

France - Carcassonne & Cathar Country

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Fly Carcassonne
Day 2/7	Excursions from Vinassan
Day 8	Fly London

Departs:

Late April – Early May

Focus

Birds, plants & butterflies plus historical sites

Grading

A (easy). Day walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA07) or brochure

Highlights

- Flamingoes, Purple Gallinule & other wetland birds on the coast
- Thousands of migrant species plus birds of prey on the Leucate Plateau
- Little Bustard on steppe, & nesting Eagle Owl on rocky outcrops
- Visit the fortified city of Carcassonne plus Quéribus castle
- An abundance of wild flowers & butterflies on 'garrigue' habitat
- Rare orchids in the Pyrenean foothills



Woodcock Orchid



Carcassonne



Blue Rock Thrush



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Introduction

Picturesque villages, spectacular landscapes and a wonderful variety of birds, butterflies, and wild flowers are the focus for this new 8-day spring tour to the Languedoc region of France. Renowned for its rich cultural history, mild climate and superb wines, the Languedoc area comprises a range of habitats – on the coast we will visit salt flats, marshlands, lagoons and rocky outcrops, while inland we will be exploring Mediterranean *garrigue* and the foothills of the Pyrenees. Each of these habitats attracts numerous migratory birds and will be awash with colourful spring flowers.



There is much of historical interest here too. The region is best known for Catharism, a Gnostic movement that began in the 10th century and was considered heretical by the Roman Catholic church. Its home was in Languedoc and the persecution of the Cathars here was severe, but dotted about the lovely Languedoc landscape remain some of the last strongholds of this religious group, such as the beautiful Medieval walled city of Carcassonne and many delightful villages, which we will take time to explore.

Flamingoes, Purple Gallinules and Bitterns are some of the many species of coastal birds which live here, and the Leucate Plateau is a hotspot for migrating birds – thousands of spring migrants may be seen during favourable conditions. Birds of prey, storks, hirundines, flycatchers and warblers all grace the air here too. We'll be visiting Vendres Lake, a well-kept wildlife gem that offers a wonderful array of wetland birds, while on the banks of the River Aude and the surrounding meadows we'll search for Hoopoes, Rollers, Bee-eaters and the rare Lesser Grey Shrike among other species.

Inland we will find one of the delights of this area, the *garrigue*, a typically Mediterranean habitat covered with thymes and sages, and home to a wealth of plant species plus their attendant butterflies and birdlife. We round off the tour with a look at the flora of the foothills of the Pyrenees and its rich variety of fritillaries, wild Tulips and rare orchids. Alpine Swifts, Crag Martins and Blue Rock Thrushes live among the hillside forests and we may even see the broad, unmistakable forms of Griffon Vultures soaring overhead!

The warm Mediterranean spring weather, a rich natural heritage, magnificent scenery, perfumed *garrigue* and a sprinkling of history combine to make this a magical spring break.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some reordering 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 Carcassonne

Today we fly to Carcassonne (probably from Stansted) and drive east for about an hour to Vinassan where we will check into our hotel. This is a pleasant, traditional village hotel, serving good French cuisine.

Day 2

Coussoules Peninsula & Leucate Plateau

One of the most striking features of the Languedoc coastline is the chain of shallow reedy saltwater lakes or lagoons (known as étangs) which lie right behind the area's beaches. These are connected to the sea by narrow channels and provide prime habitat for Flamingoes and a variety of other birdlife; oysters also do rather well here!



Greater Flamingo

Today we'll be aiming to get a taste of what this region has to offer, in particular its birdlife, starting by heading out to the salt pans of Lapalme. Flamingoes, Black-winged Stilts, Avocets and Common Shelducks inhabit these watery margins, along with various species of terns, gulls, plovers, egrets, ducks, and other waterbirds. From the Coussoules Peninsula we will take a short walk through some disused vineyards and meadows to look for some of the region's raptors, as well as Great Spotted Cuckoo, Woodchat Shrike, Yellow Wagtail, Wheatear, warblers and Hoopoe which are all found here.

In the afternoon we will visit one of the most famous sites in France for seeing migratory birds, the Leucate Plateau. This is a landmark for migrating birds which cross in their thousands in spring when westerly winds are blowing. The Plateau is covered in the low-lying scrub, called *garrigue*, that is typical of the area. This is tough, resilient wild vegetation which clings tenaciously to the rocky hillsides here. It can form very dense ground cover and comprises a fragrant mix of herbs such as wild mints, thymes, rosemary and lavenders as well as spiky Holm Oak and Broom, making in places a thistly scrub. This is excellent habitat for Tawny Pipits, flycatchers and other passerines.

The area is well-known for its rare migratory birds and Red-footed Falcon, Lesser Kestrel, Spotted Eagle, Pallid Harrier, Eleonara's Falcon and Black-winged Kite are some that have been seen here. More common birds include: Red and Black Kites, Short-toed Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Hen and Marsh Harriers, Storks, Bee-eater, martins, swallows including Red-rumped, Orphean, Spectacled, Subalpine, Sardinian, Bonelli's and Dartfords Warblers and



Swallowtail

Ortolan Bunting among many others. The Swallow migration in particular is a spectacular sight, and if the weather is favourable we can expect to see hundreds of birds passing over our heads.

If time permits, we'll also visit the Grands Sagnes reedbeds today, where we may observe and listen to the songs of various reedwarblers, Bearded Tits and Bitterns.

Day 3

Pyrenees foothills & Cathar citadel of Queribus



Ophrys tenthredinifera

We will head west and south today to explore the foothills of the Pyrenees. This is a landscape of unspoilt hills and craggy peaks topped by gaunt Cathar castles where these religious rebels made their last stand against northern rule. It is a very tranquil land now, however, dotted with interesting villages, hamlets and vineyards. The foothills are famous not only for their colourful history but also for their rich flora, and we'll be looking for some of the area's highlights such as Wild Tulips (*Tulipa australis*) and Pyrenean Fritillaries (*Fritillaria pyrenaica*), plus some spectacular and rare orchids (*Ophrys corbariensis*, *Orchis olbiensis*, *Ophrys lupercalis*, *Ophrys tenthredinifera*, *Ophrys scolopax*).

We will stop at various altitudes in order to see as wide a variety as possible of flowering plants.

We'll be searching for birds, too, on the rock faces of the Calamus gorges, and we'll be hoping to see Blue Rock Thrush and Alpine Swift. Around the forested slopes we will most likely observe Crested Tit and woodpeckers and, if we are lucky, a Golden Eagle.

The citadel of Queribus is strikingly perched on a needle-like height and this will provide a cultural finale to our day. A small group of Cathars remained here isolated and remote until they were besieged in 1255, after which they surrendered peacefully to the anti-Cathar crusading forces. The restored fortress has stunning views of the surrounding rocky Corbières landscape.

Day 4 Gruissan, island of Saint-Martin, Petit Castelou reedbeds, Bages, Peyriac sur Mer

We turn our attention back towards the coast today as we explore the mosaic of saltwater lagoons and reedbeds around Gruissan and the rocky peninsula of Saint-Martin, which is covered with fragrant herbs and flowers, typical of the rich Mediterranean flora here.

In the morning we will follow a footpath through the *garrigue*. There is a great diversity of plants here and at this time of year, which is the peak flowering period, if the weather is favourable the air should be full of butterflies and we'll be hoping to see species such as Green-underside Blue, Mazarine Blue, Chapman's Green Hairstreak, Western Marbled



Purple Heron

White, Bath White and many others. There is plenty of interesting birdlife – we should see a variety of Mediterranean warblers and we'll look out for Black-eared Wheatears, which often sing perched on top of the bushes here.

After enjoying a picnic lunch under a pine tree copse we will explore the coastal reedbeds and lagoons, searching for Purple Heron, Bittern, waders, Flamingoes, Purple Gallinule and other inhabitants of the Petit Castelou.

We will end the day by driving back to our hotel via the scenic route of Bages and Peyriac sur Mer, two typical Mediterranean fishing villages, where we will have the opportunity to stop at different viewpoints and scan the local wetlands for a few final sightings. Once back at our hotel it will be time to enjoy another delicious French meal, perhaps washed down by some of the excellent local wines!

Day 5

Lagrasse, Treilla, & Feuilla Pass

We start off the day with a visit of the medieval village of Lagrasse, set in the Orbieu Valley in the Corbières massif. Featuring a 7th century Benedictine abbey, Lagrasse is listed as one of the most beautiful villages in France. Rock Sparrows and Spotless Starlings can be observed on the rooftops here, and Dippers along the river.

Today's route leads us along quiet country roads to some remarkable natural sites: the Feuilla Pass, a well-known observation point for raptor migration and the *garrigue* countryside; we'll be looking for Rock Thrush, Thekla Lark and Rock Bunting here and may even see Griffon Vultures soaring high above us. We will also keep an eye out for wild flowers and orchids such as *Ophrys lutea*, *Himantoglossum robertianum*, as well as the variety of associated butterflies found among them.



Field of Poppies near Peuch Blanc

Although the species is in decline in the region, the last stop of the day is to a nearby site where Little Bustards are known to be found, and we will give ourselves every opportunity today and tomorrow to try and see this elusive bird.

Day 6

Vendres lake, Pissevaches lagoons & La Clape hills

The Vendres lake is one of Southern France's best kept secrets. Home to a variety of waterbirds, this vast wetland area is made up of a lake, salt flats and reedbeds. Red-crested Pochard, Cattle Egret, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, storks, Little Gull, Glossy and Sacred Ibis, Osprey, Whiskered and Black Terns and Fan-tailed Warbler can be observed here. On the northern edge, the lake is surrounded by wet meadows and steppe where Little Bustards and Short-toed Eagles can be seen, and a rocky outcrop where nesting Eagle Owls are encountered most years.

From there we will head along the banks of the River Aude and explore the surrounding riverine marshlands, wet meadows and vineyards looking for Rollers, Little Owls, Hoopoes, Ortolan Buntings, birds of prey and the very rare Lesser Grey Shrike. On the river banks we will have the opportunity to follow Bee-eaters chasing insects; birds of prey such as Hobbies are frequently observed.

Moving further south we will visit the lagoons at Pissevaches, which are a haven for waders, terns, gulls and many migratory birds stopping over on their way north. Rarer birds that have been encountered here before are: Broad-billed Sandpiper, Marsh and Terek Sandpiper; Slender-billed Gulls are more common here than White-winged Black Terns and Audouin's Gull is seen nearly every year on this site!

On our way back to our hotel we should find three rare orchids: *Ophrys bombyliflora*, *Ophrys ciliata* and *Ophrys fusca* at our last stop in the Clape hills. Another point of interest in those hills is the presence of one of the last remaining nesting pairs of Bonelli's Eagle – we might just be lucky and come across one of these majestic birds.

Day 7 Minerve, Carcassonne & the Alaric Mountains

Apart from its ornithological interests, Minerve is one of the most picturesque Cathar villages of France – it is surrounded by *garrigue* vegetation and there are dramatic lookout points over the Cesse gorges.

On this last day we will review some of the species we have already seen; it will also provide a chance of discovering some new ones, such as Woodlark, Tawny Pipit, Black-eared Wheatear, Nightingale, Blue Rock Thrush, Red-rumped Swallow, Alpine Swift, Raven, Short-toed Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Honey Buzzard, Golden Eagle, Crag Martin, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes. There is much to please botanists here and we'll be looking for the colourful blooms of *Cistus*, *Asphodelus*, rock roses, brooms, fragrant thymes and sages as well as enjoying an abundance of butterflies if it is sunny.



After a picnic lunch we will make our way to the fortified city of , famous for its role during the Cathar Crusade between 1209 and 1229, a 20-year military campaign initiated by the Roman Catholic Church to eliminate the Cathar 'heresy' in Languedoc. After a stroll through the walled city we will make our way back to the hotel through the limestone Alaric Mountains, where we will stop and have some time to relax among some more orchids and wild flowers.

Day 8 Fly London

Drive to Carcassonne and fly to London.

Tour Grading

On this holiday we will be based at one comfortable hotel throughout. From here we will go on daily excursions, using our minibus where necessary, to explore the gorges, hills, fields and other habitats of this magnificent region of rural France. Much of our exploration will be on short walks of no more than eight kilometres, utilising the many paths and tracks that criss-cross the landscape. These walks will be of a leisurely nature, with plenty of stops to examine and study the many plants, insects and birds that we will encounter on our way. Inevitably, considering the contours of the land, one or two of these paths will be fairly steep, but at our pace they should present no problem for a reasonably competent walker.

Weather

Late April is the peak flowering time for many of the plants occurring in Languedoc and the foothills of the Pyrenees, especially the numerous orchids (although, in some years, untypical earlier weather can be a factor), and we should see the majority of the species mentioned. Butterflies are also very numerous by this time, while the birds' migration is in full swing. At this time the weather should be quite warm and sunny, with temperatures usually in the mid 20's Centigrade, but it can be unpredictable, with short downpours possible at any time. For this reason you need to be prepared, bringing your raincoat with you!

Food and accommodation

Accommodation and all food, starting with dinner on day 1 and ending with breakfast on day 8, is included in the price of this holiday.



Our hotel in Vinassan

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.