

France - The Lot Valley

Naturetrek Tour Dossier

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Limoges and drive to Lot Valley
- Day 2/7** A daily programme of natural history walks and excursions in the Lot Valley and Causse country
- Day 8** Fly London

Departs

May

Focus

Plants, birds and butterflies

Grading

Grade B. Moderate day walks

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA15) or brochure

Highlights

- Daily wildlife walks – ideal for the all-round naturalist
- Flowers, birds & insects in abundance
- A profusion of spring flowers (including many orchid species)
- Look for Hoopoe, Golden Oriole & singing Nightingales
- Spectacular 'hanging' towns & villages
- Typical rural hotel serving tasty local cuisine (& wines)



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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



Pont de Valentre, Cahors

The River Lot rises in the Massif Central Mountains of France and flows westward, eventually joining forces with the Garonne before entering the Atlantic Ocean near Bordeaux. In its middle section, between Figeac and Cahors, it has carved its way spectacularly through the hard rock of the carboniferous limestone, forming steep wooded cliffs at the base of which beautiful historic villages cling to the riverside slopes. On the plateaux both to the north and south of the valley there are extensive areas of the dry scrub and grassland known as "Causse", justifiably famous for its rich

array of plants and butterflies.

Throughout this holiday we will be based in the delightfully unspoilt village of Cabrerets, next to the River Célé which joins the main river nearby. We will also be only a short distance away from the entrance to the Peche Merle caves, with their remarkable prehistoric paintings of the many creatures long since extinct in the region. From this base we will explore the surrounding countryside, taking a delicious picnic lunch every day, and looking for birds, plants, butterflies, and anything else of interest. There are 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.

Day 1

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley

We depart today from the UK bound for Limoges. From there we drive south, following a scenic route to Cahors. Here we will catch our first glimpse of the Lot Valley, and then follow the river a short way eastwards to our base at Cabrerets, where we will be staying in a pleasant and traditional village hotel serving fine local food.

Day 2

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley

This first day will be spent in the vicinity of Cabrerets itself, just the other side of the River Célé in an area known as the "Forêt Domaniale de Monclar". This is actually an area of mixed woodland, scrub and grassland with inter-connecting tracks that climb up gently from the valley below. As its name suggests, it has a few dolmens (the remains of prehistoric burial chambers) scattered here and there, and also a ruined village. Here there is a very good diversity of plants, including many orchids, and this gentle start to our holiday will help us to acquaint ourselves with species that make up a good representative selection of the local flora. If the sun is shining, this is also a superb spot for an introduction to the region's bewildering array of butterflies, with Adonis Blues, both Clouded and Pale Clouded Yellows, and Wood Whites

occurring in great numbers, amongst many other species. We will also keep an eye open for birds such as Melodious Warbler, and both Woodchat and Red-backed Shrikes.

Day 3

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley

Where the River Lot has cut through the hard limestone rock, spectacular cliffs have been formed. These are home to various nesting birds, including Crag Martin, Alpine Swift, Peregrine and other birds of prey. They also support a specialised flora, including Small Yellow Foxglove, Round-headed Leek, Tower Cress (with its strange elongated seed-heads) and the endemic *Hormatophylla macrocarpa*. Where the gradients are less severe, and also on the tops of the plateaux, extensive woods of Downy and Sessile Oak are dominant. Lady and Monkey Orchids, Sword-leaved Helleborine, and Violet Limodore orchids are all common here, while Nightingales and Bonelli's Warblers are frequently heard, and sometimes glimpsed. By contrast, the land alongside the river is richly cultivated, the many Poplar Trees here holding abundant Golden Oriole, whilst there are various dragonflies to be seen, including the very rare *Gomphus graslini*.



Nightingale

Today we will park at Bouzies, by the river, and gradually walk up to the lovely "hanging village" of St Cirq-Lapopie with its ancient half-timbered houses and wonderful views. For those who are interested, there will be a chance to explore the village's charms before we spend the afternoon drifting back down to our minibus through a mixture of woods and grassland. An interesting feature on the first part of our walk is the "Chemin de halage". This is a towpath spectacularly carved out of an overhanging cliff to enable gangs of men to pull the canal boats along in the days before powered craft.

Day 4

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley



Swallowtail

The Cajarc Causse is the most southerly part of the more extensive Gramat Causse, a region of dry limestone steppe which stretches away to the horizon in the north. It is a patchwork of grassland, scrub and woodland that provides an extremely rich habitat for many different species of plant, insect and bird. We will sample this wonderful diversity, starting out from near the small hamlet of Mas de Pegouries, completing a circular walk at a very leisurely pace to be back at our minibus by late afternoon. We will take lunch with us and spend much of the day on a lovely piece of private land, where the

sympathetic owners have given us permission to study at our leisure. Here there are colourful carpets of flowers and a bewildering array of butterflies, all of which should be at their best at this time of year.

Beautifully robust specimens of Lizard, Monkey, Lady, Butterfly (Greater and Lesser) and Pyramidal Orchid are everywhere, while other rare and interesting plants include the lovely feathery Steppe Grass, Rough Mallow, colourful flaxes, St Bernard's Lily and the pale blue of the Mediterranean *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis*. Short-tailed Blue, Black-veined White, Clouded Apollo, various fritillaries, and both species of Swallowtail are just a few of the butterfly species we can hope to see. This is also a good spot to study the dragonfly-like *Ascalaphids*, the commonest species being *Libelloides longicornus*, and also the magnificently coloured Green Lizards that are abundant here. Amongst the bird species to be seen on the open Causse are Stone Curlew, Crested Lark, Hoopoe and, very occasionally, Little Bustard. powered craft.

Day 5

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley

The predominant rock on which we have explored up until now has been limestone but not far away in the hills just to the north-west of Figeac, there are areas with schist or sandstone bedrock which weather to



Purple Viper's Bugloss

form soils of an acidic nature. These support a very different type of vegetation, with heathers, brooms, and many other plants absent from the sites we have visited so far, being found. Spiked Rampion, Knotted Geranium, Large Selfheal, Red Helleborine (on the limestone also) and Royal Fern are all showy components of this flora, whilst rare annuals such as *Scleranthus annuus* and *Lotus angustissimus* are abundant besides the sandy tracks. Once again we will complete a leisurely circuit, this time starting from Cardaillac, yet another of the many beautiful villages

that so characterise this region. Butterflies are not so numerous here, but we will stop for lunch at a small lake where we can attempt to get to grips with the identification of the numerous dragonfly and damselfly species that abound here. Goshawk, shrikes and Cirl Buntings are amongst the birds to look out for.

In the valleys of these hills there are also many small damp boggy fields, a habitat we will not have the chance to see elsewhere on this holiday. In the afternoon we will stop for a while at one of these sites to see the specialist plants which grow in these conditions. Many of these are rare in Britain, and include Viper's Grass, Ivy-leaved Bellflower, Whorled Caraway and abundant Heath Spotted Orchid.

Day 6

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley

The River Célé is a tributary of the Lot and, between our village of Cabrerets and Figeac, has carved its own cliffs through the limestone. Alongside this river there is much less cultivation than is found beside its larger neighbour; consequently we have a good chance of finding a field full of poppies as we drive to Brengues, further up the valley, for the start of our walk today. Amongst other colourful cornfield weeds we may see are the lovely pale pink of Corn Cockle, while the exuberant blues of Large Venus's Looking Glass and Cornflowers sometimes almost cover a



Red Kite

field!

France has endured an often turbulent past, especially during the Hundred Years' War. Then, the English vied with the French for mastery of the land, and both sides built impressive defensive fortifications. One of the most interesting and spectacularly situated of these is "Le Château des Anglais" at Brengues. This castle was built half way up, and into, the side of a sheer cliff-face where a natural terrace in the rock occurs. We will walk up to the castle from the village, enjoying wonderful views of both the river below and the cliffs towering above us. Raptors and other birds should be seen from this good vantage point, whilst we are also surrounded by many rare and unusual plants. These include abundant orchids, Prostrate Asparagus, Spiked Star of Bethlehem, Wild Jasmine, Rock Soapwort and, where moisture drips down the rock-face, luxuriant Maidenhair Fern.



From the castle ruins we will work our way back down to the village by means of forest tracks. These offer us another superb show of colourful wild flowers, including more orchid species, and also provide a haven for butterflies and insects, with Southern White Admiral, Cleopatra, and Glanville Fritillary being particularly common, whilst there is always a chance of an elusive Large Tortoiseshell or a Camberwell Beauty. Nearby we will also visit a large colony of the impressive Military Orchid.

Day 7

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley

Cahors is the administrative capital of the Lot department. It has a lovely old medieval quarter, nestling below the surrounding hills and almost enclosed within a spectacular meander of the river. Mont St Cyr is one of these hills, and there are magnificent views of the city, with the famous old Pont Valentre bridge spanning the river. This hill is also surrounded by an extensive area of dry grassland and scrub, and has a good selection of plants, with a particular bias to the more Mediterranean element of the flora. The exquisitely marked Dwarf Toadflax spreads across the ground, while Bedstraw Broomrape is common on its host plant. Winged Broom, alliums, the beautiful blue daisy-like Cupidone and abundant spikes of Lizard Orchid in all their glory, are just a few of the highlights to be seen here.



After exploring the town first thing, we will spend the rest of our last day in the field, visiting other sites either just to the south of Cahors or in the unspoilt valleys that lead up onto the Gramat Causse near our hotel. This will hopefully give us the chance to see any of the plant species that are particularly characteristic of this area, but that we have not yet seen! We will also make the most of our last chance to enjoy the region's birds, butterflies and other insects.

Day 8

Cabrerets, The Lot Valley

Regretfully we must leave our hotel this morning for the drive to Limoges, where we will board our flight back 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, plateaux and other habitats of this attractive rural region. 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 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 will be no problem for a reasonably competent walker.

Weather

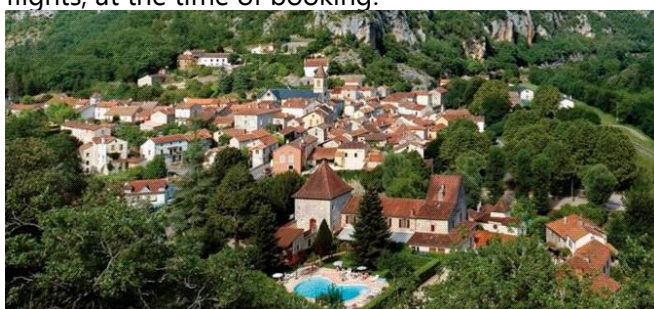
Mid May is the peak flowering time for many of the plants occurring in the Lot Valley, especially the numerous orchids, and we should see the majority of the species mentioned. At this time the weather should be quite warm and sunny, with temperatures usually in the mid to high 20s Centigrade, but it 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!

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. The hotel has a small swimming pool.

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 Lot Valley