

France - The Cevennes

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Montpellier and drive to Cocurès
-
- Day 2/7** Walking natural history excursions in the Cévennes
-
- Day 8** Fly London
-

Departs

May

Focus

Plants, birds and butterflies

Grading

Day walks only. Grade A

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA12)

Highlights

- A perfect destination for the all-round naturalist!
- Birds, flowers & butterflies galore!
- Birds of prey in abundance
- 25-30 orchid species, amongst a profusion of wild flowers
- A rugged land of medieval villages & spectacular gorges
- Classic French cuisine in an award-winning village hotel
- Led by our expert Naturetrek ornithologist & botanist leaders



Military Orchid



Green-underside Blue



View from Mont Aigoual



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

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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

The Cévennes is a mountainous region on the south-eastern edge of the Massif Central in France, with a wide variety of scenery and habitats. In the centre is the Cévennes National Park with its surrounding Zone Peripherique giving protection to the wildlife and scenery. Throughout the holiday we will be based in Cocurès in the Tarn Valley, the administrative centre of the Cévennes National Park, a convenient base for exploring the many places of interest to seek out the varied plants, birds, butterflies and other wildlife of the region.



Naturetrek group picnic lunch in the Cévennes

Day 1

Cocurès

We depart early this morning from London's Gatwick airport on a direct flight to Montpellier. We set off north on scenic 2.5 hour drive, on increasingly steep roads to Cocurès in the heart of the Cévennes, one of the villages that Robert Louis Stevenson passed through on his 'Travels with a Donkey'. We will be based here throughout this holiday in a pleasant and traditional village hotel serving fine local food. After a picnic lunch in the garden of the hotel we will head out on foot and explore the village, along the river and past the church, looking out for plants such Daisy-leaved Toadflax, as Crag Martins swoop overhead.

Day 2

Cocurès



Red-backed Shrike

Our first full day is spent exploring the limestone and Dolomitic limestone habitats of the Causse Mejean. Ascending the escarpment from Florac Trois Rivières, we stop at the crest of the hill to explore an area of sparse vegetation, rich in both plant species and butterflies. The small Burnt-tip and Early Purple Orchid can be found between the Box and Juniper bushes which are the primary vegetation, along with Dwarf coronilla which covers the spaces between with a blaze of yellow. Great Grey and Red-backed Shrike are found here, and we could see Chapman's Green hairstreak in amongst normal Green Hairstreak.

Continuing across the Cause Mejean's wide open spaces we come to a small café perched high above the Gorge du Tarn. We will base ourselves here for the rest of the day exploring the deciduous woodlands to the east,

and the Pine forests and cliffs to the west. Whilst we have lunch, Griffon Vultures drift overhead on the thermals from the gorge below, and Red-billed Chough are often in flight and calling. Butterflies abound with many varieties of blues, Common and Scarce Swallowtail, Knapweed Fritillary and Wood Whites here, whilst there are interesting plant species such as the endemic Red Pasqueflower, with velvety, deep red flowers, plus a sub-species of Alpine Aster found only in the Cevennes, and the beautiful blue trumpets of Cevennes Gentian. Yellow Flax is in full bloom, plus we can hope to see Violet Bird's Nest and Lady Slipper Orchid here. The wooded areas here are home to birds such as Crested Tit, Nightingale, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Black Redstart.

Day 3

Cocurès

Today we will explore just south of Cocurès, ascending through St Laurent-de-Trèves, where there are dinosaur footprints in the limestone dating back some 180 million years. This limestone country holds many orchids, such as Bug, Burnt-tip, Green-winged, Elder-flowered, Fragrant, Frog and Greater and Lesser Butterfly Orchid. We then continue up to the Col des Faisses, which reaches 1,026 metres to give wide views over the national park and the adjoining limestone plateaux of the Causse, particularly Sauveterre, Mejean and Noir.

As we descend more gently along the ridge of the Corniche des Cévennes, the underlying rock changes to schist to provide a different flora with heaths, Cistus and brooms. Throughout the day a good variety of birds should be present; raptors include Golden Eagle, possible Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Red and Black Kite and Buzzard. The cliffs provide an ideal habitat for Alpine Swift, Crag Martin and Rock Bunting together with Stonechats and Wheatears. We may return by way of one of the more secluded valleys.

Day 4

Cocurès

Today we return to the Causse Mejean, where we will watch the skies throughout the day for vultures and other raptors. There is a feeding station on a farm here where large numbers can be seen. We then explore the area around Hures-la-Parade, where the Przewalski's horses are to be found roaming the landscape. Red-billed Chough are often to be found with the horses, and it is a good area for Short-toed Snake Eagle, whilst the bright yellow of Spring Adonis is attention grabbing.

After lunch, taken by the Aven Armand limestone cavern, we will descend to the Gorge de la Jonte through stunning landscapes and amazing rock formations. There are several excellent butterfly spots on the descent, where we can expect to find species such as Scarce Swallowtail, Cleopatra and Adonis Blue, and the cliffs are covered in Yellow broom and Blue Aphyllanthes.

Reaching the bottom of the Gorge we pass tiny villages perched on cliffs to reach the vulture nesting area. High above us we will watch Griffon and Egyptian



Griffon Vulture

vultures circling and landing at their nests, all the while mobbed by Ravens, and with Alpine Swifts and other hirundine species darting around.

Day 5

Cocurès



Early Spider Orchid

To the north is Mont Lozère, at 1,699 metres the highest peak in the region. We will start the day walking through dense woods of oak and chestnut, where the ground flora will contrast with the pine woods we visit elsewhere. The area is home to tits, finches and warblers; Sparrowhawk and Goshawk are also recorded from this area. We then reach wild, open country with chats, Rock Bunting, Rock Sparrow and Rock Pipit, Black Redstart and even the chance of Alpine Accentor. Birds of prey could include Golden, Booted and Short-toed Eagles; Merlin,

and Hen and Montagu's Harriers have also been recorded. The underlying rocks and granite boulders produce an acid heath flora with sheets of Narcissi in early summer.

The highest point of the road is the Col de Finiels, at 1,548 metres it provides wide views all around and a further chance to see raptors overhead. Descending we come into limestone again and will examine the wetter patches which have a wide variety of butterflies and plants. Orchids include Soldier, Lady, Early Spider and Elder-flowered. Other plants we are likely to find include Water Avens, pansy, rampion, meadow-rue and Whorled Solomon's-seal.

Day 6

Cocurès

First visit the Chaos de Nimes and open area strewn with boulders and filled with exciting plants such as the endemic Cevennes subspecies of Short-stemmed Cinquefoil. It is a good location for Northern Wheater, Rock Thrush and Rock Sparrow.

To the south, just beyond the Corniche des Cévennes, is Mont Aigoual (1,567 metres), which is well-served by road and footpaths passing through deciduous woodland to pine woods and open fields. The underlying rocks are schist and limestone, which give their own distinctive floras. Just below the summit is a 'Sentier des Botanistes', a circular walk. The views can be extensive and birds of prey should be abundant. We will follow a circular route to take advantage of all these varied habitats. In the spring the open areas have white sheets of Narcissus and yellow patches of Tulips. Mountain plants such as Martagon Lily, Aconite-leaved Buttercup and Louseworts are found. The



Nimes le-Vieux limestone rock formation

woods provide Herb Paris, Roe and Red Deer and even Capercaillie, although we would be very lucky to see the latter. Other birds could include Red Kite, Short-toed Eagle, Egyptian and Griffon Vultures and Hoopoe. Likely butterflies are Cleopatra, Pale Clouded Yellow, Purple-shot Copper, Orange-tip and Marbled Fritillary. We will hope to add many new species to our lists in this different habitat.

Our last stop of the day will be at an unheralded yet incredible spot where in the past we have seen as many as 12 species of orchid on a single visit, plus many hybrid species.

Day 7

Cocurès

To the west, the Gorges du Tarn have been cut deep into the limestone and have good roads along and around them which provide easy access to the most interesting places. The ledges provide ideal nesting sites for a range of birds - Eagle Owl, Golden Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Peregrine, Chough, Crag Martin and Blue



Poet's Narcissi (*Narcissus poeticus*)

Rock Thrush. Along the river are Dipper and Grey Wagtail. Plants include both Mediterranean and mountain species including Aphyllanthes, Globularia, Helianthemum, Saponaria, Fairy Foxglove, the handsome umbellifer *Molopospermum peloponnesiacum* and the endemic Cevennes Saxifrage. Amongst this rich flora are many butterflies, plus Green Lizards are also found here.

After a morning walk along the Tarn, we will travel south over the Causse Mejean, exploring different aspects of this large plateau, searching out the endemic orchid, *Ophrys aymoninii*. Other orchids include Military, Lady and Monkey Orchids and their various hybrids and a wealth of other flora, including Red Pheasant Eye, the yellow Pyrenean Pheasant Eye, Bastard Balm, Hepatica and Poet's Narcissi. The birds should include woodpeckers, Red-backed Shrike, Crested Tit and Firecrest.

Day 8

London

We must now leave our base in the Cévennes to drive back to Montpellier for our flight back to London.

Trek grading

On this holiday we are based at one hotel throughout. We will explore the mountains, plateaux and gorges of this attractive region with its varied natural history by means of regular stops in our minibus followed by short walks or simply pottering in the richer areas of which there are many. Our pace will be gentle to allow us to examine the plants, insects and birds.



Castlebouc, Cevennes

Trumpet Gentian (*Gentiana clusii* ssp. *cevennensis*)Carthusian Pink (*Dianthus carthusianorum*)

Black-veined White

Weather

Mid May is the peak time for plants over the range of habitats and altitudes we will visit. Butterflies will be active and birds will be busy on territory. The weather should be settling down, but we need to be prepared for some wet and cool days, so bring a range of clothing.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

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.



Our hotel in the Cevennes