

# Slovenia - Bears, Birds & Caves

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

**Day 1** Fly to Ljubljana/Venice; transfer to lodge.

**Day 2/5** Excursions from the lodge including 3 hide visits a cave visit and various other local sites.

**Day 6** Fly London.

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### Departs

May/June.

### Focus

Mammals, Birds, and all-round natural history.

### Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate walks.

### Dates and Prices

See [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) (tour code SVN03).

### Highlights:

- Watch and photograph Brown Bears.
- Visit a spectacular Karst Cave.
- Ural Owl, Common Rosefinch, Black Woodpecker just some special birds.
- Corncrake possible in meadows.
- Stone Marten and Golden Jackal possible.
- Night drive to search for mammals.
- A host of butterflies and orchids.



Brown Bear, Ural Owl, Karst Caves



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## Introduction

Slovenia, squeezed between Italy and Croatia, is not a destination that many have visited, and this holiday offers naturalists and lovers of the outdoors some exciting and unusual highlights. For example, who would expect that you can enjoy spellbinding close encounters with Brown Bears? And who knew that one of the largest lakes, Lake Cerknica, sometimes disappears completely in the summer? In the south-west of the country, an extensive karst cave system abounds with underground rivers and amazing fossils of long extinct Cave Bears. And then there are the birds, abounding in the forests and meadows. Our comfortable lodge, nestled in a quiet and remote area, gives us superb opportunities to enjoy these at their best.

## 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/Venice, transfer to lodge

Today we take a direct flight into either Slovenia's capital Ljubljana or into Venice depending on flight timings and schedule. From there we journey to our base located in the south of Slovenia close to the Notranjska Regional Park and Risnjak National Park. This is a beautiful part of the world with teeming meadows, beautiful forests and rolling hills with a river running close to our base. We will arrive and settle into our small lodge before going for a short excursion to explore the immediate area should time allow.

### Day 2 - Lake Cerknika

This morning, and indeed each morning, there will be the option to head out before breakfast for a walk from the lodge. Red-backed Shrikes breed in the meadows here, Black Redstarts are common and Grey-headed Woodpecker may also be found. The river running not far from the lodge holds Otters though they are a challenge to see of course while White and Black Stork may be seen overhead and raptors may include Hobby and Goshawk. Hawfinch also breed here in good numbers.



**Red-backed Shrike**

After breakfast we will drive out to the nearby Lake Cerknika. This is the largest intermittent lake in the world and at this time of year, depending on the season of course, it will be largely dry and it is

a wonderful area to explore with wet meadows and fertile fields. The meadows here hold a good population of Corncrake, with Common Rosefinch also breeding in good numbers. Marsh Fritillaries jink over the grassland with Pearly Heath, Clouded Apollo, Southern Festoon and Sooty Copper possible. Bog Orchid, Green-winged Orchid, Broad-leaved Marsh Orchid and Burnt-tip Orchid are just some of the special flowers that can be found and other birds may include Whinchat, Tree Pipit and Marsh Warbler with Wryneck to be found in the gardens and orchards while Barred Warbler can also be found. Moving around the lake we will try to find Black and White Stork with White-tailed Eagle and Bittern possible.

After a varied visit we shall return to the lodge for lunch before transferring to our first bear hide for the late afternoon and evening. We shall leave the lodge at around 3pm and return to the lodge at around 9pm for dinner. We will sit quietly in a hide specially designed and placed in wonderful locations in these special forests. We shall hope of course for a Brown Bear to appear and we will likely be split into groups of 3 or 4 in each hide. After around 4-5 hours in the hide we will be picked up and transferred back to the lodge for a delicious meal and to discuss the day's sightings. More detailed information about the hides is at the end of the daily itinerary.

### Day 3 - Križna Jama Cave and Bear Hide

On this morning, we will visit the nearby and spectacular Karst Cave of Križna Jama. This is the only naturally preserved tourist cave in Slovenia. This cave really is one of the most beautiful water caves in Slovenia with 22 emerald lakes connected by an underground crystal clear stream. The extremely slow growing sinter barriers which have naturally developed, now separating the lakes and grow incredibly slowly at around 0.1 mm per year. The fragility of these is the reason why a restriction is required to the daily number of tourists that are allowed to visit the cave.



Križna Jama Cave

We can find here the ancient bones of the long extinct Cave Bear (*Ursus spelaeus/ingressus*) and a particularly well-preserved skull can be seen. The cave bear became extinct about 24,000 years ago and the fossils of this species are indeed most frequently found in caves. There are many living creatures here too and with 45 underground animal species it ranks the cave 4th in the world by its diversity. Various amphipods and six species of tiny snails can be found with cave spider (*Meltda taenaria*) and Cave Worm (*Pelodrilus Buresch*) also possible to find. Lesser horseshoe bats also use this cave.

We shall undertake an hour-long tour with the initial parts of the cave featuring large cave halls with some points interrupted by small stalactites. The main tunnel continues its way through the great hall and the first lake where we shall enjoy a relaxed boat ride across the lake for around ten minutes. Before entering, visitors receive boots and a flashlight.

Please note Križna cave is a natural cave with no concrete or lights. The walk through the caves to the first lake has around 150 steps (1 way) and the walking is on natural stairs and will be uneven and often slippery terrain. On this excursion you will see a cave bear skull and also join a short boat ride in the cave. This excursion is optional but walking along the paths, used by cave bears for thousands of years, and paddling along the lake in this amazing karst cave is a special and unique experience.

This is a short tour so after this we will be back outside to enjoy exploring the surrounding habitat for more birds and butterflies in particular. We may visit Planinsko Polje with its lovely flat valley with crystal clear stream and wet meadows. We will have lunch again at the lodge and at around 3pm we will transfer again to one of the nearby hides within the forests to hopefully enjoy more Brown Bear activity and to photograph these magnificent animals.

## Day 4 - Forests around Cercnika/Rakov Skocjan National Park/Bear Hide

This morning we will head out into the forests surrounding Lake Cercnika and enjoy some varied walks. We will explore the mountains above the lake around the Rakov Skocjan National Park which are dominated by extensive forests of Beech and White Fir. 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 always a



**Ural Owl**

challenge of course in the dense canopy. Middle Spotted, Lesser Spotted and Black Woodpecker are more likely and will be searched for. Other species may include Crested and Willow Tit and Firecrest. Depending on the month butterflies such as Chequered Skipper, Hungarian Glider and Woodland Brown may be seen along the forest tracks (June more likely) while Poplar Admiral is also possible. Earlier in May Southern White Admiral, Pearl bordered Fritillary and Glanville Fritillary may be seen. There are some impressive limestone gorges in the forests here and we shall explore the finest sites in search of the varied wildlife to be found here. On the rivers Dippers and Grey Wagtails are common and these forests are where the Black Storks breed while Golden Eagle is always possible.

We shall return for lunch and again at around 3pm be taken to one of the nearby hides for our final session and attempt to watch and photograph Brown Bears at close quarters.

On at least one evening we will come out after dinner to try to hear the large numbers of Corncrakes and Spotted Crakes which nest around the lake and are most vocal at night. Scops Owls, Savi's Warblers and Quail may also be heard.

## Day 5 & 6 - Exploring the local area and Mount Snežnik

Today will be left totally free and the wildlife we have been lucky enough to find during the previous days will determine where we go and what we focus on. The whole of our surrounding area is superb habitat with coniferous and deciduous forests, open grassland and meadows and lots of pretty, small villages that we will stop off at for a coffee and to explore. We may head out again searching for Ural Owl, visit areas of spruce forest to search for Three-toed Woodpecker and enjoy



**Black Woodpecker**

the meadows and forest glades searching for butterflies and birds. A visit to the area around mount Snežnik will be a very good option today.

This afternoon we will not visit a bear hide but instead keep exploring the local area through the afternoon and may well take lunch with us to stay out in the field for the whole day. After a full day exploring the area we will return for dinner at the lodge.

After dinner there will be the option to go out for a night drive with a spotlight to search for mammals in particular. We shall drive around the local area, stopping to sweep the spotlight across open fields and forest glades in the hope of finding mammals. Roe Deer, Red Deer, Badger, Fox and Stone Marten are most likely but Golden Jackal have been seen in fields very close to the lodge and their population is increasing with Wolf and Lynx inhabiting these forests but of course very difficult to find. A Lynx was photographed using a camera trap very recently in the grounds of the lodge so they are around! Ural and Tawny owls may be encountered also. A night drive may well be offered on other nights after dinner for those who wish.

## Day 7 - Transfer Ljubljana/Venice, fly London

Today we will have a final chance for some morning exploration around the lodge before making our way back through the wonderful Slovenian countryside to Ljubljana. This is a most varied and exciting holiday, perfect for the all-round naturalist and those wishing to achieve wonderful close views of Brown Bear in a special setting.

## The Bear Hides

There are 32 hides, across 8 superb locations in the surrounding forests, designed and built by our lodge owner who is passionate about the natural world and bears in particular! Each hide fits 2-4 people and every hide has been tailored to the needs of photographers and to obtain the best possible view of the animals. For more space and comfort, we will have 2 people per hide. They have been selected carefully regarding location and light availability and are approximately at eye level with the bears. It may be that you visit the same hide multiple times in accordance to higher bear activity.



**Brown Bear**

They can be equipped with bean bags and the option to fix tripod heads so are perfect for photographers. This area holds one of the world's richest densities of Brown Bears. An estimated 560 bears inhabit these vast forests and while nothing is guaranteed we have a wonderful chance here to both observe and photograph these wonderful animals.

The hide sessions will start at around 3pm as we leave the lodge and last until around sunset (approximately 4-5 hours in the hide). For everyone's safety, an experienced state ranger will always also be in a nearby hide. Depending on the location it takes about 20 to 50 minutes of driving followed by around 100m to 500m of walking along a clear trail to the hide.



**Slovenia's Ancient Woodland**

The hides we use will depend on the recent success of sightings and the opportunity will be there to experience different hides with different views of the forest. After being dropped off the group will be briefed and enter the hide. The hides are small but comfortable and there will be plenty of space as we will be split between different hides. After entering the hide, we shall be left here and picked up around 4-5 hours later.



Whilst in the hides it will be important to stay quiet. Please use hushed voices if you need to speak and limited movement all help to increase the chances of success. There is not a toilet in the hide, so it is a case of going to the toilet before entering.

#### **Bear Hides**

A small amount of corn (individual kernels) is put out in front of each hide to encourage the bears to visit, and it is done in a highly regulated way that means the bears do not rely on this food source but visit to take advantage of an extra offering. Should a bear visit, it will often spend a prolonged time in the area trying to find the concealed corn and this makes the whole experience very natural indeed. There will not be multiple bears on show for the duration of our time in the hide and patience is required of course. When a bear appears though it is a very special moment, and often breath-taking views can be obtained. For photography we recommend lenses starting from 70-200mm up to 500 mm or more. The photography distance will vary and is often between around 10 -15m and up to 50m.

## Tour grading

Grade A/B – Easy to moderate walks and activities. The walks in the cave are of grade B.

## Focus

Mammals, Birds, Butterflies, Orchids, photography and other natural history.

In terms of the variation of the species seen throughout the tour dates:

May – Late spring brings many migrating birds on passage, arriving and setting up territories.

June – Summer brings reliable sightings of butterflies and orchids. Birds are in full breeding mode and there is less migration happening.

August – Following the breeding season there is a good chance to see active fledglings, notably woodpeckers.

All months have an equal and very high chance of the bears visiting, as well as other mammals.

## Food & Accommodation

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 stay at a small, comfortable guesthouse called "Ana's Guesthouse". Ana's guesthouse is very well situated in the village of Retje in the green Karst of Loški Potok. Surrounded by meadows and forest, wildlife is on our doorstep and the guest house offers comfortable rooms with en-suite bathrooms. Typical Slovene dishes from fresh local ingredients are prepared daily. There is free Wi-Fi.

Payments can be made with either cash (EUR) or card (Maestro, Mastercard, Visa, etc.).

Please note that tea and coffee are not available in the rooms but can be accessed from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. at the bar in the restaurant.



**Ana's Guesthouse**

## Weather

At this time of year we can hope for fine and warm weather although we must be prepared for rain of course. It is worth visiting <https://www.accuweather.com> before travelling and searching for Markovec, Slovenia.

## 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](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.

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