

The Swiss Alps in Summer

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Geneva and transfer to Evolène

Day 2/7 Natural history excursions from Evolène

Day 8 Transfer to Geneva and fly London

Departs

June/July

Focus

Birds, as well as butterflies, beautiful mountain scenery and other natural history

Grading

Grade B – walks generally over undulating ground, or downhill. See grading section for further information.

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code CHE06)

Highlights:

- Nutcracker, Golden Eagle, Willow Tit & Firecrest possible from hotel grounds
- Stay in a family run hotel in the picturesque village of Evolène
- Mountain birds such as Snowfinch, Alpine Accentor, Wallcreeper & Citril Finch
- Varied butterflies including Alpine grayling, 'clouded yellows' & Asian Fritillary
- Superb range of 'blues' – Mazarine, Large, Damon & Alpine
- Mountain meadows full of alpine flowers, including Edelweiss, primroses & orchids
- Led by expert naturalist guides



From top: Snowfinch, Matterhorn & Mazarine Blue (Images courtesy of Brian Small)



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Introduction

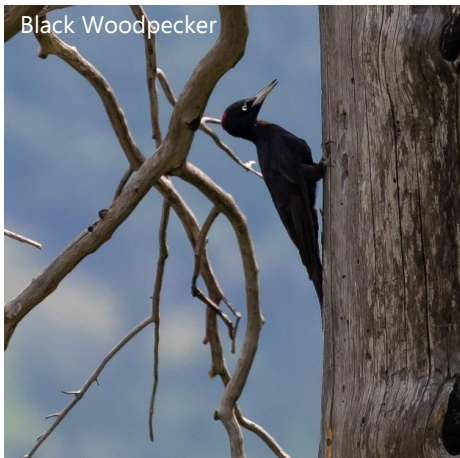
The Valais region Switzerland sits along the southern border with Italy and has some of the most spectacular scenery and highest mountains of the Alps (many of which are over 4000m), running from the Matterhorn in the east to Mont Blanc in France to the west.

The picturesque town of Evolène sits in the Val d'Hérens and will be our base for this relaxed week-long holiday. We take daily excursions enjoying some spectacular birding, beautiful butterflies and the most panoramic landscapes in Switzerland. Locally, we enjoy the Val d'Hérens, which as a Parc Regional and a Biosphere Reserve is managed using traditional methods and without chemicals, taking short drives for



Mont Collon, Arolla

walks amongst the glaciers, meadows and forest at Arolla, Ferpècle and the Grande Dixence dam. Around the town, we will discover Dipper on the cloudy mountain stream, Fieldfare and Crested Tit in the trees about the hotel, Serin, both Common and Black Redstart breed in the old buildings, and Red-backed Shrike hunt about the hawthorn scrub.



Black Woodpecker

Several longer drives will enable us to visit subtly different habitats, notably to the warm micro-climate of the northern edge of the Rhône Valley, for a range of new butterflies and birds, including Cardinal, Silver-washed and Niobe Fritillaries, as well as Citril Finch and Lammergeier, plus a special spot for Rock Thrush and Black Woodpecker. One of the highlights of the tour is a day out to Zermatt and train ride to the Gornergrat, with views of the highest peaks in Switzerland from the Matterhorn to Monte Rosa and Dent Blanche. Here Snowfinch, Alpine Chough and Alpine Accentor entertain the crowds.

Itinerary

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.

Day 1

Fly Geneva, transfer Evolène

We begin our holiday with a short flight to Geneva, before we continue our journey by minibus, driving round the northern edge of Lake Geneva – on a clear day you can see Mont Blanc across the blue waters of the lake to the south, before following the mighty Rhône to the town of Sion. From here we head south for 30 minutes, rising up the southern rim of the U-shaped Rhône Valley into the Val d'Hérens and on to Evolène.

After settling into our rooms and an introductory chat, we stroll the short distance to the restaurant for dinner - as Swifts race about the town, and Black Redstart chase about the chalets.



Black Redstart

Days 2 – 7

Excursions from Evolène

We keep our plans for the week flexible to take best advantage of the weather each day, but there is always the option of a pre-breakfast stroll about Evolène. Every morning brings something different as we walk about the historic old buildings. Listening to both Black and Common Redstarts; Serin and Firecrest sing; Crested and Willow Tits come and go and we have still not left the hotel grounds! Dipper can be found on the local stream and Red-backed Shrike feed about the fields.



Firecrest

Mountain weather can be unpredictable and so we plan our excursions carefully, keeping our days to higher elevations for the clearest, sunniest days, if possible.

Most of our days will be spent relatively locally, with visits south along the valley to Arolla and Ferpècle. Following breakfast, if the weather looks fine we will pick up provisions for a picnic lunch then slowly drive a short distance to our starting point for walks in the mountains. Parking at Arolla or Ferpècle we will slowly follow tracks from 2000m up to 2500m and get a fine range of alpine birds and butterflies as we go – as well as views of the snow-capped peaks!

The Arolla Pines and birch scrub are home to good numbers of raucous Nutcracker, with well-grown young in June that call and fly ahead of us as we walk. Crested Tit and Crossbill can be found amongst the trees and just occasionally a Black Grouse may flush



Pigne d'Arolla

from the Alpenrose beneath. As we rise to the tree line, other typical birds include Tree Pipit singing from prominent perches, Lesser Redpoll, Lesser Whitethroat, Cuckoo, Bullfinch and Mistle Thrush are to be found. On a sunny day amongst the many butterflies, we will look for Alpine Grayling, Alpine Heath, Mazarine and Alpine Blue, and a number of fritillaries – Heath, False Heath and Small Pearl-bordered amongst the most common.

Rising to the higher Alpine meadows, where the hardy Hérens cattle roam noisily with huge bells about their necks, amongst the Globeflowers and Birdseye Primrose Whinchats and Wheatears sing. High above, the alarm call of Alpine Marmot may alert us to the presence of a Golden Eagle or possibly Lammergeier quartering the slopes. Alpine and rare Red-billed Choughs danced above the meadows calling eerily. If we are very lucky, we may hear or see a Rock Partridge or Rock Thrush in these pastures. Glanville or Alpine Marsh Fritillary can be found by the trackside, accompanied by numerous Grizzled Skippers and Little Blues as well as day-flying moths.



Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary

Following lunch, we stop at rich meadows at lower elevations, where the abundance of flowers attracts numerous butterflies and birds. Amongst the white, blue and purple flowers of St Bruno's Lilies and Sainfoin we will look for Apollo, Large Blue, Berger's Clouded and Moorland Clouded Yellows, Swallowtails and Geranium Argus. Rock Bunting call from boulders, Ring Ouzel have young and Crag Martin zap about picking off insects – of which there are many.

The Grande Dixence dam is also a short drive from the hotel. Parking at the base of the dam, we take a short cable car ride to the top, where after looking for Snowfinch and Alpine Accentor, we descend by foot along a well-made track, with good opportunities for Chamois, Alpine Ibex and chances of interesting plants and birds as we head down. Wallcreeper and Alpine Accentor may be found on the cliffs, Golden Eagle and maybe Lammergeier pass overhead, plus Ring Ouzel, display-flying Water Pipit and chattering Lesser Redpoll. Water Ringlet and Peak White can be found amongst the scree, while plants such as Snowdon Lily, a variety of primroses are likely and we have a chance of Edelweiss.



Alpine Accentor



Alpine Ibex



Gornergrat train

On days of local excursions, we often return to the hotel mid to late afternoon, allowing those that wish to rest about the hotel, stroll about the town, or take a leisurely walk about the meadows of Evolène and a chance of Scarce Copper, Damon Blue or Almond-eyed Ringlet.

Longer excursions include drives to Zermatt, as well as a morning near Leuk along the Rhône Valley bottom for its Bee-eater colony, and also a trip

to the 'hidden valley' at Derborence. Each of these days offers something new and different, from stunning scenery, to varied butterflies and special birds.

Our day to Zermatt starts with a 90-minute drive to Täsch, from which we take the train to Zermatt, then the mountain railway up to the Gornergrat at c. 3000m. We always try to choose the best day weather-wise and as we depart the station at Zermatt, we hope to get stunning views of the 'shark fin' of the iconic Matterhorn. Heading up through ancient Arolla Pines we keep our eyes open across the meadows for Marmot and Wheatear, plus Snowfinch at the stations en route. From the observatory at the Gornergrat, we will wonder at the panorama across the Gornergletscher to Monte Rosa, Breithorn and the Matterhorn - surely one of the most spectacular views in Europe. About the buildings and people we watch the Alpine Chough and hope that both Snowfinch and Alpine Accentor will come and feed around our feet. Checking of patches of bare rock amongst the snow may produce Ptarmigan, and occasionally Lammergeier can appear. After lunch, we visit the local terraced fields near Zermatt station for butterflies, with Red-underwing Skipper, Apollo, plus Chalkhill, Adonis and Silver-studded Blues often about.



Chalkhill Blue



Green-eyed Hawker

Just outside the town of Leuk, in the much warmer (and German-speaking) part of Valais in the Rhône Valley, lies an old wetland and farmed fields. Reed-fringed pools attract numerous species and the air is often filled with the song of Nightingale as we arrive. Tree Sparrow breed in the Poplars, as do Wryneck and Short-toed Treecreeper; in the reeds the chunky Great Reed Warbler can be seen and from grassy ditches the amazing song of Marsh Warbler can be heard. However, the real stars here are the European Bee-eater that nest in a small colony and perch

in the trees about their nests in the bank. Dragon- and damselflies abound and include Norfolk (Green-eyed) Hawker and White-legged Damselfly (Blue Featherleg).

Taking lunch in a nearby shady spot, we spend time in the early afternoon mooching as we explore an area of scrub at the base of the Feschelbach Gorge for butterflies: Niobe, Marbled and Knapweed Fritillaries; Safflower and Large Grizzled Skippers; Great Sooty Satyr and Woodland Grayling; both White and Southern White Admiral can be seen together. Here too, Nightingale and Western Bonelli's Warbler sing in the heat of the day. We then drive up onto the northern slopes of the Rhône, to a point looking down the Feschelbach Gorge and spend a short while looking for Wallcreeper that breed in the deep canyon. This is also a good place for Rock Bunting, Honey Buzzard and especially Alpine Swift. At another wooded area as we head back, we will check for Rock Thrush, Black Woodpecker and butterflies such as Marbled White by the roadside.



Our final excursion visits Derborence, driving into a hidden valley to the north of Sion. This is a spectacular drive to a wonderful setting, where we walk round a blue Alpine lake, checking in particular for Lammergeier: this is a spot where they often breed, so we will certainly hope to see them. Our time here is spent having a relaxed walk and lunch, producing many interesting butterflies – Chequered and Glandon Blue, maybe – and birds like Citril Finch, Goshawk and Black Woodpecker. On our return, we walk by the road along the warm, south-facing slopes of the Rhône, where flowers attract numerous butterflies: Cardinal, Silver-washed and Niobe Fritillaries, plus yet more blues and skippers.



Day 8

Transfer Geneva, Fly London

This morning we must sadly return to Geneva. If time allows, we will make a brief stop by Lake Geneva for our final birding of the tour. Our return flight to London departs Geneva mid-afternoon

Images courtesy of Shutterstock & Brian Small

Tour grading

Grade B - We enjoy walks ranging in difficulty from 'easy' to 'moderately strenuous' each day, but always on well-made paths or tracks. Each day's walk varies in distance up to around 3 miles, though it will always be at a relaxed pace with plenty of time to look for birds, butterflies, plants or the mountains. If you wish to take time out, this can sometimes be accommodated, but you will need to check with the guide.

After an optional pre-breakfast stroll from c. 7 am, we usually have breakfast at around 8 am and aim to leave our hotel by 9 am for a full day in the field. We break the day to relax and enjoy lunch, and typically aim to return to our hotel at around 5 pm, at the latest, depending on the weather and our success in the field.



Willow Tit

Focus

Valais contains a rich diversity of natural history, but on this holiday we plan to focus more on the special Alpine birds, but we will also enjoy the butterflies, plants, dragonflies, insects and, of course, the amazing landscape.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All meals are included in the cost of this holiday (except for any meals or snacks you require during travel to and from Switzerland), from the evening meal on Day 1 to lunch on Day 8. Evening meals will be two courses, normally consisting of a salad style starter and a main course.

We will be staying in the charming and comfortable, family-run Hotel Hermitage in the delightful Swiss town of Evolène, which has been in the hands of the very friendly and helpful family Gaspoz for many years. All rooms are simple, yet comfortable and have en suite facilities, with a bath/shower.

Weather

The adage that mountains make their own weather is often true, but we watch the local forecast regularly to make sure we make the most of our days. Mountain weather can be variable, with cloud

and rain (and even snow!) a possibility. At this time of year, however, the weather should be becoming settled, with daytime temperatures ranging from 15 to 25°C, and plenty of clear sunny weather. Very hot weather is a possibility in the Rhône Valley. At all times carrying plenty of water is essential – at altitude the air is dry and you dehydrate surprisingly quickly. Also, in the mountains overcast conditions can rapidly reduce temperatures, and waterproofs and a warm jacket should be carried at all times.

Regional flights

Flights to Geneva are available from numerous regional airports across the UK. These are often operated by EasyJet and other low-cost carriers, and schedules do change frequently, so please contact the Naturetrek office for the latest information and prices. If your preferred regional flights do not fit in with the group flight timings, we would be happy to help arrange an additional night in Switzerland for you at either end of the trip.

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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