

Butterflies of the Picos de Europa

Naturetrek Tour Dossier

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Asturias and transfer to Cabrales
Day 2/3	Cabrales, northern Picos
Day 4/7	Espinama, southern Picos
Day 8	Fly London

Departs

June (see website)

Focus

Butterflies

Grading

B. Day walks only.

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code ESP30) or brochure

Highlights

- 150+ species of butterfly in the area
- 2-centre tour based in delightful villages in the north & south Picos
- Pearly Heath, Clouded Yellow, Purple & Shot Coppers in meadows
- Speckled Wood & Wood White, plus Green & Ilex Hairstreaks in woodland glades
- Scarce & Sooty Coppers along sunny trails
- Led by expert naturalist guide

Purple-edged Copper



Scarce Swallowtail



In support of Butterfly Conservation

10% of the proceeds from this tour will be donated to Butterfly Conservation and invested directly in the conservation of British and European butterflies.



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

This is a two-centre holiday, based in simple but comfortable family-run hotels, each one ideally located for wildlife exploration. Usually, our first three nights will be spent in the northern Picos, the more lush and green region of this mountain range (because of the much higher rainfall!). Our last four nights will be spent in the southern Picos, a much drier and more typically Spanish region. Occasionally, we may switch the order of the itinerary and go south first. From these bases we will look for butterflies, birds and plants on varied walks, taking a hearty picnic/packed lunch with us each day. Should you prefer at any time not to join us on a particular walk or outing, you are free at any time to relax or potter at your own pace in these spectacular areas.



Marsh Fritillary

The Picos de Europa is an area which hosts a very high abundance and diversity of butterfly species. Up to 160 species have been recorded within this small area. A trip at this time of year would hope to record up to 70 species, perhaps more. We have chosen mid-late June as an ideal time for seeing butterflies, flowers and birds. It is at the beginning of the peak three weeks of the year for butterfly abundance and species diversity. In addition, there should still be some interesting spring flowers around as well as some new emergences. Many of the breeding birds will be fledging now, offering us the chance to watch (and identify) young birds at a time when they are particularly conspicuous.

The walks on this holiday, although optional, are generally longer and more strenuous than on some of our other European tours. Should you prefer a tour based more on gentle walks and “pottering”, please call us for advice. However, for the purposes of this holiday we will frequently aim (with the exception of the long walk down from Fuente De) to undertake ‘out and back’ walks, thereby providing plenty of opportunities for individuals to ‘linger longer’ at favoured hotspots or stop altogether without any of the worries of being left behind by the group.

Day 1

Cabrales

We usually choose from the most suitable schedules offered by Easyjet and Ryanair from London Stansted to either Asturias or Santander. On our arrival in northern Spain, we will drive to the small village of Arenas de Cabrales in the Picos de Europa Mountains. Here we check in to our hotel for a 3-night stay, our base from which we will explore the northern region of the Picos de Europa Mountains.

There may be time this evening to take a stroll before dinner, and get our bearings and we have a chance to find some common meadow species of butterflies in the last of the evening warmth. The meadows are often packed with Marbled Whites and Meadow Brown and also host Brown Argus, Lulworth Skipper, Adonis Blue and Common Blue

amongst others. There is a typical range of common meadow plant species which may include Pyramidal, Tongue and Bee Orchids. Many birds are found in the meadows such as Wryneck, Cirl Bunting, Woodlark, Red-backed Shrike and Tree Pipit. Breeding raptors in this valley may pass over – amongst them Black Kite, Short-toed Eagle, Egyptian Vulture and Hobby and the early risers stand a good chance of seeing a Wild Boar foraging on the hillside above the hotel too.

Day 2

Cabrales

Our first full day will be a gentle introduction to the typical flora and fauna of the area. After a short drive from Arenas de Cabrales, we will start our day's walk from the pretty village of Canales. Here we will follow the road past the tiny gardens, allotments and orchards, before continuing down the steep, winding road, through flower-filled meadows and oak woods, to the little village of La Molina. From here we will follow the path along the valley of the Río Casaño,



Woodcock Orchid

enjoying the riverside plants, birds and butterflies. There are a wide range of butterfly species found here with Marsh, Meadow and High Brown Fritillary, Adonis Blues, Brown Argus and numerous skippers often conspicuous in the open meadows alongside the road. These steep meadows, still cut for hay using traditional hand tools, are usually full of orchids, particularly *Serapia cordiguera*, lingua and Fragrant Orchids, with a typical meadow flora comprised mainly of Greater Yellow Rattle and Large-flowered Self-heal. We may also find rarer species such as Yellow Turk's Cap Lily and the sub-endemic *Digitalis parviflora*.

A good number of Griffon Vultures are frequently seen in the vicinity of the valley and other raptors, most notably Bonelli's Eagles, frequently nest here too. This will be one of the highlights of the walk but other typical species which can be found along the valley include Choughs, Crag Martins and Blue Rock Thrush while the wooded areas support Tree Pipit, Redstart, Marsh Tit and several species of woodpecker.

We will aim to have a picnic lunch on a lovely green bank of the river, with the option of a bracing river swim always available (often the best way of seeing Dipper as well as river Odonata like Beautiful Demoiselle and Golden-ringed Dragonfly!) The path to the river can be excellent for Wall Brown and Large Wall Brown while the dappled shade of the valley woodlands often sustain good populations of Wood Whites and even the odd late flying Spanish Frestoon.

In the afternoon we may choose to continue our walk a little further along the valley before eventually retracing our steps back to the minibus. In Canales we often take time to stop in the local café/bar to enjoy some well-earned refreshment before eventually making our way back to our hotel in Arenas.

Day 3

Cabrales

Subject to favourable weather conditions, we may choose this day to take the longer journey towards the western end of the Picos range and venture up to the high mountain lakes of Lago de Enol and Lago de la Ercina. On route we



Large Grizzled Skipper on *Serapia cordiguera*

may stop to admire the beautiful Basilica that emerges from the treetops high above Covadonga and look for Red Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries in its wooded gardens or admire the spectacular views from the Mirador de la Reina. In either case, our journey will take us up steep winding roads, through colourful meadows and short grazed mountain pastures up to the lakes. Here we will enjoy a picnic lunch overlooking the lakes, undoubtedly in the company of inquisitive Choughs and Alpine Choughs on the lookout for an easy meal, before spending the afternoon exploring the trails around the lakes. If possible we will follow a

circular trail route that will take us through abandoned mine workings that have left jagged man-made valleys cut into the mountain. These valleys, now dripping with ferns and wild flowers, provide warm shelter from the prevailing mountain winds and provide good refuge for smaller butterfly species such as skippers and blues. Parts of our route will take us over marshy mountain pastures that can harbour good numbers of Small and Purple-edged Coppers while the steep boulder-strewn slopes surrounding the lakes could provide us with a chance of seeing some of the mountain specialists such as Apollo or Gavarnie Blue.

These mountain pastures can throw up some wonderful displays of Common Spotted, Fragrant and Marsh Orchids whilst rock gardens, adorned with mats of Saxifrages, Pyrenean Trumpet Gentians and Matted Globularia can be found clinging to shaded boulders.

The area supports some great birdlife too with the rocky slopes providing refuge for both Blue Rockthrush, Northern Wheatear, Black Redstarts and both Ortolan and Rock Bunting. Some of the *miradors* can also provide great vulture watching points too, with birds often flying past at eye level.

Later in the afternoon we will retrace our steps back towards Covadonga where, given time, we may choose to search the flowery meadows and slopes for more butterflies or stop to admire the traditional timber granaries and search for dippers along the river before eventually making our way back to Arenas.



Matted Globularia

Alternatively we may venture southwards towards the central massif, venturing along a beautiful river gorge towards Bulnes, before winding our way up along steep mountain roads towards the tiny mountain village of Sotres. In a sheltered valley below the village, known locally as Vega de Sotres, we will commence our days walk. Here, against a spectacular backdrop of sheer limestone cliffs and boulder slopes rising vertically from the valley floor, we will spend the day wandering along a gently inclined track alongside a bubbling mountain stream

up to seasonally used farmsteads at the head of the valley. The walk takes us through wonderful rocky meadows filled with Burnt Tip and Lizard Orchids and flitting with Knapweed, Twin-spot and Marsh Fritillaries, Adonis, Little and Common Blues, and Olive, Safflower, Dingy, Large Grizzled and Red-underwing Skippers. Sheltered corners amidst the derelict drystone walls often provide basking sites for Wall and Large Wall Browns, Weavers Fritillaries and Black-veined Whites whilst a seemingly constant passage of Piedmont and DePrunners Ringlets and Bergers Clouded Yellows can often be seen fluttering along the steeper edges of the valley. This is consistently a great site for butterflies and undoubtedly one of the most beautiful walks in the Picos and we should have more than enough time to explore it thoroughly, taking time to photograph and identify most of the butterflies we encounter as we make our way up the valley.

We will aim to stop for lunch amidst the boulders on a grassy slope alongside the river. Here we can cool our feet in the clear waters of the mountain stream and scan the surrounding slopes for Chamois. Along with its butterflies, this valley is another great raptor watching site, often providing us with views of Peregrine, Griffon, Black and Egyptian Vultures and Short-toed and Booted Eagles. It is also one of the most consistent sites for Golden Eagles too as they frequently nest on the highest crags at the head of the valley.

We should expect to see plenty of wildflowers on our walk with a good selection of local and regional specialists such as Sticky Flax, Pyrenean Thistle the Large-flowered Butterwort and endemics like the yellow flowering *Antirrhinum braun-blanqueti* and the Blue-leaved *Petrocoptis*.

Once at the head of the valley we will take a little time to look around the old farm buildings (covered in saxifrages), look for Black-eared Wheatears and Water Pipits catching insects around the goat pens, search the cattle troughs for alpine and palmate newts and scan the muddy margins of the ford in the stream for more butterflies, before eventually making our way back down the valley to the minibus and on to our hotel.

Day 4

Transit to Espinama

After saying our farewells in Arenas de Cabrales we will start our drive to Espinama in the Liebana Valley of the southern Picos, a journey of about an hour and a half.

What we decide to do today will depend largely on the weather, and exactly what we have seen thus far but we will certainly aim to make best use of our travel day. Our journey will take us through the wonderfully picturesque Hermida Gorge, perhaps the most spectacular section of the drive south. About half way through the gorge we will aim to stop to stretch our legs, and spend at least a couple of hours investigating the wonderful Urdon Gorge. Here we will wander up the steep path that winds its way up toward Bejes, but how far we wander can be highly variable. This sheltered river gorge, located on the eastern rain shadow of the central massif, seems to have a climate all of its own and is consistently good for butterflies. It is often difficult to make much progress beyond the imposing hydroelectricity plant located at the entrance to the gorge when the flowery verges alongside the path are filled with High Brown, Silver-washed, Heath, Knapweed, Glanville and Marsh Fritillaries, Cardinals, Large Wall Browns, Moroccan Orange-tip and numerous and varied Blues and Skippers. However, further along the path, the wooded slopes of the gorge provide cover for Green, False Ilex, Blue-spot and Spanish Purple Hairstreaks, as well as Scarce Sooty and the high altitude form of the Purple-edged Copper and beyond this the steeper rocky slopes provide good opportunities to find more of the *Eribia* species including the patchily distributed Chapmans Ringlelet. This dramatic river valley

supports other local specialties too with its colonies of the rare fern *Woodwardia radicans* and it is known to be one of the last strongholds in the Picos of the rarely seen Pyrenean Desman.

Continuing our journey towards Espinama we will aim to stop for a leisurely picnic lunch at a pretty little church at Santa Maria de Levena. Here, amidst the cherry orchards and gardens, many species of raptors can be seen, often in great numbers, rising from their breeding colony on the cliffs opposite, usually joined by a few Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed, Booted and sometimes Golden Eagles. There will also be many butterflies to see here too, including such species as Provencal and Queen of Spain Fritillaries, Camberwell Beauty, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell and Scarce Swallowtail. We may also catch a glimpse of a Red Squirrel too, as they commonly venture into the gardens in this area.

After travelling through the medieval town of Potes, the main market town of the south, we will continue on to Espinama where we will be greeted by the friendly owner of the Hotel Nevandi, Señor Santiago. After settling in to the hotel we should have some time before dinner to relax and explore the little village of Espinama or maybe take a stroll into the foothills of the mountains behind the hotel in search of more birds and butterflies.

Day 5-7

Espinama

When the weather looks good for the high mountains, we will drive the short distance to Fuente De and take the cable car which ascends 800 metres to the top of the huge cliffs which form the southern buttress of the Peña Vieja. This remarkable ascent will take you up Europe's longest single span cable - 3,000 metres in length - with spectacular views en route! At the top we alight on a vast flat area of limestone scree and pavement; the Mirador del Cable. Those brave enough to do so, may like to step out onto the Miradors famous 'Infinity Platform' that juts out over the precipitous drop before we commence our walk to explore the surrounding alpine slopes. Here we will try to look for some of the more unusual butterflies of the area, including the endemic Picos race of Gavarnie Blue, which is actually a lovely silver colour and only hosted by mats of the adorable Ciliate Rock Jasmine. In the rocky areas we also have a good chance of seeing Lefebvre's Ringlet - which like the Gavarnie Blue only occurs in the Picos and Pyrenees - the elusive Mountain Clouded Yellow and even Apollo, as well as migrant Small Tortoiseshell and Clouded Yellow. At this altitude, the non-migrant alpine specialist butterflies may only just be on the wing and should be in beautiful fresh condition.



Apollo

We will also make time to enjoy the alpine plants too. We will look for the miniature *Narcissus asturiensis*, *Aquilegia pyrenaica* ssp. *discolor*, Amplexicaule and Alpine Buttercups, *Ranunculus parnassifolia* ssp. *cabrenensis*, Sad Stock, Alpine and Pyrenean Flax, Spring Squill, Moss Champion, Alpine Milkwort, *Saxifraga conifera* and the yellow *S. aretioides*, plus masses of Spring and Pyrenean Trumpet Gentians. We may make our way off the beaten track to look for more high altitude specialties including Alpine Chough, Alpine Accentors and Snowfinches although these are usually easily seen from the main track and are often quite approachable.

As we make our way up to the main track leading us beneath the towering cliffs of Peña Vieja, we will look out for Chamois and Snow Vole as well as continually watching the boulder-scrub and high cliffs for our most sought after species of bird – the Wallcreeper. In previous years we have found nest sites and even birds feeding young, but they can be highly elusive and success is by no means guaranteed.

After eating our packed lunch, which will be spent watching for Wallcreepers in one of their most favoured areas, those with abundant energy may choose to join the tour leaders down the rough road to the Refugio de Aliva, and onwards down the Espinama Valley all the way back to Espinama (a walk of about 12 kilometres), whilst the less energetic may prefer to further enjoy the alpine meadows before returning back down the cable car to Fuente De.

As we leave the alpine meadows and scree behind and pass through the Puertos de Aliva, a gateway through the valley, we descend into very different habitat. Below us are beech and oak woods and lush meadows lining the Rio Nevandi, which we will follow back to Espinama. There is a huge change in the associated flora and fauna and we usually notice the temperature rise a few degrees! A large number of butterfly species are possible in this area including Green-underside, Silver-studded, Baton and Small Blues, Dark Green Fritillary, Green Hairstreak, Sooty and Purple-edged Coppers, and Western Dappled White. The fields are usually full of orchids; Heath Spotted, Fragrant, Pink Butterfly, Burnt-tip, and various *Ophrys* species, Spreading and Peach-leaved Bellflowers, White Asphodel, Common and Greater Yellow Rattle, Greater Burnet Saxifrage, Small Cow-wheat, the Lousewort, *Pedicularis verticillata*, *Teucrium pyrenaicum* and the endemic harebell, *Campanula arvensis*.

An excellent variety of birds should also be encountered as we descend into the lower meadows and forest. We will look for Woodpeckers, Nuthatch, Crested, Marsh, Long-tailed and Coal Tits, Pied Flycatcher, Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper before finally arriving back into Espinama...hopefully in time for a cool drink and a well-deserved ice-cream.

There are lots of other options in the area. A more leisurely start to the day is usually welcome after the long walk down from the Mirador del Cable so, depending on the weather, we will often start the day with a gentle potter through the nearby village of Pido where we will look for Wrynecks and Firecrests in the gardens and allotments and scan the terracotta rooftops for Redstarts, Serins, Rock Sparrows and Rock Buntings as we wind our way through the pretty streets. Beyond the village, we will wander along the tracks investigating the numerous tiny hay meadows and woodland clearings where Dark Green, Pearl Bordered and Small Pearl Bordered Fritillaries, Long-tailed, Pearly Heaths and Purple Shot Coppers abound. We may find other interesting insects too; like Wartbiter, Field and Mole Crickets or the impressive Great Green Bushcricket that can easily get as large as a man's thumb.

Given enough time we may choose to continue our walk, and explore some of the trails that run through the shady Beech and Oak woods beyond Pido and towards Fuente De. Here, along the woodland trails studded with Pyrenean Eryngo, Birds Nest Orchids and *Astrantia* we may see Large Tortoiseshell, Southern White Admiral, Great Banded Greyling as well as Ilex and Sloe Hairstreaks and the beautiful, orange spangled, southern form of the Speckled Wood.

In the afternoon we will aim to drive the short distance, through Potes, and up towards Canbanes. Here we will stop for lunch at a picnic site located in a grove of ancient Sweet Chestnut trees while vultures and eagles soar overhead and Wrynecks, Redstarts and Tree Pipits call from the surrounding trees. The hilltop picnic site affords commanding views of the surrounding hillsides and this is an area marked by its distinctly different geology, with conglomerates and shales, in contrast to the limestone-dominated Picos. The hillsides are clothed in broom and various heathers and are studded with high-altitude acid soil meadows, which should be at their peak during June. It is a good area for butterflies too with several species we may not encounter on the rest of our trip. Some of the smaller fritillaries, such as Weavers and Lesser Marbled, can be found here as well as the possibility of Eschers and Large Blues.

After lunch, we may have the luxury of a gentle downhill walk to look for more butterflies or some might choose to linger at the picnic site to look for raptors. Alternatively, we may also choose to drop back down into Potes, giving everyone a chance to enjoy some afternoon refreshments in one of the town's delightful coffee shops or explore the cobbled streets in search of a few last minute souvenirs before eventually making our way back to Espinama.

We will probably aim to make an earlier finish this afternoon to enable everyone to get ready for the return journey before enjoying our final checklist and dinner of the trip.



Griffon Vulture

Day 8

London

Our activities on our last day will depend largely on our flight times. Given a convenient schedule, we may choose to depart for the airport early, spending our last few hours in Spain looking for Iberian Marbled Whites, Cleopatras and Lulworth Skippers or the colourful caterpillars of Spurge Hawkmoths on the flowery sand dunes in the Parque Natural de las Dunas de Liencres. Here people may choose to stroll through the park's wonderful coastal pine forest in search of Lesser Butterfly Orchids and both Dark Red and Red Helleborines, or simply sit on the beach, watching the surf and enjoying an icecream. This wonderful little nature reserve offers it all and despite the fact that it can sometimes get a little busy, its location just 20 minutes from the airport gives us one final chance to relax and explore some completely different habitat in this little known part of Northern Spain before we eventually make our way home. It certainly beats hanging around in the airport!

Grading

This tour revolves around a series of day walks in the Picos de Europa Mountains, from our two hotel bases in Arenas de Cabrales and Espinama. Although we will be on foot for most of each day - between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. - our appreciation of the wayside flowers, birds and butterflies, often reduces our walking pace to no more than a potter. Some sections of the walks are technically demanding, a result of rugged terrain or steep inclines. Consequently, we

will take our time on these sections of the walks and will generally expect to cover less ground on walks where the terrain is difficult. We generally expect to cover between 5 and 7 miles each day, with a maximum of around 12 miles. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys the outdoors, walking, and above all, the flowers, birds and butterflies of such beautiful mountainous regions as the Picos.

Daily schedule

We usually have breakfast at about 8 a.m., and try to leave our hotel around 9.30 a.m. We then spend all day walking on trails in search of butterflies, flowers and birds. We will take a delicious picnic or packed lunch with us each day, and spend time in the middle of each day to relax and enjoy it... and the odd glass of local wine or cider to fortify us for the afternoon! After a full, but gentle-paced day in the field, we usually return to our hotel around 5.30 p.m., in time for a shower, some relaxation, or to enjoy a drink at the bar before dinner. Your leader will usually run through the sightings of the day in the half-hour preceding dinner for those who want to participate.

Weather

Mountain weather is always unpredictable, and some rain should be expected! This after all is the greenest region of Spain! However, at this season the finer summer weather should be settling in, and we hope for warm sunny days, with temperatures ranging between the early 20s and 30°C. The schedule may be altered according to the changing weather predictions for the week and we will generally attempt to schedule our excursions to higher altitudes with the most favourable weather conditions. At higher altitudes, cooler temperatures should be expected but cloud and rain can move in fast and bring a dramatic drop in temperatures, so waterproofs and warm layers should generally be carried at all times.

Food & accommodation

All included in the price. Our accommodation is modest but comfortable and well situated for wildlife exploration. Please note that private facilities are not guaranteed during our stay at Espinama. We have 9 en-suite rooms in the hotel itself. These we fill first, with late bookers and leaders being accommodated in beautiful apartments, a 5 minute walk away.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.



The hotel for our stay in the southern Picos (top) and for our stay in the northern Picos (below)