

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 through the the gorges of the Roya Valley to our base for the week, wonderful Casterino.

Days 2 & 7

Casterino, Tende

Near Casterino we'll walk a beautifully floriferous quiet track, streams flowing through rocks below and on the track. The houseleeks *Sempervivum montanum*, *Sempervivum tectorum*, and *Sedum anacampseros*, make an impressive contribution to an excellent flora that includes stately Yellow Gentian, white flowered *Verbascum lychnitis*, and two endemic bellflowers: *Campanula fritschii* and *Campanula stenocodon*. Many butterflies mud-puddle on the damp track. False Heath Fritillary and Knapweed Fritillary are both common. We may also see Glanville Fritillary and locally uncommon butterflies such as Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, Spotted Fritillary, Titania's Fritillary, Large Ringlet and Sooty Copper. Silver-studded Blues and Idas Blues occur in numbers here and we can learn how to distinguish these two very similar species at our leisure. In shadier areas Martagon Lilies are numerous and we'll find *Ranunculus platanifolius* and *Streptopus amplexifolius*.

Day 3

Col de Tende

As we drive up to the pass we'll stop at an old attempt at a tunnel, made as early as 1615, where the wonderfully cool cave has abundant cascading *Saxifraga callosa*. Surrounding woodland edge has much Alpine Sow-thistle and the local umbellifer *Trochiscanthes nodiflora*, and here we'll get our first taste of the rich butterfly fauna with Piedmont Ringlet, Purple-edged Copper and Osiris Blue. Ruined nineteenth century forts are a feature of the col, and around these we'll find *Dianthus carthusianorum* and beautiful *Scutellaria alpina* as well as *Saxifraga aspera* and *Linaria supina*. As Short-toed Eagles soar overhead we'll go a little higher and find the endemic *Allium narcissiflorum*, both *Silene saxifraga* and *Silene campanula*, endemic *Dianthus subacaulis*, and *Dryas octopetala* may still be in bloom. There are extensive meadows dotted with lovely *Nigritella corneliana*. Nearby is a

productive mud-puddling spot where amongst others we'll find Ripart's Anomalous Blue, Almond-eyed Ringlet, Dingy Skipper, and a selection of fritillaries.

Day 4

Casterino, La Brigue, and Saorge

Cliffs near the hotel have much *Jovibarba allionii*, an impressive endemic, and *Veronica fruticulosa* on the river gravels. Below Casterino both *Digitalis lutea* and *Digitalis grandiflora* flower together and here we might well find our first Apollos of the tour. Near La Brigue a small chapel marks the start of a wooded track where there were many butterflies. Here we can enjoy Large Tortoiseshell, Arran Brown, Amanda's Blue, and Southern White Admiral. Gorgeous *Saxifraga cochlearis* flowers abundantly on trackside boulders. Saorge town perches impressively above the Roya River where we'll find a strongly Mediterranean influenced flora with *Nigella damascena*, *Consolida regalis*, pink-flowered *Helianthemum nummularium semiglabrum*, *Lathyrus tuberosus*, *Tordylium maximum*, *Orlaya grandiflora*, and *Urospermum dalechampii*. Butterflies will include High Brown Fritillary, White-letter Hairstreak, Red-underwing Skipper, Mallow Skipper, and Lulworth Skipper.

Day 5

Val Santa Anna and the Col de Lombarde

The Santa Anna valley is a superb place, bursting with flowers. *Lychnis flos-jovis* provides splashes of vivid pink, we'll see robust *Campanula spicata*, many fine clumps of *Scutellaria alpina*, large-flowered *Lamium garganicum*, *Silene saxifraga*, the lovely *Viola valderia*, *Pedicularis tuberosa*, and *Centaurea nervosa* with beautiful feathery bracts. This is a great area for rampions – we'll see *Phyteuma betonicifolium*, *Phyteuma michelii*, and the beautiful dark *Phyteuma ovatum*. Lilies will include St. Bruno's and St. Bernard's, as well as the Orange Lily. Almond-eyed Ringlets and Purple-shot Coppers fly over the the flowery meadows and we've a chance of finding Lesser Spotted Fritillary, a scarce butterfly in the Alpes Maritime.

On the north side of the Mercantour 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 – some years we have seen, others we don't. Damp areas of alpine turf hold Butterwort, and a range of beautiful flowers such as Grass of Parnassus, Mountain White Orchid, *Veronica allioni*, *Pedicularis rostratospicata* 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 lovely vanilla orchid *Nigritella corneliana* is sometimes abundant and Trumpet Gentians and *Viola calcarata* make a lovely show.

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 three more species which are common on this pass, namely Meadow, Shepherd's and Grison's Fritillaries. It is possible to see no less than eight species of ringlet here including the local False Mnestrá, Western Brassy, 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*. We might also see deep-blue *Gentiana rostanii* and *Sempervivum arachnoideum* may still be in flower. Citril Finches, Water Pipits, Wheatears and Black Redstarts frequent the fringes of the tree line.

Day 6

Breil, Sospel & the Col de Turini

West of Breil we can find many beautiful blue-flowered *Catananche caerulea* whilst the rest-harrows host a colony of the scarce burnet moth *Zygaena hylaris*. Junipers and Lavender dominate a rich Mediterranean flora that includes a multicoloured flax show - blue *Linum austriacum collinum*, pink *Linum viscosum*, white *Linum tenuifolium* and yellow *Linum strictum*! Cleopatras are numerous.

We'll take a look at wooded areas near Sospel where Deadly Nightshade flowers along the track. A tremendous number of butterflies live here, both in terms of numbers and species. Among the Fritillaries are High Brown, Queen-of-Spain, Marbled, and Heath. Little, Large, Mazarine, Amanda's and Escher's Blues mud-puddle together and we'll also see Large Grizzled Skipper and Red-underwing Skipper visiting damp patches on the track. *Eryngium campestre* here is the food plant of the scarce *Zygaena sarpedon*, a burnet moth, and is parasitised by many *Orobanche lavandulacea*. Flowering brambles attract a multitude of butterflies with large numbers of Marbled Fritillaries, as well as Twin-spot Fritillary, Comma, and both Sloe and Ilex Hairstreaks.

Day 8

Departure

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

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