

France - Butterflies in Normandy

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Sail Poole-Cherbourg; transfer to hotel at Port-en-Bessin for 4-night stay

Day 2/4 Exploration of Lessay, the Forest of Cerisy and Les Montes d'Eraines from our base at Port-en-Bessin

Day 5 Drive Cherbourg; sail Poole

Departs

July

Focus

Birds and Plants

Grading

A. Easy day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA01) or brochure

Highlights

- 160 species of butterfly possible (more than twice the number in Britain)

- Sooty Copper in small meadows, & Alcon Blue on Cotentin Peninsula

- Marsh Fritillaries among a host of woodland species in Forest of Cerisy

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



Images from top: Large Chequered Skipper, Silver-studded Blue and Faust's Burnet Moth



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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

The predominantly rural departments of Calvados and Manche, located in Normandy on the north-west coast of France, are easily accessed via the numerous ferry services running between England and the French ports of Cherbourg and Caen, yet are surprisingly little visited by British or indeed any other naturalists.

The region has an attractive and varied pastoral landscape, often likened to southern England, though much more unspoiled. Small, flower-rich meadows



Searching for butterflies in Normandy

grazed by Normandy cattle dominate the rolling landscape, and there are numerous orchards, marshes, heaths, bogs and ponds. To the south lie some vast woodlands, whilst in the north a beautiful coastline, rugged in places, offers extensive areas of coastal dune grassland, interspersed by picturesque fishing villages. Normandy supports a rich butterfly fauna (with around 160 species recorded, more than twice the number recorded in Britain!), and a remarkable wealth of other wildlife, set in tranquil surroundings.

Our base for this holiday will be the picturesque coastal village of Port-en-Bessin. The town is central to our entomological destinations and close to Bayeux, famed for its world-famous tapestry.

Day 1

Port-en-Bessin



Swallowtail

We usually depart early this morning (0830) from the ferry port of Poole in Dorset for our relaxing crossing to Cherbourg. On the ferry, our natural history adventure will begin straightaway as we make periodic explorations to the outside decks to look for bird specialities such as the locally breeding British Storm-petrel, and Mediterranean Shearwaters (which come to the region to undertake a post-breeding moult). We will also look for cetaceans, hoping (with luck) to catch a glimpse of Bottlenose Dolphins, which have increased in

numbers off the east coast of the Cherbourg (Cotentin) Peninsula in recent years. The decks can also be searched for migrant moths, which frequently roost amongst the outer structures of the boat, and around us we may see day-flying migrant butterflies such as Red Admiral and Clouded Yellow, or even Hummingbird Hawk Moth heading north towards England.

After picking up our minibuses we will go to the Reserve Naturelle at Vauville, a huge area of coastal dune grassland with marshes, heathland and scrub. Here we will look for Mallow Skipper, Dingy Skipper, Adonis Blue and Small Blue amongst others. Also, if time permits, we might visit La Glacerie, a large area of Beech Forest with scrubby Bramble-rich clearings north of Cherbourg to look for Ilex Hairstreak.



Map Butterfly

On our first evening we will have ample opportunity to sample the gastronomic delights Normandy has to offer, including fresh locally caught seafood, crêpes, and for dessert the famous local cheeses (Camembert, Pont-L'Évêque and Livarot), perhaps washed down with local farmhouse cider, Calvados or Pommeau.

Day 2

Port-en-Bessin

We head west on our first full day in Normandy, perhaps stopping at suitable old meadow localities to look for Sooty Coppers which can be abundant at this time of year. En route, as we drive through the Cotentin Regional



Naturetrek picnic lunch

Nature Park (one of the largest and most important wetlands in Europe), we keep a watchful eye out for White Storks (of which more than 50 pairs now breed in Normandy) and Marsh Harriers. Along the many roadside hedgerows and flower-rich verges, we take a special interest in any whites we may see, as Wood Whites (the second brood of which is now on the wing) are locally common in this part of Normandy. We may also stop to look for Marsh Warblers if we see any suitable scrubby wet meadows beside the road, and here dragonflies are likely to be abundant.

Our main focus today is the area of wet heaths, bogs and pine forests around Lessay, at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. Here we will spend the whole day exploring the numerous trackways through this important heathland region, searching for a number of butterfly specialities. Large Chequered Skippers are common, and Silver-studded Blues abundant, but our main target species is the globally threatened Alcon Blue, which is the subject of special

conservation management in the area. Other species present include Sooty Copper, Purple and Ilex Hairstreaks, Dark Green Fritillary and Grayling. The shady pine forests are less attractive to butterflies, but we can expect to see Crested Tits amongst the evergreen foliage and, with luck, Honey Buzzards overhead. The area is important botanically and supports a large population of the orchid, Summer Lady's Tresses, together with Heath Lobelia, Bog Rosemary and of course, Marsh Gentian, the foodplant of Alcon Blue.

Day 3

Port-en-Bessin



White Storks

We make a short drive south-west today to the large, state-owned Forest of Cerisy. This forest is dominated by Beech, and contains a variety of other habitats including old meadows and calcareous mire, the latter supporting important populations of Marsh Fritillary.

We will spend the day exploring the network of rides which criss-cross the forest, looking for both grassland and woodland butterflies and moths. A very good variety of butterflies are found in the wood at this time of year including Camberwell Beauty, Ilex Hairstreak, White-letter Hairstreak, Map, Silver-washed Fritillary, Clouded Yellow and we hope, the last of the year's Lesser Purple Emperors.

This large, secluded woodland supports a wide range of other wildlife including Wild Boar, Pine Marten, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Nightjar, Black Woodpecker, Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Melodious Warbler and Firecrest.

Time permitting, we will once again explore the coastal dunes north of Bayeux to search for butterflies, wild flowers, and shorebirds such as Little Egret, Kentish Plover and terns.

Day 4

Port-en-Bessin

Today we head south, to Les Monts d' Eraines, an area of undulating limestone hills between Caen and Falaise, the birthplace of William the Conqueror. The area comprises a mixture of scrub, limestone grassland and woodland, part of which has been designated a nature reserve. This is one of the most important limestone grassland sites in Normandy, and marks the north-west limit of this habitat type in France. During the day we will scour the botanically-rich slopes for butterflies such as Chalkhill Blue and Scarce Swallowtail, and also the regionally rare Faust's



Lesser Purple Emperor

Burnet Moth. This leisurely day will give us ample time to search for other insect-life, including Jersey Tiger moth and Stag Beetle and a whole host of scarce plants such as Large-flowered Self-heal, Chiltern Gentian, St Lucie's Cherry, Mountain Germander, and a number of true orchids and helleborines. Birdlife on the slopes will be quiet at this time of year, although we may possibly see Cirl Buntings which occur commonly in the region.

Our journey back to Port-en-Bessin will take a different route, through 'Suisse Normandie', an area of fast-flowing streams, wooded hillsides and rocky outcrops, populated by Goshawks and Honey Buzzards.

Day 5

Poole

We must now leave our base in Port-en-Bessin to drive back to Cherbourg for our ferry back to Poole. If time allows we will stop at Le Pont Douve Visitor Centre at Carentan to watch White Stork chicks on the nest, and/or La Glacerie near Cherbourg to look for Ilex Hairsteaks.

Tour grading

This is a relatively relaxing, single-centre holiday based throughout in a comfortable Port-en-Bessin hotel. From this base, we will explore the grasslands, marshes, heaths, forests and dunes of this attractive region, searching for its rich and varied natural history by means of regular minibus stops followed by short walks, and by simply pottering in the richer areas, of which there are many. Our pace will be gentle to allow us to examine the plants, insects, birds and particularly, of course, the butterflies and moths. The furthest site explored each day will be around 1 hour's drive from our hotel, which is centrally-based and therefore ideal in terms of helping us to avoid any really long drives.

Weather

Mid July is an excellent time to visit this region in search of butterflies, plants and other wildlife. We will hope for warm, sunny mid-summer weather, but as this is a temperate region, with a similar climate to Britain, we need to be prepared for some wet and cool days, so bring a range of clothing.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

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, at the time of booking. Please note that as all our tours are carefully costed on maximum group sizes to maximise value for money, it may be necessary to impose a small group surcharge of 10% on groups falling short of 6.