

Wild Slovenia

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly to Ljubljana; transfer to Žerovnica.

Day 2/7 Excursions around southern Slovenia from Žerovnica.

Day 8 Fly London.

Departs

June

Focus

Birds, flowers, butterflies and all round natural history

Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate day walks

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code SVN02)

Highlights:

- Single-centre tour based on a comfortable working farm in the attractive village of Žerovnica close to the vast turlough of Lake Cerknica
- Grey-headed, White-backed & Black Woodpeckers, plus Ural Owl possible
- Adriatic Lizard, Lady's Slipper, Military and Burnt-tip Orchids amongst other temperate orchids
- Wryneck, Red-backed Shrike, Barred Warbler, Scarlet Rosefinch and Corncrake all possible
- Eat at the farm with local traditional cuisine and wines!
- Botanise on the limestone grasslands of the Karst
- Led by expert naturalist guides



Images from top: Ural Owl, Lake Cerknica, Siberian Iris meadow (by Domen Stanic)



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Introduction

Situated midway between the better known areas of the Alps and the Adriatic, the region of Notranjska (or Inner Carniola in English) has largely escaped the attention of foreign tourists, and remains wonderfully unspoilt and rich in wildlife. Much of the region's natural history revolves around the phenomena associated with Karst (limestone) topography and the dissolution of limestone by rainwater. This area is the eastern limb of the original *Karst* and many of the features, flora and fauna were originally described here in the 18th century by famous Austro-Hungarian naturalists and polymaths such as Giovanni Scopoli and Johann von Valvasor. During this single centre holiday we will be based in the pretty, traditional village of Žerovnica, close to the vast turlough of Lake Cerknica. This is one of the largest 'intermittent lakes' in Europe, rising and falling by up to 7 metres each year, fed by underground springs and snow melt. From our base on a traditional working farm we will explore the area's diverse habitats, from the damp, seasonally-flooded grasslands around the lake, to the subalpine meadows and cool Beech woodlands of the Dinaric Alps, and cold spring-fed peatlands of the Bloke plateau. This rich biodiversity extends across the board to its birds, butterflies, plant life and other wildlife and, once the region's interesting traditional architecture and agriculture are added to the mix, it becomes evident that Inner Carniola offers the perfect blend of natural history, landscapes, culture and tradition as material for a fascinating and enjoyable week.

Itinerary

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 Ljubljana, transfer Zerovnica

We begin our holiday with a lunchtime flight from London Stansted to Slovenia's charming capital city of Ljubljana, from which it is a short transfer of only around an hour south-west to the traditional village of Žerovnica. Our base for the week is the Logar Farm, a comfortable and modern house in a small village on the eastern shores of the Lake Cerknica in southern Slovenia. The nearby ancient Roman city of Postonja was called Adelsberg when it was the capital of the Duchy of Carniola under Austria-Hungary, and lies on the Gemina Roman road that connected the cities of Rome, Aquileia and Emona (modern day Ljubljana), a crucial route avoiding mountains and the main route through which animals and plants colonized the Italian peninsula at the end of the Ice Age. The grounds of the farm are rich in birdlife including breeding Wryneck and Red-backed Shrike, and early morning walks down to the lake bed with its beautiful flowery meadows should yield the likes of Whinchat, Fieldfare, Scarlet Rosefinch and Grey-headed Woodpecker. We should arrive at our base in the late afternoon, giving a little time for a walk around the farm before dinner.

Day 2

Lake Cerknica

Today we will explore the lake and its surroundings, all within 6-8 kilometres of the farm. This is a circular route around the lake, visiting the various features, and provides an excellent introduction to the area. We begin on foot, exploring the farm tracks down to the lake bed. Passing through open farmland with large scattered Sessile Oak, most of the farmland is given over to small-scale cultivation and hay-meadows, rich in wild flowers including Meadow Clary (*Salvia pratensis*) and a range of scabiouses and knapweeds. Nearing the lake, in the area subject to regular winter flooding, the trees vanish and the landscape opens out onto more than 3000 hectares of flat, open *polje* with fabulous meadows rich in orchids such as Early Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza incarnata*), Green-winged Orchid (*Orchis morio*) and swathes of Yellow Rattle (*Rhinanthus minor*). Breeding birds include Whinchat, Ashy-headed Yellow Wagtail and Tree Pipit. Moving round the lake we will try to catch up with other breeding birds including Black and White Stork, Sedge Warbler, Corncrake, White-tailed Eagle and Bittern while examining some of the varied plant communities with rarities such as Shrubby Violet (*Viola elatior*) and Bog Orchid (*O. palustris*) which here replaces the very similar Lax-flowered Orchid (*O. laxiflora*) which is common closer to the coast.

Day 3

Javorniki & the forests above the lake

Today we will explore the mountains above the lake which are covered in extensive forests of Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and White Fir (*Abies alba*) and with a magnificent ground flora that include Blue-eyed Mary (*Omphalodes verna*), Hacquetia (*Hacquetia epipactis*) and the scarce endemic Henbane Bell (*Scopolia carniolica*) (named after Giovanni Scopoli who botanised in these very forests). We will also attempt to see some of its rarer birds including Ural Owl and Three-toed Woodpecker, both present in some numbers in these forests but easy to miss in the dense canopy. Other species such as Willow, Crested and Coal Tit and the numerous Firecrests are much easier to see while butterflies such as Chequered Skipper, Hungarian Glider and Woodland Brown may be seen along the forest tracks.

On at least one evening, depending upon the weather, we will come out after dinner to try to hear the large numbers of Corncrakes and Spotted Crakes which nest around the lake and sing mostly at night, along with Scops Owls, Savi's Warblers and Quail.

Day 4

Rakov Škocjan & Planina

The outflow from the lake runs through a deep limestone gorge, Rakov Škocjan, and into cave systems set in thick forest before tumbling deep into the karst. Today we will explore the gorge and some of the caves with easy access, as well as the warmer and richer *polje* where the river re-emerges at Planina some kilometres away. Many of the birds, animals and plants at the first of our stops are similar to those seen yesterday but include some new species such as Fir Mistletoe (*Viscum abietis*), perhaps just a subspecies of the Common Mistletoe (*V. album*), but which parasitizes White Fir, making an interesting Christmassy pairing. Other elements of interest include several natural bridges in the gorge where the river runs through tunnels in the limestone before re-emerging, and a wide range of fern species which love the humid air, cold temperatures and low

light levels. The final stop in Rakov Škocjan is at *Tkalca jama*, the Weaver's Cave where the River Rak disappears into the Karst. We pick it up again where it emerges as the Unica at *Planinska jama* a few kilometres away, before flowing across the *polje*. As it rushes out of the cave there are breeding Dippers, Grey Wagtails, Hawfinches and Spotted Flycatchers whilst the open meadows of the *polje* have abundant Red-backed Shrikes, accompanied, as is often the case in central Europe, by Barred Warblers who seem to obtain nest protection by breeding close to the shrikes in an unusual symbiotic pairing. Amongst the magnificent flower meadows, one species we must look out for is the Amethyst Meadow Squill (*Scilla litardierei*), a Balkan species at the limit of its distribution and at its only site in Slovenia.

Day 5

The Bloke Plateau

The Bloke Plateau, about 15 minutes south of the lake, is one of the coldest sites in Slovenia and a remarkable area of cold springs that have given rise to a peat-bog that is one of the most important botanical sites in Slovenia, and also includes some rare invertebrates. As the cold water with little oxygen emerges from the rocks it inhibits the decomposition of dead plant material which has accumulated in the form of peat, which retains moisture and dampens down temperature changes in midsummer with the result that many rare plants survive here. One of the rarities which we may be lucky to find is the endangered Summer Lady's-tresses (*Spiranthes aestivalis*) and Summer Snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*) as well as commoner species such as Burnt-tip Orchid (*Orchis ustulata*), Water Avens (*Geum rivale*) and Great Sundew (*Drosera anglica*).

The woodlands here are largely Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and support a range of unusual birds including Common Crossbill and Nutcracker, while the droppings and prints left by Otters can often be seen along the streams as these contain the commonest food source in these cold, nutrient-poor waters: European Freshwater Crayfish. Also present are several rare species of butterflies that prefer cold, damp conditions including Arran Brown, Chestnut Heath, Woodland Brown and Poplar Admiral.

Day 6

Ždrcelj and Mount Snežnik

Most of the forests in Slovenia are managed for timber, but small patches of near-virgin forest survive, including Ždrcelj, a recently UNESCO-listed area of almost untouched Norway Spruce, White Fir and Beech. Ždrcelj, as beautiful as it is impossible to pronounce, is an area of approximately 1km² which, while not absolutely virgin forest, has not been subject to any cutting for well over a century. At 1350m above sea level, this forest holds large amounts of dead timber and so attracts significant populations of woodpeckers including the endangered Balkan subspecies *lilfordi* of the White-backed Woodpecker and the rather commoner Three-toed Woodpecker, as well as Ural Owl and good populations of small birds. There are many caves and crevasses in the area and this has protected it from exploitation. Close by is a small group of Lady's Slipper Orchids (*Cypripedium calceolus*), a very rare species in the Dinaric Alps. The forests are home to Brown Bear, Grey Wolf and Lynx, any one of which would be a remarkable sighting. The bears in particular are common, the females giving birth to large numbers of cubs, 3 or sometimes 4, suggesting plenty

of food and good genetic variety, though they are mainly active at night so we are very unlikely to catch sight of them.

Depending on the time available and the weather, we may choose to visit Mount Snežnik this afternoon, the highest mountain in southern Slovenia at 1796 metres. The summit of Mount Snežnik is a botanical reserve which holds both high alpine species and plants more typical of the Dinaric chain further south in Croatia, including the Dalmatian Rockbell (*Edrianthus dalmaticus*).

Day 7 Senožeče and the Nanoštica Valley

Lake Cerknica lies in the Danube catchment and a short distance away towards the coast the river systems flow into the Adriatic. The most westerly arm of the Black Sea river system is the Nanoštica valley, which we will visit today together with the extensive dry limestone grasslands close to Senožeče, with its fine displays of orchids and large numbers of butterflies.

The River Nanoštica emerges in springs from the foot of the limestone massif of Mount Nanos, passing through beautiful unspoilt farmland and damp flowery meadows before flowing into the River Pivka and then underground, before re-emerging as the River Unica in the *Planinska Jama* which we visited on Day 4. The flowery meadows include superb displays of Siberian Iris (*Iris sibirica*) as well as other wetland plants, while butterflies include the Large Copper and Large Chequered Skipper. Not far away, and reached in a matter of minutes, are the mountain meadows of Mount Vremščica with large displays of orchids including Fragrant Orchid (*Gymnadenia conopsea*), Orange Lily (*Lilium bulbiferum*) and Carnic Lily (*L. carniolicum*) and large numbers of rare butterflies including Great Sooty Satyr, Queen-of-Spain Fritillary and Clouded Apollo.

Our final stop of the day, close to our route back to Žerovnica, are the meadows close to Senožeče. Butterflies are the most obvious attraction here with Heath, Glanville, Knapweed, Assman's, Nickerl's and Marsh Fritillary all on the wing in early June, though we will also enjoy the beautiful displays of orchids and some interesting specialities such as the Yellow-berried Mistletoe (*Loranthus europaeus*).

Day 8 Transfer Ljubljana, fly London

Our flight from Ljubljana back to Stansted usually departs in the early afternoon, giving us a little time this morning to enjoy a final walk in the local area or perhaps make a stop on the way back to Ljubljana. We are due to arrive back into London Stansted in the early evening.

Tour grading

Grade A/B – Easy to moderate day walks. We travel by minibus most days, but will spend plenty of the time exploring on foot, expecting to cover between about 3 and 8km on a typical day. Please note that some of the trails can be narrow, steep and rocky on occasion. In particular, the path

up to Mount Snežnik and in the forest at Ždroclje involve some steep ascents (around 10 minutes walking) although everyone can proceed at their own pace and enjoy the wayside flowers. Enjoyment of this tour, therefore, demands a reasonable level of fitness and an enjoyment of walking. All walks will be taken at a leisurely 'botanical' pace, and a built-in flexibility will take account of the overall abilities of the group.

Focus

This is an all-round natural history holiday, focusing on the outstanding birdlife, flora and fantastic scenery of the area. We will also enjoy the rich diversity of butterflies and other fauna, as well as a little of the local culture and cuisine.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour, except for any meals required during travel to and from Slovenia. We will be based on the Logar Farm in the village of Žerovnica for the entire week. Rooms are divided between neighbouring houses, are a mixture of doubles and twins, and most are en-suite (these will be allocated on a first come, first served basis). The remainder of the rooms have a private, separate bathroom. Note that as this is not a traditional hotel, all the rooms are very different! We will eat breakfast and dinner at our accommodation each day, taking picnic lunches with us to keep us going during our daily excursions.

Weather

At this time of year, the weather should be sunny and warm with occasional showers, and daytime temperatures typically range from 15 to 25°C. That said, the weather in Slovenia varies enormously from place to place and it can certainly feel cooler in the forests and on higher ground. Rain showers are always possible at any time of year.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Slovenia. 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 – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice prior to 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.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.