

# The Reptiles & Amphibians of Italy's Apuan Alps

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

**Day 1** Outbound flights; arrive Milan

**Day 2 – 4** Apuan Alps

**Day 5 – 7** Northern Apennines

**Day 8** Inbound flights

### Departs

April

### Focus

Amphibians, reptiles, and local cuisine

### Grading

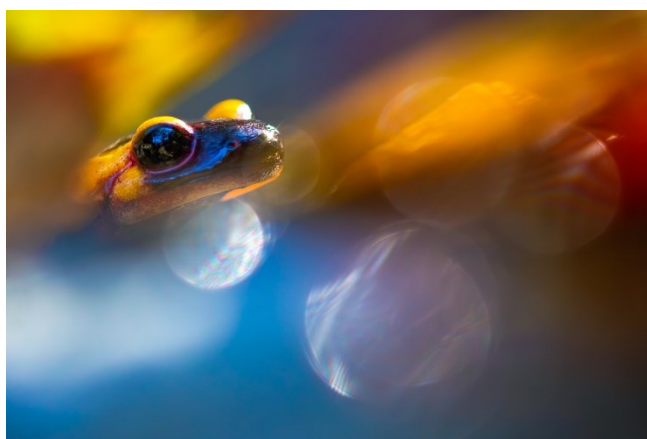
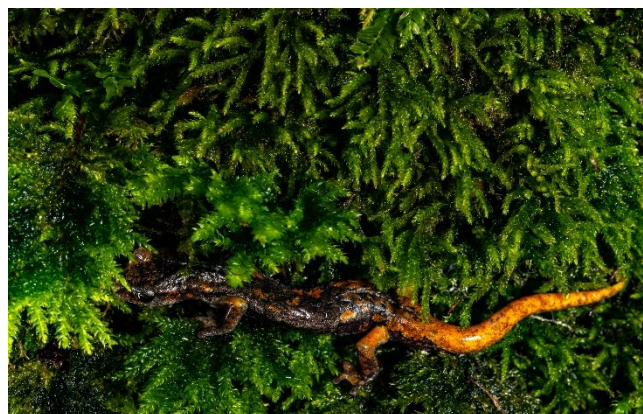
B. This tour is suitable for participants with a good level of fitness.

### Dates & Prices

Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code ITA22)

### Highlights

- Learn about the herpetofauna of the Apuan Alps and the northern Apennines.
- Explore the region at the prime time for salamander activity.
- Taste the local cuisine of Tuscany.
- Explore one of the most scenic Italian caves.
- Beautiful Apennines scenery away from the main tourist areas.
- Led by an expert local herpetologist.



Italian Cave Salamander, Fire Salamander, Northern Spectacled Salamander © Simone Giachello



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## Introduction

The Apuan Alps are an iconic mountain range situated in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, in northern Italy. These mountains have been exploited for over two millennia for the extraction of the renowned Marmo di Carrara, a high-quality variety of marble. The legacy of this long-standing exploitation is clearly visible in the dozens of quarries and mines that punctuate the landscape.

Despite such extensive human impact, the ruggedness of the Apuan Alps has allowed some excellent wild habitats to be preserved, characterised by a karst landscape of steep peaks and numerous caves interspersed with narrow and lush valleys that provide the perfect habitat for several endemic amphibian species.

On this tour, led by an expert Italian naturalist, we will traverse from the unique mountain scenery of the Apuan Alps to the wet and narrow valleys of the Tuscan Apennine, passing through majestic caves, ancient traditional villages and abandoned mines reclaimed by nature.



Apuan Alps © Simone Giachello



## Itinerary

*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

### Fly Milan

Our holiday begins with a flight to Milan. Upon arrival, we will all disinfect our shoes with an antimicrobial solution to prevent the spread of harmful pathogens affecting amphibians and reptiles. This is very important since many Italian species are potentially very sensitive to those pathogens, and we will repeat the process each time we will change location. We will then begin our journey toward the ophiolites of the northern Apennines, a unique and fascinating habitat, en route to our accommodation in the Apuan Alps. Depending on flight schedules and weather conditions, we may spend a few hours exploring this area in search of reptiles and amphibians such as Asp Viper, Italian Three-toed Skink, and two species of newts: Italian Crested and Alpine (*ssp. apuana*). Once we arrive at our hotel in the Apuan Alps, we will settle in and enjoy our first evening meal together. After dinner, there will be an opportunity to explore the surroundings of the hotel in search of signs of amphibian activity. This hotel will serve as our base for the next four nights.

### Day 2

### Apuan Alps

On our first full day in the Apuan Alps, we will spend the morning visiting an abandoned marble quarry, where in recent years a thriving population of Alpine Newt has become established. This excursion offers a unique opportunity to observe the long-term ecological effects of marble extraction in the region, while encountering the local herpetofauna in an evocative setting.

For lunch, we will stop at a traditional restaurant located in the heart of the Apuan Alps Regional Park. After enjoying a Tuscan meal, we will continue our exploration by venturing into the surrounding woods and creeks of the valley.

Later in the afternoon, we will return to our hotel and take a short walk to a nearby abandoned mining site. This location hosts several key target species for our trip, including endemics restricted to the Italian Apennines such as Italian Cave Salamander and Northern Spectacled Salamander. To maximize our chances of encountering these species, we will return to the site after dinner for a nocturnal exploration.



Abandoned Mine Habitat © Simone Giachello

## Day 3

## Apuan Alps

The following morning, we will visit a significant wetland area situated between the mountains and the sea. These wetlands serve as a vital refuge for a rich biodiversity, from amphibians to breeding and migratory birds. In this habitat, we will search around ponds and canals for species such as Italian Tree



Italian Tree Frog © Simone Giachello

Frog and Smooth Newt. Of course, this will also be an excellent opportunity to observe a wide range of bird species, including Marsh Harrier, Hoopoe, and potentially a large number of migratory birds stopping to rest and feed on the way to their breeding grounds in northern Europe. After a picnic lunch featuring local focaccia, we will head to a remote and well-preserved valley within the Apuan Alps Regional Park to visit the Grotta del Vento, a cave considered one of the finest caves in Europe.

The cave is fully equipped for visitors, making it accessible even to those without prior speleological experience, and it offers an extraordinary array of geomorphological formations created by karst processes. This incredible subterranean environment is also home to the Italian Cave Salamander. With a bit of luck, we may be able to observe this endemic species in its natural underground habitat.

## Day 4

## Apuan Alps

On our final full day in the Apuan Alps, we will take a one-hour hike through a nearby valley to reach the stunning Acquapendente Waterfall. Along the trail, we will search for Italian Stream Frog and the Italian subspecies of Fire Salamander (*ssp. giglioli*), two additional endemics with distributions restricted to the Apennines. Lunch will be enjoyed at a traditional locanda situated near the trailhead. The remainder of the afternoon will be dedicated to relaxation and exploration of the area surrounding our accommodation.

## Day 5

## Apuan Alps – Northern Apennines

Today we change locations, moving westward and away from the Apuan Alps to a region of the Apennines closer to the Ligurian border, where we will spend the next three nights. The morning will be dedicated to the transfer, with the possibility of making stops along the way. We will enjoy lunch at a traditional trattoria in Pontremoli, a small and characteristic village located near our accommodation. In the

afternoon, we will explore a nearby canyon, an ideal habitat for Strinati's Cave Salamander. This is the only Italian Cave Salamander species that is not strictly endemic to Italy, as its distribution also extends into south-eastern France.

## Day 6

## Northern Apennines

Today we will spend the day close to our accommodation, exploring the surrounding woods, meadows, and streams in search of the local herpetofauna. Depending on weather conditions, we may focus more on either reptiles or amphibians. Among the reptile species we may encounter are Italian Slow Worm, Barred Grass Snake, and Aesculapian Snake. Early April also coincides with the blooming period of Mediterranean orchids, and this area offers the opportunity to observe species such as the distinctive Scarce Tongue-Orchid (*Serapias neglecta*) in flower.

## Day 7

## Northern Apennines

On our final full day, we will cross the regional border from Tuscany into Liguria to explore a new area in search of the third and final cave salamander species found in peninsular Italy: Ambrosi's Cave Salamander. This species is endemic to Italy and has the most restricted distribution among the three, one of the reasons for why it is considered to be at critical risk of extinction.

Although the primary focus of the day will be finding this highly localised endemic, we will also take the opportunity to enjoy the Ligurian cuisine and, weather permitting, we will explore the meanders of a pristine river, with the possibility of encountering the Dice Snake (*Natrix tessellata*), a common inhabitant of such aquatic environment.



Ambrosi's Cave Salamander © Simone Giachello

## Day 8

## Inbound flights

After a wonderful tour, sadly it will be time to leave the Italian Apennines and make our way to Milan for our inbound flights.

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## Tour Grading

On a typical day on our herpetology tours, we'll begin searching in the field after breakfast, when the sun has warmed the substrates and landscapes, often getting into the vehicles at 9am and, after stopping for approximately one hour for lunch (which is often a continental-style picnic eaten in situ), we'll continue



into early evening, when we will stop for a rest and dinner. Most evenings, it will be possible to go on excursions in search of nocturnal species, which will on average last for three hours after dinner. With an equal percentage of the target reptile and amphibian species likely to be nocturnal, these night searches are an important part of the tour but are optional, with some participants preferring to rest on some of the days.

We'll focus our time in the field on building an enviable list of reptile and amphibian species seen. Whilst searching, there is no doubt we'll come across a huge variety of amazing fauna and flora, which we'll also take time to enjoy, but reptiles and amphibians will strongly remain our focus. Sensitively checking under stones, logs and other refugia is an effective way of finding many species. Some of the target reptile or amphibian species may require longer field hours to locate, and therefore this tour is suitable, and most enjoyable, for experienced herpetologists or naturalists who, aside from wishing to see the region's rarely-seen reptiles and amphibians, relish being in the field searching for and identifying the vast array of birds, butterflies, invertebrates, orchids and other wildlife which can be found sharing the wonderful habitats that we'll explore on the tour.

In summary, Naturetrek herpetology holidays offer tremendous value and are suitable for those whose main holiday focus is seeing some of the world's superb reptiles and amphibians, whilst spending the majority of their time in wildlife habitats.

On this holiday, some occasional ascents are required and on average, 3-5 miles are walked per day.

## Weather

Whilst we should hope for warm, sunny conditions, it can be overcast at times with occasional rains. The time in the mountains could be cool, particularly at night. It would be sensible to come prepared for such possibilities.

## Food & accommodation

All meals starting with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 8.

The hotel's bedrooms are quite simply appointed but are clean and comfortable, with en suite bathrooms, and the restaurant serves excellent cuisine.

## Booking your place on the tour

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, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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Fire Salamander © Simone Giachello