Spain's Picos de Europa Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Spain and transfer to Arena
Day 2/3	Arenas de Cabrales, northern Picos
Day 4/7	Cosgaya, southern Picos
Day 8	Fly London


Marsh Fritillary

Departs
June (see website)

Focus
Birds, plants and butterflies

Grading
A. Day walks only.

Dates & Prices
See website (tour code ESP12) or brochure


Eurasian Griffon Vulture

Highlights
- The perfect destination for the all-round naturalist!
- Outstanding natural history & mountain scenery
- Birds, flowers & butterflies galore!
- Wallcreeper, Snowfinch & Alpine Accentor
- Gentians, saxifrages, orchids & narcissi
- Experience the Fuente Dé cable car
- Enjoy local cuisine


Matted Globularia

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Introduction

The Cantabrian Mountains run along the north coast of Spain for about 300 kilometres. The Picos de Europa lie in the centre of this range, a dramatic block of jagged limestone peaks, amongst them Torre de Cerrado, at 2,648 metres, the highest mountain in northern Spain. These little-known mountains remain an area of wild natural beauty, rich in bird and plant-life and with many species of butterflies. The whiteness of the limestone is a special feature of an area comprised of deep gorges, towering white cliffs and pinnacles, woods and alpine pastures.


Naturetrekkers in the Picos

On this 2-centre wildlife holiday, we will be based first in the small village of Arenas in the northern Picos, the more lush and green region of this mountain range (because of the much higher rainfall!). Our second base is in the delightfully unspoilt and attractive village of Cosgaya in the southern Picos, a drier and more typically Spanish region. We will take full-day walks as we go in search of the region's rich natural history, with a packed or picnic lunch taken at leisure amongst flower-filled meadows and mountains. Another highlight will be our ascent on Europe's longest single-span cable car from Fuente Dé to the limestone summits 800 metres above, where alpine flora and Wallcreepers are amongst the attractions!

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.

Occasionally, we may reverse this published itinerary, heading south first to Cosgaya, before finishing at Arenas de Cabrales.

Itinerary

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.

Day 1 Fly Spain, transfer to Cosgaya

We will begin this tour with a direct flight from London to either Oviedo, Bilbao or Santander whichever has the best flight schedules. On our arrival in northern Spain, we will drive to Arenales de Cabrales (3 hours from Bilbao). After settling in at our hotel, there should be time to explore the nearby meadows

which host a typical range of common meadow plant species and may include Pyramidal and Bee Orchids. Many birds are found here 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.

Day 2 Arenas de Cabrales

Today 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.


Lizard Orchid

The walk takes us through wonderful rocky meadows, filled with Burnt Tip and Lizard Orchids and we should expect to see plenty of wildflowers 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 Petrocopsis. Knapweed and Marsh Fritillaries, Adonis, Little and Common Blues, and Olive, Safflower and Dingy Skippers may flit by whilst Piedmont and DePrunners Ringlets and Clouded Yellows can often be seen fluttering along the steeper edges of the valley.

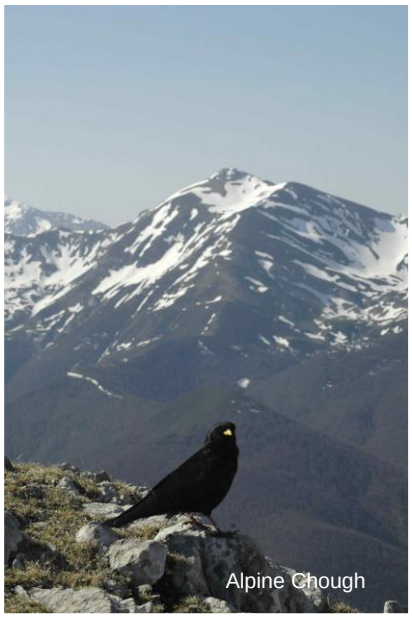
This is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful walks in the Picos and we should have more than enough time to explore it thoroughly. We will aim to stop for lunch amidst the boulders on a grassy slope alongside the river. Here we can cool our feet in the clear waters of the mountain stream and possibly pick up a Dipper. As we go further up the Valley, species such as Water Pipit, Alpine and Red Billed Choughs and Wheatear will become commonplace and we may add a Rock Bunting or Rock Thrush. This is one of the most consistent sites for Golden Eagles too as they frequently nest on the highest crags at the head of the valley.

Day 3 Arenas de Cabrales

We will take time this morning to visit the Basilica de Santa Maria that emerges from the treetops high above Covadonga. On route we will admire the traditional timber granaries and at Covadonga, we may see Red Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries in the wooded gardens and maybe an Egyptian Vulture or two. If there is time, we may also stop in Canga de Onis to photograph the famous Roman bridge and watch the Sand Martins zip back and forth over the river.

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From the pretty village of Canales 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 hamlet of La Molina. From here we will follow the path along the valley of the Río Casaño, 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 Serapias cordiguera, Serapias 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 subendemic Digitalis parviflora.


Alpine Chough

A good number of Griffon Vultures are frequently seen in the vicinity of the valley and other raptors are frequent – with a chance of Bonelli's Eagle which has nested. Other typical species which can be found along the valley include Choughs and Crag Martins, while the wooded areas support Short-toed Treecreeper, Tree Pipit, Redstart and can hold several species of woodpecker.

We will retrace our steps to the minibus and we often take time to stop in the local café/bar at Canales to enjoy some well-earned refreshment.

Day 4 Arenas de Cabrales to Cosgaya

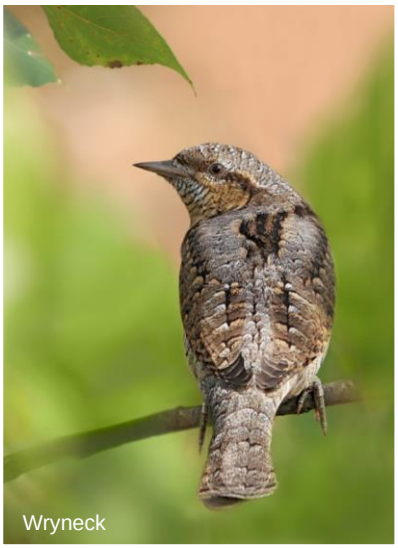
Today we must leave Arenas de Cabrales and drive to Cosgaya, a journey of about an hour and a half. What we decide to do today will depend largely on the weather, and exactly what we have seen thus far!

We will make time to explore the area of the Hermida Gorge, perhaps the most spectacular part of the drive north. Looking out for various plants, including Narrow-leaved Valerian, Sticky Flax and the endemic yellow Antirrhinum braun-blanquetii. On the way, we will stop at a lovely small church, Santa Maria de Lebena. From here, many species of raptors can be seen, often in numbers. Kettles of up to a hundred Griffon Vultures will rise from their breeding colony on the cliffs opposite, joined by a few Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed, Booted and sometimes Golden Eagles. There may also be butterflies to see, including such species as Blue-spot Hairstreak, Long-tailed and Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Red-underwing and Lulworth Skippers and Knapweed and Spotted Fritillaries.

We will arrive at the quaint town of Cosgaya in the southern Picos de Europa Mountains, and check-in to a charming, family-run hotel.

Days 5/6 Cosgaya

These two days will be spent exploring a number of sites in the Liebana Valley. Within Cosgaya, we may ascend the riverside track along the narrow valley of the Rio Cubo. The area is particularly good for butterflies and various species are usually abundant, including Large Skipper, Pearly Heath and lots of Black-veined Whites and Holly Blues. There are many plants of interest to watch out for as well. The rocks harbour small clumps of the endemic Blue-leaved Petrocoptis and the track sides may have Bird's Nest and Man Orchids. The woodland here is excellent for a range of interesting birds and we will be walking level with the tops of the trees, making viewing easy. We may see Crested Tit, Firecrest and Middle-spotted Woodpecker.


Wryneck

One of our favourite sites is Pendes - an area of ancient coppiced sweet chestnut woodland with magnificent views over the beech and oak woodlands as well as the snow-capped eastern (Andara) massif of the Picos De Europa lying to the north of us. Redstarts nest in the old gnarly cavities and Tree Pipits, Serin and Wryneck are possible. The area is particularly good for birds of prey - Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and Honey Buzzard can all be seen quite easily.

At some point, we will probably travel from Cosgaya to Pido or possibly Pido to Fuente De, depending on the conditions and what we have or haven't seen. This will give us the chance to explore the meadows and beechwoods, hopefully seeing some more interesting plants, birds and butterflies. Around Pido we may see butterflies such as Chapman's Ringlet, Dark Green Fritillary, Speckled Wood, Duke of Burgundy, Small Blue and Clouded Yellow. After passing through the settlement we will be able to enjoy awe-inspiring views of the cathedral of rock surrounding Fuente De, with the tiny cable-car station suspended between the crags (or so it appears)! The orchards here are good for Wryneck and Black Woodpecker is becoming increasingly more frequent.


Sawfly Orchid

The meadows at the foot of Fuente De often contain some interesting plants and butterflies. We often find Dull, Fly, Sawfly, Early Spider and Early Purple Orchid here as well as an interesting range of alpine plants, which have been transported from the high tops by the stream which runs through the meadow in the early spring. These may include Vernal Sandwort, Chamois Cress, Ciliate Rock Jasmine, Alpine Aster, Moonwort and Fairy Foxglove. Butterflies may include Turquoise Blue, Safflower Skipper and Mountain Argus.

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Large Grizzled Skipper

The tiny village of Mogrovejo has meadows full of orchids and the roofs and stone walls are dripping with saxifrages and other succulent plants. We may wander the streets here as well as scanning the cliffs opposite which has a breeding colony of Griffon Vultures.

Not far away is Brez, where the habitat becomes much more Mediterranean, dominated by Holme and Cork Oak woodland. Time here is always well spent with Western Bonelli's Warbler regular and we also see Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Cirl Bunting and raptors such as Booted Eagle. Various fritillaries such as Small Pearl-bordered or Silver-washed may be found along with species such as Cleopatra, Small and Grizzled Skippers and Iberian Marbled White.

Day 7 Cosgaya

Today, if 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 us 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. Here we will try to see as many alpine plants as possible. 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 Campion, Alpine Milkwort, Saxifraga conifera and the yellow S. aretioides, plus masses of Spring and Pyrennean Trumpet Gentians. We will make our way off the beaten track to look for more high altitude specialities including Alpine Accentor, Snowfinches and possibly a wandering Lammergeier, the result of a recent reintroduction project.

As we make our way up to the main track leading us towards the towering cliffs of Peña Vieja, we will look out for some of the more unusual butterflies of the area, including the endemic Picos race of Gavarnie Blue as well as Lefebvre's Ringlet, the elusive Mountain Clouded Yellow and even Apollo. At this altitude, the non-migrant alpine specialist butterflies will only just be on the wing and should be in beautiful fresh condition. We will probably also see the unusual yellow and black, high mountain dayflying moth, Eurranthis plummistraria.


Alpine Accentor

We will focus our time and energy on making the most of the alpine species along the base of the cliffs, also watching out for Rebeco (the Iberian version of the Chamois) and Snow Vole as well as continually

watching the boulder-scree and high cliffs for our most sought after species – the Wallcreeper. In previous years we have found nest sites and even seen mating pairs, although they can be highly elusive and in very low abundance. To boost our chances, we will enjoy our picnic lunch in one of their most favoured areas.

We will return back to the cable car station for a refreshing drink, further enjoying the alpine meadows on the way. We will then descend back to Fuente De and if there is time, those with the energy can be dropped above Pido to enjoy a short walk back to the hotel.

Day 8 London

Depending on our flight times, we may have time for a further walk in the Arenas de Cabrales area this morning, before our transfer to check in for our return flight to London.

Grading

A. 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 Cosgaya. Although we will be on foot for most of each day, our appreciation of the wayside flowers, birds and butterflies, often reduces our walking pace to no more than a potter. Consequently, we generally cover between 3 to 4 miles a day. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys the outdoors, and in particular the birds, butterflies and flowers 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 a.m., or just before. We then spend all day walking on trails in search of birds, butterflies and flowers, in the company of our two leaders - both ornithologist and botanist. We will take either a packed or picnic lunch to be eaten in a scenic location. After a full, but gentle-paced day in the field, we usually return to our hotel around 5 p.m, in time for a shower and some relaxation. We normally meet to enjoy a drink at the bar before dinner when your leaders will usually run through the day's sightings. Dinner is normally around 8pm (the earliest that kitchens open in Spain).

Weather

Mountain weather is always unpredictable, and some rain should be expected, though is not assured! This after all is the greenest region of Spain! However, at this season the fine summer weather should be settling in, and we hope for warm sunny days, with temperatures ranging between the early 20s and 30ºC. At high altitudes, however, cloud and rain can bring a dramatic drop in temperatures, and waterproofs and a warm jacket should generally be carried.

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Food & accommodation

All included in the price, starting with dinner on day 1 and finishing with breakfast on day 8. Our accommodation is modest but comfortable with en-suite facilities in all rooms and is well situated for wildlife exploration.

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