

# France – Learning French in La Brenne

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Eurostar & TGV from London St. Pancras to Tours and drive La Brenne.
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- Day 2/7** Wildlife and cultural visits in La Brenne
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- Day 8** Drive Tours for TGV & Eurostar train for London St. Pancras
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### Departs

September

### Focus

Birds, other wildlife, culture and French!

### Grading

A. Day walks only

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA34) or brochure.

### Highlights

- Learn and practise French with our French speaking guide and optional tutored lessons.
- Enjoy the autumnal wildlife in this quiet, picturesque corner of France
- Cultural highlights include Châteaux Valençay and Villandry, and visit to a vineyard.



From top: Spotted Redshank, Gardens of Château de Villandry, Short-toed Treecreeper



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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.**

## Day 1

## Train to Tours

We will leave London St. Pancras during the morning on the Eurostar service, either to Lille or Paris (depending on schedules – please check with the Naturetrek office), changing stations and then board our TGV service down to Tours (Saint-Pierre-des-Corps), from where we have an hour and a half's drive to La Brenne and our lovely family-run small hotel in tranquil town of Mézières-en-Brenne.

## Day 2

## Chérine National Nature Reserve

Our first day will be spent in the nearby Chérine National Nature Reserve, a large protected area with a wide variety of habitat that supports an astonishing number of plant and animal species. It is a myriad of ponds, lakes, marshes, meadows, heath and scrubland with wooded areas as well. It is well set up for visitors with hides, viewing platforms and flat paths throughout and we will easily spend the whole day here exploring.

At this time of year the birds are less active compared to spring, but there is still plenty to see here, with Great Crested, Black-necked and Little Grebe all present, with various duck and geese species also on the water such as Greylag, Shelduck, Gadwall, Teal, Common and maybe Red-crested Pochard. Little, Cattle and



Black-crowned Night Heron

Great Egret are found on the waters edge along with Grey, Purple and Black-crowned Night Heron. Waders include Common, Green and Wood Sandpiper, Common and Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank and Ruff, and there are also Common and Yellow-legged Gull and a few Whiskered Tern as well, plus Great Cormorants on vantage points above the water.

Some of the largest reedbeds in the region are found here and we will keep our ears and eyes open for Zitting Cisticola, Reed Buntings, possibly warbler species such as Dartford and Cetti's, and if really lucky, Bluethroat as well. We might also see the flash of a Kingfisher or a glimpse of Water Rail, and Common Snipe feeding nearby. Out in the more open areas are Lapwing and Meadow Pipit, and of course these inland wetlands also attract a variety of birds of prey, with Marsh Harrier quartering overhead a common sight. Common Buzzard and Short-toed Snake Eagle are soaring overhead, with Black-winged Kite also possible, plus both Hen and Montagu's Harrier.

We will head back to the hotel in time for a 90-minute informal lesson with a French tutor (attendance optional!), before dinner in the restaurant.

## Day 3

## Château de Valençay and vineyard

Today we will put some of our French vocabulary to good use as travel north-east to visit the Château de Valençay, one of the finest Renaissance and Classical châteaux in the Loire region, renowned for its distinctive architecture and rich historical associations. Built from the 16th century onwards, the château combines elegant French Renaissance design with later Classical additions, creating an impressive residence set within extensive landscaped grounds. It became particularly famous as the residence of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Napoleon's influential diplomat and foreign minister, who entertained many notable European figures here. We will explore lavishly furnished state rooms, including Talleyrand's private apartments, ceremonial salons, and a remarkable theatre commissioned by the Prince of Valençay. The château's collections include fine furniture, paintings, and decorative arts that illustrate the lifestyle of the French aristocracy. Outside, formal gardens, woodland walks, and ornamental lakes provide attractive surroundings for leisurely exploration, which we will do all the while keeping our eyes open for birds, any butterflies still on the wing such as Clouded Yellow, and any interesting flora.



After a full morning here we will head to a nearby vineyard for a tour of the fields and a tasting. It is the harvest season so we will see this happening first hand, and then sample some of the delicious wines that this generational family Loire Valley winery produces. We then head back to the hotel for another fabulous dinner in our hotel.

## Day 4

## Massé-Foucault Regional Nature Reserve

Today we will stay in La Brenne National Park, heading south to the Massé-Foucault Regional Nature Reserve, another large protected area of ponds and lakes with trails and hides, which we will spend the day exploring. There could still be some later dragonflies and damselflies on the wing such as Migrant Hawker and Southern



Darter, and Willow Emerald and Winter Damselfly, and as such we have a good chance of seeing Hobby here. It has also been known for Osprey to be seen here at this time of year amongst the other more common raptors.

On the water will be the usual array of waterfowl and egrets, herons and waders patrolling the shorelines, and there is a chance of Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis and even a Black Stork or two. There could well be hirudines darting over the water and grassland, and tits, Chiffchaff, Blackcap,

Pied Flycatcher, Corn and Cirl Bunting in the scrub or grasses, plus European Bee-eater if we are really lucky.

We will head back to the hotel once again in time for another (optional) French lesson before dinner.



## Day 5

## Château de Villandry and Loches Forest

Today we head north once again to the larger, more well-known Château de Villandry, a UNESCO World Heritage site, next to the River Loire for another cultural visit. Completed in 1536, Villandry was the last of the great Renaissance châteaux to be built along the Loire, whilst the château itself displays elegant and harmonious architecture, it is the magnificent gardens for which it is renowned for, which were redesigned in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by a Spanish doctor that bought the château.

Arranged across several terraces, the gardens combine ornamental flower beds, geometric parterres, water features, and a decorative kitchen garden where vegetables are planted in intricate patterns. The Garden of Love, the Water Garden, and the Sun Garden each showcase different themes and designs, creating a succession of striking landscapes throughout the seasons. There are panoramic views from the château overlooking the grounds, while the estate's avenues, ponds, and woodlands provide a peaceful setting that reflects the artistry and refinement of Renaissance garden design. Most of our time here will be spent in the gardens and extensive grounds, where Short-toed Treecreeper and Black Redstart amongst other birds can be found.

On our way back we will stop at some woodland outside the town of Loches where we will look for Middle-spotted and Black Woodpecker and with luck, Crested Tit.



Middle-spotted Woodpecker

## Day 6

## Maison du Parc, La Brenne

On our last full day we head further into La Brenne national park once again, this time to the Maison du Parc area, where the headquarters is located, and yet more wetlands and woodlands to visit. Today will be the last opportunity to find species not yet seen that we can expect or hope to see and our leader will tailor today accordingly. There is an outside chance of seeing species such as White-tailed Eagle, Black-winged Stilt, Garganey or Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, but even if we don't, we will finish the holiday in style with a selection of local delicacies for lunch in the quaint restaurant here. We will slowly make our way back to the hotel making stops along the way, before our farewell dinner.

## Day 7

## Train to London

Today we will have to pack and return to Tours to take the TGV/Eurostar service back to London St. Pancras, either via Paris or Lille, arriving late afternoon / early evening.



Southern Darter



Whiskered Tern

## Grading

This tour is graded A and will consist of day walks only and as such is suitable for any age and level of fitness. It is based at one hotel from where we will be taking day trips by minibus visiting the various sites looking for birds and other wildlife, or to châteaux, and taking a picnic lunch with us. There will be some gentle walking involved at most of the sites.

## Language

Who are we aiming this tour at in terms of language ability? Anyone from good holiday French to fluent(ish) speakers we hope, but enthusiasm and willingness to learn (only dropping into English when necessary) is more important than your ability. The inclusion of cultural visits is an opportunity to practice and broader range of vocabulary, as well of appealing to those who want to experience more than the wildlife in this little visited part of France. There will be two (optional) 90-minute lessons at the hotel with a French tutor in the late afternoon. Please call us for further discussion and advice.

## Weather

September is generally mild and sunny, with average temperatures in the low 20s at this time of year, but as with Britain, the weather can vary as the season changes from summer in autumn. It is therefore wise to be prepared for all conditions from shorts and 'T' shirts to pullover and waterproofs.

## Daily schedule

We will typically take breakfast at about 8 a.m. and aim to leave our hotel no later than 9 a.m. for a full day in the field. We'll break the day to relax and enjoy a picnic or cafe lunch, which will be varied, but may include pâté, terrine and cold meats as the main part, with lots of crusty French bread, together with olives, coleslaw, pickles and several sorts of cheese. To follow, fresh fruit, yogurts, and chocolate, all washed down with a glass of vin de table if required. We'll aim to return to our hotel at about 5.30 pm, depending on the weather and our success in the field, or earlier on the days a French lesson is planned. After dinner, for those with

energy remaining, your leader will be keen to run through the wildlife seen during the day, and discuss findings with you before retiring to bed.

## Accommodation & meals

Accommodation for all six nights is in a small hotel in the town of Mézières-en-Brenne, where all rooms have en-suite facilities. All meals from evening meal on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 7 are included, i.e. meals en-route are not included.

## 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](http://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.

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