

Abruzzo in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Rome and transfer to Pescasseroli
- Day 2/7** Wildlife walks in the Abruzzo National Park and surrounding area from Pescasseroli
- Day 8** Transfer to Rome and fly London

Departs

September

Focus

Mammals, birds, butterflies and plants,

Grading

Grade B. All walks are optional day walks, some of them on quite steep and rocky terrain

Dates and prices

See newsletter or website (tour code ITA14)

Highlights

- Afternoon/evening excursion to look for Marsican Brown Bear
- Enjoy a myriad of plants, butterflies and birds in the Apennines
- Watch birds of prey such as Golden Eagle, Peregrine & Griffon Vulture
- Woodpeckers (including Black, and the rare Lilford's subspecies of White-backed)
- Fringed Gentian, Autumn Crocus & Ivy-leaved Sowbread among flora
- Butterflies include Great-banded & Tree Graylings plus Apollo



Marsican Brown Bears, Apennine Chamois, Abruzzo NP



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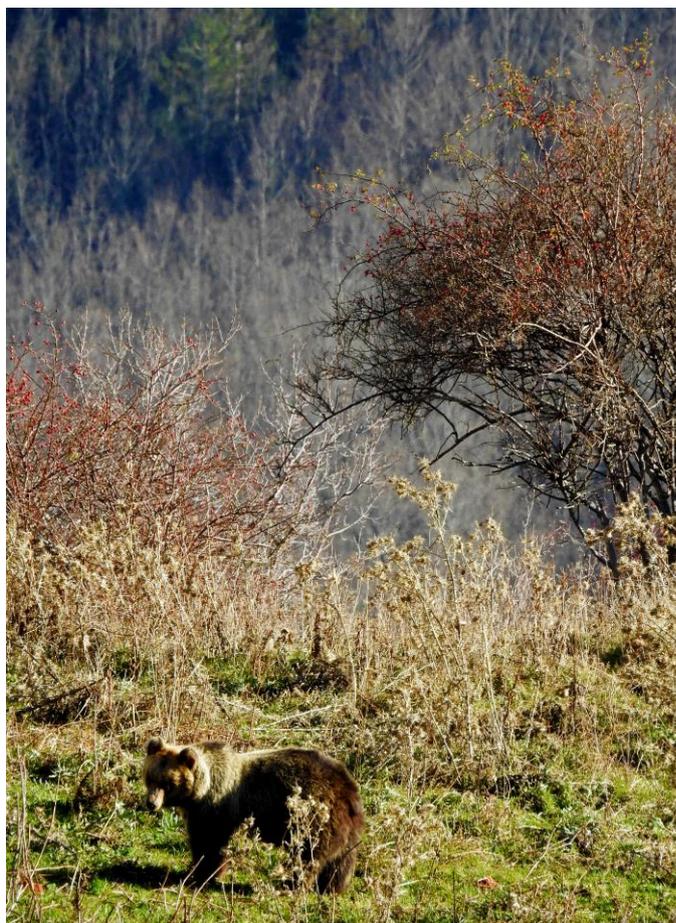
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N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be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

Introduction

Stretching the length of Italy, the Apennine Mountains provide a refuge for much of Italy's most interesting natural history. This is very much a working rural landscape of rolling hills and traditional sheep farming, made special by its wealth of atmospheric mediaeval villages, traditional cuisine and aromatic local wines, all of which combine to make this holiday a well-rounded and enjoyable Italian experience.

The Abruzzo National Park, in the heart of the central Apennines, was set up in 1923, in recognition of the wildlife importance of the area, where extensive Beech forests harbour healthy populations of Marsican Brown Bear and Apennine Wolf, along with Wild Boar, Red and Roe Deer, while Abruzzo Chamois inhabit the higher mountain slopes. This park is the focus of our single-centre holiday, during which we will be based in a comfortable, family-run hotel, set in a quiet location at the edge of the large, friendly village of Pescasseroli. The village, set at just under 1200m asl is situated in the valley of the River Sangro, surrounded by the gentle green meadows and imposing partly-forested mountains which make up the Abruzzo National Park.



Marsican Brown Bear by Paolo Iannicca

On this week-long holiday we will enjoy daily natural history walks amongst the beautiful Apennine valleys and mountain slopes aiming to see the best of the wealth of wildlife this area has to offer. By September, the potential of spring has given way to the fruitfulness of autumn, and the mammals and birds feast on Nature's bounty.

The park is the last bastion of the endemic Marsican Brown Bear and we shall try to catch a rare glimpse of this wonderful animal, of which there are some 40 adults present. For the Marsican Brown Bear, Alpine Buckthorn (*Rhamnus alpinus*) is a particular treat, and in early September they seek out these bushes to gorge on the berries. Apennine Wolves are also to be found in the area, although both these and the Marsican Brown Bear are typically elusive and rarely seen. The best times for seeing bears are in the early morning and late evening, so our programme of daily walks will allow for this.

Day 1

London – Pescasseroli

We depart from London to Rome in the morning, arriving approximately two hours later and transferring to our privately hired minibus(es) for the 3-hour drive to Pescasseroli, ascending rapidly on winding roads during the last hour of the journey. It will be well worth keeping your eyes open during the final stages of this journey - a May group had their best view of a bear by the roadside as we entered the park!

On arrival in Pescasseroli we will settle into our hotel before, if time permits, taking a gentle stroll to explore the local area.

Day 2

Vallone Pesco di Lordo, and Evening Watch

For those who wish, we will start this morning with a stroll round the hotel. Tree Sparrow, Black Redstart, Serin and Common Crossbill are regular in the conifers of the hotel grounds, and we may spot the chocolate-brown Red Squirrels playing in the trees. After breakfast, we will explore the Vallone Pesco di Lordo, which rises gently through meadows and well-established beechwoods (*Fagus sylvatica*), from near the hotel. The older beech trees here provide a good habitat for the range of woodpeckers found in the area including, possibly, the very rare Lilford's White-backed Woodpecker, which needs mature and dead trees as habitat. The woods at this time of year are generally quiet, apart from vociferous Nuthatch families, and mixed tit parties may be seen.

We will return to the hotel for lunch, before setting off mid afternoon, to meet the local guides who will lead us on our bear watch, from the Rifugio di Iorio. The numbers who visit here are regulated, so only accompanied groups are permitted. We will be driven in 4WD vehicles along the track of the Vallone di Peschio di Iorio, on the outskirts of Pescasseroli, to the start of the path. The rifugio is very remote and everything needed there must be carried, so you may be asked to find space in your rucksack for supper ingredients! We will then walk for about 1.5 hr, climbing about 450m, to reach the ridge where the rifugio is perched above the tree line



Marsican Brown Bears

(1830m). Admiring the stunning views in all directions, we will take a short break here to change (it is worth carrying a dry shirt and plenty of layers, as you cool down very rapidly when sitting still). We walk a short distance along the ridge, to a comfortable spot, from where we can scan the slopes, dotted with the Alpine Buckthorn (*Rhamnus alpinus*) shrubs, whose berries are such a treat for bears. We hope that there are still some left to tempt them! We will also be on the watch for other mammals, such as Wild Boar and Red Deer, which may put in an appearance. The Red Deer should be starting to rut, so we may hear the bellows of the stags echoing round the hillsides.

As darkness starts to fall (sunset will be around 7.15pm) and visibility becomes limited, we return to the rifugio, where our guides will provide a light supper for us, of local fare: soup, bread, cheese, salamis and wine, which we eat by candle light. On clear nights, the stars are amazing from here and, by their light or using torches (they are able to lend head torches) we then retrace our steps back down to the vehicles. It is a good path, and easier than you might expect in the darkness. We will probably get back to the hotel at around 10pm.

Day 3

Scanno and Gole di Sagittario

Today we will have the opportunity for an early search for mammals and birds in the valleys of the park, or a local stroll, before returning for breakfast at the hotel.

Today we are taking a circular route, which encompasses some of the dramatic limestone scenery of the area. We start by driving northwards, taking the road through Bisegna, whose valley may be profitable for wildlife, and where bears frequently raid the orchards. Leaving the National Park at Ortona, we climb via Colle Romano through the rolling hills that link the Marsican mountains with the Sirente-Velino range. We will stop to explore some of the tracks heading north, keeping an eye on the skies for large raptors. Griffon Vulture is a possibility here.

We will take our picnic on the edge of Anversa degli Abruzzi, at the northern end of the Sagittario Gorge. The area is designated as an Oasi WWF, and the reserve symbol is the Wallcreeper. This tends to be more frequent in the gorge in winter, but we will scan the rock faces as we explore the area. Peregrine Falcon, Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush may be possibilities here, while Dippers patrol the fast-flowing river. Ivy-leaved Sowbread (*Cyclamen hederifolium*) forms pink patches along the path. There is a small Botanic Garden here, with a range of local plant species.

Moving on, we drive south through the dramatic Gole di Sagittario to the ancient town of Scanno. We take time to explore this fascinating town, with its narrow alleyways and small squares. Scanno has a tradition of lace-making and jewellery, and women often still wear traditional dress. Leaving here, we drive on south, over the Passo Godi, and down to Villetta Barrea, where we rejoin the Sangro valley back to Pescasseroli.

Depending on the time, we make a stop in the beautiful Val Fondillo, to scan the slopes of Monte Marsicano, before returning to the hotel for dinner.

Day 4

Val di Rose

This walk is the most strenuous of the week, as we climb above the tree line, and it can only be undertaken in favourable weather conditions. However we walk at a naturalist's pace, with plenty of rests to enjoy the stunning views and wildlife.

We start in the medieval hilltop village of Civitella Alfedena, above the Lago di Barrea. The stony path goes steeply upwards through forest and clearings. At this time of year, the Beech canopy is dense, and we will watch out for small mammal activity in the leaf litter. Wolves frequent these forests, and we may also encounter their droppings by the path. Above the tree line we enter montane grassland, where boulders hold a variety of alpine flowers. We may find late specimens of endemic Reddish Saxifrage (*Saxifraga porophylla*), the endemic pansy *Viola eugeniae*, Mulleins (*Verbascum spp*) and *Eryngium spp*.



Chamois by Ron Brown

However, the main focus will be the endemic Abruzzo Chamois, a different sub species from the Alpine Chamois, which we hope to see on the slopes around. The walk is closed to the public from July until early September, to reduce disturbance for these beautiful animals. We will also look for Alpine Accentor, Rock Bunting and Snow Finch, and scan the horizon for birds of prey, as Peregrine Falcon, Black Kite and Golden Eagle may all be seen.

We will climb to the ridge, and continue to the Forca Resuni hut (1952m, total ascent c845m), enjoying the stunning views in all directions. We return by the same path, and pause for refreshments in the village, before returning to the hotel.

Day 5

Camosciara

We will make another early outing, for those who wish.

This morning we will drive a short distance along the valley of the River Sangro to where it meets a small tributary, the River Scerto, which is the starting point for today's walk. We follow the river up the valley as the dramatic amphitheatre of Camosciara and surrounding mountains opens before us. As we progress we will scan the hillsides around us for Red Deer, Chamois and Wild Boar. Golden Eagle regularly nests nearby and we will keep an eye out for this and other mountain birds such as Alpine Chough. Dippers frequent the stream, and mixed tit parties, Nuthatch and Firecrest flit through the undergrowth. Spindle (*Euonymus europaea*), Cornelian Cherry (*Cornus mas*), Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) are among the shrubs giving colour, while maples, oaks and willows join the ever present Beech trees. On the steep crags above are relic populations of Villetta Barrea Black Pine (*Pinus nigra subsp. italica*).

From the top of the valley, we take the path up through the trees, above the river gorge, to the Belvedere viewpoint, which affords stunning tree-fringed vistas back down the valley. Along the way we will find a scenic spot to partake of our picnic lunch, before we have to return down the valley in the afternoon.

We may have a later outing, to explore the park at dusk.

Day 6

Pescasseroli and an Evening Watch

Today, following another early outing, we will have the opportunity to explore the environs of the hotel, walk locally, and spend some time in the quaint village of Pescasseroli. In the later part of the day, we hope to repeat our trip to Rifugio di Iorio, with the Ecotur guides.

Day 7

Aielli and Monte Velino

Today we travel north, to the Sirente-Velino Natural Park. Our journey takes us back out of Abruzzo, to the Avezzano Plain, via Pescara. Beyond the little village of Aielli, a winding dusty track gently climbs through the rolling hills. We will continue on foot, watching for raptors as we walk. This is a known location for the elusive endemic Rock Partridge, and we will scan the hillsides and likely spots. It is also an area that can be rich in butterflies, with Apollo, Great Banded and Tree Graylings, Sooty Copper and Clouded Yellow amongst the possibilities. Autumn Crocus (*Colchicum autumnale*) grows here, its beautiful mauve flowers like stars in the dusty ground.



Autumn Crocus

We will have our picnic here, before returning to Pescasseroli, where we will take the opportunity to sample the wares of the town's gelateria. We will return to the hotel to give people the opportunity to rest, pack, or take another local walk.

Day 8

London

An early start is likely, as we must reluctantly leave the mountains to drive back to Rome for our return flight to London.

Tour grading

On this holiday we will be based at one hotel throughout – the very friendly and comfortable Albergo Paradiso, where we will be excellently looked after by our hosts Geraldine and Marco. We will explore the mountains of this spectacular region and enjoy their natural history, by means of day and half-day walks of between two and ten 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 may have the support of two minibuses (depending on group size) to allow maximum flexibility, and provide options to each day's programme.

The tour is graded B – some of the walks are quite long and steep, the terrain is rocky and the weather can be challenging. However, all walks are optional day walks.

Weather

We have chosen September as being a prime time for mammals in this region. 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 may experience some wet, cloudy and cool weather; the changes can be dramatic, so bring a good range of clothing!



Great Banded Grayling

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.

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