A Wildlife Festival in the French Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1  Fly to Lourdes and then drive to Gedre

Day 2/7  Walking excursions in the Parc National des Pyrenees

Day 8  Return London

Departs
June

Focus
Birds, plants, mammals, butterflies and general natural history.

Grading
Day walks only. Grade B.

Dates and Prices
See tour code (FRA31) or brochure

Highlights
● The perfect mountain holiday for the all-round naturalist

● Daily mountain walks in the Pyrenees National Park – fabulous walking country

● Spectacular Pyrenean scenery & delicious picnics in flower-filled meadows

● Look out for Marmots & Chamois

● Golden Eagles, Lammergeiers & Griffon Vultures

Images from top: Cirque de Gavarnie, Heath Fritillary and Trumpet Gentian
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

For this festival of wildlife we have booked all 25 rooms at the Hotel la Brèche de Roland and have planned a wonderful week exploring this beautiful, wildlife rich region.

Naturetrek and Odile and Phillipe Pujo, the owners of the Hotel la Brèche de Roland, go back a long way. Indeed we have worked with them for over 25 years, longer than any other hotelier in Naturetrek’s 34-year history. Our story together began with the First Gulf War. When Saddam Hussein’s forces invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Naturetrek’s founders, David and Maryanne Mills, had been running the business for four years exclusively to long-haul destinations, particularly to those in the Himalaya and the rest of the Indian subcontinent. However, from August 1990 until the ensuing war of early 1991 concluded at the end of February, Naturetrek bookings ceased. Nobody was prepared to book a long-haul holiday at this time, let alone one overflying the Gulf region! Our business had come to a complete standstill. We now knew that we had to have a programme of European holidays on which to fall back at such times. So it was that, in June 1991, Maryanne and David, and a one-year-old baby, headed to the French Pyrenees to see what the area had to offer. The following year, in June 1992, David and Maryanne returned to the Pyrenees, accompanied by botanist Martin Beaton and his wife Louise, to run two full groups back-to-back from Odile and Phillipe’s family hotel. Wallcreepers, Lammergeiers, Black Woodpeckers and Snowfinches were amongst a wealth of birds, and the abundance of flowers and butterflies was even more spectacular! It was the perfect destination for the all-round natural history enthusiast … and one that we’ve been running tours to every year since!

You will be joined by a number of longstanding Naturetrek leaders, amongst them expert birders, botanists, and entomologists who will be looking for butterflies by day and running a moth trap each night in order to reveal the moth highlights of this region. David Tattersfield and Jason Mitchell will head up the team of leaders. They will offer you a varied programme of morning and afternoon activities each day which will include both long and short walks, while, for those less keen to walk, there will be minibus excursions to spectacular wildlife hotspots. There will be natural history walks and strolls, raptor and Wallcreeper watches, birding, butterfly and botany excursions, mammal forays, moth traps, illustrated evening talks and much more … our week-long stay in the wonderful high Pyrenees sustained by Phillipe’s cuisine and Odile’s hospitality!

Throughout the holiday we will be based in the quiet village of Gèdre, some six kilometres north of the popular road-head village of Gavarnie, in the heart of the Parc National des Pyrenees. We will use our hotel as a base from which to explore the trails of the national park, and to enjoy the exceptional variety of birds, plants and butterflies of the region.
Daily Itinerary

Please be aware that the itinerary that follows is a guide to the activities that can be undertaken during the week but with a larger group than normal (up to about 40 maximum), more leaders than a usual tour and being a special one off departure, there will be choices each day for you to choose from. You will be offered a varied programme of morning and afternoon activities each day which will include both long and short walks and minibus excursions. Over the week we shall be watching for raptors, searching for the enigmatic Wallcreeper, enjoying butterfly and botanical excursions and on some evenings we shall run a moth trap. This holiday really has something for everyone.

Day 1

Gedre

We depart from London Stansted on a Ryanair flight to Lourdes at the foot of the Pyrenees and much closer to our base than the alternative airport of Toulouse. Having arrived in France we transfer to our privately hired minibuses for the drive to Gèdre, ascending rapidly on winding roads only during the last 45 minutes or so of the journey. It will be well worth keeping your eyes open during the final stages of this journey, as Wallcreepers (one of the species of birds that we will be trying hardest to see on this holiday) have bred close to the road in recent years.

On arrival in Gèdre we will settle in to our hotel, with a short evening stroll before dinner if time allows.

Day 2

Gedre

We start by exploring the wide range of habitats along the Heas valley where plant highlights will include deep-blue aquilegias, our first orchids and the endemic Pyrenean Hyacinth Hyacinthus amethystinus. Not far above is the Barrage des Gloriettes where we leave our minibuses and spend the day walking in the Estaube Valley. This provides us with a good introduction to the natural history of the region. We will watch the amusing antics of Alpine Marmots and should see our first groups of soaring Griffon Vulture and perhaps our first Lammergeier, two of the avian highlights of the Pyrenees. We may see the beautiful Pyrenean Snakeshead Fritillaria pyrenaica and on the limestone boulders will be enchanting miniature rock gardens, with such gems as Hairy Rock Jasmine Androsace villosa and Pyrenean Saxifrage Saxifraga longifolia. Turf is studded with the sweetly scented Garland Flower Daphne cneorum and the acidic slopes below the dam will have fine displays of Alpenrose Rhododendron ferrugineum. Today's walk is up to 10km but, as we return the same way, it can be shortened to suit everyone.

Day 3
Gedre

This morning we will drive to Gavarnie, normally bustling with tourists, but at this time of year surprisingly quiet. We take a route, away from the main tourist trail, passing colourful hay meadows, full of the endemic Horned Pansy *Viola cornuta* and alive with insects. Stunning views of the spectacular World Heritage Site of the Cirque de Gavarnie open up before us as we approach the Park boundary. The walk is through mixed forest, followed by pine, as we climb higher. Notable plants include Irish Spurge *Euphorbia hiberna*, One-flowered Wintergreen *Moneses uniflora* and Whorled Solomon’s-seal *Polygonatum verticillatum*. Red Squirrel, Firecrest, Citril Finch, Coal Tit and Crested Tit may all be seen in the trees, and, as we approach the Cirque, it is worth searching the cliffs for the elusive Wallcreeper, which has bred here in the past. We will have lunch in the Cirque, in the company of Alpine Chough and look for special plants such as the endemic Ashy Crane’s-bill *Geranium cinereum* on the rocky slopes below La Grande Cascade, the highest waterfall in Europe. We continue on a high path beneath the cliffs, where we find Long-leaved Butterwort *Pinguicula longifolia*, Pyrenean Yam *Dioscorea pyrenaica* and the curious Thore’s Buttercup *Ranunculus thorei*. Wheatears, Ring Ouzels and Water Pipits are amongst the birds of the high open slopes and the mountain views are spectacular. A long steep descent to Gavarnie completes our circular walk of around 7km.

Day 4

Gedre

We spend a full day walking in the Ossoue Valley which is perhaps one of the best areas for both birds and plants. Griffon Vulture, Lammergeier, Golden Eagle and other birds of prey all breed here on the high limestone cliffs, while along the valley we may see Ring Ouzel, Northern Wheatear, Dipper, Rock Bunting, Rock Thrush and Red-backed Shrike. Flowers will include *Ramonda myconi*, on shaded rocks, drifts of marsh orchids in the wet valley bottom and the delicate Rush-leaved Daffodil *Narcissus assoanus*. Butterflies can be abundant in sheltered spots, lizards bask on sunny rocks and Alpine Marmots are common and easily observed. At the head of the valley, we walk around the barrage, where alpine flowers enliven the turf, below a panorama of high ridges. Up to 5kms.
Day 5

Gedre

Today we will drive west to Pont d’Espagne, a very different area of granites and extensive forests of Pine and Silver Fir. A chair lift gives us easy access to the large and beautiful Lac de Gaube, where we can expect a different range of plants. We will spend the afternoon walking along the lake and in the lower Marcadeau Valley looking for Crested Tit, Citril Finch and Dipper and keeping an eye open for the large but elusive Black Woodpecker. Up to 6km.

Day 6

Gedre

The Cirque de Troumouse is a peaceful place in comparison with the popular Cirque de Gavarnie, yet it is just as beautiful, and being fairly undisturbed, it is a haven for wildlife. Marmots and Chamois may be seen here and Alpine Accentor and White-winged Snowfinch can usually be located after a little effort. An interesting array of alpine plants should also be on display, both in the bogs beneath the Cirque and in the boulders at the foot of its high cliffs. After the snow melts the ground is carpeted with white Pyrenean Buttercup *Ranunculus pyremanus*, Entire-leaved Primrose *Primula integrifolia* is abundant on wet banks and the tubby blue trumpets of Alpine Gentian *Gentiana alpina* stud the turf. The cold streams are home to the Pyrenean Brook Newt, which we hope to find with some patient searching. Up to 4km.

Day 7

Gedre

Above Gavarnie, we drive past the ski resort to the Col des Tentes, from where it is a short walk to the Port de Boucharo, at 2,270 metres on the Spanish border, another site where we regularly see Snowfinch and Alpine Accentor. Alpine plants along the way include the yellow *Vitaliana primuliflora*, Alpine Toadflax *Linaria alpina*, Alpine Moon Daisy *Leucanthemopsis alpina* and the attractive Pyrenean Thistle *Carduus carlinoides*. After a picnic lunch we descend into the Valle des Espeieres, where a good path leads us all the way into Gavarnie. The views from the trail into the Cirque are outstanding and this exhilarating walk makes a fitting finale to our week in the Pyrenees. 7km.
Day 8
Gedre

We may have time for a final early morning walk before we must reluctantly leave the mountains and drive back to the airport for our return flight to London Stansted, where we’re due to land at 1505.

Grading

On this holiday we will be based at one hotel throughout. We will explore the mountains of this spectacular region, and enjoy their natural history, by means of day walks of between six and twelve kilometres in length. Our pace will be gentle, and we will frequently be merely pottering as we take a closer look at the plants, butterflies and birds. We will have the support of at least three minibuses (depending on group size) to allow maximum flexibility, and provide options to each day's programme.

Weather

We have chosen early June as being the prime time for flowering plants, butterflies and birds in this region of the Pyrenees. However, as we will be high in the mountains throughout this holiday you must be prepared for the very variable weather associated with all mountain ranges, and particularly the western Pyrenees. Whilst we can expect some clear, sunny and hot (c 75ºF) weather, we should also expect some wet, cloudy and cold weather; the changes can be dramatic, so bring a good 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.
Images clockwise from top-left: Apollo, Heath Fritillary, Lac de Gaube, walking in the Pyrenees, Chamois, Pyrenean Bluebell, Pyrenean Brook Newt and Alpine Accentor