



ORNITHOLOGY

Wintering of Rough-legged Buzzard in southern France

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By Christian Riols & François Legendre



Rough-legged Buzzard, Poland, January 2026 (© Radoslaw Gwozdz)

The Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus* is a North Holarctic species, whose range covers the Arctic and Subarctic regions of Eurasia and North America (Bechard *et al.* 2020). In Europe, it breeds from southern Norway, where it inhabits the high-altitude tundra of the Scandinavian Alps, to northern Fennoscandia and throughout Arctic Siberia (Björklund 2020). A migratory species, it leaves its breeding grounds from late September onwards, with peak passage occurring in the first two weeks of October at Falsterbo, in southern Sweden. Post-breeding movements are mainly towards the south and south-east, with the wintering range covering the great plains of Central and Eastern Europe, from Denmark to the southern Urals through the southern shores of the Baltic Sea, and southwards to the Balkans and the Caucasus (Dupuy 2022). Whilst the Rough-legged Buzzard is a fairly common winter visitor in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and Hungary, it becomes rarer further west – in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium (Sylvén 1978).

The western European coast, on both sides of the North Sea, therefore receives only a small number of individuals, and France lies on the edge of the species' wintering range, although there are five accepted records in Spain (SEO). The birds seen in these regions apparently originate from the Norwegian population, as evidenced by the only two known recoveries in France – 1985 in Saône-et-Loire and 1998 in the Marne.

Correlated with cold spells in the north-west of the continent and/or excellent breeding success in Fennoscandia, influxes were noted in France during the winters of 1978–1979 (17 records), 1984–1985 (17), 1985–1986 (22), 1986–1987 (39), 1994–1995 (15), 1996–1997 (60) and, most notably, 2010–2011 (143 individuals). The species is then found mainly north-east of a line linking Seine-Maritime to the Jura and is very rare further south; the southernmost records come from the Pyrénées-Atlantiques, the Camargue and the department of Aude (see Table 1).

Excluding influxes, the average number of individuals observed in France was 13 per year between 1981 and 2010 (Issa 2015), but this has since fallen considerably, to the point where it is virtually zero today; the arrival of two or three individuals in France is now considered remarkable (P.J. Dubois, personal communication).

The potential period of occurrence of the species in France extends mainly from early October to late March, peaking in January–February, with the earliest and latest dates being 2 September 1999 in Le Havre, Seine-Maritime (L. Philippe – Frémont & the CHN 2000) and 7 May 2025 in Lanuéjols, Lozère (U. Breyse/Faune France). The duration of stay during full wintering periods could reach 19 to 25 weeks (138–174 days). As is the case with many species, juveniles are more erratic than adults and therefore venture further south: thus, during the influx of 2010–2011, 88% of the birds observed in France were first-winter birds.

During the winter of 2024–2025, five Rough-legged Buzzards were observed in France, of which only three made a relatively prolonged stay (as far as was noted, assuming these birds were monitored from the start to the end of their wintering, without ever being certain of the exact date of arrival at the site). Of these, two birds in juvenile plumage spent the season in quite unusual areas: the Causse de Séverac, on the border between Lozère and Aveyron, and the Sault plateau, in the Aude Pyrenees. The other three sightings were recorded north of the 48th parallel and a line joining Caen and Mulhouse:

- Hotot-en-Auge (Calvados), one bird (considered a second-year individual, adult male or female depending on the observer), from 18 January to 25 March (66 days),
- Amenucourt (Val-d'Oise), juvenile, from 2 to 15 December 2024 (13 days),
- Courtisols (Marne), adult male, from 7 December 2024 to 4 January 2025 (28 days).

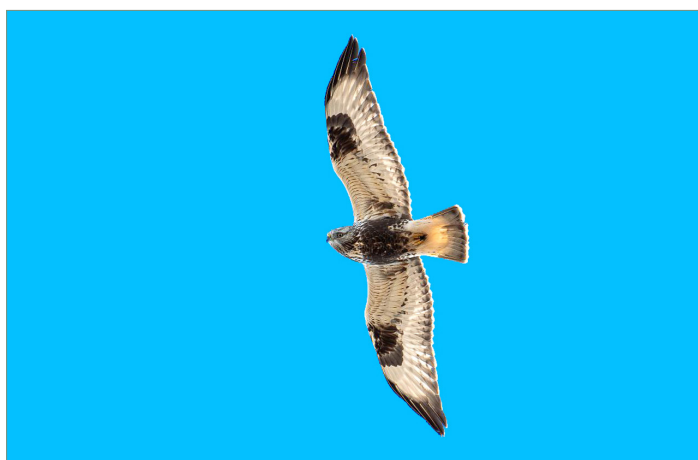
I - Two Rough-legged Buzzards wintered in Occitanie

The two cases of wintering in Occitanie described here occurred in Lozère and in the Aude, 550 and 700 km south of the three 'northern' records from that winter, respectively. They share the fact that they occurred at an altitude of 900 m, a remarkable feature in the distribution pattern of the Rough-legged Buzzard in France.

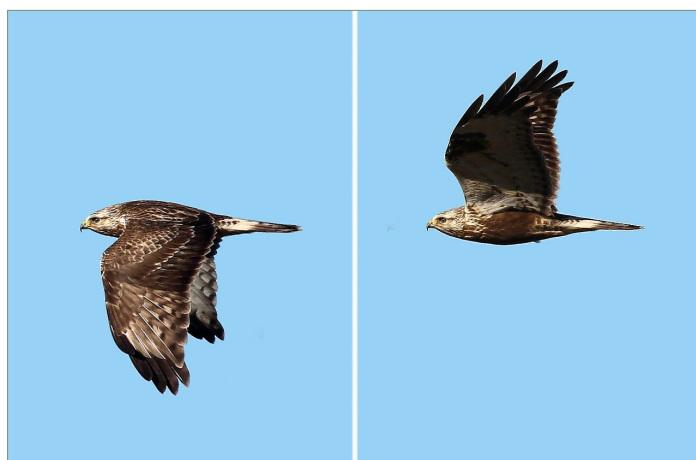
I-1. On the Causse de Sauveterre (Lozère)

A juvenile wintered from 22 December 2024 (Théo Bonnefous and Romain Monlong/Faune France) to 28 March 2025 (F. Legendre/Faune France), *i.e.* for at least 97 days, in the municipalities bordering the Massegros (Lozère) and, occasionally, in Séverac-le-Château (Aveyron). This is the second record from Lozère, following that of a first-winter bird on 9 December 1998 on Mont Aigoual, in the commune of Bassurels (L. Malthieux and J-L. Pinna – Frémont & the CHN 1999). It should be noted that the sighting of a Rough-legged Buzzard at Lanuéjols (Lozère) on 7 May 2025 (U. Breyse/Faune-France) appears to relate to the bird that wintered at Massegros, located 40 km to the south-west.

The wintering site in Lozère is a limestone plateau comprising large expanses of grassland dotted with junipers and pines, and including a motocross track. The Rough-legged Buzzard's hunting territory consisted mainly of a 150-hectare limestone grassland with a few scattered shrubs, bordered to the west by a pine forest, to the north by cultivated woodland, and to the east and south by similar grasslands heavily overgrown with boxwood. Only a quarter of the grassland used by the buzzard is grazed; the rest is left to develop naturally and is therefore covered in tall grass and boxwood. Voles were very numerous there, attracting up to 8 Short-eared Owls, 3–5 Common Kestrels, 5–10 Common Buzzards and 3–4 Hen Harriers. The Rough-legged Buzzard also hunted regularly above the motocross track, sometimes even in the presence of motorbikes, and excelled at catching rodents struggling to cross the tracks rutted by the wheels!



Rough-legged Buzzard, Le Massegros, Lozère, February 2025 (© Tom Vellard)



Rough-legged Buzzard, Roquefeuil, Aude, December 2024 (© Romain Riols)

I-2. On the Sault plateau (Aude)

A juvenile male was observed from 23 November 2024 (C. Riols/Faune France) to 10 April 2025 (C. Riols/Faune France) at Roquefeuil and Espezel (Aude), providing the fourth record for the department, following those of 2010, 2012 and 2013 (see Table 1). The duration of its stay (138 days) makes it one of the longest recorded in France, and constitutes the southernmost wintering record in France at 42°50'11.12" north latitude.

The site in the Aude where the Rough-legged Buzzard overwintered consists of an agricultural plateau of some 1,500 ha, stretching between the northern Pyrenean foothills and the first high peaks (2,000 m) of the range. Until recently still devoted primarily to livestock farming, mainly cattle, with its natural hay meadows, it has recently undergone significant changes in land use, with the rapid development of various crops: cereals, potatoes and artificial grassland (alfalfa, ryegrass and others). Populations of the common vole regularly experience cycles of very high densities here, boosting the local reproduction of several birds of prey, including Hen Harrier, Common Buzzard and the Common Kestrel, and to a lesser extent Red Kite, Black Kite and Long-eared Owl, whilst also encouraging daily stopovers by kites, harriers and falcons during post-breeding migration, as was the case in 2024. The wintering of the Rough-legged Buzzard was further favoured by an exceptional lack of snow: only two days with a snow cover of around ten centimetres.

During its stay, the Rough-legged Buzzard utilised an area covering just over 60 hectares of grassland and arable land (crops), featuring a micro-relief of alternating ridges and hollows. From the first days of April, it avoided the arable fields, where vegetation was growing too rapidly, confining itself to the most short-grassed patches of grassland and also frequented the edges of paths, riddled with rodent burrows.

County / Town	Sex/Age	Date(s) of sighting	Observers (reference)
Aude			
La Palme ¹	1 st -winter	7 December 2010	G. Olioso (Reeber & le CHN 2011)
Grissan	1 st -winter	31 October 2013	T. Guillosson, V. Goma (rapport CHR-LR)
Plaigne	1 st -winter	29 January 2012	T. Guillosson, L. Guillosson (Kayser <i>et al.</i> 2015)
Roquefeuil, Espézel	1 st -winter male	23 November 2024–10 April 2025	C. Riols, R. Riols <i>et al.</i> (Faune France)
Aveyron			
Cresseils	1 st -winter	5 November 2007–16 January 2008	F. Legendre, R. Destre <i>et al.</i> (Reeber <i>et al.</i> 2008)
Salles-Curan	1 bird	21 March 2011	S. Talhouët, P. Dreno (Reeber & le CHN 2012)
Bouches-du-Rhône			
Arles	adult female	10 February 2003	Y. Kayser (Frémont & le CHN 2005)
Arles	1 st -winter	3 December 2010	G. Massez (Kayser <i>et al.</i> 2015)
Berre-l'Étang	1 st -winter male	23 February–12 March 2010	T. Louvel <i>et al.</i> (Reeber & le CHN 2011)
Eyguières	1 st -winter	10 January 2011	A. Flitti (Reeber & le CHN 2012)
Arles	1 st -winter	13 January 2011	Y. Kayser (Reeber & le CHN 2012)
Drôme			
Valence	1 st -winter	6 December 2010	V. Palomares (Reeber & le CHN 2011)
Gard			
Vauvert	1 st -winter	12 February 2011	J.-P. Trouillas <i>et al.</i> (Reeber & le CHN 2012)
Vauvert, Saint-Gilles ²	1 st -winter	9–10 December 2017	C. Souc, T. Laurent <i>et al.</i> (rapport CHR-LR)
Hérault			
Villeveyrac ²	1 st -winter	11 December 2017–6 January 2018	G. Picotin <i>et al.</i> (rapport CHR-LR)
Lozère			
Mont Aigoual	1 st -winter	9 December 1998	L. Malthieux (Frémont & le CHN 1999)
Le Massegros, Séverac	1 st -winter	22 December 2024–29 March 2025	T. Bonnefous, F. Legendre <i>et al.</i> (rapport CHR-LR)
Pyrénées-Atlantiques			
Oloron	1 bird	early 1963	J.-C. Albery (Grangé 2014)
Arette	1 bird	13–23 January 1990	J.-L. Grangé (Dubois & le CHN 1991)
Saint-Michel-Orisson	1 bird	10 April 2011	L. Gonzalez, A. André (Grangé 2014)
Urrugne	1 bird	30 October 2012	M. Le Bourgeois/OCL (Grangé 2014)
Pyrénées-Orientales			
Salses-le-Château ¹	1 st -winter	27 December 2010	C. Peignot (Reeber & le CHN 2011)

Table 1. List of records of Rough-legged Buzzard in France south of the 45th parallel (¹ The records from December 2010 at La Palme and Salses-le-Château refer to the same bird ² The bird observed on 9 and 10 December 2017 at Vauvert and Saint-Gilles is considered to be the one found at Villeveyrac the following day)

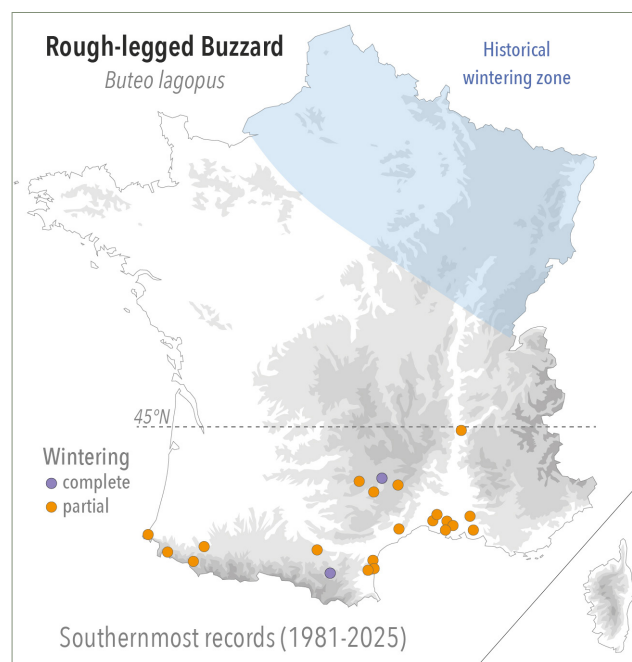


Fig. 1. Map of southernmost records of Rough-legged Buzzard in France (1981–2025)

II – Discussion

II-1. Other southern records

Records of this northern species are, unsurprisingly, rare in the south of France. Confirmed southern records are listed in Table 1 and shown on the map (Fig. 1), taking into account only those south of the 45th parallel in the following departments: Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, Hautes-Alpes, Alpes-Maritimes, Ardèche, Ariège, Aude, Bouches-du-Rhône, Drôme, Gard, Haute-Garonne, Gers, Gironde, Hérault, Landes, Lot, Lot-et-Garonne, Lozère, Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Hautes-Pyrénées, Pyrénées-Orientales, Tarn, Tarn-et-Garonne, Var and Vaucluse.

II-2 - Length of stay

Three of these southern records deserve special mention:

- the partial wintering, from 5 November to 16 January—a period of nearly two and a half months—of a young bird in the Aveyron in 2007–2008 (F. Legendre, R. Destre *et al.*, in Reeber *et al.* 2008);
- the three-week stay, from 7 to 27 December 2010, of a young bird on the border of the Aude (G. Olioso – Reeber & le CHN 2011) and the Pyrénées-Orientales (C. Peignot in Reeber & le CHN 2011), as part of the significant influx of 2010–2011;
- the very brief wintering (less than a month for the known dates) of another juvenile in 2017–2018, first recorded in the Gard region of the Camargue on 9 and 10 December 2017 (C. Souc, T. Laurent *et al.*), then in the Hérault from 11 December 2017 to 6 January 2018 (G. Picotin *et al.*).

An interesting parallel (altitude, length of stay) can be drawn with a series of records concerning the Planèze de Saint-Flour (municipalities of Celles, Ussel and Coltines), in the Cantal, situated almost immediately north of the latitudinal limit considered (Dulphy *et al.* 2016, Romain Riols, pers. comm.). Indeed, during the massive influx of 2010–2011, three Rough-legged Buzzards were observed there: an adult female from 16 January to 9 March 2011 (53 days' presence) and two second-year males found on 8 January 2011, one of which remained until 6 March (58 days) and the other until 20 March (72 days).

Furthermore, that winter, a second-year male stayed from 3 to 27 April 2011 (25 days) not far away, on the Puy de la Balle (municipalities of Saint-Georges, Mentières and Coren) north-east of Saint-Flour, without it being possible to establish a link with either of the two males from the Planèze de Saint-Flour. This individual had arrived exceptionally late, constituting the last record collected during this unprecedented influx and providing one of the latest dates recorded in France.

II-3. Fidelity to the wintering site

The two males from the Planèze de Saint-Flour returned in the winter of 2011–2012, one from 5 November 2011 to 18 March 2012 (135 days), the other from 11 November 2011 to 11 March 2012 (122 days), and then one of the two again the following winter, from 23 December 2012 to 5 March 2013 (73 days).

The female was surprisingly found at her former site in 2016–2017, at least from 24 December 2016 to 10 March 2017 (76 days), in the absence of any influx and, moreover, against a backdrop of dwindling food resources. Another adult (presumed female) was observed that same winter, on 28 December 2016, in the Cézallier, some thirty kilometres further north, but at an altitude of 1,385 m, one of the highest recorded altitudes for the species in France, with two other Auvergne individuals recorded during the influx of winter 2010–2011, one at 1,464 m in the Forez and the other at 1,691 m in the Sancy. The female from the Planèze de Saint-Flour was again observed at her wintering site, very briefly this time, from 26 to 29 January 2019.

Other successive returns of a Rough-legged Buzzard to favourable wintering sites are known (Riols 1997, Michelat *et al.* 1998, Thiollay & Hervé 2016), but remain rare. For example, at Courtisols (Marne), an adult male was recorded for three consecutive winters (from 14 December 2023 to 29 February 2024, from 7 December 2024 to 4 January 2025 and from 15 to 18 December 2025).

III - Conclusion

In addition to having taken place at an altitude of 900 m, which – apart from the departments of Cantal (900–1,100 m) and Doubs (800–1,000 m) – is, to say the least, unusual in the distribution pattern of the Rough-legged Buzzard in our country, the two true southern winterings present another peculiarity. The southernmost bird (Aude) was the earliest to arrive in France this winter, but also the latest to depart. Its stay thus constitutes the first recorded wintering this far south – in the Pyrenean foothills – as well as one of the nine longest stays observed in France.

Due to the unexpected length of its winter stay, this young bird, originally from the tundra, will have encountered in its hunting grounds or within a kilometre's radius a host of species – mostly southern ones – that are highly unexpected in the environment of a Rough-legged Buzzard, namely a Black-shouldered Kite (late November), Red Kite, Griffon Vulture, Red-billed Chough and, in the second half of March and the first few days of April, Black Kite, Mediterranean Gull, Marsh Harrier, Short-toed Eagle, Egyptian Vulture, Pallid Harrier and Booted Eagle! This is therefore a staggering series of spatio-temporal improbabilities, bringing to a close a stay that was already extraordinary in terms of its location and duration!



Rough-legged Buzzard, Czech Republic, February 2021 (© Pavel Štěpánek)

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Christian Riols (LPO Occitanie DT Aude – christian.riols@orange.fr) and François Legendre (LPO Occitanie DT Lozère – fl1973@yahoo.fr)



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