

Maritime Alps

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Nice and Transfer to Valdeblore

We land at Nice airport just as the warm Mediterranean sun starts to wane and the Cote d'Azur's sun-worshippers start to think of leaving the crowded beaches which are just a stone's throw from the airport. We'll soon leave the crowds behind and head northwards into the impressive mountains just inland, where our road snakes up the Var valley and then enters the Vesubie Gorge. In just over an hour we will have climbed to the lovely town of St Martin du Vesubie, and from there it is but a short journey over the Col St. Martin to Valdeblore.

Days 2, 3 & 5

Parc National du Mercantour

We have chosen Valdeblore as our base for this superb mountain holiday as it has easy access to wonderful Mercantour National Park and because at Valdeblore the influences of both the mountains and the Mediterranean merge to produce a tremendously rich fauna and flora. This tour offers perhaps the widest diversity of butterflies to be seen in any comparably sized area of Europe with more than 110 species expected in the week, and it is the area around Valdeblore itself which is perhaps richest of all! Sunny south-facing hay meadows and terraces are covered in aromatic labiates such as marjoram and thyme and in these we'll find Skippers such as Silver-spotted and Safflower, and a multitude of Fritillaries including Knapweed and Spotted. Fields around the hotel contributed many to the last tour's impressive tally of 124 species! As Orphean Warblers sing from copses of hazel and hornbeam we will find ourselves admiring blues such as Idas, Mazarine, Damon, Escher's and the localised Meleager's Blue. The Arran Brown will be amongst the first of very many species of Ringlet that we will encounter over the next week. The strikingly-marked Great-banded Grayling tarries on paths whilst the startling eye-spots of a huge brown butterfly and nearby the mat black uppers of another initially confuse us into thinking that there are two more species present. These are female and male Great Sooty Satyrs, and here they are numerous, enjoying the warm sunny slopes draped in figs, brambles, bright Carthusian Pinks and a great variety of campanulas. They are joined by a number of their brethren - Oriental Meadow Brown, Dusky Meadow Brown and Dusky Heath amongst them. We shall see some of southern Europe's most spectacular butterfly species here, amongst them Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Large Tortoiseshell, Southern Comma, Southern White Admiral and if we are lucky the beautiful Lesser Purple Emperor. On the north-facing slopes the scene is very different. Here we'll encounter thick forests where Martagon Lilies and the beautiful blue flowers

of Alpine Columbine poke through the dark green lacinate foliage of Stinking Hellebores. Under trees are fine Dark Red Helleborines and in deep shade the strange Yellow Bird's-nest.

Lying between our hotel and the Italian Border is the magnificent Mercantour National Park. We will start our exploration of this wonderful wilderness at Le Boreon where many of Europe's finest butterflies and flowers can be found within walking distance of the hamlet's pretty little lake. Spruce and Larch forests hold colourful displays of Alpine Sowthistle, Cheddar Pink, Purple Lettuce and the abundant Wood Cranesbill. Crested Tits and Crossbills are common and a pair of Red-backed Shrikes nest in meadows by the lake. A short walk downhill takes us to a beautiful waterfall amongst woods rich in bellflowers. Dark Green and High Brown Fritillaries and occasional Camberwell Beauties float past and the dazzling golden orange colours of the Scarce Copper will soon catch the eye. The stunning Titania's Fritillary frequents glades decorated with lovely Large Yellow Foxgloves. Heath and Provençal Fritillaries will soon be encountered. Virtually all Europe's *Mellicta* fritillaries occur here and identifying them is a tricky business - however few are better qualified than Paul when it comes to sorting them all out!

As we enter the national park we penetrate a world of fabulous alpine riches. The landscape is one of serene beauty, with forest interspersed with meadows and wild rushing streams, and cliffs rising to great peaks high above. Our walks take us through meadows dotted with bright blue *Aconitum compactum* and *Delphinium elatum* which flower photogenically next to rushing streams, often with the creamy-yellow Wolfsbane for company. The pinky-purple heads of *Adenostyles glabra* add to the show and it is to these that an immense variety of butterflies are attracted. Balkan and False Heath Fritillaries frequently utilise these flowers and they are often joined by the fiery orange males of the beautiful local race of Purple-edged Copper. Purple-shot and Sooty Coppers frequent rocky meadows where Bistort, Lesser Masterwort and the large purple flowers and feathery bracts of *Centaurea uniflora* grow in profusion. The stately pleated leaves of both False Helleborine and *Gentiana burseri* adorn slopes coated with the famous Alpenrose. Stands of these three-foot tall gentians with heads of pale cream flowers dotted with bluish-black are an impressive sight. That king of alpine butterflies, the beautiful Apollo, is amazingly common here. The sight of a meadow full of beautiful flowers with several of these large white butterflies strikingly decorated in red and black, is one of the classic scenes of any alpine sojourn. Higher up are cliffs where some of the Maritime Alps' finest flowers grow. Mats of *Silene cordifolia* line fissures mixing with Parsley Fern and Maidenhair Spleenwort making a decorative pastiche. Perhaps most stunning of all are the mats of bright pink *Dianthus neglectus*. These often mix to magical effect with the silvery-green leaves of that great local rarity, *Potentilla valderia* and the large bright golden-yellow flowers of *Potentilla grandiflora*. Sorting out the many *Erebia* or ringlet species represents a real challenge! Large Ringlet and Almond-eyed Ringlet are both abundant, and careful searching of different micro-habitats will reveal many others.

Bright-eyed Ringlet frequents woodland edge and sunny screes whilst damp meadows attract Common Brassy Ringlets. Other species we should find are Silky Ringlet and the localised False Mnestra Ringlet. Pearly and Darwin's Heaths frequent the paths along which we walk. Shepherd's and Meadow Fritillaries flutter above yet more perfect flowers; Purple Lychnis, the gorgeous purple-red Cobweb Houseleeks which bejewel rocks at all altitudes, the large orange-yellow flowers of Arnica, silvery Carpathian Catsfoot and the beautiful red flowers of *Calamintha grandiflora* to name but a few. Creeping Ladies Tresses and the blackish-flowered *Phyteuma ovatum* inhabit larch forests where Nutcrackers are common while overhead Golden Eagles will pass by from time to time. Sharp whistles alert us to the presence of rotund Alpine Marmots, these endearing animals are very common here. They've even spawned a popular tourist industry in the local gift shops! The stripy faces and the little hooked horns of Chamois will be a feature of this holiday. This impish relative of the larger Ibex is quite common in the national park, and while most sightings will be distant they are nevertheless very approachable and you can expect to see them at close quarters as well!

Day 4

Col du Lombardie

On the north side of the National Park is the wonderful Col du Lombardie, a high road pass which straddles the Italian border and allows us to drive all the way up to 7,500 feet. The views in both directions are magnificent, with several small lakes adding intense blues to the landscapes on the Italian side. Along ridge-top paths we will find ourselves in the company of some of the finest fauna and flora in the Alps. Our main quarry in the plant line will be the 'Ancient King'. This regal inhabitant of high altitude granite cliffs is known only from this part of the Maritime Alps and can best be described as a bit of an oddball! The rosettes of concentric rings of bright green leaves cling tightly to cliff faces, often almost folded double where they grow in a shady fissure. This strange plant puts forth flowers only very infrequently. Damp areas of alpine turf hold Butterwort, and a range of beautiful flowers such as Grass of Parnassus, Mountain White Orchid, *Veronica allioni*, *Pedicularis kernieri* and Tofield's Asphodel. The fragrant *Achillea erba-rotta* grows with grey-leaved *Adenostyles leucophylla* and intense blue *Veronica fruticans*. We may encounter locals collecting the *Achillea* as the fragrant flowers are prized as an aromatic addition to a local alcoholic brew! Below are meadows where both Large and Small Yellow Foxgloves flower together. The butterflies here are great! The beautiful Cynthia's Fritillary, the males white marked with red and black, can be found amongst the swathes of cotton grass while the bright lemon and black uppersides of Mountain Clouded Yellow will vie with Apollos for our attention. We should look for Yellow Mountain Saxifrage which is the foodplant of the uncommon 'gazeli' race of Small Apollo which can be seen flying at this season. By now we will have seen plenty of Heath, Provençal and False Heath Fritillaries so it will be a chance to get to know two more species which are common on this pass, namely Meadow and Grison's Fritillaries. It is

possible to see no less than eight species of ringlet here including the local False Mnestra and Yellow-spotted Ringlets. Alpine Choughs chatter amongst cliffs home to yellow *Viola biflora* and the beautiful blue and purple orbicular heads of *Phyteuma charmelii*. Citril Finches, Water Pipits, Wheatears and Black Redstarts frequent the fringes of the tree line.

Days 6 & 7

La Brigue, Casterino & Tende

We'll leave the Mercantour and head east over the peaceful Col du Torini before reaching the Valle de Roya where the road heads up to Tende. For centuries the route over the Col de Tende has provided a link between the principality of Monaco and Italian Piemonte and now a good road offers fast access to the high country. A beautiful old bridge built with rocks taken from a local limestone outcrop is the home of endemic *Saxifraga cochlearis*, whose delicate white 'fountains' of flowers emerge from blue-green rosettes. Nearby we'll see *Saxifraga callosa* and *Saxifraga paniculata* and we'll look for the natural hybrids that occur in this region. Above Casterino lies some wonderful high alpine country with meadows interrupted by craggy outcrops festooned in Sempervivums. *Dianthus* species are plentiful and in particular *neglectus* forms great colourful patches, sometimes with gentians.

Day 8

Departure

After our last night in Casterino we may have some time to further explore the alpine slopes before descending to the Mediterranean and Nice Airport where we'll catch our flight back to the UK.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours to the Maritime Alps. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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