

The Italian & French Alps

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Turin and transfer to Cogne
- Day 2/3** Botanical and birdwatching walks in the Gran Paradiso National Park, from Cogne
- Day 4/7** Botanical and birdwatching walks in the Vanoise National Park, from Lanslevillard
- Day 8** Transfer to Turin and fly London

Departs

June/July

Focus

Alpine plants, birds, mammals and butterflies

Grading

Grade B. Day walks only, some on steep ground. All walks are optional

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ITA07) or brochure

Highlights

- A perfect Alpine destination for the all-round naturalist
- Birds, flowers & butterflies galore
- Alpine flowers in profusion
- Mountain walks on good trails
- Look out for Ibex, Marmots & Chamois
- Birds of prey including Lammergeiers
- A wealth of butterfly species, including Alpine specialities



Images by Jenny Wilsher



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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 maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

This is a two-centre holiday and for the first part we will be based in Cogne, a small unspoilt and friendly town with a good range of shops and restaurants, situated high above the Aosta Valley in the Val di Cogne, surrounded by gentle green meadows and with glacier-covered mountains rising above. The region is French (as well as Italian) speaking, though each valley tends to have its own dialect; the area is also noted for its Valdostane food, including plenty of Chamois and venison and Valle d'Aosta wines. For the latter part of our tour we will be based in the village of Lanslevillard situated on the River Arc at the foot of a famous pass and its winding road built by Napoléon. This Haute Maurienne village combines its traditional agricultural activities with tourism and is a popular place to stay for visitors to the nearby national park. We will use our hotels as bases from which to explore the trails of the Gran Paradiso and Vanoise National Parks, and to enjoy the exceptional variety of birds, plants and butterflies of the region. The outlined programme below must be used only as a rough guide, as so much will depend on the weather, and how we feel each day – there is such a choice of things to do in this area, and having two vehicles will further extend our options.

As early as 1856 the Gran Paradiso mountains were afforded protection as a wildlife reserve by Italy's King Vittorio Emmanuel II to protect their herds of Ibex and by 1922 it had become Italy's first national park. Today it covers 720 square kilometres. On the creation of the adjoining Vanoise National Park by the French in 1963, the largest protected area in Western Europe was formed. On this week-long holiday we will enjoy daily natural history walks amongst the beautiful alpine valleys, forests and high peaks (rising to Mount Paradiso at 4,061 metres) of the Gran Paradiso and Vanoise National Parks, focusing on their alpine flora, birdlife, butterflies and of course such mammals as Ibex, Chamois and Alpine Marmots.

Day 1

Fly Turin transfer Cogne

We depart from London to Turin where we transfer to our privately hired minibuses for the 2 hour drive to Cogne, ascending rapidly on winding roads only during the last hour of the journey. It will be well worth keeping your eyes open during the final stages of this journey for the colourful roadside flora found in the region.

On arrival in Cogne we will settle into our hotel, leaving you at leisure for what little is left of the day! Hopefully there will be time to purchase local maps and postcards or perhaps to take a walk in the lush flower-rich meadow opposite our hotel, where we should see local bird species such as Whinchat, Black Redstart and Redpoll.

Day 2

Cogne

Early risers can stroll down the road to the little hamlet of Cretaz to look for Dipper in the river. The lush meadows along the river are full of various buttercups, Bistort, Alpine Lovage, Masterwort and various *Silene* species such as Bladder Campion, Nottingham and Spanish Catchfly. These hay meadows become a huge cross-country ski area in the winter.

Having enjoyed breakfast and purchased picnic provisions in Cogne, we head up the valley of Valnontey to the hamlet of the same name. Here we leave our vehicles and taking our picnic, head further up the valley. It is a mostly level walk so we can really stretch our legs which will be a welcome change after yesterday's travelling. We walk through a variety of wooded and open habitat, with much Green Alder along the edges of the river, and wet flushes where we should find Broad-leaved Marsh and Vanilla Orchids, Globeflower, Alpine Milk Vetch, Water Avens and the tiny Yellow Eyebright. Birds include Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Treecreeper, Willow Tit and woodpeckers. The flora at our feet is always fascinating with the possibility of Snow Gentians, Cow-wheat, Yellow Wood Violet, Alpenrose, Lesser Masterwort and Snowy Wood Rush but we will also keep an eye open for the possibility of Lammergeier and Golden Eagle that might float above us against the backdrop of the glaciers at the head of the valley.

After our picnic we can either walk further up the valley to the foot of the glacier scree, or return leisurely to Valnontey where we can explore the Botanical Gardens or relax with refreshments at one of the cafes and watch for Chamois amongst the screes on the valley sides.

Day 3

Cogne

Our walk is quite local today. We will drive to the small village of Gimillian, from where we will set out on foot to follow a path up the Vallone di Grauson, which ascends into a spectacular range of peaks to the north-east of Cogne, Monte Grauson (3,240m) being the highest.

The first part of our walk is through cow-cropped meadows but on the rocky sides of the track many plants flourish. These should include campanula species such as Clustered Bellflower, Harebells, Round-headed, Betony-leaved and Globe-headed Rampions; silene species such as Bladder Campion, Nottingham, Spanish and Valais Catchfly; composites such as Catsfoot, Mountain Cornflower, Woolly Hawkweed and Alpine Thistle and many representatives of the pea family such as Kidney and Horseshoe Vetch, Mountain Sainfoin, Mountain, Alpine, Red and White Clover and Round-leaved Restharrow. We should also find Panicle Saxifrage, large clumps of Common Toadflax which grows very tall here and the Alpine umbellifer, *Laserpitium siler*.

This is a good area for butterflies and we should see Swallowtail, Apollo, Black-veined White, Clouded and Berger's Clouded Yellow, Scarce Copper, skippers and heaths. Birds may include Red-backed Shrike, Rockthrush, Rock Bunting and Crested Tit whilst overhead we will scan the skies for Alpine Swifts and Lammergeier.



Edelweiss - by J Willsher

After walking through the wooded valley sides, we will cross the river and explore the meadow where we should find pinks and rockroses, houseleeks, Matted Globularia, Alpine Toadflax and the spiny Mountain Tragacanth, alongside other alpine vetches and Edelweiss – a true alpine.

As usual, during our picnic lunch, we will enjoy the scents of the meadows and the abundant butterflies, scan for ungulates and birds of prey, and keep an eye open for Black Redstart, Northern Wheatear and Coal Tit.

On the return walk, we will have wonderful views of the Gran Paradiso range, spread across our skyline. If there is time before returning to our hotel we will re-visit Valnontey, not just for the delicious cherry pie at the café but to stroll in the damp meadows the other side of the river, where we can find Grass of Parnassus, Alpine Willowherb, orchids and the very woolly *Astragalus centralpinus*, an endemic of the south-west Alps. We will also be ever vigilant in the hopes of being lucky enough to see the elusive Nutcracker and Black Woodpecker.

Day 4

Lanslevillard

Today we will transfer to our second base in France. Saying farewell to our hosts, we will head north for Aosta, then turn south again heading for the Col du Petit St-Bernard. We may stop for coffee or hot chocolate at a favourite café where we can sit outside and scan the peaks for Ibex and raptors. At the col, which is the old border point between Italy and France, there are market stalls selling souvenirs and goat skin rugs but we will be stopping to watch the Snowfinches, which frequent the roof tops of the old buildings, flashing their white wing patches as they fly off to the hillsides.

Where the valley opens out just past the col, we should find sheets of Kingcups and white Aconite-leaved



Alpine Marmot by J East

Buttercups, and if we have time we will explore some of the roadsides for flowers such as Spiniest Thistle, Spikes Rampion, Yellow and Spring Gentian, Common Butterwort, Alpine Bartsia, Small White, Alpine and Frog Orchids. The shrill bark of Marmots is often heard here and they are frequently seen quite close to the edge of the road, although they do not wait around to be photographed! This is also a good place to scan the skies for raptors such as Peregrine, Golden Eagle and Lammergeier. Further stops on our way down to Val d' Isère should find us the pale blue Bearded Bellflower, Common Spotted Orchid and May Lily, whilst birds may include Red-backed Shrike, Raven, Crag Martin and Alpine Chough.

We will have stunning views as we make our way up to Col de l'Iseran, stopping en route to enjoy the flowers, birds and butterflies. During our descent from the col we will stop to look at a large area of scree, where we should find Glacier Crowfoot, Moss Campion, Purple Saxifrage, Purple Speedwell and many other alpine plants making little cushions of colour on the grey scree.

We should arrive at our base in the village of Lanslevillard in time to settle in and unpack before dinner.

Day 5

Lanslevillard

We will spend a full day today in the Vanoise National Park, France's first national park, which was created in 1963 to protect the Ibex. Adjoining the Gran Paradiso National Park, the two parks combine to form the largest protected area in Western Europe. The Vanoise lies just to the south of Mont Blanc (which can be seen from many parts of the park) along the spine of the High Alps, in the Savoie region of France, and the area ranges in altitude from 774 metres to 2,827 metres (2,541 feet to 9,227 feet).

It covers 520 square kilometres and like the Gran Paradiso, encompasses an impressive diversity of wildlife. Chamois, Alpine Ibex and Alpine Marmots are all found here in abundance, the alpine flora and attendant insect-life are magnificent, and 125 species of breeding birds include the re-introduced Lammergeier and



the enigmatic Wallcreeper. The geology ranges from sedimentary sandstone and limestone to metamorphic schist and gneiss, all showing signs of the extensive glaciation that shaped the Alps.

Our destination today is a valley west of Lanslebourg which leads up to the Col de la Vanoise. We may stop in the forest en route to look for Nutcracker and other woodland birds. The Nutcracker is dependent on the Swiss Stone Pine (*Pinus cembra*) and is responsible for the widespread distribution of

the tree, as it caches stores of seeds in the ground in the same way as its cousin the Jay caches acorns. We make our way up to the tiny hamlet of Bellecombe where we park our vehicles. We will walk to the edge of the gorge (Doron de Termignon), where we hope to observe Lammergeier at the nest or to see young birds. We will also look out for Rock Partridge, Rock Thrush and Snowfinch.

We will then make our way to the Refuge de Plan Lac where we can supplement our picnic with coffee, soft drinks or beer. Track-side plants may include Alpine Gypsophila, Dark Stonecrop, gentian species, Pink Rock Jasmine, Bird's-eye Primrose and Vitaliana. After lunch we may decide to walk further up the valley before returning to our vehicles. On the way back to our hotel we will make another stop in the woods to look for Birdsnest Orchid, Twayblade and marsh orchids in the wet flush of a mountain stream.

Day 6

Lanslevillard

Focusing once again on the Vanoise National Park today, we will head south to visit the area of Mont Cenis, renowned for its alpine flora. Many plants are attributed to Mont Cenis such as Mont Cenis Pansy, Mont Cenis Bellflower and Mont Cenis Restharrow but these plants have a much wider distribution than just this particular area. We have only one day to devote to this region but we will do our best to explore the wonderful flora and we will be sure to add new species to our list. In the lush meadows around Lac du Mont Cenis we expect to see Alpine and Woolly Hawkweed, Giant Catsear, Yellow Bellflower, German Gentian, *Stachys grandiflora*, Crested Lousewort, pansies and the bright pink Three-veined Pink. On the rocky screes we will look for *Phyteuma globularifolium* ssp. *pedemontana* (its name is almost longer than

its flower stalks!), Mountain Alyssum, Tufted Milkwort, Alpine Pasqueflower, Piedmont Primrose, Blue Saxifrage and Mont Cenis Lousewort.

The meadows are good for the elusive Quail and we should see Alpine and Red-billed Choughs and Alpine Swifts. Other species that we may hope to see today include Lammergeier, Golden Eagle and other birds of prey, whilst Ring Ouzel, Wheatear, Dipper, Black Redstart, Rock Bunting, Serin and Citril Finch occur in the meadows and along the streams.

Day 7

Lanslevillard

Today we will head back from Lanslevillard up to the Col de L'Iseran. Although it is part of the same route as we travelled on Day 4, this time we will have more time to explore and enjoy the profusion of flowers in the many meadows and side valleys on this south-west-facing side of the park. Higher up there are screes and cliffs with many alpine species of flora and fauna and this will be a further opportunity to search for elusive species like Wallcreeper. Depending on weather and time we will travel beyond Val d'Isere and walk in the nature reserve of La Grande Sassiere, a glaciated alpine valley with flower rich grazing meadows.

Day 8

Fly London

Depending on flight times, 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.

Tour grading

On this holiday we will be based at two different hotels. We will explore the mountains of this spectacular region, and enjoy their natural history, by means of full day walks of between six and 12 km in length. Whilst our pace will be gentle, with any steep uphill sections usually completed before our picnic lunch and the afternoon spent returning, we will have clear objectives on our walks in order to offer access to the greatest range of species. This should, however, still offer ample time to view, admire and photograph plants and animals seen along the way. We will frequently be merely pottering as we take a closer look at the plants, butterflies and birds. We will probably have the support of two minibuses (depending on group size) to allow maximum flexibility, and provide options to each day's programme. A degree of fitness will be required as there will be unavoidable stretches of uphill walking involved, although many walks will follow reasonably level contour routes.

Weather

We have chosen early July as being the prime time for flowering plants, butterflies and birds in this region of the Alps. 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. Whilst we can expect mostly clear,

sunny and hot (c 75°F or 23°C) weather, we should also expect some wet, cloudy and cool 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. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.