

The Gargano

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Bari to Peschici

The hills of the Gargano will first come into view some forty minutes after leaving Bari's provincial airport. We pass Lakes Lesina and Varano where the limestone hills of the peninsula plunge coastwards to the two pretty little white-walled towns of Peschici and Rodi.

Day 2

The North Coast

The coastline between Rodi and the stunningly situated cliff-top town of Peschici is quite beautiful. Hills covered in cistus roses and pines descend to a coast of white cliffs and small fields. Bushes of Jupiter's Beard and Tamarisk lie behind sand covered in medicks and pretty pink *Silene colorata*. Short turf on old dunes is an ideal habitat for orchids and we shall see perhaps a dozen species before lunch! Little patches of Bumble-Bee Orchids grow so thickly that they seem like grass and one has to be careful where one stands. The endemic *Ophrys garganica* and diminutive *Ophrys sicula* (a type of Yellow Bee Orchid) are hardly less common and with the spectacular large flowers of *Ophrys apulica* are two rather uncommon species, *Ophrys oestrifera* and *Ophrys incubacea*. Lunch will be taken below one of the many watch towers built to keep an eye out for marauding Turks - this one has the endemic *Campanula garganica* growing on it!

Day 3

Bosco di Spina Pulci, Lake Lesina & Cagnano

The hills rise sharply from the coast and as we reach the upper slopes the view north over the Lago di Lesina and the sea beyond is sublime. Perched atop the hills, the Bosco di Spina Pulci is an area of mixed limestone grassland and superb oak woodland. The ground flora is quite exquisite. Brilliant pink *Cyclamen repandum* is such a striking sight whilst in other areas blue *Anemone apennina* carpets the woodland floor mixed with violas and swathes of Pheasant's-eye Narcissus. Woodlarks and Mistle Thrushes and cattle laden with huge bells seem to emphasise the idyllic rural nature of this beautiful place. Still there are new orchids. The creamy-yellow spikes of Roman Orchids are a common sight and in the open areas we shall find one of the most beautiful of all the peninsula's bee orchids - the Spectacle Ophrys. The Gargano is surprisingly good for birds and the morning will see us at an excellent wetland - the Lago di Lesina. A cacophony of sound from Edible Frogs will greet us.

Water Rails call frequently and Great Reed and Fan-tailed Warblers add their voices to the general din! Marsh Harriers float over the reeds and Bearded Tits are quite common. Later we will move to the hillsides above Cagnano where the panorama over the huge Lago di Varano is spectacular. The lush slopes hold lots of orchids - here we can find Spectacle Ophrys, and two specialities, the endemic *Ophrys parvimaculata* and *Ophrys archipelagi*, all growing together amongst *Lathyrus venetus* and the Mediterranean subspecies of Kidney Vetch.

Day 4

The Foresta Umbra

Today we traverse the famous Foresta Umbra en route to the south. Famous throughout Italy, the cool green beech, oak and hornbeam forest will be in early leaf and it is a delight to wander the paths across the open forest floor. Some of the trees are huge - one roadside beech is five metres in circumference and forty metres tall. With all these trees about it is not surprising that woodpeckers are common. We should see Middle-spotted and Green Woodpeckers and with a little luck Black Woodpecker too. Collared Flycatchers which should just have arrived will be busy setting out their territories. Provence Orchid, a robust yellow orchid, blooms under these trees along with Sword-leaved Helleborines, the latter not always in flower at the time of the year. The pink flowers of *Dentaria heptaphylla* are quite striking and we shall find Spurge Laurel and Peonies before dropping towards the Carbonara Valley, its fields adorned with Wild Tulips.

Day 5

San Marco in Lamis

Swathes of Pink Butterfly Orchids grow with a rich assortment of other orchids. Green-winged Orchid and *Orchis italica* are both abundant and hybrids between the former and the butterfly orchid are common. On dry rockeries we can admire the uncommon Milky Orchid and Lady Orchid and these have Burnt-tip and Four-spotted Orchids for company. *Ophrys bertolonii* with its bright speculum set amid a dark purple-black hairy lip and set off by rich pinky-red sepals and petals is a magnificent thing. The closely related *Ophrys bertoloniiformis* will already be familiar to us but here is abundant and we shall also find the third of the triumvirate, the large-petalled *Ophrys promontorii*. Both the last two are endemic to the region! Sawfly, Yellow Bee, Early Spider and Dark Ophrys all grow amidst Asphodels, Grape Hyacinths, Rosy Garlic and lots and lots of rockroses, including the pretty white *Helianthemum apenninum*. Just a few plants of what is now known as *Ophrys lupercalis* can be found at this site.

Day 6

Manfredonia's Wetlands & Monte St Angelo

En route to the marshes and reed beds of the Vasca del Lago Salso we shall see the very rare endemic *Ophrys sipontensis*, this lovely bee orchid is only found in the

vicinity of Manfredonia! The reedbed is very extensive and is home to many thousands of frogs - both Edible Frogs and Italy's own tree frog, *Hyla intermedia*. These little green frogs are very abundant as you'll hear but are not easy to find. A variety of terns fly above the reeds from which occasional Ferruginous Ducks fly. Elegantly plumed Little Egrets, Marsh Harriers, Purple Herons and various warblers will be much in evidence. Spoonbills, Glossy Ibises and Spectacled Warblers can be seen in the salt marshes by river. A little to the south are extensive salt pans with flocks of Greater Flamingos and colonies of Slender-billed Gulls looking resplendently pink in their breeding dress! In the afternoon there will be an opportunity to visit the nearby town of Monte St Angelo. The narrow streets are a delight and the 13th century Sanctuary of St Michael is a major pilgrimage centre, being the last on the "via Francigena" from France before pilgrims set sail for the Holy Land from the port of Manfredonia.

Magnificent many-flowered specimens of *Ophrys garganica* mix with the finest *Ophrys incubacea*, the two producing a wonderful selection of sometimes bizarre hybrids. Pink *Crepis rubra* and *Anemone pavonina* form a fine backdrop for stately Lady Orchids, patches of deeply coloured Four-spotted Orchids, and the unbelievably variable bright furry flowers of Bertoloni's Bee Orchid. Amongst the smaller bee orchids present are *Ophrys funerea* and the third member of the yellow bee orchid group, the tiniest among them, *Ophrys phryganae*. Green Hairstreaks are abundant as are Cirl Buntings and Stonechats. Nearby we'll search dry limestone slopes where locally rare *Serapias orientalis* and *Serapias apulica* grow with plentiful *Ophrys sicula*, Toothed, Burnt-tip and Lizard Orchids!

Day 7

Bosco Quarto

Narrow winding lanes take us up onto the Bosco Quarto amongst the stunning limestone karsts and oak forests of the Central Gargano. This area is perhaps the most sublimely beautiful in the region and certainly has the most remarkable floral show! Once again the sward is a carpet of *Anemone apennina* and *Narcissus poeticus*, but here also is *Corydalis cava* mixed with colonies of both yellow *Iris pseudopumila* and purple *Iris lutescens*. Another iris, *Hermodactylus tuberosus*, adorns open areas with its delicate green and black flowers and whole fields are turned blue or yellow by the lovely *Viola graeca*. Amazingly there's lots of orchids in all this. Swarms of purple Green-winged Orchids and yellow Elder-flowered Orchids mix with such beauties as Sparse-flowered Orchid and Spectacle Ophrys. Almond woods hold magnificent displays of Giant Orchid and Yellow Asphodel. Hawfinch, various woodpeckers and perhaps Wryneck are on the agenda while Buzzards and Montagu's Harriers drift by overhead.

Day 8 Departure

If time permits we can have another wander around the local orchid-rich fields before we depart for Bari Airport.

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