

Italy's Sibillini Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Ancona
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- Day 2/7** A daily programme of natural history walks from our base
-
- Day 8** Fly London
-

Departs

June

Focus

Plants, birds, mammals and butterflies

Grading

Grade B. All walks are optional day walks, some of them on steep ground

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ITA04) or brochure

Highlights

- Explore the little-known mountains of Sibillini National Park
- Enjoy superb plants and butterflies
- Good birdlife and some mammals too!
- Peaceful, comfortable hotel serving delicious Italian cuisine
- Walk through the dramatic La Gola dell 'Infernaccio (Hell's Gorge)



Pearly Heath



Mount Vettore



Amanda's Blue



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

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N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximize best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

In recent years we have been very pleased to introduce some of Italy's lesser known wildlife reserves to a wider Naturetrek audience. We are proud to continue this tradition by the inclusion in our programme of an 8-day tour focusing on the magnificent scenery and outstanding natural history attributes of Sibillini National Park.

Our destination is rural Marche which, together with neighbouring Umbria, is known as the green heartland of Italy. Situated in the central Italian Apennines, this is a region of the country (indeed Europe) that has escaped the ravages of industrialisation and urbanisation. We will be based in the peaceful rolling hills to the east of the Sibillini National Park, which share with other areas of the Marche and Umbria the increasingly rare characteristic of still possessing original unspoilt habitats. Deciduous woodlands, scrub and meadows cover much of this picturesque hill landscape, and are home to species of flora and fauna which, although not unfamiliar to the British naturalist, are no longer to be seen in Britain.

Perhaps the real key to the charm of this area lies in the subtle balance between the civilisation man has wrought here since antiquity and the wealth of untamed natural beauty in which he has done so, each enhancing rather than degrading the other. Years ago, the Renaissance painters were enchanted by the mystical light and colour in the landscapes of the Marche and Umbria. That same magic is still felt, and today this region offers a uniquely inspiring setting in which to enjoy the natural world.

Today's national park sits atop the mythical kingdom of Sibilla Cumana, infamous throughout Europe for its necromancers and devilish connections during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Queen of horrors was Sibilla herself, a prophetess and communicator with the dead who lured brave knights to their deaths and her lair was a cave on the slopes of Monte Sibilla. Amongst many other myths and legends, one of the most famous is that of Pontius Pilate, whose lifeless body was reputed to have been dragged into the waters of Lago di Pilato by a herd of buffalo, where it was consumed by red waves.

In the south-west corner of the Marches, the protected landscape of the Parco Nazionale dei Monte Sibillini covers almost 710 square kilometres and encompasses more than 20 peaks over 2,000 metres in height. The highest point of the Sibillini range is the summit of Monte Vettore (King's Mountain at 2,476 metres). The park was established in 1993 and over 16,000 people live in the small, traditional communities within its boundaries. Nearby is La Gola dell'Infernaccio (Hell's Gorge), where the memories of old wizard's rituals and the suggestive examples of the erosion activity by the River Tenna on the limestone of the area are still alive.

In addition to these pristine montane habitats there are also extensive tracts of forest, rolling pastoral hills and superb flower-filled meadows creating a natural history paradise. Our base for exploration of the park is an unspoilt area of the eastern Apennines, a region steeped in history and legend.

Day 1

Fly Ancona, transfer to Amandola, Marche

We commence our holiday by departing from London on a flight to Ancona. From here it will take one and a half hours to complete the drive to Sarnano, from where we will continue the short distance to our hotel at Amandola. It will be easy to stop during this last part of the journey should anything of interest be sighted, perhaps our first orchids, or an overhead bird of prey, a good variety of which occur in the region.

We will be based on the eastern edge of the Apennines in one of its most unspoilt areas, rich not only in vegetation and wildlife but also in art and architecture. There is many a hilltop which is surmounted by a castle or tower, giving an indication of the colourful history of the region.

Close by are the historic towns of Sarnano and Smerillo. The town of Sarnano has a very attractive medieval centre, and has been known since Roman times as a spa town – offering all the important mud, water and aerosol tortures! The Pinacoteca has some exceptional c.1600 works, with some fine frescoes in the Santa Maria Assunta. The whole region is rich in culture and each small town has its own treasures. The illustrious Venetian artists, Carlo and Vittore Crivelli are responsible for the sumptuous altar of the San Martino church in Monte San Martino and the magnificent work of “Madonna Adoring the Christ Child with Two Angels” preserved in Sarnano. The region is also home to numerous highly expressive architectural works such as the main doorway of the Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Tolentino, the antique boundary wall of Montemonaco and the rustic workmanship of the Piazza Alta in Amandola.

Depending on flight times, we can begin to savour the magic of the area this afternoon. There should be time for a short walk nearby to try to find the Golden Orioles that are ever present calling in the nearby trees or a wander down the local white roads searching for *Orchis fragrans*, *Ophrys tetraloniae* and *Ophrys fuciflora* ssp. *gracilis* endemic to peninsular Italy. After a morning of travel, a more appealing alternative may be just to relax before we enjoy our evening meal and look forward to our explorations, which begin in earnest tomorrow.



Flower meadows of Castelluccio

Day 2

Monte Sibilla, overnight Amandola

The mountains, which frame the area, are a botanist's and butterfly enthusiast's paradise and Monte Sibilla is no exception. The meadows on the journey up to the refuge provide us with several stops

searching for *Ophrys bertolonii*, *Gymnadenia odoratissima*, *Astragalus sempervirens* and much more with butterflies including Dusky Heath, Amanda's Blues and many puzzling fritillaries.

Once at the refugio (1540m) we will pack our bags for the walk to our lunch stop near the Grotto della Fate a della Sibilla near the summit of Monte Sibilla, a long but stunning walk (600m of climb over five kilometres of track) giving spectacular views towards Monte Vettore and later into Hell's Gorge to our north. Once near the top *Gentiana verna* and *G. kochiana* carpet the slopes with *Pulsatilla alpina* and *Crocus vernus* appearing near the snow patches. Overhead the noisy Alpine Choughs will be cavorting and we will hope a sweet musical song may reveal an Alpine Accentor amongst the boulders near the summit.

On our return journey to the buses there will be plenty to see and there will be chances to find the rare Sooty Ringlet ssp *Pluto var belzebub* and the Eastern Large Heath amongst others. We will stop for a refreshing drink back at the refugio and before returning to our hotel for supper.

Day 3

Piano Grande, overnight Amandola

Once a glacial lake, the Piano Grande is now a vast upland plain where Skylarks make the air throb with their song. At the far end of this plain sits Castelluccio, atop a knoll that is ringed with fields of cornflowers, poppies and a vast area of alpine meadows. This huge expanse of treeless plateau, 1250 metres above sea level, is eight kilometres long by five wide and is transformed into a carpet of wild flowers. Amongst the poppies you might find wild tulips (*Tulipa australis*), fritillaries (*Fritillaria involucrata*) and exotic alpine flowers such as *Carex bauxbaumii*, *Cerastium scaranii*, *Dianthus carthusianorum* ssp *tenorei*, *Alyssoides urticulata* and *A. argenteum*. Around on the slopes are carpets of Meadow Clary, Mountain Cornflower, *Polygala nicaeensis* and *Trinia glauca*, with *Asphodelus albus* and *Paeonia officinalis* in the damper areas; birds here include Northern Wheatear and Whinchat. This is a magnificent wild place where the songs of countless Skylarks combine to provide a background symphony to our walks.

After having lunch overlooking this stunning scenery, we will explore some of the woodlands looking for the Southern White Admiral butterfly and searching for Bonelli's Warblers and Short-toed Treecreepers, before heading off to look around the village of Castelluccio itself with its resident Black Redstarts and the chance for a few Choughs feeding nearby. On our return we will search out a few more butterflies in appealing sites looking in particular for Chestnut Heaths, Eros and Osiris Blues, with the chance for the Olive Skipper. In some of the woodlands we will keep our eyes open for *Dactylorhiza saccifera*. After our explorations we will return to our hotel for a freshen-up before supper.

Day 4

Colfiorito, overnight Amandola

As a contrast to the mountains, today we will explore this little known regional park, which includes a large area of reed-beds with nearby *piano* regions (a form of open plains and arable fields). The marshlands have an extensive reed-bed area intersected with open water bodies and the reed areas are full of the song of Great Reed Warblers and twanging Bearded Reedlings. We will have plenty of opportunity to discover Penduline Tits in the bushes around the edge of the marsh and while looking

over the reeds there is always a good chance of seeing Marsh Harriers and the rare Bittern as it gracefully flies to new feeding areas.

The surrounding *piano* areas provide cover for breeding Quail and Montagu's Harriers, while Corn Buntings pour out their jangling song from every wire. Plants in this area include many arable weeds that are very rare in Britain now, including Cornflower, Corn Buttercup and Corn Cleavers with many others also present. There is always the chance of seeing the impressive Short-toed Eagle flying around too. The *pianos* are awash with colour at this time of year with an amazing selection of butterflies and possibly some *Orchis laxiflora* and *Dactylorhiza majalis* in the marshy areas.

Day 5

Prati di Ragnolo, overnight Amandola

Today will be spent exploring the little visited area of the Prati di Ragnolo located on the northern border of the National Park. We will undertake a selection of gentle walks in the rolling upland pastures that are awash with colour at this time of year. This is an area renowned for its colourful flora, and rightly so, as our senses will be assaulted from all sides by the stunning combinations of pinks and yellows. Plants that we would hope to find among the commoner species in this upland plateau area include *Saxifraga bulbifera*, *Aster alpinus*, *Trinia glauca* and *Pedicularis tuberosa* to name but a few. The deep red *Dianthus carthusianorum* is particularly common in some areas here.

The forested gulleys hold a healthy population of breeding Honey Buzzards whilst Montagu's Harriers are regularly seen quartering the open plateau. Tawny Pipits and Northern Wheatears perch prominently on the roadside poles whilst the calls of Hoopoe can be heard and possibly glimpsed on the woodland edges. Butterflies can be abundant here and with luck we should find the localized Eastern Large Heath and various Coppers.

The views from this area towards the higher peaks of the park make this an area well worth the visit alone. We will make the most of our time here to relax and enjoy the spectacle with little interruption from other people and the sounds of modern life.

Day 6

Monte Vettore, overnight Amandola

Today we plan to enjoy the intriguing scenery of the Sibillini National Park and Monte Vettore (2476m). Once in the village of Foce, we will park our minibus(es) and set off for the hardest walk of the trip, taking us into the stunning alpine pastures and on into the snowline and if time and energy permit, up to Lago di Pilato (it is said that Pontius Pilate is buried here) and its stunning cirque. The lake (1840m), the only one with natural origins in Marche, has an endemic Fairy Shrimp – the lively Chirocefalo of Marchesoni.

The first meadows to be reached are a delight after the climb up through the beech forest. They are covered in *Geranium phaeum* and *Doronicum*, with clouds of attendant butterflies, amongst which we will be looking for the very rare and localized Grisson's Fritillary, found only in the Sibillini region and small areas of the Alps. Alpine Edelweiss (*Leontopodium nivale*), Martagon Lily, *Isatis allionii*, *Potentilla*

calabra and Alpine Buckthorn are just some of the plant species, whilst birds should include Snow Finch and Alpine Chough.

The mountain pastures here will appeal to the botanists amongst our party, containing many species of orchid, *Campanula tanfani*, *Primula auricula*, *Potentilla caulescens*, *Potentilla apennina* and several gentians during the spring and early summer. If time allows, short walks into the Beech woods on the way down should produce some interesting birds such as dapper Collared Flycatchers and Bonelli's Warblers, with plants including Coralroot Orchid. Once at the buses and the meadows below, we can wander through them looking at the Swallow-wort and searching for more butterflies including Amanda's Blue and Clouded Apollos.

Day 7

Gola dell'Infernaccio (Hell's Gorge)

La Gola dell'Infernaccio is arguably the most impressive limestone gorge in the Apennine range. It is a striking example of the erosion by the River Tenna on the limestone of the area. Our path leads gently down to the river as it exits the narrowest part of the gorge, with sheer rock faces dripping with water and plenty to look at with *Senecio cordatus* and *Drypis spinosa* on the path sides and Alpine Choughs calling overhead. Once at the river we cross to the other side to start our ascent through pleasant Beech forests, crossing the rushing stream several times, (plants to look out for include *Adenostyles alliariae*, *Geranium phaeum* and on the rocks *Saxifraga callosa*) and with three inclines to get the heart racing to arrive at the open meadows at Cerasa. Lunch here in the shade next to a spring will rejuvenate us for the afternoon! We will continue along the trail to the source of the river and search for the excellent butterflies found in these meadows including Italian Fury Blue, Clouded Apollo, Mountain Alcon Blue, Purple-edged Copper and Lesser-spotted Fritillaries. After an exhilarating and memorable day we return the same way back to the buses and then on to the hotel.

Day 8

Fly London

Depending on flight schedules we may have time for a last walk this morning, before leaving for the return drive to Ancona airport and our onward flight to London.

Extensions

Extra nights (unguided) in other parts of Italy, either before or after the holiday, may be arranged on request.

Tour grading

All excursions on this holiday are optional. Those walks offered as part of a daily programme are graded B, being half-day or full-day walks in the Marchegano countryside and it should be noted that some of the terrain is over steep ground.

From our outstanding base we will explore both the foothills and mountains of the Central Italian Apennines on daily outings, enjoying their natural history by means of day walks. Our pace will be medium, as we look for birds, plants and butterflies but we will aim to be outdoors as much as possible covering perhaps between five to seven miles (eight to eleven kilometres) each day. This holiday should suit those of all ages who enjoy natural history and countryside environments.

Weather

We have chosen June as being a good time for the flowering plants, birds and butterflies of this region. However, although we expect plenty of fine, warm and sunny weather (especially at lower altitudes), in the higher areas the weather is never predictable and you must be prepared for such variability and bring a good range of clothing.

Food & 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.

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