

Catalonia - The Eastern Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Barcelona; transfer to Avellanes

Day 2/3 Daily programme of birdwatching and botanising outings from Avellanes

Day 4/7 Espot/High Pyrenees

Day 8 Fly UK



Departs

May

Focus

Birds, plants and other wildlife

Grading

Grade A/B. Mostly limited day walks only

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP01) or brochure



Highlights:

- Superb landscapes, from dry plains to snow-capped pinnacles of the high Pyrenees
- Stay at two charming family-run hotels
- Little Bustard, Bonelli's Eagle, Bee-eater & Black Wheatear
- Also: Lammergeier, eagles & Black Woodpecker
- Visit the stunningly beautiful National Park of Aigüestortes
- Led by expert naturalist guide(s)



Images (from top to bottom):
Griffon Vulture, Red-backed Shrike & Aigüestortes National Park



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction



Aigüestortes National Park, Pyrenees

Catalonia is an immensely proud and semi-autonomous region of Spain which boasts its own culture and language, age-old customs and festivals, a highly diverse landscape, and internationally renowned culinary traditions. Situated in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula, it has over 6 million inhabitants and covers an area the size of Belgium or Switzerland. The Catalanian Pyrenees, part of that spectacular natural barrier between France and Spain, dominate the entire north of the region, stretching for more than 200 kilometres from Val d'Aran, in the west, to the headland of Cape Creus, in the east, where the last rocky spurs of the Pyrenees, stripped base by the wind

and waves, plunge into the Mediterranean. It is a dramatic land of snow-capped peaks, glacial lakes, wooded gorges and astonishing rock formations. Its flora and fauna is equally rich.

Day 1

Barcelona, Avellanes and The Monastery

This morning we fly from the UK on a direct flight to Barcelona. Our charming accommodation for the next three nights is at the monastery of Santa Maria de Bellpuig, near les Avellanes, which is a couple of hours' drive away. Depending on the flight arrangements, we may stop off at the Estany d'Ivars, a newly-recovered lowland lake in an agricultural setting, often near-to-teeming with birds. From the paths and hides we will be able to observe several species of duck, which may include Red-crested Pochard and Garganey. Squacco Heron, Night Heron, Purple Heron and Cattle Egret are usually present, along with Black-necked Grebe, Whiskered Tern and Black Tern. Black-winged Stilts and other waders seek out the shallows, while Penduline Tits, Great Reed Warblers, Tree Sparrows, Melodious Warblers, Cetti's Warblers and Bee-eaters are never far from the lake's shores.

Once at the hotel, we may have time to make our first excursions into this attractive area before dinner. The grounds of the monastery itself incorporate a vineyard, pinewoods and sunny, scrub-covered slopes which are home to birds such as Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit, Sardinian Warbler and the scarcer Orphean Warbler.



European Bee-eater

Day 2

Mont-roig and Montsec

This morning we head for the nearby Serra de Mont Roig to enjoy a walk and stunning views over the plains of Lleida and beyond. Beside the track we may find plants such as *Helichrysum stoechas*, Cotton Lavender (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*), the white *Thymus mastichina*, *Paronychia capitata*, Wall Pepper (*Sedum acre*), the pungent Pitch Trefoil (*Psoralea bituminosa*), the pine cone heads of *Leuzia (centaurea) conifera*, *Verbascum thapsus*, Weasel's Snout (*Misopates orontium*), Dwarf Mallow (*Malva neglecta*) and Blue Aphallanthes (*A.monspelienensis*). Blue Rock Thrushes sing from the heights, parachuting down to rocky perches that tower over our heads, and Red-billed



Mont-roig

Choughs twist, dip and glide effortlessly in the air while huge Griffon Vultures sail by at almost eye level. On the rocky slopes below we must look out for Black Wheatears and Subalpine Warblers, and plants like Turpentine Tree (*Pistacia terebrinthus*), Mastic Tree (*P. lentiscus*) and Giant Fennel (*Ferula communis*). On the grassy banks we may see Pyrenean Pink (*Dianthus pyrenaicus*), Alpine Gypsophila (*G. repens*) and Three-veined Aster (*A. sedifolious* ssp *trinervis*) and on the overhanging rocks Creeping Snapdragon (*Asarina procumbens*) and *Sarcocapnos enneaphylla*, a white fumitory that is endemic to the mountains of northern Spain.

After the first of many sumptuous picnic lunches, we head up into the mountains again, taking a track up to Montsec d'Ares, the highest point of the whole Serra del Montsec. Ortolan Bunting, Orphean Warbler, Woodlark and Rock Bunting breed here whilst towards the top Rock Thrushes are present. The rocky banks support many alpine plants such as Pyrenean Honeysuckle (*Lonicera pyrenaica*), the blue flowered Hedgehog Broom (*Erinacea anthyllis*), Mountain Kidney Vetch (*Anthyllis Montana*), Matted Globularia (*Globularia repens*) and Grape Hyacinth (*Muscari racemosum*). At the top we can take time to admire the spectacular views, and look for Dartford Warbler and Stonechat amongst Star-of-Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*) and wild tulips (*Tulipa australis*).

Day 3



Southern Smooth Snake

Lleida steppes and wetlands

Taking advantage of the fact that our hotel is strategically placed between the pre-Pyrenees and the plains, we today head southwards to the plains, where a completely new array of birds and plants can be seen. Little Bustard, Roller, Calandra Lark, Thekla Lark, Crested Lark, Hobby, Little Owl, Stone Curlew, Southern Grey Shrike and Montagu's Harrier are some of the avian delights that make their home on the steppes. For the botanists, *Coris monspeliensis*, *Sideritis romana*, *Gynandiris sisyrrinchium*, the intriguing miniature brown blubell *Dipcadi serotinum*, the fine leaved *Convolvulus cantabria*, sheets of Corn Poppy

(*Papaver rhoeas*), Sainfoin (*Onobrychis vicifolia*), the white Round-headed Thyme (*T. mastichina*) and showy stands of grasses such as Albardine (*Lygeum spartum*) and *Aegilops geniculata* should all be seen, whilst the roadsides will be awash with Spanish Broom, Lucerne and Common Mallow.

Next we head to the Estany D'Ivars for lunch. This is a large lake which was drained against popular opinion in the 1950's and which is now subject of an ambitious project of re-establishment. There are large stands of Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*), *Phragmites australis*, and *Arundo donax*, with *Pallenis spinosa*, Wild and Corn Mignonette (*Reseda lutea*, *R. phyteuma*) Tufted Vetch (*Vicia cracca*) and *Plantago afra* here and although only in its second year the lake is already thriving with birds, including numerous Whiskered Terns, Gull-billed Terns, Little Grebe, Little Egret, Purple and Squacco Herons, Black-winged Stilts, Lapwings, Little Ringed Plovers, Little Stint and Marsh Harrier. Passerines provide interest too, with Penduline Tit, Great Reed Warbler, Melodious Warbler and Cetti's Warbler all present.



Black Redstart

After lunch in the shade on the cool shores of the lake we will head westwards to follow an almost-forgotten track into silent rocky landscapes on the eastern edge of a large reservoir. Here there are some excellent open areas for plant and erfly lovers and the variety of bird species that make up the list of possible encounters is large: Rock Sparrow, Black-eared Wheatear, Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Cirl Bunting, Sardinian Warbler, Woodlark, Black Redstart, Short-toed Treecreeper, Golden Oriole, Wryneck and Dartford Warbler.

Day 4

Espot



Our hotel in Espot

Today we leave the tranquil surroundings of the monastery to transfer to our base high up in the Pyrenees.

Our journey will take us through a variety of habitats. Roadside stops should yeild Carob Tree (*Seratonia siliqua*), Rock Soapwort (*Saponaria oymoides*), Green Hellebore (*H. viridis*), Fringed Rue (*Ruta chalepensis*), and Scorpiurus (*S. muricartus*), a vetch with a very atypical leaf and a tangle of spiny seedheads. Birds of prey will be very much in evidence, including potentially Golden Eagle, together with Woodchat Shrike, Red Kite and Short-toed Eagle.

We will arrive at our splendid mountain hotel in the afternoon, possibly with some time to begin some exploration of the neighbouring Aigüestortes National Park.

Day 5

Aigüestortes National Park



Citril Finch

A 4 wheel-drive taxi will take us into the park, drop us off at an altitude of over 2,000m and then drive away again, leaving us to walk down the mountain! The walk can hardly fail to be a pleasant one, and will largely be spent admiring plants and butterflies in a truly beautiful alpine setting. Here we should get a taste of true alpine flora such as *Pulsatilla alpina* ssp. *sulphurea*, *Hepatica nobilis* which grows white here, *Bartsia alpina*, *Ranunculus alpestris*, *R. pyrenaicus*, *R. amplexicaulis*, *gentian* sps., possibly white crocus, *Primula elatior*, *P. farinose*, *P. integrifolia* and bright yellow cushions of *Vitaliana primuliflora*. Shrubs may include the small-flowered Pyrenean Honeysuckle, red-berried Alpine Elder, Alpenrose and the fragrant Garland flower (*Daphne cneorum*)

Marmots and Chamois are a possibility for the early risers, while the birdlife that could be seen includes species such as Ring Ouzel, Water Pipit, Crossbill, Lammergeier, Citril Finch, Golden Eagle and Alpine Accentor.

Day 6

Aigüestortes National Park – the eastern fringes

The plan for today is to take a peaceful drive interspersed with numerous short walks around the little visited eastern edge of the Park, all to a backdrop of tiny picturesque villages, lush pastures, flower-filled meadows and pinewoods. Later we will drive up to a mountain refuge where a short uphill walk will take us to a spot with splendid views over the national park. Black Woodpecker, Crested Tit, Red-backed Shrike, Ring Ouzel and Capercaillie (much luck needed with the latter) are all possible on this route.

Day 7

Val d'Aran

In the morning we will set out by minibus to follow one of the best otter rivers in Catalonia (Dipper, Grey Wagtail) to lush green meadows and scented pinewoods, and an area which is one of the last refuges of the Brown Bear on the southern side of the Pyrenees. Taking a circular route, in the afternoon we will stop at a mountain pass at over 2,000 metres altitude, where there will be another chance to catch up with some elusive high mountain species like Alpine Chough or even Alpine Accentor.



Woodcock Orchid

Day 8

London

Today we will make our way back to Barcelona for our return flights to the UK.

Trek grading

On this holiday we are based in two different but comfortable Spanish hotels. From these outstanding bases we will explore both the foothills and mountains of the Catalonian Pyrenees on daily outings, enjoying their natural history by means of gentle day walks. Our pace will be slow, as we look for birds, plants and butterflies, but we shall aim to be outdoors as much as possible covering perhaps 3-4 miles each day, occasionally more. This holiday should suit those of all ages who enjoy natural history and mountain environments. We should be accompanied by two leaders to allow us maximum flexibility (depending on a group size of 9+), and provide options to each day's programme.

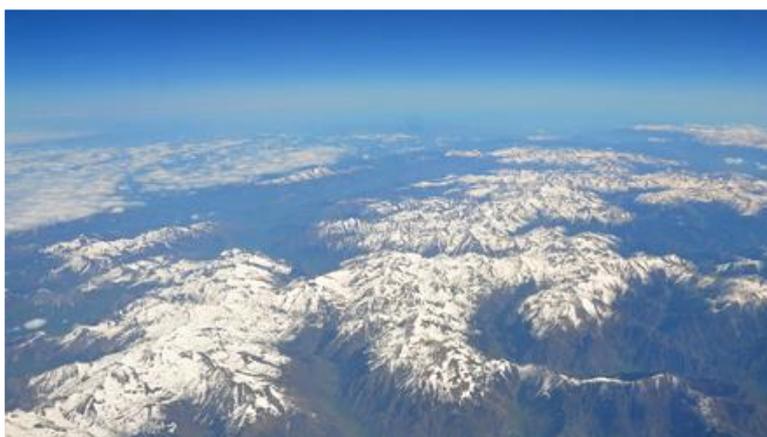


Naturetrek group near Balaguer

Regional Departures

Barcelona is a popular holiday destination and subject to confirmation we hope to be able to offer direct flights from a wide selection of regional airports including Gatwick, Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle. Contact us for details, or make your preference known to us upon booking. Depending on flight times from regional airports you may have some spare time in Barcelona at either end of the tour.

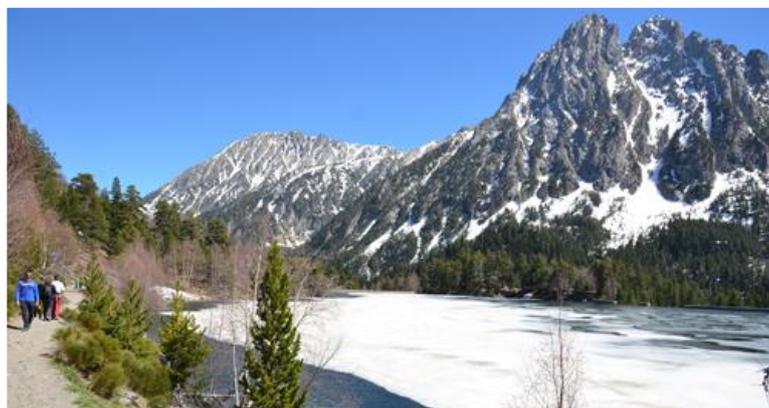
Extra nights in the city can be booked easily, either through Naturetrek or independently.



The eastern Pyrenees seen from the flight to Barcelona

Weather

We have chosen May as being an ideal time for the flowering plants, birds and butterflies of this region. However, although we expect plenty of fine, hot and sunny weather (especially at lower altitudes), in the high mountains the weather is never predictable and you must be prepared for such variability and bring a good range of clothing!



Lake Saint Maurici, Aiguestortes, taken during the very late 2013 spring!

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.



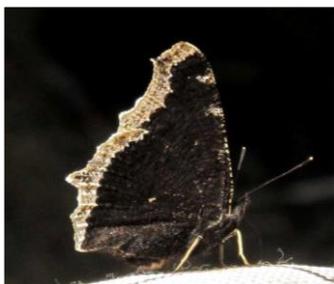
The gardens of the hotel in Avellanes



Vulture feeding station

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.



From left: Camberwell Beauty, Crossbill, *Ranunculus pyrenaicus* (Pyrenean Buttercup) and Common Wall Lizard