

Butterflies of the Cévennes

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Montpellier and transfer to Cocurès
- Day 2/7** Cocurès
- Day 8** Transfer to Montpellier and fly to London

Departs

June

Focus

Butterflies and other natural history

Grading

A. Easy day walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA02) or brochure

Highlights

- 70-80 butterfly species possible during a week-long stay
- Blues such as Escher's, Chapman's & Mountain Alcon
- The highly localised Esper's Marbled White
- 25-30 orchid species among a profusion of wild flowers



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: Lozere to Florac road, Chequered Blue and Marbled Fritillary



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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

The Cévennes is a mountainous region on the south-eastern edge of the Massif Central in France, with a wide variety of scenery and habitats. In the centre is the Cévennes National Park with its surrounding Zone Peripherique giving protection to the wildlife and scenery. Throughout the holiday we will be based in Cocurès in the Tarn Valley, the administrative centre of the Cévennes National Park, a convenient base for exploring the many places of interest to seek out the varied plants, birds, butterflies and other wildlife of the region.



View from Mont Aigoual

Day 1

Fly Montpellier, transfer Cocurès

We depart from London's Gatwick airport on a direct flight to Montpellier. A two-hour scenic drive will take us to Cocurès in the heart of the Cévennes, one of the villages that Robert Louis Stevenson passed through on his 'Travels with a Donkey'. We will be based here throughout this holiday in a pleasant and traditional village hotel serving fine local food.

Day 2

We will begin our explorations just south of Cocurès, ascending through St Laurent-de-Trèves, where there are dinosaur footprints in the limestone dating back some 180 million years. This limestone country holds many orchids, such as Bug, Burnt-tip, Green-winged, Elder-flowered, Fragrant, Frog and Lesser Butterfly Orchid. We then continue up to the Col des Faisses, which reaches 1,026 metres to give wide views over the national park and the adjoining limestone plateaux of the Causses, particularly Sauveterre, Mejean and Noir. As entomologists are well aware, a rich limestone flora can be a haven for a wealth of butterfly species including many Blues, Hairstreaks, Fritillaries, Satyrids and Skippers.

As we descend more gently along the ridge of the Corniche des Cévennes, the underlying rock changes to schist to provide a different flora and insect fauna with heaths, Cistus and brooms attracting many butterflies and day flying moth species. Throughout the day a good variety of birds should also be present; raptors include Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Red Kite and Buzzard. The cliffs provide an ideal habitat for Alpine Swift, Crag Martin and Rock Bunting together with Stonechats and Wheatears. We will return by way of one of the more secluded valleys where hopefully more butterfly species will be added to the day's list.



Lady Orchid

Day 3

To the west, the Gorges du Tarn have been cut deep into the limestone and have good roads along and around them which provide easy access to the most interesting places. The ledges provide ideal nesting sites for a range of birds – Eagle Owl, Golden Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Peregrine, Chough, Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush. Along the river are Dipper and Grey Wagtail. Plants include both Mediterranean and mountain species including *Aphyllanthes*,



Dipper

Globularia, *Helianthemum* and *Saponaria*. Both Lady and Monkey Orchid are recorded, as well as the more common Man Orchid. More importantly from our perspective, amongst this rich flora are many butterflies including Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail, Adonis Blue, Cleopatra, Green Hairstreak and Fritillaries. Green Lizards are also found.

After a morning walk along the Tarn, we will travel a few kilometres north over the Causse Sauveterre to some pinewoods which should provide very different species such as Speckled Wood, Wood White, Weavers Fritillary and other species. Red Squirrel and Pine Marten can sometimes be seen

here whilst the birds should include woodpeckers, Crested Tit and Firecrest. Typical plants are Yellow Bird's-nest, Bird's-nest Orchid, White Helleborine and five Wintergreen species amongst the pine litter and mosses.

Day 4

To the north is Mont Lozère, at 1,699 metres the highest peak in the region. We will start the day walking through dense woods of oak and chestnut, where the ground flora will contrast with the pine woods of yesterday. The area is home to tits, finches and warblers; Sparrowhawk and Goshawk are also recorded from this area. We then reach wild, open country with chats, Rock Bunting, Rock Sparrow and Rock Pipit, Black Redstart and even the chance of Alpine Accentor. Birds of prey could include Golden, Booted and Short-toed Eagles; Merlin, and Hen and Montagu's Harriers have also been recorded. The underlying rocks and granite boulders produce an acid heath flora with sheets of Narcissi in early summer. Here we will look for high altitude butterfly specialities such as Bright-eyed, Piedmont and Mountain Ringlet, Cardinal, Mountain Fritillary and Mountain Argus.

The highest point of the road is the Col de Finiels, at 1,548 metres it provides wide views all around and a further chance to see raptors overhead. Descending we come into limestone again and will examine the wetter patches which have a wide variety of butterflies and plants. Orchids include Soldier, Lady, Early Spider and Elder-flowered. Other plants we are likely to find include Water Avens, Pansy, Rampion, Meadow-rue and Whorled Solomon's-seal.



Giant Peacock Moth

Day 5

To the south-west lies the Causse Noir, a limestone plateau providing a very different habitat – a comparatively flat, open area above the Canyon de la Dourbie. Typical birds include Little Bustard, Stone Curlew and Black-eared Wheatear. By June the flora is rich with mountain and Mediterranean plants flowering together. Some forty species of orchid have been recorded, even the threatened Lady's Slipper, so we should enjoy our morning amongst these riches. As might be expected this rich and diverse flora is attractive to a wealth of butterfly species with many Pierids, Blues and Ids in particular.



Naturetrek clients on Causse Noir

Not to be missed is the Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux, an amazing jumble of eroded limestone with pockets of damp woodland sheltering a rich flora and fauna, where we will spend the afternoon. Fly Honeysuckle, Amelanchier, Lily-of-the-Valley and Violet Bird's-nest Orchid, together with Green Lizard, Crested Tit and s can all be found here. Down in the canyon Scops Owl and Egyptian Vulture occur (and Wallcreeper is a regular winter visitor), while above could be Choughs and raptors, including the re-introduced Griffon Vulture.

Day 6

To the south, just beyond the Corniche des Cévennes, is Mont Aigoual (1,567 metres), which is well-served by road and footpaths passing through deciduous woodland to pine woods and open fields. The underlying rocks are schist and limestone, which give their own distinctive floras. Just below the summit is a 'Sentier des Botanistes', a circular walk. The views can be extensive and birds of prey should be abundant. We will follow a circular route to take advantage of all these varied habitats. In the spring the open areas have white sheets of *Narcissus* and yellow patches of Tulips. Mountain plants such as Martagon Lily, Aconite-leaved Buttercup and Louseworts are found. The woods provide Herb Paris, Roe and Red Deer and even Capercaillie. Other birds could include Red Kite, Short-toed Eagle, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures and Hoopoe. Likely butterflies are Cleopatra, Pale Clouded Yellow, Purple-shot Copper, Orange-tip and Marbled Fritillary. We will hope to add many new species to our lists in this different habitat.



Yellow Flax (*Linum Campanulatum*)

Day 7

We will continue to monitor the situation at the Gorges de la Jonte, the centre for the re-introduction of the Griffon Vulture. In late 1998 the area was closed due to too many visitors disturbing the birds. The area provides the best chance to watch the Griffons and Golden Eagle can also be seen around here. Along the river are Dippers and Grey Wagtails, whilst in the gorge are Blue

Rock Thrushes, Black Redstarts, Crag Martins and Choughs. Eagle Owls also breed here. From the town of Le Rozier the long distance path GR6 follows a clear path up to the Causse Mejean. Again the Green Lizard is common, whilst butterflies here include Scarce Swallowtail, Cleopatra and Adonis Blue. Man, Lady and Monkey Orchids are also found here together with Rockroses, Box, Yellow Flax, *Globularia*, *Amelanchier* and *Aphyllanthes*, a mix of montane



Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper

and Mediterranean species. Should the area still be sectioned off we will be more than happy to pass the day with a gentle walk along the Tarn river or discuss any one of a multitude of other options available to us.

A little further west is the wet valley of Trebans which has a particularly rich flora and butterfly population. Loose-flowered, Bug, Lesser Butterfly, Pyramidal and Frog Orchids, together with butterflies that include various blues, browns and fritillaries are all species we will hope to see. These should provide a suitable climax to our last full day in the field.

Day 8

Fly London

We must now leave our base in the Cévennes to drive back to Montpellier for our flight back to London.

Tour grading

On this holiday we are based at one hotel throughout. We will explore the mountains, plateaux and gorges of this attractive region with its varied natural history by means of regular stops in our minibus, followed by short walks or simply pottering in the richer areas of which there are many. Our pace will be gentle to allow us to examine the plants, insects and birds.

Weather

Early-June is the peak time for plants over the range of habitats and altitudes we will visit. Butterflies will be active and birds will be busy on territory. The weather should be settling down, but 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, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.