

The Pyrenees

Wildlife at Leisure

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 Berdun

After our lunchtime arrival in Bilbao we've a two hour drive through increasingly beautiful countryside to the Aragonese foothills around Berdun. Nearing the village we'll no doubt be tempted to stop as birds of prey appear more frequently in the sky above us and the hillsides all around are cloaked in aromatic vegetation that provides foodplants and nectar sources for a fabulously rich butterfly fauna. Here we'll see Weaver's Fritillary, Spanish Purple Hairstreak, Marbled Fritillary and Esper's Marbled White. White-letter Hairstreak, Spanish Chalkhill Blue, Provencal Chalkhill Blue and Safflower Skipper fly amongst varied and colourful flowers along the paths and lanes around the village. Hoopoe, Black Redstart and Serin are all frequent around the houses whilst a short walk from the Casa Sarasa will see us enjoying Lizard Orchid and Bug Orchid, Great Banded Graylings, Great Spotted Cuckoo, and both Red-backed and Southern Grey Shrikes. Subalpine and Melodious Warblers sing from bramble covered banks, the flowers attracting Olive Skipper, Tufted Marbled Skipper, False Ilex and Sloe Hairstreaks and Knapweed and Dark Green Fritillaries. There seems hardly a moment when birds of prey are not in the skies. Red and Black Kites are common even over the village, and we'll see Short-toed Eagles and Egyptian Vultures too. We'll explore the Ansó Valley where in the warm afternoon sunshine there will be a lot of butterflies busy on the Ground Elder including Blue Spot and Ilex Hairstreaks, Dingy Skipper, Esper's Marbled White and Lesser Marbled Fritillary. Orange-tips and Spanish (Scarce) Swallowtail visit flowers by the banks of the Rio Aragon where we'll see European Bee-eaters and at least hear Cetti's Warblers and Nightingales. This is a good spot too for *Odonata*, including Beautiful Demoiselles and Emperors, indeed the tour as a whole will see us finding a good range of dragonflies and damselflies.

Day 3 The Hecho Valley

Crested Tits and Firecrests mark our progress through the beech and pine forests of Gabardito as we reach a well-known location for Wallcreepers. These iconic birds are perhaps as easily seen here as at any location in these mountains and there'll likely be the added bonus of Lammergeiers, Egyptian Vultures and Golden Eagles cruising the blue skies overhead. Red-billed Chough cavort above the crags whilst the calls of Black Woodpeckers ring out from within the forest. Red Squirrels are frequently spotted here. We'll walk higher where we'll find Rock Buntings and Crag Martins and

the lovely Citril Finch, before emerging into rich alpine meadows where Chestnut heaths and De prunner's Ringlets fly over turf decorated with Burnt-tip Orchids and Snow Gentians.

Day 4

Fago Gorge & Roncal Valley

The Fago gorge is a limestone chasm just a few kilometres to the west of Berdún. On and above the craggy cliffs we will find a host of raptors. Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Peregrine, Lammergeier and Golden Eagle all breed here. We'll also find Alpine Swifts, Red Billed Choughs and Blue Rock Thrush. On the rocks are several species of Saxifrage as well as Petrocoptis, while the verges throng with butterflies including some rather special species such as Chequered Blue and Striped Grayling. We continue up, crossing over to the Roncal Valley, where after a brief stop in a wild flower meadow near a stream, where we hope to find some Scarce and Purple-shot Coppers as well as Lesser Purple Emperor, we head up to the enormous Beech forest at the Rincón de Belagua. Here in a cathedral of leafy green we will search for an orchid on the forest floor. Not any old orchid, mind, but the Ghost Orchid – one of Europe's rarest and most unpredictable flowers. Ghost Orchids have been found under these beeches twice in the last five years – clearly luck will have to be on our side! We finally make it all the way up to the frontier with France at 1800m above sea level. Common Crossbills will be accompanying us, while Lefebre's, Piedmont and Chapman's Ringlets will be around on the grassy slopes. The Aquitaine depression stretches away to the Bay of Biscay, but in the foreground Lammergeier and Short-toed Eagle cruise above the hilltops. On the col Apollos float over beautiful blue gentians, pink primulas and elegant Snowbells. Alpine Accentors inhabit this zone and we've another chance of Citril Finch. Both colour forms of Elderflower Orchid will be in bloom and amongst stately Great Yellow Gentians we'll find the lovely Black Vanilla Orchid. The characteristic sharp cries of yellow-billed Alpine Choughs lend atmosphere to the stunning landscapes as we watch the local '*alpestris*' race of Ring Ouzel. Alpine Swifts scythe through the sky above us. Alpine Marmots whistle at us as we walk over the flowery turf and we've a good chance of spotting a Chamois or two.

Day 5

Tena Valley

One of the very few Lady's Slipper Orchid populations in the Pyrenees is found in the Tena Valley and will be in flower during our visit. In the same area we'll encounter the Pyrenean Fritillary and swathes of white Pyrenean Buttercups. Overhead are occasional Booted and Golden Eagles and Peregrines, and more frequently, Griffon Vultures. The yellow turk's-caps of *Lilium pyrenaicum* are a magical sight, whilst in woodlands we'll find Martagon Lilies and along tracksides Pyrenean Bellflowers and St Bernard's Lilies shine in the sun.

Day 6

Riglos

The weathered clay and pebble conglomerate of the Riglos Loarre produces a most startling and beautiful landscape, the distinctive rock formations providing a dramatic backdrop for photographs of flowers such as the unusual *Leuzia conifera* and the lovely blue Cupidone. Montagu's and Marsh Harriers quarter the nearby fields whilst in the hedgerows we'll see Sardinian Warblers and Cirl Buntings. Spotless Starlings are common around the fringes of the village and we've a good chance of unearthing a Wryneck or two. Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Sparrows are common and Lammergeiers regularly sail past; Griffon Vultures are very common. We should also see Black Wheatears on the cliffs.

Day 7

Canfranc, Atarés and San Juan de la Peña

Canfranc is the home of the enormous international railway station that served the trains going through the Somport Tunnel. It has recently been converted into a luxury hotel, but is a magnificent place to stop and admire. We go past and up to some interconnecting meadows along the pilgrim's route to Santiago. Bonelli's Warbler and Garden Warbler will serenade us as we find flower and butterfly rich habitats all around. Purple Emperor, Camberwell Beauty and Apollo are all regulars here, while Pyrenean Rampion, Martagón Lily, Greater Butterwort, Yellow Rattle and English Iris are to be found either in the meadows or in the little patches of damp woodland along the path. Later we head to more montane territory, stopping at the Atarés river crossing, where a small brook runs through some oak woodland. Here we are looking for Iberian Water Frog, Midwife Toad and several species of dragonflies and featherlegs. We finally head up to the pine woods near the San Juan de la Peña monastery. This is a great place to get up close to Crested and Long-tailed Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, Nuthatch and Firecrest. Black Woodpeckers are often found here, while the rocky outcrops by the Pyrenees viewing platform are where we hope to find *Ramonda myconi* – an ice age relic found only in the Pyrenees.

Day 8

Departure

Perhaps a final Short-toed Eagle or Lesser Spotted Fritillary, or maybe a photograph of a basking Green Lizard or a perched Broad Scarlet, before we depart for Bilbao and our flight home.

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