

France - The Dordogne

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Limoges and drive to the Dordogne</u>
Day 2/7	<u>Daily programme of natural history walks and excursions in the Dordogne region</u>
Day 8	<u>Fly London</u>

Departs

May

Focus

Plants, birds and butterflies

Grading

Grade B. Day walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA13) or brochure

Highlights

- Daily wildlife walks – ideal for the all-round naturalist
- Flowers, birds & insects in abundance
- A profusion of spring flowers (including 25-30 orchid species)
- Look for Hoopoe, Golden Oriole & singing Nightingales
- Pretty medieval towns & villages
- Typical Dordogne village hotel serving tasty local cuisine (& wines)



Wild Cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus*)



Rocamadour



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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 River Dordogne rises just below Puy Sancy in the Auvergne and flows roughly westward to join the Atlantic Ocean near Bordeaux. The area that most people think of as “The Dordogne” is actually the middle section of the river where it carves its way through hard limestone rock by means of a spectacular series of meanders. Here gaunt castles, remnants of the division of the land in medieval times between the English and of course the French, stand sentinel on the craggy outcrops overlooking the river far below. Above these chasms gently sloping wooded hills stretch away either side to the horizon, dotted here and there with lovely old towns and villages such as Sarlat and Domme, while Rocamadour is actually built majestically into the side of a sheer cliff face. This beautiful unspoiled countryside is also a haven for all forms of wildlife, with a particularly rich and diverse assortment of plants and butterflies.



The Chateau des Anglais at Autoire

Throughout this holiday we will be based in the very heart of the region in the delightfully rural village of Nadaillac-de-Rouge which nestles amongst beautiful wooded countryside just to the south of the river near the small town of Souillac. From this base we will explore the surrounding countryside, taking our picnic lunch every day, looking for birds, butterflies, plants, and anything else of interest. There are obviously many other attractions in this lovely area, so, should you prefer at any time not to join us on a particular walk or outing, you are free to relax or potter at your own pace. Our locally based tour leader, Jason Mitchell, will have details of these options/opportunities for anyone who is interested.

Day 1

Nadaillac De Rouge, Dordogne Valley

We depart this morning from London's Stansted airport bound for Limoges. There we meet tour leader, Jason Mitchell, and commence a scenic drive south through the wooded hills of the Lot. As we get closer to our destination we will notice the scenery becoming gradually more varied and attractive, with tantalising views of distant chateaux and small villages. We will be staying in a pleasant and traditional village hotel serving fine food and drink, with a particular emphasis on some of the delicious wines and dishes that this area is rightly renowned for.



Lady x Military Orchid hybrid

Day 2

Nadaillac De Rouge, Dordogne Valley

For this our first full day in the field, we will drive the short distance across the river to St Sozy where we will explore on foot the impressive limestone ridge just to the north of the village. Initially, we will wind our way up through woodland of Oak, Ash and Box which, at this time of year, is filled with birdsong, before emerging first into scrub and then dry grassland at the top of the ridge. From here we will be able to enjoy superb



Scarse Swallowtail

views down and along the river, and this vantage point is a good spot from which to look for such birds of prey as Buzzard, Red Kite and Peregrine. All around us we will find an amazing diversity of plants – an opportunity to make a start in identifying some of the many to be found in this type of habitat. Species to look out for include Mediterranean Buckthorn, White Rock-rose, Little Robin, Nottingham Catchfly, Cheddar Pink, and two of the local specialities, *Globularia punctata* and *Astragalus monspessulanus*.

As we descend towards the river, there are many abandoned fields of vines and other crops where orchids are numerous, the most obvious being the many magnificent spikes of Lizard Orchid. If the sun is shining, this is also a good place to see some of the vast variety of colourful butterflies that are on the wing at this time of year. Cleopatra, Black-veined White, and both Swallowtail and Scarse Swallowtail (actually the commoner of the two) are perhaps the most spectacular, but many other species may also be seen.

We return to the minibus by means of a spectacular terraced path which hugs the side of the overhanging cliff which towers way above us, whilst the river lies some way below us to our right. This path proceeds through rocky woodland with, in one spot, some rather impressive prehistoric caves cut into the rock. Small-leaved and Large-leaved Limes are present here, whilst both the Small Yellow Foxglove and the rare sedge, *Carex depauperata*, are common. Below, the river at this point is sometimes carpeted with the white flowers of the Water Buttercup, *Ranunculus penicillatus*.

Day 3

Nadaillac De Rouge, Dordogne Valley

We head downstream today, making sure not to miss the splendid scenery on the way, the highlight being the troglodyte houses built into the cliff-side at La Roque-Gageac. A little further on we cannot fail to be impressed as we note two magnificent and imposing castles glowering at each other from either side of the river. These are the well-preserved Beynac (French-built) and Castelnaud (English-built) fortresses, an awesome legacy of the medieval wars fought between the old enemies in this area. Our destination today is the hilly region surrounding the latter, where there is much Oak (mainly Downy and Sessile) woodland, with some small fields, scrub, and open areas of grassland adding to the variety of habitats here. Flowery



Burnt Tip Orchid

tracks, paths and quiet country lanes thread this landscape, and these provide ideal access from which to explore examples of all of these rich habitats in a leisurely manner.

Orchids abound, with Lizard, Lady, Pyramidal, Bee, Fly, Woodcock, Violet Limodore and a huge colony of Birds-nest Orchids, together with both Red and Sword-leaved Helleborines, all spread over a substantial area. Other interesting plants include Scorpion Vetch, Yellow Woundwort, Wall Germander, Spiked Star-of-Bethlehem, Orobanchaceae ssp, and the strange poisonous Mediterranean shrub *Coriaria myrtifolia*. Butterflies are ever-present, with a great variety of species; Southern Speckled Wood, Wood White, Cleopatra and several fritillaries being particularly common. We may also be lucky enough to find the rare and beautiful Scarlet Tiger Moth perched upon some vegetation.

This area also provides very good habitat for songbirds, with Nightingales singing from almost every thicket, warblers common (notably Melodious, Bonelli's and Wood) and, near habitation, the lovely tinkling glass song of the Serin may be heard. Additionally, near the castle itself, we find a good viewpoint from which to watch for Red Kites, and other birds of prey.



Violet Limodore

Day 4

Alzou River

The Alzou River is a raging torrent in the winter months (right up until April when it suddenly disappears underground) and, over the eons, has carved out a spectacular gorge which is home to a stunning array of birds, insects and plants. Perhaps the water flow was more reliable in the past as there are a series of crumbling water mills along its course, one of which – the Moulin de Saut – has a small parking area on the adjacent cliff-top. This is a few kilometres south-east of our hotel, and is the starting point for today's exploration.



Booted Eagle

As we walk from the minibus, we will gradually emerge from the predominantly oak woodland into a mixture of scrub and grassland that runs along the top of the gorge at this point. Here, there are wonderful views down into the depths below, and obviously this is a good spot to look for Red and Black Kites, breeding Peregrines, Crag Martins, Ravens and perhaps a Short-toed or Booted Eagle. This is also a rich habitat for many different species of plant, with numerous orchids including hundreds of spikes of both Greater and Lesser Butterfly

Orchid. Other plant species to look out for are Blue Bugle, Winged Broom, Cornelian Cherry, Montpellier Maple, Martagon Lily, Cut-leaved Self-Heal and the showy blue flowers of both the Peach-leaved and Spreading Bellflowers.

We then descend into the gorge to take lunch at another ruined mill. This spot seems to be a magnet for butterflies, where we can identify at our leisure such species as High Brown and Silver-washed Fritillaries, Southern White Admiral, and perhaps a Large Tortoiseshell. Here, along the valley floor, the vegetation is much more lush, with plants like Leopard's-bane, Green Hellebore, Columbine, Dame's Violet and Soft Comfrey taking advantage of the shade. We will return to the minibus via a track across more open country which offers a good selection of wildlife including Crested Larks, Nightingales and more orchids.

Day 5

Nadaillac De Rouge, Dordogne Valley

Good wet habitats are very rare in this area, even by the rivers, as the limestone is very porous and any accumulation of water tends to drain away very quickly. Therefore, the wonderful fens of the Beune Valley, west of Sarlat, are a real pleasure to visit, especially when they are also surrounded on all sides by such marvellous countryside. A fen is a marsh where the ground water which gradually drains through it is of a basic, i.e. nutrient-rich, nature. In this case this is derived from the surrounding limestone rock, and creates a very rich and diverse sedge and rush habitat.

We will spend much of the day in the vicinity of the evocatively sited ruins of the Chateau Commarque, which look out rather forlornly over the fens below that stretch out either side of the fast-flowing River Beune. Here, as we walk down through woodland, we should initially see Solomon's seal, Green Hellebore and Narrow Buckler Fern before emerging into the open, reed-covered fen. The distinctive song of Cetti's Warblers is frequent, while there will be numerous dragonfly and damselfly species to try to identify. It is the plants that are the real stars here though, with Blunt-flowered Rush the most dominant, interspersed with Greater Tussock, Lesser Pond, Common and Large Yellow Sedges, all of which are uncommon in this part of France. Amongst these there are drifts of purple and magenta Loose-flowered and Early Marsh Orchids, the former rather puzzlingly appearing almost to grade into yet another species *Orchis palustris*. Other plants include Marsh Valerian, Yellow Loosestrife and Meadow Thistle.



Glanville Fritillaries

Emerging again from the valley, good scrub and grassland once more hold many orchids, including Greater Butterfly, Pyramidal, Monkey, and the hybrid between the last two species, along with the pretty Carthusian Pink and Rock Stonecrop. We are now quite close to the many prehistoric caves and troglodyte dwellings of the Vézère valley so, depending upon the time, we may either choose to further explore with these sites in mind or, alternatively, inspect the Military Orchid colonies further up the valley. Either way, we will keep an eye open for any colourful Poppy fields, as they are usually an indicator of a rich attendant weed flora.

Day 6

Nadaillac De Rouge, Dordogne Valley

Further upstream of our base, towards the north-west, the River Dordogne emerges from the high mountains of the Massif Central through hills of hard schist and sandstone, and flows through the beautiful little town of Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne with its exquisite church and sculptures. Here we will find a pleasing contrast

from the familiar limestone, with the predominantly acid soils giving rise to many species that are absent from the former. This area is farmed very traditionally with a mixture of Sweet Chestnut woodland interspersed with small, unimproved flowery meadows, grazed almost exclusively by the handsome brown Limousin cattle. These meadows have a wealth of good plant species including Crimson Clover, Burnt-tip Orchid, yellow rattle species, Poet's-eye Narcissus and Small Tongue Orchid, although the last two may be past their best by the time of our visit. We should also be able to locate a field somewhere in this area that is coloured blue and pink with the flowers of Cornflower and Corn Cockle.

Dry heath and small valley bogs where streams emerge from the hillsides are another feature, with their own characteristic species such as heathers, Least Bird's-foot Trefoil, Dwarf Milkwort, Scorpion Grass, Whorled Caraway, Heath Spotted Orchid, Ivy-leaved Bellflower and many different sedges, while we may be very lucky and find the uncommon Summer Lady's Tresses. In one spot there is an outcrop of Serpentine rock with a strange mixture of acid and nutrient-loving plants that include the rare ferns *Asplenium cuneifolium* and *Cheilanthes hispanica*. Butterflies are less diverse here, although Marbled White, Mazarine Blue, and both Meadow and Marsh Fritillaries are abundant, whilst birds are everywhere, with Goshawk, Buzzard, both kites, Cirl Bunting, Red-backed Shrike, Golden Oriole and four species of woodpecker all present. We will spend the day at a variety of sites in these hills, seeing many of the species mentioned, before returning to the hotel via a site where Military Orchid should still be in flower.



The Dordogne Valley

Day 7

Nadaillac De Rouge, Dordogne Valley

Further down the Alzou from the point of our earlier visit to the Moulin de Saut, the gorge widens somewhat. Here sits the famous medieval abbey of Rocamadour, spectacularly constructed into the side of the cliff face. The buildings seem almost to defy gravity as they tumble down in layers from the chateau at the top to the Chapel of Notre Dame (with its striking black Madonna) and on to the village at the bottom. Today there will be an opportunity, for those that wish, to visit this magnificent site whilst, at the same time, exploring the rich wildlife habitats of the gorge and the immediate very dry, stony country just to the south of the gorge.

We will park up on this open country next to a "Lavogne" (a small pond used in the past by the shepherds for quenching the thirst of the vast sheep flocks that used to roam these parts). Sadly, this land-use has now declined and, even here, there has been an increase in modern arable farming in all areas accessible to today's plough. Luckily, much of the surrounding countryside is far too rocky, stony or steep for any more inroads to be made into this landscape, which remains very rich in wildlife.

In the vicinity of our parking area, a remarkable collection of small, mainly annual, plants may be found, many of them rare but thriving in this particular habitat. Amongst them are Mitre Cress, Bur Medick, Small Hares-ear, Honewort, Small Alyssum, Fine-leaved Sandwort, the little Pink, Kohlrauschia velutina, and the southern French speciality, Cardoncellus mitissimus, all to be found crowded together in the short turf.

From here we head down into the canyon, stopping to take in the superb views of Rocamadour on the far cliff before moving downstream next to the dried-up bed of the river. The micro climate here, along the bottom of the gorge, creates a haven for many species of butterfly, with Great Sooty Satyr, Black Satyr, Black-veined White, Marbled Fritillary, Adonis Blue and many others likely to be seen. We then return to the minibus through a lovely valley where a huge colony of hundreds of robust Red Helleborines may be found. Other orchids should be seen here too, whilst Wild Candytuft, Round-headed Leek, Dwarf Toadflax and White Flax add to the flowery spectacle. This is also likely to prove to be a good day for birds. Nightingales and warblers are generally everywhere, with a variety of raptors, Hoopoes, Red-backed Shrikes and Corn Buntings likely to feature amongst the supporting cast.

On any of our excursions this week, with today no exception, there should be a good chance of locating a field filled with red Poppies. Such a site is usually an indicator of a rich selection of other arable weeds, and these may include the beautiful blue Large Venus's Looking Glass, Narrow-fruited Cornsalad, Corn Buttercup, Shepherd's Needle, Blue Pimpernel, Spreading Hedge-Parsley, Small-Bur Parsley and the very rare fumitory, *Fumaria vaillantii*.

Day 8

London

Regretfully we must leave our hotel this morning for the drive to Limoges, where we will board our flight home to Stansted.



Our hotel in the Dordogne



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 May is the peak flowering time for many of the plants occurring in the Dordogne Valley, 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, whilst the birds' breeding season is in full swing and the air filled with birdsong. At this time the weather should be quite warm and sunny, with temperatures usually in the mid to high 20s Centigrade, but it can be slightly unpredictable, even in high summer, with short thunder storms ever the threat. For this reason you need to be prepared, bringing your raincoat with you!

Train travel

Should you prefer not to fly, it is possible to join this holiday by train. This involves taking Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris, then across Paris on the Metro to Austerlitz station, from where you board the SNCF service to Souillac, which is about 12km from our hotel. From here you will have to pay for a taxi (price quote on request). Please let us know as soon as possible should you prefer to travel by train. Sometimes taxis are not available outside the station (particularly on Sundays) and we may have to contact the hotel to have them pick you up.

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.