

France - Provence in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Fly Marseille and drive to the Luberon region of Provence.
Days 2 - 4	Daily programme of natural history walks and excursions in the Luberon region of Provence
Day 5 - 7	Daily excursions in the Camargue
Day 8	Fly to London

Departs

April

Focus

Plants, birds and butterflies

Grading

A. Easy optional day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA10) or brochure

Highlights

- Perfect holiday for the keen all-round naturalist as we enjoy birds, butterflies and botany.
- Birds including Hoopoe, Squacco and Purple Herons and many more.
- Around 40 species of butterfly possible including Cleopatra, Moroccan Orange Tip, Large Tortoiseshell and Scare Swallowtail.
- Flowers may include Giant and Lady Orchid.



Greater Flamingos, Les Baux-de-Provence, Scarce Swallowtail



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Introduction

Throughout this 2-centre holiday, we will be staying at small, family-run hotels in the picturesque villages of Sault, located on the Plateau of Vaucluse, amid wonderfully scenic unspoilt countryside, and another hotel just outside Arles nearer the famous Camargue. Mont Ventoux (a western extension of the Alps) spectacularly dominates the view just to the north, while to the south the hump-backed Montagne du Luberon separates us from the coastal plain beyond. The plateau is itself dissected by the magnificent Nesque Gorge, with the famous jagged, rocky crags of the Dentelles de Montmiral rising majestically to the sky in the west.

We will use our hotels as a base to explore the varied habitats of the region, from rocky gorges to open wetlands as we observe and study the wonderfully rich spring flora, whilst at the same time also enjoying the many, birds, butterflies, and other insects that are on the wing at this time of year. The following programme must be used only as a guide, as so much will depend on the weather, and how we feel each day is best spent. Some time will also be allocated for visiting the lovely towns and villages, and seeing some of the cultural history of the area. Where possible, optional morning walks before breakfast and night drives after dinner will be offered for those who wish.

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

Sault, Vaucluse

We depart this morning from London bound for Marseille or Montpellier. Having collected our minibuses we will drive away from the flat coastal plain towards the hills of the Vaucluse. Depending on flight times, we may stop en-route for lunch, or visit a site where we can sample the rich Provençal wildlife for the first time. On arrival at Sault we will settle into our hotel, hopefully admiring the distant views of Mont Ventoux, before enjoying our first traditional French country dinner of the week. We shall stay here for the first four nights of the holiday.

Day 2

Sault, Vaucluse



Griffon Vulture

Our first full day in the field will be at a very leisurely pace, allowing us to acquaint ourselves of the lovely landscape, and offering a great introduction to the diverse natural history of the region. Today we will explore the area near to Sault itself and following breakfast, we will drive down to the fields in the valley where Lavender and other produce is grown. We can hope to see Southern Wild Tulips growing in the

verges along with a variety of other plants. We should see Corn Buntings and Skylarks in the fields and there is the potential for Tawny Pipit, Nightingales and Cirl Buntings while overhead we hope to see Griffon Vulture, Hobby, Kestrel and Black Kite.

We will drive the short distance to the Gorges de Nesque, a spectacular cleft carved into the limestone plateau. Here the rocky sides are cloaked with a scrub-like woodland consisting of mainly Downy Oak and Box, interspersed with shrubs and flowers including Rock Roses, Star of Bethlehem, Wild Jasmine, Dwarf Toadflax, and many other colourful spring blooms. The tall spikes of the Lady Orchid can sometimes be found here, while we may be lucky and find the endemic but shy flowering dainty Snowflake *Leucojum fabrei* in all its glory. Aquatic birds such as Cetti's Warbler, Water Rail and Great Reed Warbler can be seen here but are more frequently heard. A walk along the stream in the gorge should produce flowers such as Hepatica and perhaps Stinking Hellebore. Butterflies such as Painted Lady, Large Tortoiseshell and Black-eyed Blue can be hoped for amongst others.



Moroccan Orange Tip

Stopping at the belvedere (viewpoint), we will admire the view across the gorge to the Rocher du Cire, whose impressive cliff face towers up to the sky, whilst at the same time keeping an eye open for some of the special birds of this habitat. Short-toed Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Crag Martin, Alpine Swift and Blue Rock Thrush are all possible.



Short-toed Eagle

We will search for other plants and birds, and if the sun is shining, observe the spring butterflies that are on the wing, which could include Moroccan Orange Tip, and both Bath & Black-veined White.

There may also be the opportunity to explore Sault for those who wish or to have some downtime before dinner.

Day 3

Sault, Vaucluse

Today we will take the winding two hour scenic route to arrive at the tiny village of St. May perched overlooking the Gorge de l'Eygues. From here we will climb by road up into the hills and onto the level plateau where we will stop and explore the area on foot. The main reason for our visit is to see the re-



Western Subalpine Warbler

raptors in addition to the vultures.

introduced Griffon Vultures. In recent years we have been lucky enough to see a few Black Vultures and have recorded Egyptian and Bearded Vultures here too. This area is also a likely spot for orchids and other interesting plants plus the chance of the very localized Spring Ringlet butterfly and a variety of other open country butterflies. With sunshine we will look for Western Green and Wall Lizards too and passerine birds tend to include Skylark, Woodlark, Western Subalpine Warbler, Stonechat and sometimes Dartford Warbler. Looking upwards we hope to find other aerial

Day 4

Sault, Vaucluse

Efforts today will be made to explore the general area around Mount Ventoux, and although it is very likely that the road over the mountain summit will be closed we can still explore the uplands on either the east or west slopes. Oak trees give way to pines and beech as we ascend the mountain roads and the wildlife changes too. The east slope hides big mammals in the woodland with re-introduced Red Deer and Wild Boar but sightings are infrequent. More likely we might find alpine birds and plants with the west slope providing opportunities to find the localised Citril Finch as well as the more widespread Firecrest, Crested Tit, Black Redstart, Nuthatch, Crossbill and Serin. Black Woodpeckers tend to be vocal in the pinewoods and occasionally we see them.

If the weather is not extreme, we will endeavour to enjoy an open air picnic in this alpine setting with fabulous views, listening to birds in the trees around us and seeing if the local Ravens come in for picnic scraps.



Crested Tit

We will descend in the afternoon and visit the very pretty village of Brantes with a variety of typical plants and flowers of Provence and hopefully a mix of insects which might include day-flying moths, vibrant butterflies and Violaceous Carpenter Bees. Breeding birds often include Common and Black Redstart, Serin, Firecrest and Nightingale which often show as we take a slow walk around the paths. Leaving Brantes we will take a slow drive back to Sault through traditional countryside and quaint villages, with an opportunity of another walk if there is still any energy left.

Day 5

Sault, Vaucluse - Camargue

Today we will be packing up and leaving our first base and driving slowly southwest and heading for the Camargue where we shall be based for the remaining three nights of the holiday. We may stop at small roadside meadows to track down interesting flora, insects and invertebrates and birds of light woodland and open countryside.



Scarce Swallowtail

Just to the south of the River Durance rises another impressive chain of limestone hills, namely Les Alpilles, where the picturesque village of Les Baux-de-Provence, with its ruined chateau, is spectacularly sited at the top of a sheer cliff. We will spend the majority of the day here in these hills. Upon arrival at the historic town of Les Baux we may walk around the perimeter of the town to experience the Mediterranean flora. It is often considerably warmer here on the south facing slopes compared to our previous location at Sault and this is usually

reflected in the plants present which include Shrubby Hare's-ear *Bupleurum fruticosum*, Turpentine Tree *Pistacia terebinthus*, Mastic Tree *Pistacia lentiscus*, Kermes Oak *Quercus coccifera*, Mediterranean Buckthorn *Rhamnus alaternus*, *Phillyrea angustifolia*, Wild Jasmine *Jasminum fruticans* and *Laurustinus* *Viburnum tinus*. Birds might include Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart, Sardinian Warbler and Crag Martin. We may have time to climb the ramparts into the village for a coffee and even a little retail therapy and then we will drive a few miles away for a late picnic lunch in pine woodland, holding small numbers of Crested Tits and occasionally Crossbills and if it's sunny there are often butterflies on the wing including Swallowtail and Scarce Swallowtail.

We will then drive on to Arles and check in at our hotel ahead of our evening meal and optional drive out to try and hear and possibly see the mighty Eurasian Eagle Owl.

Days 6 -7

Camargue

Our last two full days provide an opportunity to explore the Camargue, famous for the magnificent white horses, which we should see well, and iconic black bulls as well as its rich and abundant birdlife. There are various sites to visit and the leaders will decide on how best to work the daily itinerary.

Pre-breakfast walks from the hotel into the surrounding farmland can be productive for a range of species including Zitting Cisticola, Crested Lark, Bee-eater, Whinchat, Yellow Wagtail and a variety of other spring migrants. There has also been Little Bustard in the fields here in recent years and Nightingales are often singing away around the hotel. The Etang du Charnier and Etang du Grey in the Petit Camargue, should hold a great many birds including Great White Egret, Squacco and Purple Heron, Black-winged Stilt and Glossy Ibis. The extensive reed beds support Great Reed and Common Reed

Warblers while Cuckoos are usually common here as a result of all the potential host parents! Mediterranean Gulls, Gull-billed and Whiskered Terns and Red-crested Pochards all add great interest.

The Grand Camargue and the area of Mas d'Agon can be very productive when there is plenty of water. This extensive area of open flat fields, remnant sedge habitat and freshwater étangs (lakes), mean a wide range of species are possible. Coypu sometimes feed on the banks and *Aristolochia rotunda* grows in the verges but it will be the birds that draw most of our attention which regularly include Purple Heron, Whiskered, Black and Gull-billed Tern, Collared Pratincoles, Great Reed Warbler, Bearded Tit and Red-crested Pochard. We will also check suitable habitat nearby for Stone Curlews. A whole array of migrant and breeding birds can be found here.



Purple Heron

The eastern edge of Etang de Vaccares and the Parc Ornithologique on the west side of the delta are areas that hold a great deal of interest with the latter supporting a heronry containing Little Egret, Grey Heron, Cattle Egret, Glossy Ibis and sometimes Night Heron all allowing close views. As we explore this spectacular reserve, we can expect very close views of Greater Flamingos and this is the perfect place to photograph them. As we explore, we may find Purple Swamphen, noisy breeding Mediterranean Gulls, Little Terns, Common and Wood Sandpipers, Black-winged Stilt, Spotted Redshank, Avocet and possibly other migrant waders including Temminck's and Little Stint.



Greater Flamingo

We may also find time to visit the super reserve at Marais du Vigueirat which often provides views of Squacco Heron, Gull-billed Tern, Wood Sandpiper, White Stork, Spoonbill, Yellow Wagtail and possibly early odonata including Black-tailed Skimmer, Lesser Emperor, Hairy Hawker, Red-veined Darter and Blue-tailed Damselfly.

Another potential site is Plage de Piemanson with a stop off at some salt pans on the way. Waders could include Little Stint, Kentish Plover and Avocets. Caspian and Sandwich Tern are both possible and if we're lucky, Slender-billed Gull may have returned from their African wintering grounds.

Day 8

Camargue

Depending on flight times, we may have time for a final morning walk, or a short visit to one of the sites listed above or the area known as La Crau, a region of semi-steppe habitat to the north-east of the Camargue. Here several specialized species of bird, plant and insect occur which have limited ranges in France. We will be particularly searching for birds such as Roller or Short-toed Lark and possibly Southern Grey Shrike before we must reluctantly leave the Camargue and drive back to the airport for our return flight to London.

Tour Grading & Focus

On this holiday we will be based at two hotels. From these pleasant bases we will go on daily excursions using our minibus where necessary, to explore the mountains, valleys, upland plateau, gorges, reed beds, lagoons and other habitats of this wonderful region of rural France. We will explore by means of short to medium walks of no more than five kilometres. These will be of a leisurely nature, with plenty of stops to examine and study the many plants, insects, birds, and animals that we will encounter on our way. The paths will be on broken stone or wooden walkways. Inevitably, considering that this is a hilly region in the north, some of the paths will be steep, but at our pace they should present no problem for a reasonably competent walker.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

The end of April is the peak flowering time for many of the Mediterranean plants of this region, while butterflies should be numerous and the majority of the migrant birds will have arrived. The weather should now be starting to settle down and can be quite warm (+ 20 ° C), but rain is always possible, whilst in view of the altitude (e.g. Mont Ventoux when the mistral is blowing!), can also be quite cold. Therefore, we recommended that you bring a good range of clothing and appropriate footwear!

What's Included

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. All rooms have private facilities.

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, at the time of booking.