden Society (AGS) tours schedule.

As an integral part of my career development, I was sponsored jointly by the AGS and the Merlin Trust, a trust founded by Valerie Finnis in 1990 in memory of Merlin Scott to encourage and assist young and new horticulturists to widen their horizons. The tour was organised by the AGS and led by Christopher Grey-Wilson, a well-travelled and eminent plantsman and author.

The tour covered three locations spanning the Haute-Alpes and the Vanoise, beginning with Vercors, before moving on to Briançon and then Lanselbourg, taking in some of the famous passes of the region, like the Col de Galibier and the Col d'Isoard.

Our group was an eclectic mix of 12 enthusiastic people from all walks of life, including professional horticulturalists and informed hobbyists. We had members ranging from their mid-twenties to mid-seventies and from the UK, Norway and Germany.

Each day was broken down into areas of study, briefs took place each evening and morning, covering aspects of the areas, what we may see and specific highlights to look for. Once reached, these areas were covered systematically by the group "botanising", photographing, recording, comparing and finally, discussing and sharing our combined discoveries. To assist us less informed members, guide books and charts were provided and we were encouraged to adopt the study methods of our expert tour members, learning as we were looking.

Each evening, a plant ID and listing session was held to collate, record, compare and discuss the discoveries of the day and was used in a variety of ways by the group dependant on their own objectives and requirements.

In addition to the study of Alpine plants, birds and insects were looked at and recorded using the specialist knowledge of team members who wished to diversify and add to their knowledge of these subjects, these are presented at Annexes Two and Three.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY TOUR.

I would imagine that this would vary for every participant. For someone very new to horticulture the objectives of this trip were many fold, both personally and professionally. As a learning experience for any gardener, it can only be described as gold dust. For me, it is begun by quoting my initial application: *"Since recently taking up my first professional gardener post, my major project has been the restoration/rebuild of a substantial and significant Arts and Crafts Rock Garden, dismantled and simplified in the 1980's. This rock garden was originally created at the end of the 19th Century by the then owners of the property. I would see this tour as a golden opportunity to study hardy alpine plants in their natural environment, gaining valuable planting and landscape inspiration and plant knowledge. It would*

undoubtedly add to and re-enforce my current studies and investigations and may hopefully add a little more professional gravitas to my duties as someone so new to the industry, yet responsible for such an important historical garden feature”.

As well as satisfying the above requirements, it will offer the opportunity to interact with highly experienced botanical experts, network with others involved in a diverse range of horticultural, botanical, cultural and professional circles and finally, have the opportunity to see and experience a stunning part of Europe.

3. ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY TOUR.

This event was a ten day study tour held on the 16-27 June 2014 at a number of locations across the Rhône-Alpes. A total of 12 participants including our leader were in attendance. Transport in France was by way of self-drive hire vehicles. Accommodation was organised by the AGS and was a mix of hotel and cottage accommodation. Food and refreshments were packed lunches, breakfasts and evening meals were provided at each evening stop over. A full tour itinerary is presented at Annex one.

4. AREA VISITS AND BOTANISING STOPS.

There were many stops during our days out, some for mere minutes, others much longer. I have chosen to highlight the specimens mainly on the longer stops, selecting my favourite plants and flowers per stop. They may not have been the groups highlighted plants, but as I mentioned in a previous chapter, these plants (or similar) may be something I can source at home and include in my project at work. The first couple of days were a steep learning curve, and the phrase ‘rabbit in headlights’ springs to mind as I tried to look, listen, take notes, photograph, keep up and also take in the scenery. You may also notice that, as the day’s progress, the pictures improve as I relax into the trip and the routines and get a little more adventurous. [Camera used throughout: Nikon Coolpix L25 pocket digital].

Day 1, Tues 17th June 2014.

4.1. La Chalp (Gare Peyrou d’mont).

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 45.025790 6.289334.

Altitude: 2413m.

Weather: Cool at altitude, breezy and changeable, showers later.

Topography: High altitude scree/rock slopes, low growing vegetation, quite barren at first glance.

Brief narrative: This area was accessed by way of a cable car. Once on the upper slopes, to me, it looked barren and devoid of life. The views were absolutely

stunning and being new to this botany business I was initially distracted by this. However, once encouraged to ground level and pointed in the right direction I realised just how much life there was. I was amazed to see such lovely flowers at such height, the more I looked, the more I saw and having experts to hand to aid identification began me on the path of actually knowing how to look, what to look for and being able to ascertain whether things were of note or not. I did have a lot to learn though.



Picture page.

Top left to bottom right: *Daphne cneorum*, *Orchis mascula*, *Silene acaulis*, *Gentiana alpina*.





4.2. Villar d'Arene (surrounding hillside).

Botanising stop # 2.

Grid reference: 45.042273 6.342228.

Altitude: 1707m.

Weather: Very wet and cool.

Topography: Meadow, farmland, roadside verge.

Brief narrative: The weather took a rapid turn for the worst whilst on top of the mountain, so we had to beat a hasty retreat. But not to be out-done, we returned to the area surrounding the hotel and had a brief, wet stroll up one of the surrounding hillsides, again lush with flowers and plants of all kinds (if a little bedraggled!).



Picture page.

Top left to bottom right: *Pulsatilla alpina*, *Narcissus poeticus*, *Orchis ustulata*, *Anthericum liliago*.



Picture of the day.



I think that my job is challenging working at an altitude of 1800m, these chaps are gardening at 1800m!! Doing a fine job too (one working and one 'supervising').

Day 2, Wed 18th June 2014.

4.3. The Lautaret Alpine Botanical Garden.

Botanical visit.

Grid reference: 45.036053 6.400134.

Altitude: 2086m.

Weather: Cool and breezy, but dry.

Topography: An exceptional geographical location. At the crossroads of the northern and southern Alps and internal and external Alps. A diverse range of ground conditions, geological features and growing areas have been created.

Brief narrative: Truly an amazing place, not to be missed if in the area. Spends a lot of time under metres of snow, so challenging in the extreme. It showcases a wide range of alpine areas of the world, rock types and topographical features. I came away from here with a huge amount of pictures with ideas, inspiration and tips. I could write an entire report on these gardens, but I bought the excellent book instead, (ISBN 978-2-9535562-7-8).

Picture page.

A small selection of pictures to indicate the size and scale, but could not possibly do it justice, a visit is a must.





4.4. Col d'Izoard (surrounding hills).

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 44.819427 6.734391.

Altitude: 2359m.

Weather: Cool and breezy, dry, clearing.

Topography: Relatively barren, stony, with low growing sparse vegetation.

Brief narrative: Again, at first glance it looks barren and featureless, but look and you will see! Small areas of colour appear as you wander and scramble around the outcrops surrounding the roadside. A brief stopover was made at the bottom of the pass, illustrated by the last 3 pictures.



Picture page.

Top left to bottom right: *Petrocallis pyrenaica*, *Ornithogalum umbellatum*, *Globularia punctata*, *Biscutella* sp.



Picture of the day.



Roadside *Pulsatilla alpina*....just lovely!

Day 3, Thurs 19th June 2014.

4.5. La Chalp. (Lac de Roue).

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 44.761483 6.766065.

Altitude: 1853m.

Weather: Warm, sunny and clear.

Topography: A mixture of lakeside, forest edge and meadowland.

Brief narrative: I stumbled upon this area whilst enquiring about somewhere to run to one evening, I was directed to it by the hotel staff. It is a stunningly beautiful lakeside meadow, surrounded by mountains and with an enormous abundance of flora and fauna in all directions, an absolute must if in the area, and accessible by car. We pretty much spent the whole day in this area:



Picture page.

Top left to bottom right: *Primula farinosa*, *Aquilegia alpina*, *Paradisea liliastrum*, *Gymnadenia conopsea*, *Phyteuma orbiculare*, *Menyanthes trifoliata*.



Picture of the day.



Our illustrious leader, Christopher Grey-Wilson, absolutely in his element!

Day 4, Fri 20th June 2014.

4.6. Colle dell’Agnello, Italian border, (areas x2 at roadside on the ascent).

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 44.718899 6.904355.

Altitude: 2028m.

Weather: Hot, clear and sunny (much cooler on the col).

Topography: Lower Mountain slopes, grassy meadows, riverside gravel beds and rocky outcrops higher up.

Brief narrative: This day was one of the stand out days for me, as it marked the time when things started to come together. I had got my ‘eye in’ with respect to spotting the plants, I had relaxed into my camera and begun being more conscious of the pictures and surroundings, the botanical diversity continued to gather momentum, it was a stunning valley and finally, the weather was gorgeous! (as it was for the rest of the trip). We began on the lower slopes of the valley, scouring from the roadside right up to the rock outcrops near the tops, then gradually moved up higher, ultimately finishing up at the top of the pass and the Italian border.

The entire days botanising areas in one picture, simply spectacular...



Picture page.

From top left to bottom right: *Saxifraga aizoides*, *Gentiana verna*, *Fritillaria burnatii*, *Tulipa australis* (x2).





4.7. Colle dell'Agnello, Italian border, (areas x2 at roadside on the ascent).

Botanising stop # 2.

Grid reference: 44.691867 6.972544.

Altitude: 2595m.

Weather: Warm, clear and sunny.

Topography: Rocky, scree slopes, high level meadow and snow line edge.

Brief narrative: This stop was much higher up, but no less interesting. We were on the snow line and it was interesting to see how plants and flowers were emerging as the snow receded, tough little plants indeed. It was also a chance to investigate some of the cliffs and their nooks and crannies.



Picture page.

From top left to bottom right: *Primula marginata*, *Ranunculus pyrenaicus* (multi petalled), *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Viola calcarata*.





Picture of the day.

How many can you identify?



Day 5, Sat 21th June 2014.

4.8. Col du Galibier (between Lautaret Botanical Gardens and Valloire).

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 45.082582 6.426675.

Altitude: 2224m.

Weather: Warm, sunny and clear, light breeze.

Topography: Scree slopes to one side of the road, sparse meadow and stony ground to the other side.

Brief narrative: This roadside stop, was on the ascent to the Col, very steep sided scree slopes with sharp, high cliffs, challenging botanising.



Picture page.

From top left to bottom right: *Salix reticulata*, *Linaria alpina*, *Viola cenisia*, *Thlaspi rotundifolium*.





4.9. Col du Galibier (between Lautaret Botanical Gardens and Valloire).

Botanising stop # 2.

Grid reference: 45.086293 6.436111.

Altitude: 1996m

Weather: Warm, sunny and clear, light breeze.

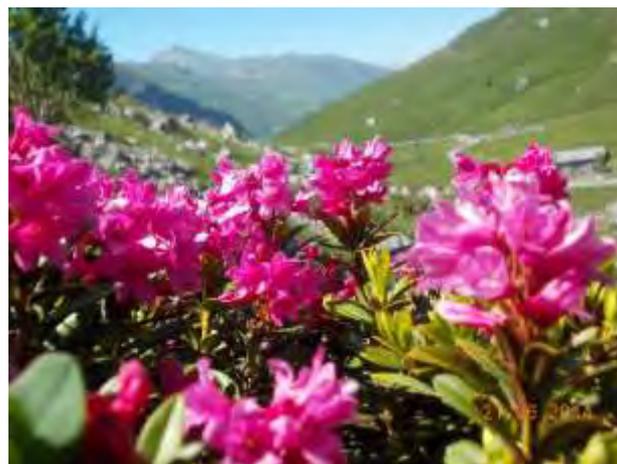
Topography: Boulder slopes, riverside meadow.

Brief narrative: We had a couple of stops on the descent to Valloire, I was pleased to find the Rhododendron that I had had in mind and something that had become one of my personal favourites, the Snow Bell.



Picture page.

From top left to bottom right: *Silene acaulis* ssp. *Longiscapa*, *Soldanella alpina*, *Crocus vernus albiflorus*, *Globularia cordifolia*, *Rhododendron ferrugineum*.



Picture of the day.

Can't quite see our house from here, but I can see Mt Blanc! (Col du Galibier, at 9000ft).



Day 6, Sun 22th June 2014.

4.10. Lac du Mont-Cenis (foot hills surrounding the lake).

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 45.220864 6.886475 (approximate area given due to vague mapping available on line).

Altitude: 2103m.

Weather: Hot, sunny, clear and wind free.

Topography: Mountain glades, bog, rocky outcrops.

Brief narrative: Yet again, this trip throws up another breath taking destination! A large azure blue lake with cloud rolling in from the Italian side and a massive abundance of flora and fauna. Not quite sure where to begin at first but once in the main botanising area it becomes clear that the overriding attraction is the orchids. We were used to seeing the odd one or two, but here there are dozens of them of all types and the shouts of “oh my god there’s more” became the norm for the afternoon.



Picture page.

NB. I had a devil of a job identifying the Orchids, I gave it my best shot!

From top left to bottom right: *Primula pedemontana*, *Sempervivum arachnoides*, *Dactylorhiza fuchsia*, *Gymnadenia conopsea*, *Dactylorhiza majalis*, *Dactylorhiza viridis*, *Nigritella nigra*, *Gymnadenia conopsea?* *Platanthera bifolia*, *Dactylorhiza sambucina*.







Picture of the day.

Lots of Common Blue butterflies gathered at the lakeside to drink and take in minerals, quite a sight!



Day 7, Mon 23th June 2014.

4.11. Towards Col du Galibier from Valloire.

Botanising stop # 1:

Grid reference: 45.089710 6.430312

Altitude: 2237m.

Weather: Warm and sunny with the odd brief shower, breezy.

Topography: Steep scree slopes, cliffs and boulder fields.

Brief narrative: Today was a short day to allow members to gather their breath and do a little personal exploring. So a trip up the valley was planned and the stop off allowed for low level and high level searching. I chose high level and climbed to the high points in search of one or two of the plants on my list that had still not been seen...I wasn't disappointed.

Botanising area top right behind our teams 'botany battle bus'.



Picture page.

Top left to bottom right: *Gentianella campestris*, *Campanula barbata*, *Campanula thyrsoides*, *Lamium maculatum*, *Clematis alpina*.





Picture of the day.

I thought this was a berry at first glance, but on closer inspection it looks like a Blue Mint Beetle.



Day 8, Tues 24th June 2014.

4.12. Col de L'iseran (route leading up to it).

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 45.396523 7.038582.

Altitude: 2261m.

Weather: Warm, sunny, clear with a breeze.

Topography: Riverside high meadow.

Brief narrative: As we were moving to our final accommodation stop, we stopped at various locations briefly, but the main area was beside a spectacular waterfall on the climb up to the Col. Further brief stops were made on the descent to Val d'Isere so there are a selection of pictures from them all.



Picture page.

From top left to bottom right: *Gentiana lutea*, *Ranunculus glacialis*, *Saxifraga retusa*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Pleurospermum* sp.





Picture of the day.

The view of Val d'Iserre from the top, prior to descending the valley, more jaw dropping scenery.



Day 9, Wed 25th June 2014.

4.13. La Thuile.

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 45.587615 6.873987.

Altitude: 1182m.

Weather: Warm, sunny and clear.

Topography: Low forest valley.

Brief narrative: After a group discussion, a decision was made to spend the morning at low level and explore the wooded valley adjacent to our cottage, walking along to the next village down the valley. This was a pleasant walk, stopping every now and then to look at flowers and made a nice change from charging around the mountains.

Vegetation hanging on to the tips of the outcrops along the valley.



Picture page.

From top left to bottom right: *Geranium phaeum*, *Dactylorhiza fuchsia*, *Campanula glomerata*, *Aquilegia atrata*, *Digitalis lutea*, *Aconitum vulparia*, *Lilium martagon*, *Paris quadrifolia*.





Picture of the day.

Slightly arty shot of a sapling caught in a light shaft, hanging on to the rocks.



Day 10, Thurs 26th June 2014.

4.14. Col du Petit St Bernard.

Botanising stop # 1.

Grid reference: 45.674957 6.882328.

Altitude: 2221m

Weather: Warm, sunny and clear, breezy at height.

Topography: River valleys, bog and scree.

Brief narrative: This was a place I have visited before many years ago, so was looking forward to re-acquainting myself with the area. It is a popular place with visitors, cyclists and botanists alike, it has the obligatory gift shops, visitors centre and cafes, but also, it has the most surprising botanical garden! It has been there for many years and is maintained on an 'as and when' basis, so is not pristine, but contains many examples of the Alps flora including some that we had not managed to find on our travels. In addition to the above, the wartime history of the area is clear for all to see and illustrated very well in the local café.

Botanising area plus the lovely botanical garden:



Picture page.

From top left to bottom right: *Pulsatilla alpina* subsp. *apiifolia* (x2), *Ranunculus* sp?, *Petasites paradoxus*, *Astrantia minor*, *Pseudorchis albida*, *Soldanella alpina* (an entire hillside carpeted with them).





Picture of the day.

Great view of Mt Blanc!



5. CONCLUSION.

I was honoured and excited to be selected for this trip and approached it with a very open mind, having no idea what to expect. It is my first Botanical experience and exposure to proper 'experts'. I was a little nervous if I am honest having only been working in the industry for a little under a year and a tad unsure of the expectations of my fellow travellers.

My concerns were unfounded. From the very start I knew I was going to enjoy the experience. My travelling companions were an eclectic mix of all ages, experience, backgrounds and nationalities. Some were working at all levels in the green industry and others were enthusiastic, informed hobbyists.

Concerns about my lack of knowledge in the alpine field, were again, quickly dispelled as the extremely experienced members of the team began to freely share their knowledge with me and point me in the right direction. I found myself on a very steep learning curve but thirsty for information, this was to continue, unabated for the entire 10 days.

It is difficult to describe just how astounded I was at the abundance of alpine flowers and the rich diversity at all altitudes, every venue we visited never failed to amaze me, I really had no idea and my expectations were more than exceeded.

It never was my plan to become a botanist in 10 days, but the experience I gained in field work, observation, note taking, key work, Identification skills, photography and botanical teamwork will stay with me and have already become an additional facet to my daily work schedules.

I have come away with inspiration, plant lists, know how, partner planting ideas and most importantly, the confidence to approach (for instance) our specialist alpine nursery whilst shopping for plants on a much more level playing field, I can now get them thinking instead of the other way around.

Plants and ideas have already been incorporated into key areas of the Rock Garden under my supervision. Further plant lists, minor plans and projects are awaiting the relevant authorisation and funding.

Finally, and just as important as the professional elements of the trip, I have met, spent quality time and socialised with a great group of people who, in their own individual ways have enriched my life and further confirmed that the horticultural industry, in spite of its problems and drawbacks is a great industry to work in with lots of dedicated people contributing in their own ways to the greater good.

This trip has most certainly given me a taste for plant hunting in different parts of the world and I am already looking to what may be available in the years to come, so here is hoping?

6. REFERENCES.

The Alpine Flowers of Britain and Europe. Christopher Grey-Wilson. Collins. 1985. London.

The Lautaret Alpine Botanical Garden Guide Book. Serge Aubert. Universite de Grenoble. 2013. France.

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www.alpinegardensociety.net

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www.alpineflowers.ch

Other reference material (guide books and leaflets) were collected at each destination (where available) and used during the compilation of this report.

ANNEXES.

Annex 1: The Study Tour original Itinerary, (some changes were applied on route).

Return flights to Lyon from Stanstead with Easyjet.

Breakfasts in hotels throughout; picnic lunches to be provided by individuals from local shops and stores; dinner in hotels or local restaurants.

June 16th. Arrive Hotel de Faranchin, for 2 nights (Route du Lautaret, Villar d'Arene 05480; tel. +33476799001).

June 17th. Explore the Clavans valley N of Barrage du Chambon, north then west to Alpe-d'Huez.

June 18th. Travel towards La Chalp. Morning visit the Jardin Alpin du Lautaret (Station Alpine Joseph Fourier).

Explore the Col de l'Izoard en route. Arrive at Hotel la Ferme de l'Izoard, for 3 nights (La Chalp, 05350 Arvieux; tel. 33492468900 / 607469343).

June 19th. A meadow day exploring the area between la Draye, Brunissard and la Chalp.

June 20th. Explore the area NW of Brunissard towards Chalets de Clapeyto and the Col du Lauzon.

June 21st. Transfer to Valloire via the Col du Galibier (c. 82km = 50 miles). Explore the north side of the Col du Galibier.

Arrive at Hotel de la Poste, 3 nights (Rue de grandes Alps, Valloire 73450; tel. +33479590347).

June 22nd. Explore the area between the Lac du Mont Cenis (about 70-80 minute drive from Valloire) and the Col du Petit Mont Cenis.

June 23rd. Return to the summit of the Petit du Mont Cenis and walk to the SE towards the Col du Clapier (2482 m).

June 24th. Transfer to Sainte Foy Tarentaise (126 km via Col d'Iseran). Explore the Col de la Madeleine and the Vallee d'Averole en route. Arrive Auberge & Chalets sur la Montagne, 3 nights (La Thuile, 73640 Sainte Foy Tarentaise; tel. +33479069583)

June 25th. A day exploring the area of the Col d'Iseran

June 26th. A walking day primarily heading to Chenal and Le Monal towards the Italian border.

June 27th. Long drive back to Lyon but time for one or two botanising stops en route, or a short diversion to La Sassiere.

Annex 2: List of birds identified.

Chaffinch.	Ubiquitous.
House Sparrow.	Most human settlements.
Goldfinch.	Many human settlements.
Carrion Crow.	Occasional on pastures.
Yellowhammer.	Frequent on pastures.
Citril Finch.	Villar-d'Arene.
Crag Martin.	Most human settlements.
Chiffchaff.	Occasional in woods.
Coal Tit.	Occasional in woods.
Kestrel.	3 sightings all near cliffs.
Wheatear.	Regular on high grassland.
Eagle.	One sighting above La Grave.
Buzzard.	Several sightings by La Thuille, possibly a Honey Buzzard.
Magpie.	A few sightings.
Meadow Pipit.	On high grasslands.
Skylark.	Common on high grassland.
Quail.	Possible calling at Villar-d'Arene.
Black Redstart.	Present in all human settlements & often in rocky places.
Pied Wagtail.	Mostly using buildings.
Duncock.	One singing at Lautaret Botanic Garden.
Garden Warbler.	A few heard & seen in scrub.
Fieldfare.	Nesting at Lautaret Botanic Garden.
Lesser Whitethroat.	Several in scrub.
Redpoll.	Heard flying amongst conifers.
Linnet.	Several singing in high altitude scrub.
Serin.	Singing in human habitation.

Swift.	Nesting in most human sites.
Green & Black Woodpecker.	In some woods.
Blackcap.	In woodlands and scrub.
Warbler.	Pale bellied with trill call in woods above Arvieux.
Willow Tit.	In several woods.
Cuckoo.	In woods above Arvieux.
Goldcrest.	In woods above Arvieux.
House Martin.	In Arvieux.
Raven.	Calls occasionally heard.
Wood Warbler.	In woods above Arvieux.
Great Spotted Woodpecker.	In woods above Arvieux.
Nutcracker.	Calls occasionally heard in woods - one brief sighting.
Alpine Chough.	Often seen and heard near the passes.
Greenfinch.	Valloire.
Blackbird.	Valloire.
Sedge? Warbler.	In scrub above Lac du Mont Cenis.
Griffon Vulture.	3 at Col du Mont Cenis.
Jay.	Near woods.
Heron.	One seen flying up towards Val d'Isere.
Nuthatch.	One heard in woods near La Thuille.
Tree creeper.	One seen in woods near La Thuille
Song Thrush.	One seen in woods near La Thuille.
Snipe.	3 at Col du Petit St. Bernard.

Annex 3: List of butterflies identified.

Swallowtail.
Apollo.
Clouded Yellow.
Marbled White.
Black-veined White.
Alpine Heath.
Green-underside Blue.
Mazarin Blue.
Large Blue.
Small Blue.
White Admiral.
Small Tortoiseshell.
Heath Fritillary.
Spotted? Fritillary.
Marbled Ringlet.
Brassy Ringlet.
Arran Brown.

Richard Wilson, AGS/Merlin Trust French Alps report 2014.

Woodland Ringlet.

Dingy Skipper.

Large Skipper.