

The Cottian Alps

The Stone King

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 - 8

Valle de Varaita, Colle di Sampeyre and Monte Cugulet, Colle del'Agnello, Colle de l'Izoard, Casteldelfino and Monte Viso

We'll land in Turin and head straight for the Cottian Alps and our lovely accommodation 'il Mulino delle Fucine', a small livestock and organic fruit and aromatics farm, nestled amid the greenery of the Val Varaita in the heart of the Cuneo Alps.

The week will see us enjoying meadows, woodlands and alpine areas equally rich in both butterflies and flowers.

First the butterflies. We can expect around 120 species during the week. The variety of habitats and the altitudinal variation in a comparatively small area facilitates this impressive variety. Apollos are rather common in the area and there are several strong colonies of Small Apollos at higher altitudes where their larval foodplant *Saxifraga aizoides* is abundant. We'll encounter a few Scarce Swallowtails and European Swallowtails during the week. In the highest areas we'll find Mountain Green-veined Whites and with a little luck a Peak White or two. There's Mountain Dappled Whites and reasonable numbers of Mountain Clouded Yellow as well as a strong colony of Moorland Clouded Yellows.

Large groups of mud-puddling blues are found in some places. Silver-studded and Idas Blues are common, and so to is Damon Blue, one of the commonest species at this season. At higher altitudes we will find colonies of the typical mountain *Lycaenids* such as Glandon Blue, Silvery Argus, Alpine Blue, and Eros Blue. Large Blues will be seen and so to Escher's Blue, Chalk-hill Blue, and Turquoise Blue. Scarce, Sooty, and Purple-edged Coppers are all common, and all equally beautiful, their shimmering golden-orange wings lighting up the meadows. There's also Purple-shot and Small Coppers to be seen.

We are likely to see in excess of twenty species of Fritillary. Silver-washed and Dark Green are common, the former including a number of the form *valezina*. High Brown and Niobe Fritillaries will be noted too. The alpine meadows hold good colonies of both Mountain and Shepherd's Fritillary, and we'll see several Balkan Fritillaries. Marsh Fritillary may still be flying. Middle altitude meadows have plenty of both Titania's Fritillary and Marbled Fritillary, and we'll see good numbers of Glanville, Knapweed, Spotted, False Heath, Heath and Provençal Fritillaries during the tour. Highlights will be a colony of Cynthia's Fritillary on a high pass, and on the French side another high-altitude species, Grison's Fritillary.

Lesser Purple Emperors, usually of the *clytie* form, will be much enjoyed and we'll also see Large Tortoiseshell, Comma and White Admiral.

Erebia ringlets are one of the faunal signature species of the Alps and here several species are present in good numbers. Large Ringlet can be abundant, and Lesser Mountain Ringlet, Piedmont Ringlet and Common Brassy Ringlet are all widespread. More unusual are Silky Ringlet, False Mnestrá Ringlet and Sooty Ringlet. Both Alpine Heath and Chestnut Heath fly in these higher meadows. Lower down we'll likely encounter Great Sooty Satyr, Great Banded Grayling, Pearly Heath and Large Wall Brown. The list of skippers is impressive - Large Grizzled, Olive, Carline, Safflower, Tufted Marbled, Red Underwing and Silver-spotted Skippers will all be seen and we can hope for the local endemic Foulquier's Grizzled Skipper. though it's not always easy to find!

In July the flora is rich and varied. Above the tree line the alpine meadows and pastures are a riot of colour. Various pinks, cinquefoils, clovers, gentians, speedwells, bellflowers, knapweeds, and orchids put on a fine show.

At mid altitudes the flowery meadows that are not yet cut for hay are rich in species such as both Greater and Lesser Masterwort, Wood and Dusky Cranesbills, Caraway, Betony, Meadow Clary, Large Yellow Foxglove and Hoary Plantain. Campanulas are especially well represented in the area. Among the more widespread species are *Campanula patula*, *Campanula glomerata* and *Campanula trachelium* whilst more unusual are *Campanula spicata*, *Campanula rhomboidalis* and *Campanula scheuchzeri*. We should also find no fewer than seven species of Rampion.

Among the orchids a few of the local speciality, stunning bright pink *Nigritella corneliana* will be a fine sight and at several sites we'll find Small White and Frog Orchids as well as Fragrant and Pyramidal Orchids.

The alpine slopes yield, among a host of other species, *Bartsia alpina*, *Potentilla grandiflora*, *Viola calcarata*, *Lotus alpinus*, *Pedicularis rostratospicata*, *Erigeron alpinus*, *Arnica montana*, *Trollius europaeus* and the very attractive Plume Knapweed. Moonwort is locally common. The impressive cobwebbed rosettes of *Sempervivum arachnoideum* are not uncommon and we'll find *Saxifraga oppositifolia* still in flower at the highest sites. Yellow Mountain Saxifrage is very common, this species is the food plant for the colonies of Small Apollos.

Pinks are a feature, notably *Dianthus seguieri*, *Dianthus pavonius*, *Dianthus sylvestris*, *Dianthus furcatus* and *Dianthus deltoides*. Alpine, Mountain and Brown Clover will all be in flower. Edelweiss looks at its alpine best here and there's the impressively large flowered *Hypochoeris uniflora*, as well as *Doronicum grandiflorum*, and the endemic *Delphinium dubium*. A few *Primula farinosa* will still be in flower. White False Helleborines will be in good bloom, and we'll see several Martagon Lilies, as well as an Orange Lily or two. The beautiful endemic *Allium narcissiflorum* will be one of the week's most stunning flowers.

Astragalus alpinus, *Astragalus hypoglottis*, *Astragalus sempervirens*, *Oxytropis campestris*, *Ononis cristata*, *Ononis natrix*, *Onobrychis montana* and *Anthyllis montana* are amongst a fine mix of alpine legumes. On roadsides in France we'll encounter the impressive large *Astragalus alopecuroides*, reminiscent of several central Asian species of this huge genus. Gentians will be much in evidence with the local speciality *Gentiana rostanii* in fine flower. We'll also find *Gentiana tenella*, *Gentianella campestris*, the latter common, as well as some fine Snow Gentians.

Marmots will be much in evidence on the alpine pastures, being particularly common below the Col d'Agnello, their shrieking whistles a feature of the area. Alpine Chough are found at higher altitudes, and in the coniferous forests Nutcrackers are rather common. Raptors include Golden Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and Honey Buzzard. Red-backed Shrikes, Water Pipits, Whinchat, Snow Finch and Citril Finch are typical montane birds here.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the report from our previous tours to the Cottian 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.

To book a place on this holiday please click on the 'Book this Tour' button on the right-hand side of the page where you downloaded this itinerary, or fill in a booking form downloadable from <https://www.greentours.co.uk/booking/> (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post to Greentours, 8 Eliot Close, Armitage, Rugeley, WS15 4UP, UK. Tel +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Flower, butterfly and bird checklists are available.