

Spring Birding in Sicily

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Catania; transfer Siracusa
Day 2/6	A daily programme of wildlife and birding excursions to the south-eastern coastline, inland gorges
Day 7	Fly London



Sardinian Warbler

Dates

April/May

Focus

Primarily birds, with the added attraction of a moth trap.

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks only.

Dates and Prices

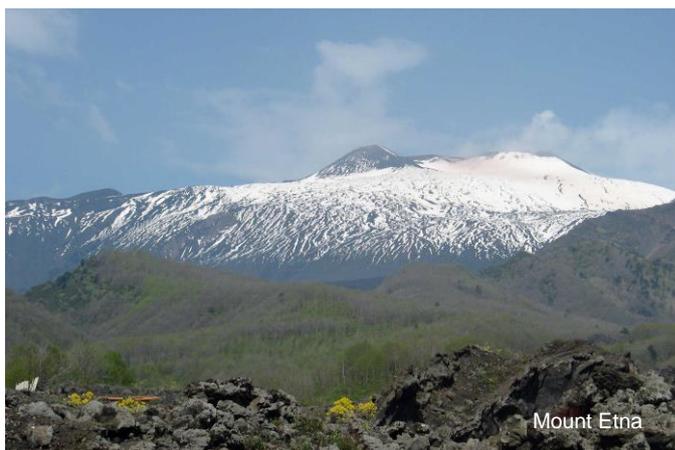
See website (tour code ITA12) or brochure

Highlights

- Search the lava flows of Mount Etna for Sicilian Rock Partridge
- Take a cable car & 4x4 guided vehicles to the rim of Etna's crater!
- Explore south-facing headlands for recently-arrived migrants
- Woodchat Shrike, Subalpine Warbler & Bee-eater among a host of spring migrants



Audouin's Gull



Mount Etna



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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

Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, is curiously undiscovered by many tourists despite having a fascinating history that can be traced back over 15,000 years. It is essentially a limestone island coupled with the massive presence of continental Europe's largest active volcano, Mount Etna. This impacts not only on the climate of the island but also means that much of the island has been repeatedly covered by volcanic ash, so the soils are exceptionally fertile. This has ensured that Sicily has been a sought-after territory for centuries. The large size of the island also partly accounts for its strategic significance, and for these combined reasons it has been fought over many times.

As part of Magna Graecia 3,000 years ago, it was home to great philosophers, and local folklore stories abound. There are many Greek remains across the island and we shall visit the astonishingly well-preserved Siracusa Greek Theatre during our tour. Sicily later formed part of the Roman Empire, being a significant producer of food for the Empire.

The position of Sicily in the central Mediterranean, together with its large size mean that it is used as a stop-over point by many of the migrant birds that are headed north from Africa for the summer. Our tour will focus on these migrating birds by visiting coastal headlands and marshes that are the first port of call for tired migrants. This tour is based at a recently renovated farmhouse outside Siracusa. The adjoining farm still grows lemons, almonds and olives as well as market garden produce and we will enjoy these to the full in the lavish local fayre served every evening for dinner.

We will relax with a sundowner before dinner whilst listening to the distant gentle lapping of the waves on the Mediterranean shore. The rural nature of our accommodation allows us to set a moth trap in the orchard in the grounds, and our clients will be given a rarely seen opportunity to experience the amazing variety of intricately patterned moths that will, weather permitting, be drawn in to the trap.

The itinerary is made up of a number of mainly half-day walks, on generally flat terrain. Transportation during the tour will be by minibus.

Day 1

London/Catania & Siracusa

Today we start our tour departing from London on our flight to Catania, midway along Sicily's east coast. With luck, the weather will be clear on our descent and we will be treated to spectacular views of Mount Etna with its smoking summit. After arrival, we will complete the airport formalities before picking up our minibus for the week. We will head south towards Siracusa, where we will settle in to our rooms at Case del Fuedo. Depending upon our flight times, we may have time for a short walk around the lemon groves that surround our accommodation to catch our

first sight of the many migrants that use the area to feed at this time of year. Likely birds include Serins serenading us with their twittering song, Woodchat Shrikes keeping a beady eye out for passing prey and Sardinian Warblers playing hide-and-seek in the vegetation. We will then have time for the group to get to know one another as we enjoy our first dinner at the Case del Fuedo. Rest assured that there will be nobody left feeling hungry as we are treated to an array of locally-influenced cuisine, with many ingredients sourced from the farm itself.

Day 2

Capo Murro di Porco, Siracusa Salinas

Those wishing to make the best of the early morning light will no doubt want to explore the trees and fields around our accommodation in a pre-breakfast walk. After breakfast we will make our way to the nearby headland of Capo Murro di Porco where we will park the minibus to search the headland garrigue vegetation for recently arrived migrants. Northern and Black-eared Wheatears can be anticipated in the more open areas, with the dense vegetation perhaps holding Collared and Pied Flycatchers, Wood and Subalpine Warblers. The derelict buildings give a home to Blue Rock Thrushes and we will hope for passing birds of prey on the look-out for an easy meal. Montagu's Harriers skim low over the bushes while Lesser Kestrel and Red-footed Falcon are more likely to be searching for insects higher up in the sky.

We will break for our picnic lunch before changing habitat to the nearby Siracusa Salinas. There we'll look for our first Squacco and Purple Herons in the reeds and, if the water levels are right, we can expect passage waders like Little Stint, Greenshank and Little Ringed Plover mixing with the local Kentish Plovers. The reedbeds should provide us with our first sightings of Great Reed Warblers - we can compare their song with those of Sedge and Reed Warblers.

We will return to Case del Fuedo to relax in time for dinner. Weather permitting, we will set the moth trap to see what nocturnal delights are attracted in before bedtime.

Day 3

Siracusa Greek Theatre, Riserva Naturale Cava Grande del Cassibile

If the moth trap was set, we will gather for a pre-breakfast look at our overnight haul and, no doubt, will be fascinated at the many amazingly intricate patterns shown by the moths.

After breakfast, we will drive to the outskirts of Siracusa to visit the truly unmissable Siracusa Greek Theatre and the surrounding Archaeological Park. The Greek Theatre is one of the best preserved in existence anywhere and is a marvel to behold. Coupled with the many other archaeological remains on the site, it is a fascinating place.

We will then travel south, before cutting inland to the Riserva Naturale Cava Grande del Cassibile. Here we will wind our way up steep mountain roads to arrive at the awesome viewpoint that looks across the limestone gorge with its river, many hundreds of feet below us. We will use our vantage point to try to find the Rock Sparrows and Blue Rock Thrushes that nest in the cliffs, as well as keeping a sharp eye out for any raptors that may be using the gorge as a natural flyway. Possible sightings include Peregrine and Lanner. After our lunch and a refreshing coffee at the Rifugio, we will take a walk along the top of the gorge. Amongst the olive and almond groves we will look for Cirl Bunting and any migrants as Woodlarks deliver their wonderful fluty songs above our heads.

On our descent back down towards the coast we may stop at any likely looking habitat to see what secrets they hold. We will set the moth trap if the weather is favourable.

Day 4

Vendicari, Penisola Magnisi & Saline di Priolo

After a look at the moth trap, or a pre-breakfast bird walk, we'll enjoy our breakfast before heading south for our first stop. Our target is the large coastal wetland of Vendicari, where we will leave the minibus at the reserve centre before exploring the wetland. There are several hides here that give good views across the large lakes and we will be looking for terns over the water, Marsh Harrier and Purple Heron in the reedbeds, and migrating warblers in the coastal juniper bushes. Of additional interest, there is also the 15th Century coastal tower built by Peter of Aragon.

After lunch we will then head back, north of Siracusa, to the promontory of Penisola Magnisi. This headland can, in the right weather conditions, be a magnet for birds. As the vegetation is mostly quite short, it is often alive with Northern Wheatear, and with lesser numbers of Black-eared Wheatear. Stone-curlews and Calandra Larks breed here and we will also be looking for Short-toed Larks hiding amongst the vegetation. Offshore we may chance upon some skuas harassing the local gulls for a meal. We will look for Audouin's Gull amongst the more common Yellow-legged Gulls.

If time permits, we will also visit the hides of the nearby Riserva Naturale Saline di Priolo where Greater Flamingoes and Audouin's Gulls are regular. We will then return to Case del Fuedo for dinner followed by the moth trap.

Day 5

Southern lakes & Portopalo

Today we will head to the very south of the island to explore various headlands and lakes. We will travel to Pantano Morghella to look for passage waders – Spotted Redshank and Greenshank may be joined by a Wood Sandpiper if we are lucky. This is also a good spot to see Slender-billed Gull. We will then move on to Pantano Cuba to try to find the elusive Purple Gallinules that breed there. This is quite an open lake and we will be looking for any recently arrived migrants in the surrounding bushes, which may include Whinchats, Hoopoe or Wood Warbler. At this time of year, almost anything can turn up! We will then take a walk alongside Pantano Longarini, where passing marsh terns often feed over the water, sometimes in large mixed flocks. Black, Whiskered and White-winged Black Terns are all possible. Cetti's Warblers will be giving away their presence by their loud songs, but we will be fortunate indeed if we actually see one of these elusive birds!

After lunch, the harbour at Portopalo will be our destination, where we will hope that a fishing boat returns to port bringing with it a group of Audouin's Gulls. A seawatch here could give us views of Yelkouan and Scopoli's Shearwaters, perhaps with a marauding skua giving chase.

We will then take a walk around the headland to look for migrants. Wheatears favour this open terrain, mixing with the resident Crested Larks. As the sun goes down, it will be time to make our way back to Siracusa to spruce up before dinner.

Day 6

Etna & Nicolosi

Today we will devote to Mount Etna, a mountain of many superlatives. Currently standing at 3,350 metres, it is continental Europe's highest volcano as well as being the most active. The last significant eruption occurred as recently as 2003 and we shall see first hand the impact that this had. The journey there will take approximately 2 hours; we will aim to stop at selected locations on the way up the mountain to try to locate the distinctively streaked Sicilian form of the Long-tailed Tit.

Winding our way up around the various lava flows, we will reach the Rifugio Sapienza at 1,923 metres, where we will leave the minibus. From here, the cable car takes us to 2,500 metres before we join our 4x4 vehicles with guides who will escort us to the highest point where access is allowed on the volcano. On a clear day, the views from here are stunning and this will without doubt be a highlight of the trip for us all. We will then descend back to the minibus where we will be ready for some lunch!

We will wind our way back down the mountain, stopping at likely spots to search for the very elusive Sicilian Rock Partridge, to try to find the Sicilian subspecies of Crossbill in the pine forests and then we will aim to take a walk in the chestnut and oak woods looking for the distinctive Sicilian Coal Tit, as well as Wood Warbler and Golden Oriole.

Throughout the day we will also keep our eyes peeled on the skies as the Etna slopes are home to Golden Eagle as well as an excellent place to connect with the very healthy Sicilian population of Lanners – one of the best places to see this elusive falcon in Europe. We will then make our way back to Case del Fuedo, perhaps with a short siesta on the way home in the minibus for those who wish!

Day 7

Catania/London

Depending on flight times, we might have the chance of a last stop to look for fresh migrants – either a visit to a headland near to our accommodation or to Siracusa Salinas. We will then have to leave Siracusa to make our transfer journey north to Catania Airport for our return flight to the UK.



Italian Wall Lizard

Tour grading

We have graded this tour A/B – easy to moderately difficult at times. There is no major trekking on tour but there will be plenty of daytime walks in a variety of habitat types. All walks and excursions are optional and taken at a leisurely pace but they will often be over hilly, rocky or forested terrain, and sometimes in hot, humid conditions.

It should be noted that the journey to Mount Etna is approximately 2 hours each way in the minibus. When travelling in Sicily it is necessary to accept that the mountain roads may be in poor repair on occasions. This will mainly take the form of pot-holes formed by the volcanic nature of the island. Warm clothing may be needed high up on Etna.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation are included in the price. There is a lovely pool at the hotel.

Clothing

Please read our separate clothing list included in the pre-departure information sent to you after booking. However, as we will visit the mountains during this holiday you must be prepared for the very variable weather associated with all mountain ranges. Whilst we can expect mostly clear, sunny and hot (about 75°F or 23°C) weather, we should also expect some wet, cloudy and cool weather; the changes can be dramatic, so bring a good range of clothing!

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.

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