

France - The Vercors (by train)

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Train (St Pancras via Lille), to Lyon</u>
Day 2/7	<u>Natural history excursions in the Vercors</u>
Day 8	<u>Train to London</u>

Departs

May

Focus

Birds, plants, mammals and butterflies

Grading

Grade A. Easy walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA24) or brochure

Highlights:

- Travel by train to Lyon on a flight-free holiday
- Wonderful wildlife amidst truly magnificent scenery
- One of the three principal orchid hotspots in mainland Europe
- Stunning alpine plants with abundant gentians, saxifrages & many more specialities
- Wallcreeper, lekking Black Grouse, & numerous birds of prey
- Friendly, family-run hotel serving good home cooking based on local produce



Mt. Aiguille from the Pas de l'Essaure



Marsh Fritillary



Our hotel in the Vercors



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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

Vercors Regional Nature Park is a stunningly beautiful area of limestone peaks, gorges and high plateaux extending over 186,000 hectares between the Isère valley in the north and the Diois to the south. The park was founded on 16th October 1970 to protect the rich and varied flora and fauna. Seven regions make up this unique and magnificent area: the Quatre Montagnes, the Trièves, the Coulmes, the Vercors Drômois, the Royans, the Diois and the Gervanne. In the north the harsh weather systems of the Alps prevail while in the gentler south, the air has an almost Mediterranean feel.

The landscapes of Vercors are extremely varied, with cliffs, caves, hills, peaks and high plateaux providing a home to a remarkable abundance of wildlife. Nearly 80 protected plant species can be found within the regional natural park - Lady's Slipper Orchids in the wooded areas, large-flowered bellflowers on the screes, primroses on the cliffs and wild tulips on the sub-Alpine pasture.

Several sought after bird species breed here including a pleasing variety of raptors, plus grouse, owls and the enigmatic Wallcreeper.

We will be based for the duration of our holiday in a small, charming, family-run hotel in La Chapelle-en-Vercors, on the doorstep of the dramatic Haut Plateaux.



Day 1

La-Chapelle-En-Vercors



We start our holiday with a morning departure from London St Pancras with Eurostar and TGV via Lille to Lyon. From here we pick up our minibuses and drive south for around two hours until, approaching a rise in the motorway, a jagged area of spectacular limestone looms into view. The deep Isère valley in the foreground and the high snow-capped Alps frame the Vercors beautifully - the area cries out for exploration!

At this point, and if time permits, we will make a diversion away from the motorway, to the area

around Grenoble Isere Airport. This area of arable fields, pasture, open grassland and shrubby woodland, is a wonderful place to watch birds, especially raptors. Twelve species have been recorded in the past, including 3 species of Harrier, several Falcons, 2 species of Kite and 2 species of Eagle. If the sun is shining, it is also possible to see butterflies.

Continuing on, we will leave the motorway at Grenoble, and make our way up onto the Vercors plateau, and on down through Lans en Vercors to the quiet town of La Chapelle en Vercors. Here we complete our journey at the family run Hotel Bellier, our base for the week. There may have time for some gentle exploration in the flower-filled meadows in the vicinity of the village, where we might see Man Orchid (*Orchis anthropophora*) and Sword-leaved Helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*).



Dog-tooth Violets (*Erythronium dens-canis*)

Day 2

Font d'Urle

A shorter drive today to the little winter ski resort of Font d'Urle. En route we may choose to stop to visit a cemetery for members of the wartime resistance at Vassieux en Vercors.

There is a nice circular walk at Font D'urle which crosses open, alpine-style habitat before heading back to the village along a spectacular cliff which offers panoramic views across the sprawling Forêt de Quint.



Green Lizard

The meadows and rock crevices are a veritable garden with Gentians, Saxifrages, Cinquefoils and Lady's Mantles, as well as *Narcissus poeticus* (Pheasant's-eye Daffodil), *Erythronium dens-canis* (Dog-tooth Violets), *Tulipa sylvestris* ssp. *sylvestris* (Wild Tulip) and *Daphne mezereum* (Mezerion) to name but a few species present.


Birders can hope for great views of Chough, Alpine Chough and Water Pipit, while past tours have also yielded views of Alpine Marmot, which is quite common here.

After lunch we will travel through the spectacular Route Combe Laval, stopping to admire the wonderful views at the Col se la Machine. From here we will travel down to St. Jean en Royans to visit the hypermarket to buy picnic supplies for the week, before returning to La Chapelle.

Day 3

Haut Plateaux

One of the highlights of our week will be a day spent on the Haux Plateaux Nature Reserve (We will attempt to coincide this day with the week's best weather!) This wild area, in many respects unique in Europe, consists of a patchwork of meadows, moorlands, forests and high mountain ridges, shaped by savage winters and centuries of forestry and grazing. A small pioneering population of elusive Wolf, presumed recently colonised from the Italian Alps, hides in the vast Mountain Pine (*Pinus uncinata*) forest, their presence belied by tracks left in the extensive winter snows. Golden Eagle, Ring Ouzel, Citril Finch, Crossbill, Firecrest, and Lesser Whitethroat are all possibilities, while, unusually for one of our European tours, we will offer you the opportunity of an early start today (4-4.30am) to head up to a Black Grouse lekking site. The remainder of the group will make a later start on the same excursion, stopping at a marshy meadow, before joining up with the early risers. The alpine flora is at its dazzling best at this time of year, and may include numerous patches of dark pink Garland Flower (*Daphne cneorum*), spikes of Wild Tulips and Spring Gentians, the elegant, nodding Alpine Pasque Flower (*Pulsatilla alpina*) as well as Alpine Snowbells (*Soldanella alpina*) and Holly Fern (*Polystichum lonchitis*).



Escher's Blue



On the high scree-slopes Ibex and Mouflon roam and we may also have details of nesting sites of Tengmalm's Owl and Black Woodpecker for us to observe.

Day 4

Gervannes

Leaving La Chapelle this morning, we drive towards Vassieux en Vercors and then turn up to the Col de la Chau and on to the Col de la Bataille, where there are often fine patches of Trumpet Gentians (*Gentiana clusii*).

Moving on, we make our way south to Plan de Baix, via Leoncel, La Vacherie and the botanically famous Col de Bacchus, where we will spend time looking for birds, orchids and butterflies. Monkey Orchid (*Orchis simia*), Toothed Orchid (*Orchis Tridentata*) and Military Orchid (*Orchis militaris*) are all found here as well as Bonelli's Warber. From here, we head on down to Beaufort sur Gervanne, where we will turn west, parking in some scrubby fields and pine woods at Gigors. Here we will take lunch in a woodland clearing among



Cephalanthera rubra (Red Helleborine, *Platanthera bifolia* (Lesser Butterfly Orchid) and *Limodorum abortivum* (Violet Bird's-nest Orchid). Bonelli's Warbler and Short-toed Eagle have also been seen here. After lunch we will explore the area in search of more orchids,

butterflies and birds. A short drive up the road will bring us to some arable Lavender and Sage fields. The arable weeds here include *Melampyrum arvense* (Field Cow-wheat), *Legousia speculum-veneris* (Greater Venus's Looking-glass) and *Himantoglossum hircinum* (Lizard Orchid), all interesting plants, some having long since disappeared from the British countryside. Rock Sparrow and Turtle Dove as well as Tawny Pipit are often seen here.

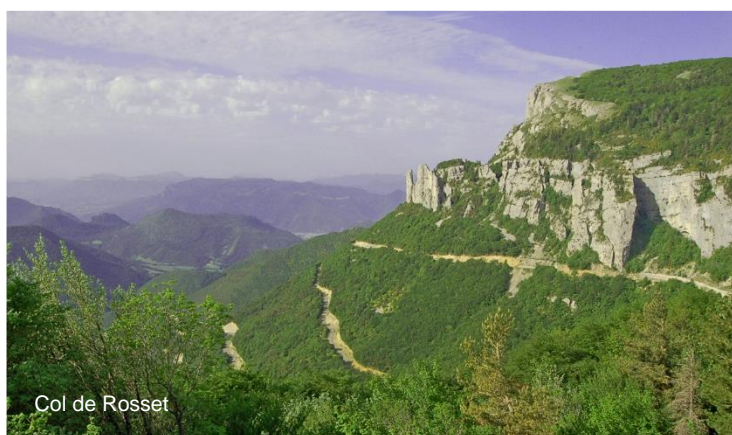
We will now begin our journey back to La Chapelle, stopping in Leoncel for refreshments on the way.

Day 5

Les Nonnieres, Vallee de Combau and Archiane

We head south today to the spectacular Vallee de Combau and the Cirque d'Archiane (a photo of this cirque graces our brochure page).

En-route, we pass over Col De Rosset where the view is stupendous in fine weather. From here we descend the gorge to Die, on the south side of the Vercors Regional Park, and turn east via Pont de Quart. Along the way, we will stop at a series of rocky outcrops where Vultures roost. If our timing is right, and the weather good, we should catch this majestic birds leaving to soar on thermals. Along much of the route we will pass clumps of pink Rock Soapwort (*Saponaria ocymoides*).



Col de Rosset

We will make our way to a point north of the village of Les Nonnieres, passing clumps of Blue Aphallanthes (*Aphallanthes monspeliensis*), to explore some pine woods and meadows. These woods are particularly rich, containing a good number of Lady's Slipper Orchids (*Cypripedium calceolus*), Bird's-nest Orchid (*Neotia nidus-avis*), Fly Orchid (*Ophrys insectifera*), *Phyteuma nigra* (Black Rampion) and the Fly Honeysuckle (*Lonicera xylosteum*). From here we will return a little way south and enter the Vallee de Combau. Here we may see Chamoix as well as the local specialty Orchid (*Orchis spitzelii*) and *Gentiana angustifolia* (Trumpet Gentian). Lunch will be taken at the top of the valley, next to a stream and a ford. After lunch we will visit the delightful village of Archiane and its towering limestone cliffs.



Lady's Slipper Orchid

Here there are some lovely views, good botanising and chance to see Ibex and Golden Eagle and several species of butterfly. Flowers are abundant in the surrounding meadows. Plants here include Man Orchid (*Orchis anthropophora*), Lady Orchid (*Orchis purpurea*) and Sword-leaved Helleborine (*Cephalanthera longifolia*) as well as at least three species of Broomrape (*Orbanche* sp). We will relax around the picturesque village, visiting the small rustic café for

refreshments. Coal Tit and Crested Tit are avian possibilities here before we retrace our steps back to the hotel.

Day 6

Les Merciers, Traffe and Lans-En-Vercors

A drive north today to Lans en Vercors, before continuing to the hamlet of Les Merciers. Along the way we will look for Pale Orchid (*Orchis pallens*).

Wallcreeper often nests in the sheer limestone cliffs at Les Merciers and, with patience, we shall hope for views of this stunning bird. The botanists in the party might prefer to explore the meadows and lane banks. Martagon or Turk's Cap Lily (*Lilium matagon*), Wood Crane's-bill (*Geranium sylvaticum*) and (*Saxifraga paniculata*) are found here. Our picnic can be eaten in a small combe, with stunning views of the snow-capped Alps south-east of Grenoble.

After lunch we will take a walk in the pine forest of Traffe. Black Woodpecker, Willow Tit and Crested Tit have all be seen here. Plants include Bird's-nest Orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*) and, hopefully, Coralroot Orchid (*Corallorhiza trifida*). Later we will visit a damp meadow near Les Bruyeres where in the past we have found Broad-leaved Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza majalis*), *Geum rivale* (Water Aven) and *Senecio helenitis* (A Ragwort). For the birders, Red-backed Shrike, Yellowhammer and Marsh Warbler are all possible.

Returning to La Chapelle en Vercors, we know of a detour where a shady road verge supports *Ophrys scolopax* (Woodcock Orchid), *Orchis simia* (Monkey Orchid), *Ophrys fuciflora* (Late Spider Orchid) and the curious brown flowers of *Asarum europaeum* (Asarabacca).



Sword-leaved Helleborine

Day 7

Royans

We will drive north today from La Chapelle along the beautiful lane that connects St. Julien en Vercors with Les Barraques en Vercors. From here we turn south to Choranche, and then up to the spectacular Route de Romeyere. We will check the high ridges for birds of prey, including possibly one or two Peregrines, for



whom the high cliffs provide an ideal home. At Rochers de Presles, just below Gazon, Crag Martins and Alpine Swifts are active, and plants here include *Anacamptis pyramidalis* (Pyramidal Orchid), *Ornithogalum pyrenaicum* (Bath Asparagus), *Lactuca perennis* (Blue Lettuce) and *Linum suffruticosum* ssp. *salsaloides* (Pyrenean Flax).

At this point we will make a weather dependent decision. We may travel north over the Col du Romeyere and up to the spectacular Conyons des

Ecouges. Greater Butterwort (*Pinguicula grandiflora*) and Bear's-ear Primrose (*Primula auricular*) grow here, and there is additional opportunity to seek out the elusive Wallcreeper. Alternatively, we will stop on a gentle grassy col on a minor road near Pont en Royans. Over 20 different orchid species, including Burnt Orchid (*Orchis ustulata*) and BeeOrchid (*Ophrys apifera*) can be found here, amongst a variety of other flowers and, if the weather conditions are ideal, several butterfly species too. The col also acts as a passage route for migrants, and we have seen numbers of Honey Buzzards here in the past.

To complete our circuit for the day, and following another sumptuous picnic, we will drive down to the beautiful and unique town of Pont de Royans, where we will be able to spend time exploring, before meeting for ice creams, prior to our journey back to our hotel.

To cap the week off we may try after dinner to look for both Tengmalm's and Pygmy Owls. Depending on the weather and how we are feeling we may include an "owl excursion" after dinner this evening. This will of course be an optional outing! It should be emphasized that at this time of year, it is becoming harder to see these already secretive birds, as they seldom respond to calls, as feeding young becomes a priority.

Day 8

London

We must now leave our base in the Vercors to drive back to Lyon for our train back to Lille and London.

Tour 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.

Weather

The second-half of 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. A long range weather forecast for Grenoble can be obtained from www.bbc.co.uk/weather shortly before departure.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday (except on the train journeys between London and Lyon). The hotel has a small outdoor 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, at the time of booking.



Monkey Orchid (*Orchis Simia*)