

Sibillini

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Arrive Ancona

Our mid-morning arrival means that we've plenty of time to make the hundred minute journey to our destination. Just under an hour into our journey we'll stop to enjoy lunch and to visit the Cistercian abbey of Fiastra. The abbey is surrounded by a 4400 acre nature reserve with White Poplar-lined rivers home to Kingfishers and Little Grebes. The centre-piece of the reserve is a hundred acre woodland of mixed Turkey and English Oak, Manna Ash and Oriental Hornbeam. This type of woodland is rare now in the region but in centuries gone would have covered the hills of Marche. In the afternoon it will take another to reach Sibillini National Park. We'll arrive in the mountain hamlet of Altino, so small that our accommodation is a significant percentage of the habitation! It's a walk of only five minutes to get into flowery and butterfly-rich meadows from the hotel!

Day 2

Montemonaco, Foce & Colle del Galluccio

The Renaissance Painters were captivated by the clarity of the light in Central Italy's Umbria and Marche and during our visit we'll probably think that little has changed since then for this is a very rural and untouched part of Europe. The sublime mountain landscapes include deep gorges, high flowery plateaus, many snow-capped peaks, and extensive woodlands. The many tiny villages that populate the seven-hundred square kilometre Sibillini National Park seem to be part of the landscape itself, a place where nature and man have at last found a way to enhance each other.

We'll start our exploration of the national park very locally with a walk along the deep valley of Montemonaco. The rocky slopes above the track offers varied birding and a variety of orchids including Sword-leaved Helleborines, Green-winged Orchids and Italian Orchids. We'll then follow an easy track from Foce that take us through meadows that are home to *Ophrys sphegodes* and the unusual *Globularia bisnagarica*. Now though Sibillini's glorious beech woodlands will be just bursting into spring leaf and so this is the perfect time to witness a wonderful woodland floor blooming. Collared Flycatchers and Bonelli's Warblers will just be taking up territories as we photograph glades decorated with *Hepatica nobilis*, yellow *Anemone ranunculoides*, and glorious displays of *Cyclamen repandum*. Red Squirrels and Green Woodpeckers will be evident as we marvel at the range of hybrids between Primroses and Cowslips. We'll visit the Colle del Galluccio, a relatively low (1100 m) pass that should have marvellous displays of *Narcissus poeticus* at this time of year. Later we'll drive downhill to a medieval church next to a lake that is surrounded by maquis-covered hills, and here we'll enjoy more

orchids as Common Wall Lizards scurry under cover. If we're quiet here we might spot a brilliant green reptiles sunny itself quietly amongst the flowers, the beautiful Western Green Lizard.

Day 3

Forca di Presta & Castelluccio di Norcia

Thirty kilometres south of our hotel is the Forca di Presta a pass 1540m above sea-level. Migrant Whinchats, Northern Wheatears, Red-backed shrikes and Ortolan Buntings are common but we'll have a hard job looking up from superlative clumps of Spring Gentian and the gorgeous trumpets of *Gentiana dinarica*. Short-toed Eagles soar overhead and Quail call as we photograph the abundant *Globularia meridionalis*. We'll also find orchids such as Man Orchid and Italian Orchid and in the woodlands below both White and Sword-leaved Helleborines.

The village of Castelluccio, or better, what's left of it after the devastating earthquake of two years ago, overlooks the Grand Piano Grande, a montane plain in a quite stunning setting. The underlying strata is impermeable, yet the surrounding karstic rocks allow free drainage – normally! But when the outlets of the lurid green ditches are blocked the water can back up and form a temporary lake. At this season though these plateau grasslands are alive with clumps of yellow or purple *Viola eugeniae*. *Androsace villosa* offers its pretty white yellow or red centred blooms in tight clusters and we'll see fine shows of Green-winged Orchids and Elder-flowered Orchids.

Day 4

To the Mountain of Flowers and the Laga Mountains

Today we'll drive South to the Abruzzi, up from the medieval town of Ascoli Piceno, beyond the small ski resort of San Giacomo through the meadows and woods of the aptly named "Montagna dei Fiori", the verges literally covered with fabulous trumpet gentians. Flowers are everywhere and particularly abundant are *Anemone hortensis*, *Helleborus foetidus* and *Cephalanthera longifolia*. We'll then drive further inland toward the acidic Laga range, where we'll find the only local sites for lovely *Orchis pallens*.

Day 5

up to the Rifugio Sibilla

Red-billed Chough and Alpine Chough will be a noisy accompaniment to us as we wander up the winding trail to the Rifugio. Here the snow-streaked alpine turf is alive with *Crocus vernus*, and extensive populations of *Muscari neglectum* and *Scilla bifolia*. Red mats of Moss Campion adorn rocky outcrops and we'll find *Anemone ranunculoides* in scrubby field margins and if it is an early season the Peonies will already be in flower.

Day 6

Prati di Ragnolo

Today we'll drive to the northernmost part of the Sibillini range: the rolling plateau called "Prati di Ragnolo". Here there are stunning views to the main peaks – it seems a natural balcony overlooking Marche and Umbria. There is a fine alpine meadow which at over 1500m meters is usually still partially covered by snow at this season... Blooming next to these snows are scores of Crocuses, *Viola eugeniae*, Spring Gentians, *Gageas*, *Scilla bifolia*, and of course, Elder-flowered Orchids. We'll drive back to Altino through the deep Fiastrone Gorge, along a road lined by thousands of *Allium triquetrum* in a dark Mediterranean woodland of *Quercus ilex*.

Day 7

Medieval Norcia and the Forca Canapine

In the morning we'll travel one hour through the mountains to Norcia. This is one of several medieval villages and towns that pepper these hills. Indeed, it seems one is never out of sight of a hilltop castle or beautiful church. In the 1500s this was thought a region of necromancers and devil worshippers, wizards and witches.

In the afternoon we'll travel back along the scenic road that crosses the Forca Canapine, a pass at 1541m above sea level. Below the pass we might find Lady Orchid and Early Purple Orchid as well as *Cynoglottis barrelieri* and *Anemone hortensis*.

Day 8

Departure

Today we've a mid-morning departure so after an early breakfast we'll head straight for Ancona.

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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