

Maritime Alps

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 to Valdeblore via the Tinee Valley

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 Tinee valley, and in just over an hour we will have climbed over a low col to Valdeblore, or base for the first four nights of the tour.

Day 2 Rimplas, Valdeblore & the Col St.Martin

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 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.

Day 3

Madone de Fenestre & Gordolasque Valleys

We'll start with the lovely endemic *Lilium pomponium* today though it is late in the season for this species and it is not always still in flower at this season. Piedmont Ringleet flies here and we can also see Bath White, Green Hairstreak, and Queen-of-Spain Fritillary. Crossbills feed above us as we admire *Silene saxifraga*, *Galium obliquum*, *Hypericum coris* and the lovely *Viola valderia*.

At the upper end of the Gordolasque Valley valley is a very pleasant short walk amid fine alpine scenery, alongside a rushing stream, with beautiful flowery meadows alive with butterflies. Among the plants are *Trifolium badium*, *Minuartia capillacea*, *Spergularia rubra*, *Saponaria ocymoides*, *Dianthus carthusianorum*, *Dianthus furcatus*, *Armeria alpina*, *Hypericum montanum*, *Malva moschata*, *Erigeron atticus* and *Erigeron acer*. Purple-edged Coppers are common here. *Geranium macrorrhizum* blooms on roadsides lower down where we can also find the scarce *Orobanche salviae* parasitic on *Salvia glutinosa*.

After lunch a drive takes us down the Vesubie valley, and then up to the village of Utelle. Species such as *Psoralea bituminosa*, *Convolvulus cantabrica*, *Osyris alba* and *Asparagus acutifolius* show the Mediterranean influence in this area. We'll see the large ant lion *Palpares libelluloides* with its distinctive fluttery flight. Safflower, *Carthamus lanatus* and *Coriaria myrtifolia* are in flower. We'll pass through the impressively situated village of Utelle before going over a low col and returning to the Tinee valley.

Day 4

Col de Turini

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 5

The Col de Lombarde and Val Santa Anna

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 rostarii* and *Sempervivum arachnoideum* may still be in flower. Citril Finches, Water Pipits, Wheatears and Black Redstarts frequent the fringes of the tree line.

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. We'll descend on the Italian side to Limone where we'll be based for the next three nights.

Day 6

Col de Tende: Italian and French sides

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 7

Entracque (the Gorge della Reina)

The lovely Gorge della Reina in Entracque is famed for its rare *Primula allionii* in spring but in summer it is also a wonderful place full of fine flowers and butterflies. As we explore the rich mix of habitats along a nice easy track we'll note *Scabiosa holsericea*, *Odontites luteus*, tall *Digitalis lutea* and impressive *Astragalus glycyphyllos*. The butterflies are exceptionally diverse. Two particularly uncommon species we'll look for here are the two skippers Foulquier's Grizzled Skipper and Tufted Marbled Skipper. There's also Southern Small White, Rock Grayling, Dusky Meadow Brown, Purple-shot Copper, Mountain Alcon Blue, Baton Blue, Amanda's Blue, Turquoise Blue, Chalk-hill Blue and many species of Fritillary including Weaver's Fritillary, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Knapweed Fritillary, Lesser Spotted Fritillary. A fitting finale to a holiday that show-cases one of Europe's biodiversity hotspots.

Day 8

To Turin and Departure

After our last night in Limone we'll descend to Turin 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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