

France - The Lot Valley

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 11 May 2017

Report compiled by Jason Mitchell



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Tour participants: Jason Mitchell (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 4th May

Sunny, 19°C

With the flight arriving on time into Limoges, we loaded the minibus and were soon heading south, noting Black Kite and Buzzard along the way. Leaving the autoroute, the hills started to close in around us as we entered the limestone 'Causse'. Here we had our first glimpse of the region's rich flora; most prominent was the yellow of Scorpion Senna, the white of Snow-in-Summer and the lovely pink of Rock Soapwort. Arriving at the hotel, we were soon settled into our rooms ahead of the first of many excellent evening meals together.

Day 2

Friday 5th May

Sunny, 21°C

On our first morning we drove east to the village of Cabrerets, parking the minibus next to the ancient bridge that spans the clear waters of the River Célé. In a nearby thicket, a Melodious Warbler sang its jumbled song and, before long, the first of several Black Kites drifted along the valley. From here, we took a rough track that skirted a cliff, giving lovely views over the river below and of dozens of Troglodyte dwellings on the opposite side of the valley. Overhead, ever-busy Crag Martins made for a welcome distraction, along with a group of Alpine Swifts that sped through giving the briefest opportunity to pick out their characteristic white undersides. The way was awash with colourful blooms, including Meadow Saxifrage, Bastard Balm, Wild Jasmine, Bloody Crane's-bill and the delightful Tassel Hyacinth. At the same time we were seemingly surrounded by birdsong as Nightingale, Blackcap and Bonelli's Warbler all belted out their best repertoires. Further up the slope, in a more open area, some super examples of Lady, Early Purple and Monkey Orchids stood proud of surrounding grasses, along with a rather impressive example of a Lady x Monkey hybrid. Other interesting plants here were Blue Bugle, Pink Bindweed and sheets of Wild Candytuft.

Gaining height, we eventually came into an area of scrub and grassland known as the Forêt de Monclar, where we enjoyed our first picnic lunch. Here we delighted in a host of butterflies that were on the wing: Berger's Clouded Yellow, Scarce Swallowtail, Adonis Blue and our only Southern White Admiral of the week. Another attractive insect was the striking, yellow-and-black Ascalaphid or Owl-fly, a relative of the lacewings but more closely resembling a dragonfly. Along a side track a Subalpine Warbler sang from deep cover, but our attention was drawn to the numerous fritillary butterflies flitting over low vegetation about our feet; a careful inspection turned up two species – Knapweed and Spotted, with the latter also present in an unusual aberrant colour form with almost entirely black forewings.

Having reached the highest point of the walk, we took time to inspect a Neolithic dolmen (burial chamber) and in doing so found some large and impressive specimens of Burnt Orchid, which had several of the group on all-fours in an effort to capture a nice photo. On the plateau, new birds included a pair of Woodlarks making their fluttering song-flight overhead, and the soft purring song of a Turtle Dove gave its

presence away. The home-strait was all downhill and took us past a nicely restored shepherd's hut before arriving back at the bus.

Day 3

Saturday 6th May

Early rain, sunny later, 14°C

Waking to rain, we decided to visit the caves at Pech Merle, a cave system discovered in 1922 by some local children. The walls of several chambers are painted with dramatic murals depicting Woolly Mammoths, spotted horses and bison, dating from 25,000 years BC. Studies suggest that several handprint images were produced using a delicate spitting technique, and other human elements exist as the footprints of children, preserved in fossilised clay more than half a mile underground. After the guided tour, the group looked around the very informative museum. With everyone having enjoyed a rather special, if somewhat different visit, we left the caves and were pleased to find the weather had improved in time for our picnic.

Replete, we set out on a short circular interpretation trail which finished with spectacular views across the Céle Valley. Once more orchids were well represented, with Sword-leaved Helleborine and both Fragrant and Man Orchids making it onto the tour species list. Towards the end of the walk, gathering dark clouds gave way to a heavy shower that saw a swift return to the bus, followed by a search for refreshments. Our quest led us to a nice little café in Bouziés where the very hospitable patron served coffee and ice cream, the latter now appropriate as the sun had once more returned. The rapidly improving weather brought out some exciting raptors, with both Short-toed and Booted Eagles noted, along with a probable, distant Egyptian Vulture. With most of the group opting for a short walk, others relaxed back at the café and were treated to excellent views of a male Cirl Bunting singing from a nearby garden wall. Returning to the bus once more, we headed for the hotel.

As the evening had turned out warm and sunny, after dinner we drove a little way up the Céle valley to a cliff face which is a regular nest site for Eagle-Owl. We parked in a lay-by next to the river before the light faded, and scanned the cliff for any movement. Sadly, the owls didn't show, but we did have wonderful views of bats as they skimmed over our heads until we finally gave up and returned to the hotel.

Day 4

Sunday 7th May

Sun with scattered cloud, 19°C

Today we drove east to Brengues, parking at the start of a walk which leads to the 'Chateau des Anglais', another of the many remnant fortifications dotted around the Lot region as testimony to the ferocity of the One Hundred Years War. Emerging from the village, we gradually climbed, reaching a wide ledge traversing the side of the cliff with lovely views over the river and beyond. Here, close to the chateau, was a superb assemblage of colourful plants with many orchids, including our first Woodcock Orchids and the only Greater Butterfly Orchids of the tour, along with the attractive Spiked Star-of-Bethlehem.

Emerging through the small hamlet of Le Causse, where we had a wonderful encounter with a Common Redstart flitting around the roof of a pretty house, we followed the road back to the minibus. Having

relocated to down by the river for lunch, we found the colourful and bizarre Purple Toothwort, a parasite growing on the roots of Alder, Poplar and Willow, and glittering Banded Demoiselles flitted over the river.

We then headed up the other side of the valley onto the high 'Causse' near Mas de Pégouriés. Here there is a patchwork of woodland, scrub, and more open country grazed by sheep, with impressive dolmens a relic of the very distant past. We parked the minibus, and immediately started to circle the highest point, finding an area where dry-stone walls enclosed several small fields which were carpeted with Early Purple and Monkey Orchids. This was also a good spot for the many low-growing plants that thrive on these dry, shallow, limestone karst soils, good examples being Blue Flax and White Rock-rose. Butterflies were also noted with Orange Tip, Common Blue and Wall Brown all seen. A singing Cuckoo was conspicuous as it circled a Dolmen, performing its song flight, eventually landing and giving distant views, while a smart, male Stonechat was more obliging, perching high on a nearby bush. However, both of these were 'trumped' by two Bee-eaters which skimmed over the tree tops giving their distinctive, rippling, flight calls.

Another successful day was rounded off nicely with yet another fine example of regional fare for dinner back at the hotel.

Day 5

Monday 8th May

Sunny, 22°C

Today we headed north-east to the acid rocks of Cardaillac, just to the North of Figeac, for a change of both scenery and species. Close to Grézes, an impromptu stop to watch a pair of Honey Buzzards soaring over the road rewarded us with some cracking views of this sought-after bird of prey, followed by an equally exciting encounter with a Black Kite, complete with a beak-full of entrails! On surrounding farmland, a Corn Bunting 'jangled its keys', four Bee-eaters drifted past, and the fascinating Birthwort was found growing in a shady passage between fields.

Arriving at the attractive medieval village of Cardaillac, we set off on a short walk towards a small artificial lake nestling amongst pines on a hillside. Initially dropping down to the river, banks of luxuriant vegetation were home to Royal Fern, Spiked Rampion and Yellow Archangel, while the beautiful song of a Blackcap seemed to mirror the rippling sound of the water below. Reaching the bridge, insects abounded, with a Dingy Skipper little completion for a striking Bee Chafer equipped with defensive black-and-yellow markings.

Walking under pines, the change to acid soil saw us add many new plant species to the list, including Hairy Greenweed, Wood Sage, Bell Heather and Heath Speedwell. Reaching the pond, it was pleasing to see dozens of dragonflies on the wing; good numbers of Downy Emerald and Emperor Dragonfly were constantly on the move, while the more delicate Common Winter Damselfly perched, with cryptic colours rendering it almost invisible.

Having moved the bus close to the Plan d'Eau des Sagnes, we enjoyed lunch in the shade of pine trees, on a convenient picnic table close to the lake. With our French goodies polished off, we headed towards Figeac, where the maze of narrow and winding streets hasn't changed since the Middle Ages and makes a fine setting for some superb 12th-, 13th- and 14th-century medieval houses. Jean-François Champollion, the

first translator of Egyptian hieroglyphics, was born in Figeac and several of the group went to see a giant copy of the Rosetta stone on the '*Place des écritures*'. Having enjoyed a culture-filled afternoon, we returned to Vers where we enjoyed another wonderful evening.

Day 6

Tuesday 9th May

Sunny, 24°C

After breakfast, we gathered to empty a moth trap that had been left running overnight adjacent to the river. The catch was sizable, with Cream-spot Tiger, Privet and Lime Hawk-moths some of the more eye-catching species, but the smaller and more cryptic specimens were also well appreciated, especially a rich chestnut-coloured Small Lappet.

Today saw us return to Bouziés, which is reached via a very narrow bridge spanning the Lot. We parked near the village and started out walking alongside the river. Soon the cliffs were towering high above, and the path increasingly hugged the base as we continued along the '*Chemin de Halage*': a towpath spectacularly carved into the side of the cliff enabling gangs to pull boats along the river before the days of powered craft. It was here that we enjoyed close views of Crag Martins as they flew around us, now and again returning to their nests on the cliff just above our heads. This was also a good place for some nice plants with Tower Cress, the lovely yellow Greater Celandine and, in one spot where moisture seeped down from above, a huge clump of Maidenhair Fern. Along the river there was the constant to and fro of Club-tailed Dragonflies, and a newly emerged female allowed a very close approach for a superb photographic opportunity.

We were now nearing the lovely 'hanging village' of St Cirq-Lapopie with its ancient half-timbered houses and wonderful views of the river valley far below. After a short, stiff climb through Holm Oak woodland, everyone was then able to enjoy the extensive views up and down the river. Good plants here were Hoary Mullein, French Figwort and the impressive Large Cuckoo Pint. After a picnic lunch in the village square, we spent the rest of afternoon exploring this attractive village before a gentle downhill walk back to the bus.

Before returning to the hotel, we decided on another visit to our friends at the local café for refreshments.

Day 7

Wednesday 10th May

Sunny, thundery later, 21°C

Being a Wednesday, we headed for Cahors to experience its excellent street market and to spend the morning exploring its medieval quarter, with half-timbered houses and narrow alleyways. A visit by some to the imposing Cathédrale St-Étienne (Cahors Cathedral) was interesting, not least for its splendid Gothic and Romanesque architecture with large domes and centuries-old frescoes but also for the nesting Black Redstarts, Crag Martins and Grey Wagtails in the cloister! The bustling market was full of the wonderful sights, sounds and smells so typical of a traditional French market, and an ideal opportunity to purchase a few keepsakes, not to mention the odd nibble to keep one going before lunch! Our picnic was taken close to the famous Pont de Valentré; this medieval masterpiece is the city's hallmark and is said to be the most photographed sight in France outside Paris!

After lunch we drove up a steep zigzag route to the Croix de Fer, where we were treated to stunning high-rise views of the bridge and Cahors below. The same spot was covered in orchids, with Man the most plentiful, and a find of several Man x Monkey hybrids was well photographed.

Moving on, we drove up to Mont St Cyr, where again we were able to admire the magnificent view of Cahors as it sat almost encircled by a huge meander in the River Lot. We then explored the surrounding dry grasslands, while some took a siesta. The extensive grasslands here are good for orchids and other interesting plants. A patch of Bedstraw Broomrape was appreciated, with its wonderful clove-scented fragrance, as were several species of orchid including Lizard, Pyramidal, Fly and Bee, along with some wonderfully fresh Violet Limodore. In the cool conditions butterflies were not numerous, but three species of fritillary did make the roll call: Heath, Glanville and Spotted. However, the day's star insect was an alien-like, Cone-headed Praying Mantis settled in some low Juniper bushes.

We finally headed back towards Vers on scenic back roads, making short stops along the way wherever flowers or butterflies caught our eye. A Grizzled Skipper put in its first appearance of the holiday, and we were delighted with an exquisitely-marked Mother Shipton moth. The grasslands looked ideal for Corn Bunting; however, it was the more attractive Cirl Bunting that was heard singing from the top of a tree. Orchids were fewer but we did manage some nice examples of Sword-leaved Helleborine and more Woodcock Orchid before heading back to the hotel for our last dinner of the tour.

Day 8

Thursday 11th May

Early rain, becoming sunny later, 19°C

Waking to light rain and with a long drive in front of us, we decided on a local walk followed by lunch back at the hotel.

Having said goodbye to Bill and Margaret, as well as thanking the hotel staff, we departed for the airport. Arriving in good time, we made our farewells before heading our separate ways. The enthusiastic, good company had ensured a highly enjoyable week, during which time we had seen some excellent wildlife, whilst savouring the ambience, culinary delights and beautiful countryside of this lovely part of France.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	
3	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			✓					
4	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			✓					
5	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓			✓			
7	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>					2			
8	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓				
9	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓		
10	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	✓							
11	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						✓		
12	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>		H			H			
15	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>				✓	H		H	
16	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>		✓			✓	✓		
18	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>						✓		
19	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>				2	10			
20	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			H	✓				
21	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				✓	✓			
22	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓						
23	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		✓						
27	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
30	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓	✓			✓	
31	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
33	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓		✓	✓	
34	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>				✓				
36	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓	✓				
37	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>		H						
40	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		✓		✓				
41	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
42	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus colybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
44	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓	✓			
45	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓		✓				

	Common name	Scientific name	May							
			4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
48	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
49	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
50	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Carion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
53	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓					
54	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
55	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
56	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
57	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				✓	✓			
58	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓	✓		✓		
59	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			✓	✓			✓	
60	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>					✓			

Butterflies

Swallowtail, *Papilio machaon*
 Black-veined White, *Aporia crataegi*
 Small White, *Pieris rapae*
 Berger's Clouded Yellow, *Colias alfacariensis*
 Cleopatra, *Gonepteryx cleopatra*
 Green Hairstreak, *Callophrys rubi*
 Sooty Copper, *Lycaena tityrus*
 Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*
 Southern White Admiral, *Limenitis reducta*
 Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*
 Comma, *Polygonia c-album*
 Glanville Fritillary, *Melitaea cinxia*
 Spotted Fritillary, *Melitaea didyma*
 Small Heath, *Coenonympha pamphilus*
 Wall Brown, *Lasiommata megera*
 Dingy Skipper, *Erynnis tages*

Scarce Swallowtail, *Iphiclides podalirius*
 Large White, *Pieris brassicae*
 Orange Tip, *Anthocharis cardamines*
 Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*
 Wood White, *Leptidea sinapis*
 Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*
 Brown Argus, *Aricia agestis*
 Adonis Blue, *Lysandra bellargus*
 Peacock, *Inachis io*
 Painted Lady, *Vanessa cardui*
 Pearl-bordered Fritillary, *Boloria euphrosyne*
 Knapweed Fritillary, *Melitaea phoebe*
 Heath Fritillary, *Mellicta athalia*
 Speckled Wood, *Pararge aegeria*
 Grizzled Skipper, *Pyrgus malvae*

Orchids

Anacamptis morio, Green-winged Orchid
Cephalanthera longifolia, Sword-leaved Helleborine
Limodorum abortivum, Violet Limodore
Neotinea ustulata, Burnt Orchid
Ophrys insectifera, Fly Orchid
Orchis anthropophora, Man Orchid
Orchis purpurea, Lady Orchid
Platanthera chlorantha, Greater Butterfly Orchid

Anacamptis pyramidalis, Pyramidal Orchid
Gymnadenia conopsea agg., Fragrant Orchid
Himatoglossum hircinum, Lizard Orchid
Ophrys apifera, Bee Orchid
Ophrys scolopax, Woodcock Orchid
Orchis mascula, Early Purple Orchid
Orchis simia, Monkey Orchid

Hybrids:

Orchis simia x *O. purpurea*, Lady x Monkey Orchid hybrid
Orchis x *bergonii* (*O. anthropophora* x *simia*), Man x Monkey Orchid hybrid