Madagascar's Endemic Birds

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1/2	Depart London / Arrive Tana
Day 3/5	Andasibe & Mantadia
Day 6	Tana
Day 7/8	Ankarafantsika
Day 9	Katsepy
Day 10	Lake Kinkony
Day 11	Katsepy
Day 12	Tana
Day 13	Saint Augustin
Day 14/15	Ifaty
Day 16	Tana
Day 17/18	Depart Tana / Arrive London

Day 17	Fly Masoala Forest Lodge
Day 18/19	Masoala National Park
Day 20	Fly Tana
Day 21/22	Depart Tana / Arrive London

Departs

September / October

Focus

Primarily birds, plus mammals and general natural history

Grading

Grade B/C. Moderate to difficult day and night walks

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code MDG07)







Images from top: Scaly Ground-roller, Red-shouldered Vanga, Sakalava Rail

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Introduction

The island of Madagascar is blessed with some of the world's most unique and exciting wildlife. Over 80% of all life here is endemic, the legacy of 90 million years of isolation following the break -up of the continents 75 million years before. Its birdlife is particularly special. Those few pioneer species that made it to the island in the distant past have, over many generations, evolved and diversified into the wonderful spectacle of Malagasy birdlife that we see today; each family and species has been moulded over the millennia by natural selection to fit its own unique niche and habitat. Today, Madagascar is home to four endemic families of birds (the mesites, ground-rollers, asities and Malagasy warblers), plus two additional families (the vangas and cuckoo-rollers) that occur only on Madagascar and the nearby Comoros. In all, this ancient fragment of Gondwanaland can boast 36 endemic bird genera and around 120 endemic species!

This itinerary visits a variety of habitats, providing the opportunity to see a broad range of species, including some of the rarer endemics of Madagascar. The trip will be based in three areas of the country: Andasibe, the Ankarafantsika & Mahajanga area and Ifaty & Toliara area. The rainforest of Andasibe is arguably the best place to see as much of Madagascar's unique wildlife in one place as possible, with the birds no exception. In the north-west, Ankarafantsika National Park and Lake Kinkony are off the beaten path where very few other tourists venture. This part of the country is a stronghold for many species, and there will be an adventurous element here with a night of camping on the shores of Lake Kinkony, which will afford the opportunity to see the incredibly rare Sakalava Rail. Finally, we visit the Spiny Forest of the south-west around Ifaty, finishing our trip in a wonderful hotel on a beautiful stretch of beach on the Mozambique Channel. There is also the opportunity to do a post-tour extension to the remote and untouched Masoala National Park, one of the best places to see the fabled Helmet Vanga.

Itinerary

Please note that this itinerary is based on Air Madagascar's current internal flight schedule. Should they change their flight timings, or days of travel, we may need to amend our itinerary accordingly. 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.

Days 1 – 2 Antananarivo

We depart Heathrow this evening on an overnight flight to Tana via Addis Ababa (please see section below regarding flight connections). We then connect with a mid-morning flight to Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, arriving in the early afternoon. On arriving at Madagascar's international airport, we will purchase our visas, clear immigration and customs and transfer to a comfortable hotel, our base for the first night of the tour. This afternoon, depending on our flight arrival time, there should be the opportunity to enjoy an excursion to a nearby wildlife spot in Tana.

Day 3 Drive Andasibe

This morning, we will set off eastward to the rainforest reserves at Andasibe (Périnet), a journey of around 5 hours. The road takes us firstly through a relatively productive agricultural region before beginning its winding descent to the east coast, where we will start to see patches of rainforest on the steeper slopes. We will pass through a variety of small colourful villages, all thronging with life and many with wonderful names such as Ambohimangakely, Ambohimahandry and Manjakandriana. En route, we will stop at the Mangoro River to look for Madagascar Pratincole and will arrive at Andasibe mid-afternoon. The Andasibe reserves complex includes two distinct protected areas: the special reserve of Analamazaotra (Périnet) is the most well known of the two and protects the Indri, whilst the lesser known Mantadia National Park, a much larger area of primary rainforest (10,000 hectares), is also hugely rewarding. For our three nights at Andasibe we will stay in a comfortable forest lodge.

Days 4 – 5 Andasibe

This morning, we rise early to visit the special reserve of Analamazaotra (Périnet) in order to see the Indri (*Indri indri*), Madagascar's largest and most vocal lemur whose eerie cries, once heard, are never forgotten. They are also one of the world's most attractive primates and are frequently likened to large black and white teddy bears! Each year presents a different aspect of the life of this large primate. Some years we have been treated to spectacular family singing contests, whereas in other years the Indri were silent but came to the ground within a few feet to eat soil. Incidentally, the word Indri is actually Malagasy for 'look!' The early French explorer and naturalist, Pierre Sonnerat, heard his local Malagasy guide point at a lemur in a tree and took the word to be the animal's name. The Malagasy name for the Indri is 'Babakoto'.


Velvet Asity (Aniket Sardana)

After watching the Indri, we will have time to take the reserve trails at a relaxed pace. Amongst the birdlife we will look out for are Collared Nightjar, Red-fronted Coua, Red-breasted Coua, Malagasy Pygmy Kingfisher, Blue Vanga, Nuthatch Vanga, Velvet Asity, Madagascar Starling, and the Pitta-like Ground-roller. The rainforest here is also a good site for reptiles such as the Madagascar Tree Boa, Parson's Chameleon and Short-horned Chameleon.

The following morning, we drive 2 hours north to Mantadia, which was declared a national park in 1991 and has some of the most diverse forests in all of Madagascar. It is a relatively short distance, but the road is in such a state that the journey has to be undertaken in 4x4s and takes this long. Although the wildlife can be difficult to see on occasion and the terrain is tough, visits here are to be treasured. There are few relatively accessible places in Madagascar that offer such a fantastic pristine rainforest experience. This is the best area in which to look for two of the most elusive

ground-rollers, Short-legged Ground-roller and Scaly Ground-roller along with a wide variety of other species such as White-throated Rail, Madagascar Crested Ibis, Pitta-like Ground-roller, Common Sunbird-Asity, Velvet Asity, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Madagascar Partridge, Red-breasted Coua, Red-fronted Coua, Blue Coua, Nuthatch Vanga, Blue Vanga, Forest Fody and the rare Collared Nightjar whose call is still unknown.


Pitta-like Ground-roller

Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemurs are frequently seen and with a little patience we hope to find the Diademed Sifaka. The rare Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur also occurs at Mantadia, though they can be difficult to find and are more frequently heard than seen, given that much of the forest here is still inaccessible to visitors. During our time at Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, we will also undertake night walks to look for Crossley's (Furry-eared) Dwarf Lemur, Eastern Woolly Lemur, Goodman's Mouse Lemur, Madagascar Long-eared Owl and perhaps one of the wonderfully named Satanic Leaf-tailed Geckos (*Uroplatus phantasticus*).

Day 6 Andasibe, drive Tana

We will spend another morning in the forests of Andasibe, looking for any species we are still to see, before making the 5-hour drive back to Tana, where we stay for the night.

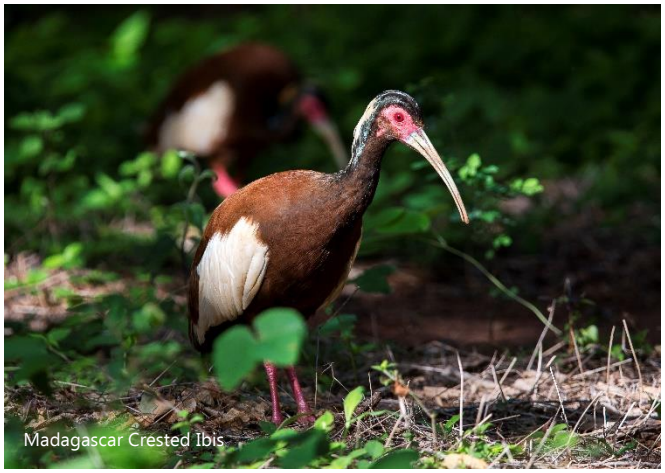
Days 7 – 8 Fly Mahajanga, Ankarafantsika National Park

This morning, we will head to Tana airport to catch a flight to Mahajanga on the island's north-western coastline. From there we will drive for approximately two and a half hours to the dry western forest reserve of Ampijoroa Forestry Station, part of the larger Ankarafantsika National Park. This reserve protects the Coquerel's Sifaka, a beautiful silky-white and chestnut lemur which frequently uses a tree right beside the car park to sleep. Other lemur species to look out for include Mongoose Lemur, Western Woolly Lemur, Milne-Edward's Sportive Lemur, Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur, Grey Mouse Lemur and the recently discovered (1998) Golden-brown Mouse Lemur; indeed, Ankarafantsika is the only place in the world to see this rare primate.


Coquerel's Sifaka (Jonas Christiansen)

Our visit will also give us a chance to see a wide variety of birds, such as the rare Van Dam's Vanga, Schlegel's Asity and White-breasted Mesite. Other species include Madagascar Crested Ibis, Coquerel's, Red-capped and Crested Couas, Sickle-billed Vanga, Madagascar Green Pigeon, Greater Vasa Parrot, Sakalava Weaver, Madagascar Jacana, African Open-billed Stork and Madagascar

Pygmy Kingfisher. A nearby lake has a population of Nile crocodiles and often a nesting pair of the critically endangered Madagascar Fish Eagle. Ampijoroa is also famous for the Jersey Trust conservation project for the Ploughshare Tortoise and, more generally, is one of the best areas on Madagascar for reptiles. Species to look out for include Rhinoceros Chameleon, Stump-tailed Chameleon, Madagascar Tree Boa and Giant Hog-nosed Snake.


Madagascar Crested Ibis

We will stay here for two nights in basic accommodation. Please also note that it will be very hot during the day at Ankarafantsika National Park, and so dawn starts will be the norm.

Day 9 Ankarafantsika NP, drive Katsepy

We have another morning to explore the national park of Ankarafantsika before making the return drive to Mahajanga. We will head to the busy port here and take a boat across the 5-mile-wide estuary of the Betsiboka River, one of the longest in Madagascar, with its source close to the capital Tana. In this final stretch the river is a very distinctive browny-red colour, as it carries a lot of sediment from the highlands. Once on the other side, we travel a few miles to the north to stay at a simple lodge on the beach of Bombetoka Bay.

Day 10 Lake Kinkony

This morning, we set off to the south-west for the 2-hour drive to Lake Kinkony, and into the area known as the Mahavavy-Kinkony complex, a Ramsar site which encompasses a vast amount of coastal and wetland habitat featuring mangroves, swamps, marshes, mudflats and dry forest as well. We will make some birding stops en route, where we might see Greater and Lesser Flamingoes and African Spoonbill, and cross the Mahavavy River before arriving at our campsite on the shores of Lake Kinkony, the second largest lake in Madagascar and home to many threatened species, including the critically endangered Madagascan Big-headed Turtle.

We will take a walk from the campsite and as well as keeping an eye on the lake, we will also scan the surrounding vegetation for endemic species such as Giant, Coquerel's and Red-capped Coua and Sickle-billed Vanga, which all reside in the area, and other more common species such as Souimanga Sunbird, Madagascar White-eye, Madagascar Swamp Warbler and Broad-billed Warbler.


Red-capped Coua

Day 11 Lake Kinkony, Katsepy

We wake before dawn this morning for what should be one of the highlights of the whole tour. We will get in our dugout canoes and silently make our way through the reedbeds here as daylight breaks. Our target species is the shy and reclusive Sakalava Rail and this location is one of the best places to try and see this endangered bird. Whilst doing so. we will also keep our eyes peeled for other rarities such as Meller's Duck, Madagascar Pond-heron, Madagascar Sacred Ibis, Madagascar Fish Eagle, and if extremely lucky, Madagascar Teal, as well as the usual heron and egret species.

After a good number of hours on the water we will head back to shore and then make our way back to Katsepy, making birding stops en route, and spending the night at the eco-lodge on the beach.

Day 12 Katsepy, fly Tana


Striated Heron, Cathy Harlow

Today's activities will depend on the time of the flight from Mahajanga to Tana, but on the assumption that it will be in the afternoon, we will have time this morning for a boat trip on the Betsiboka River. Heading upstream, we will stay close to the mangrove-lined shore and are likely to see egrets, sandpipers, Hamerkop, Black-winged Stilt and hopefully Humblot's Heron, amongst others, with Lesser and Greater Crested Terns passing overhead.

We head over to the other side of the river to Mahajanga and head to the airport for our flight back to Tana. We transfer to a comfortable hotel for the evening.

Day 13 Fly Toliara, Saint Augustin

This morning, we return to Tana airport to catch a flight to the town of Toliara on Madagascar's south-western coastline, where upon arrival we will head south to Saint Augustin Bay. This bay was the site of one of Madagascar's first European settlements when a group of shipwrecked sailors established a short-lived colony there in the 17th century. Nowadays, the area still holds patches of spiny forest and is a good place to search for the highly elusive Red-shouldered Vanga, plus Sakalava Weaver, Running Coua, Verreaux's Coua, and Madagascar Sandgrouse. The Onilahy River empties into the bay, and we will make a visit to the mud flats here, where we might see Greater Sand Plover, Grey Plover and Curlew Sandpiper, amongst other waders.

Today we can also take the opportunity to visit a nearby arboretum, which has an extensive collection of Madagascar spiny forest plants and is also a good location for birding, including the chance for a roosting Madagascar Nightjar. We spend the night at a simple lodge close to the beach in the village of Ankilibe, south of Toliara, where, if lucky, we might see Crab Plover.

Days 14 – 15 Ifaty

This morning, depending on the previous day's success, we may choose to take a second excursion to look for Red-shouldered Vanga and Verreaux's Coua, before we drive north for 28 kilometres to the small community of Ifaty. Here, we will be based for the next two nights in a comfortable beachfront hotel whilst we explore the bizarre spiny forest, Madagascar's most unique habitat. The region of spiny forest around the Fiherenana River is home to two of Madagascar's most attractive and localised birds, the stunning Long-tailed Ground-roller and the Sub-desert Mesite, whose defence mechanism is to freeze motionless on a branch. During our first evening here, we will take an afternoon walk along the coast to look for the endemic Madagascar Plover, and enjoy our first visit to the nearby Reniala Reserve. Walking through spiny forest here is a fascinating experience and an undoubted highlight for many. The forest is a botanical treasure house with 92% of spiny forest species endemic to Madagascar. The most striking of these are the strange spiny *Didiereaceae* (Octopus Trees), whose trunks can grow to up to 10 metres tall and curve to grow into the prevailing southerly wind. The forest also holds many fine examples of the Bottle Baobab, aloes, kalanchoe and *Pachypodium lanerii*.


Sub-desert Mesite (by Paul Stanbury)

The following morning, we will take a dawn birdwatching walk in an effort to find birds such as Banded Kestrel, Archbold's Newtonia, Thamnornis Warbler, Lafresnaye's Vanga, Hook-billed Vanga, Chabert's Vanga, Sickle-billed Vanga and Running Coua. Returning to our hotel for lunch, there will be an opportunity to relax on the beach or swim in the sea. As the tide retreats, the beach in front of the hotel attracts various wading birds including Whimbrel, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper, Grey Plover, Turnstone, White-fronted Plover and hopefully the rare and endemic Madagascar Plover. The hotel can also arrange snorkelling or diving excursions to the nearby reef (not included in the tour cost).

Day 16 Fly Tana

Depending on the time of our flight from Toliara to Tana today, there may be some time for further birding in the spiny forest. On arrival in Tana, we will head to our comfortable hotel close to the airport.

Days 17 – 18 Fly London

Our flight usually departs from Ivato International Airport in the early afternoon, arriving back into London the following morning.

Masoala National Park Post-Tour Extension

Day 17 Antananarivo

When the rest of the group are preparing to head home, we will take a private flight directly to the beautiful Masoala Forest Lodge, which is nestled in a sheltered cove, surrounded by Masoala National Park and opening onto the warm, coral-rich waters of the Tampolo Marine Reserve. From this lodge as our base, you can choose whether to take guided forest walks each day, enjoy some snorkelling and swimming or even try guided sea kayaking!

Days 18 – 19 Masoala National Park



Helmet Vanga (by Stephen Woodham)

We now have two full days to explore the Masoala National Park. Masoala is home to the most significant area of remaining tropical rainforest in Madagascar. In excess of 400,000 hectares of virgin rainforest clothe the peninsula, 220,200 hectares of which are protected within the Masoala National Park. This is a landscape of great natural beauty. Steep-sided mountains rise out of the clear blue waters of the Bay of Antongil. Fast flowing mountain streams tumble down their sides and forests of towering buttress-rooted trees, draped with climbers and epiphytes, create a home for a huge diversity of animal and plantlife. Indeed, Masoala is thought to be the richest area in the whole country for wildlife and, with much of this enormous biodiversity still largely unknown to science, who knows what we may find!

Ten species of lemur are known to occur here including Red-ruffed Lemur, White-fronted Brown Lemur, Eastern Woolly Lemur and Brown Mouse Lemur. These live alongside Fossa, Fanaloka and Aye-aye, although the latter three are elusive and difficult to find. Birdlife is abundant and includes such species as Brown Mesite, Madagascar Wood Rail, Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk, Pitta-like Ground Roller, Short-legged Ground-roller, Red-breasted Coua, White-throated Oxylabes, Forest Fody, Nuthatch Vanga, Rufous Vanga and the striking Helmet Vanga, the largest of this endemic family and relatively easy to find here. The rare and elusive Madagascar Serpent Eagle, Madagascar Red Owl and Bernier's Vanga also occur in Masoala, but are much more difficult to find and only seen by the fortunate few.

For the botanist, Masoala contains an exceptional palm flora, including some of the rarest and most unusual palms on the island. The forest coconut, *Voanioala gerardii*, occurs as scattered individuals on the peninsula and is known from only a handful of mature trees, making it one of the most endangered palms in the world. This is also a wonderful place for reptiles and amphibians including frogs such as the Tomato Frog and Green-backed Mantella, Panther Chameleon and two species of intricately camouflaged *Uroplatus* leaf-tailed Geckos.

Day 20 Fly Tana

Today will be the private flight back to Tana, the timing of which might allow one last morning of exploration in this pristine habitat. On arrival in Tana we will transfer to a nearby hotel for the night.

Days 21 – 22 Fly London

Our flight usually departs from Ivato International Airport in the early afternoon, arriving back into London the following morning.

Price:
4-night extension: £3,995 per person and single supp £775. This includes three nights at Masoala Forest Lodge and one night in Tana, all activities and excursions, park entry fees, return private flights, full board accommodation, transfers, plus local park guides.

NB: In the past we have arranged extensions to Masoala using the scheduled Air Madagascar flights, but these have proved very unreliable and increase the amount of travel time. For this reason, we have chosen instead to offer this post-tour extension to the exclusive Masoala Forest Lodge using the lodge's own, much more reliable, private flights.

Holiday Inclusions / Extra Expenses

The following costs are included in the price of the holiday:

- International and domestic flights in economy class
- Full board accommodation throughout (i.e. breakfast, lunch and dinner)
- All transport and guiding
- Park fees and reserve entry fees
- Tips to reserve / national park guides and trackers, drivers, waiters, porters and other locals

The following are not included and should be budgeted for:

- Visa (e-visa or purchased on arrival in Tana)
- Drinks (though your guides will keep a supply of bottled water on the bus for you to help yourself to during the day)
- Tip for Local Guide (who will be with you the whole time)
- Any other personal spending e.g. souvenirs, laundry

Tour Grading

This tour has been graded B/C. We will be covering considerable distances on this holiday, although the overland travel has been cut significantly by the addition of several internal flights. There is no major trekking on tour, but there will be plenty of daytime walks in a variety of Malagasy habitat types and in some of the major forest reserves of Madagascar we will organise night walks to see nocturnal lemurs, reptiles and sometimes roosting birds. All walks are optional and taken at a

leisurely pace, but they will often be over hilly, rocky or forested terrain, and in hot, humid conditions. Since animal activity dies away quite quickly after the first few hours of daylight, we will need to make full use of the early hours and so dawn starts will be encouraged.

Please note that the trails at Mantadia are steep, narrow, covered in roots and slippery after rain. Walking here is in single file and can be tough and tiring. Walking boots or shoes are a must and some people may find a trekking pole useful. We may also opt to leave the main trails and clamber over rough terrain or through dense vegetation in order to find wildlife that has been spotted deeper into the forest.

The months of September and October immediately precede the wet season, so the air is heavy with impending rain and rising temperatures, but they are the best months in which to see wildlife. Many birds are nesting, reptiles are emerging from their winter rest and mating, and the lemurs and birds are most easily seen at this time as many deciduous forest trees are still without their leaves. As such, the long travelling on some days (with stops as required) and walking in the tropical climate demand at least average general fitness. It should be noted that there are several long vehicle journeys included in this tour. Madagascar's top wildlife sites are well spread out and so a few long drives cannot be avoided if you wish to see a good cross-section of the island's habitats and animal-life.

When travelling in Madagascar it is necessary to accept that the roads may be poor on occasion and the internal airlines may not always leave exactly on time! Likewise, whilst we will provide comfortable lodge and hotel accommodation throughout, it must be stressed that Madagascar is a very poor country and has yet to establish the same high standard of tourist facilities found in many other African destinations. Several of the hotels/lodges are basic in nature and lacking in many of the comforts found in western hotels. What is needed more than anything, therefore, is a good sense of adventure, and if you come equipped with this, you are sure to enjoy the fascinating animals, birds, plants, culture and landscapes of this unique African island.

International Flights

We usually fly to Tana with Ethiopian Airlines via Addis Ababa (there are no direct flights from the UK to Madagascar), and quite often there is an Ethiopian flight from Manchester and a handful of other European cities that links up with the flight from Addis to Tana. Please ask the office for more details about this if of interest. Flight routes and timings will be confirmed on your invoice once these have been booked. You do not need a visa for either route. Flights are usually overnight in both directions.

Air France does provide a viable alternative, flying via Paris, but we have found this route unreliable in recent years, with difficult connection times in Paris and an extremely late arrival into Tana. Should you wish to instead fly with Air France, we would strongly recommend flying to Paris and staying overnight at an airport hotel ahead of your flight to Tana the next morning. This flight arrives very late the same day as the Ethiopian Airlines arrival, meaning that you would meet up with the rest of the group at breakfast on your first morning in Madagascar.

Flying with Ethiopian Airlines means that we arrive on a much smaller aircraft at a more civilised time of day, making the (somewhat chaotic!) process of purchasing a visa on arrival a little easier. It also allows the afternoon to recover from the long journey. The downside is that there is a fairly long transfer in Addis Ababa on the way home. They do not offer premium economy but do offer upgrades to business class; please contact the Naturetrek office for a quote.

Accommodation

Most of the hotels and lodges have private facilities, although at Ankarafantsika facilities may be shared.

The one night of camping at Lake Kinkony will be basic but there will be staff there to pitch the tents and a chef. Foam mattresses and sleeping bags will be provided, and at this time of year it will be warm at night. The site is at the edge of the lake and there are basic cooking and toilet facilities and shelters for the tents. Only an overnight bag will be required – luggage can be left at the accommodation in Katsepy.

Madagascar is becoming ever more popular as a holiday destination and at present there are too few beds for the number of people who wish to visit. It is getting increasingly difficult for groups to secure an allocation of rooms and, whilst we at Naturetrek always reserve our room allocation up to two years in advance of the holiday, we do occasionally find that we do not get our first choice of hotel or lodge. This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that hotels and lodges in Madagascar are notorious for overbooking their rooms. Although we always strive to keep our groups in the same lodge whilst exploring a park, on rare occasions it may be necessary to split the stay, or group, between two. The names of the hotels and lodges will be confirmed a little closer to the departure date, but if you require any additional information on accommodation, please do not hesitate to call the Naturetrek office.

Your Safety & Security

You have chosen to travel to Madagascar. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/madagascar regularly up to the point of travel.

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.