

Wildlife Photography in the Spanish Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Zaragoza and transfer to Berdún

Day 2/7 Programme of photography tuition and daily excursions to photograph scenery, birds, insect-life and flowers from our base in Berdún.

Day 8 Fly Stansted

Departs

May/June/September

Focus

Wildlife Photography (birds, plants and insects) also walking.

Grading

A/B. Some longer optional walks sometimes involving substantial altitude gain, but not generally over difficult terrain.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP25) or brochure

Highlights

- Understand your camera – depth of field, light, filters & more
- Micro, macro, landscape & night time shoots
- Learn from our expert photographer & tour leader



The Sierra de Alcano at Anso Valley, Lammergeier and Green Lizard – Sergio Padura



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Introduction

The scenery of the Spanish Pyrenees has a pleasing grandeur and provides a setting that attracts many visitors each year, but with photography as our focus on this 8-day holiday to rural Aragón, we'll view the region's stunning cliffs, canyons and limestone erosions with a more artistic eye than the general tourist. Aimed at beginners and intermediates, you will have a chance to hone your wildlife and landscape photography skills in a beautiful and unspoilt setting, with breathtaking Pyrenean scenery as a backdrop to your shots. The comfortable base for our activities is a delightful 300-year-old property situated in the pretty hilltop village of Berdún which enjoys fine views of the Pyrenees, surrounding foothills, and valleys of the Veral and Aragón Rivers. Our friendly hosts will make us most welcome, keeping us well fed on local cuisine, while our tutor will be experienced local photographer Sergio Padura. Sergio fine-tuned his artistic appreciation with a B.A. in Art History at the University of Barcelona, as well as completing a 5-year course at the Institute of Photographic Studies of Catalonia. Now based in the Aragonese Pyrenees, he has travelled widely, and works as a professional photographer in a variety of different sectors from architecture to landscape. He has an open, friendly manner and an excellent understanding of how to help people make the most of their potential as a photographer, whatever level they start at. This tour is designed for those who want to learn more about the basics of photography and who also have a keen interest in nature. Advances in technology mean many of us now own digital SLR cameras. If you have become accustomed to setting the dial to 'AUTO', and have forgotten or are only dimly aware of such concepts as focal length, aperture and shutter speed, but have the kit and are keen to learn (or remember) how to use it, this holiday offers such an opportunity. Sergio will teach you the basics, and more depending on how fast you progress, then head straight off outside each day to help you practice your new skills, with the natural beauty of the setting providing the backdrop of scenery, birds, plants and butterflies that will be the subjects of the holiday. It is important to stress, however, that this holiday is about learning to take photographs, and not about your camera. Excellent results can be achieved with the simplest of cameras, and despite all the technical wizardry on offer, there is no substitute for a good eye, good subject matter and knowing how to make the most of the light.

Itinerary

The sites described in the detailed itinerary below give an idea of locations in the area that we may visit during the photography holiday. However, the decision of exactly where we will go on any particular day will be decided at the time by Sergio, and will depend a great deal on the weather – especially light conditions, or particular species which are known to be showing well at the time of our visit.

Day 1

Berdún

We depart from London Stansted on a flight direct to Zaragoza. From the airport we will meet our guide and continue on to Berdún. As we arrive late in the afternoon, we will drive directly to our accommodation at Casa Sarasa, a comfortable 'casa rural' at the foot of the medieval village of Berdún. Rooms open directly on to the garden, and there are fine views of the Aragón Valley and the surrounding mountains and foothills. Each day we'll make excursions to locations within an hour's drive for the photography course – to the high Pyrenees and foothills, rounding off each evening with a debrief of the day's 'work' and analysis of everyone's pictures.

Day 2

Berdún & Arrés

Getting to know your camera; landscape photography 1

This morning we will have our first photography lesson at the guesthouse with professional photographer and tour leader, Sergio Padura. After our first 'classroom' session we'll head outside to begin practicing our skills.

Today, Sergio will help you understand your camera and how to achieve the best results from it, starting with finding your way around the camera's controls. After a brief introduction, and a chance to practice with your camera on its automatic settings (and what the abilities and limitations of this mode are), Sergio will move onto 'capturing light' – understanding exposure. While 'AUTO' modes are very helpful for the novice photographer, in order to develop your photography further, it is essential to learn how to take control and use exposure in an imaginative way. Exposure is one of the most creative decisions you can make when taking a photograph, but in order to be able to express your creative feelings about how you want a subject to look, you need to understand what the camera is doing. The aperture controls the depth of field in the photograph – that is, the point of focus that is held sharp. Sergio will explain about the functions of the aperture and shutter as the mechanisms that control exposure; we'll learn how to control the depth of field in a photograph and how it can be used as a creative tool. This offers the photographer a chance to control mood, draw the viewer's attention to particular points of interest in the composition, and influence colour and tone.

Armed with this morning's information about understanding exposure, we'll head outside after lunch for a first exploration of the bird and plant-rich areas right on our doorstep around Berdún. This afternoon, though we may see and enjoy such bird species as Griffon Vulture, Black Kite, Bee-eaters and Rock Sparrows as we explore the local area with our cameras, we'll be aiming to photograph some rather easier-to-capture subjects – namely the stunning scenery of the Aragón and Veral Valleys, and we may take in some of the region's exciting flora which includes Violet Horned Poppy and Blue Grass Lily, plus a wealth of orchid species including Woodcock, Early Spider, Bug, Pyramidal, Southern Marsh and Marsh Helleborine. We will take a short drive to Arrés where we hope to capture some unforgettable views of Spain's most photogenic and colourful seasonal bird, the Bee-eater, near a remarkable underground nesting colony.

We'll then return to our guesthouse for a debriefing of the day's first attempts to control exposure levels manually, view the results we have achieved with different settings, and then retire for a hearty Aragonese supper as a reward for all our hard work.

Day 3

San Juan de La Pena & Aisa

Picture composition; landscape photography 2

Picture composition is not a hard concept to understand and it is an essential consideration if you wish to progress from taking mediocre pictures to great ones. Sergio will talk to us this morning about some of the basic rules of picture composition. He'll touch on ideas passed down by the classical painters - some of which were arrived at by the Old Masters using trial and error, while others have come to us through history from the architects of Ancient Greece! Finally, we'll talk about how the digital camera now allows us to manipulate composition after taking the photograph, having returned to the studio, with post-production programs such as

Photoshop.

This morning we will continue to explore landscape photography with an excursion to the beautiful Aisa Valley, which offers splendid stream-side meadows in a high and remote Pyrenean valley. The valley's peaceful and remote situation make it a haven for wildlife and we'll keep our eyes peeled for Alpine Marmot, the Pyrenean race of Chamois (the Izard) and, if it is a warm sunny day, a good many alpine butterflies should be on the wing. The superb flora here includes Pyrenean Buttercup, Globe Flower, Bird's-eye Primrose and several orchids including Lady, Frog and Musk. A large colony of cliff-nesting House Martins is to be found here, together with Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Buzzard, Chough, Alpine Chough, and other high-altitude species.

This is a delightful location for us to explore today's photographic themes and we'll hope to capture the mood of this alpine location, perhaps enhancing and drawing out the natural beauty of the surroundings to our individual tastes using new-found techniques, while also finding time to simply sit back and enjoy the wildlife and scenery around us.

In the afternoon we combine landscape with history, when we follow a route that would once have been taken by medieval pilgrims to see the holy relics (including the Holy Grail) at San Juan de la Peña. This is a fascinating walk along a rarely trodden path which passes through a variety of habitats. For the naturalist, the allure is the wildlife inhabiting the open pastures, woodlands and thick forests. As photographers, we'll be trying to use our new knowledge about picture composition and understanding of aperture to exert far greater control over our subject matter as we explore the spectacular scenery towards the high Pyrenees and the stunning views on the south-facing cliffs at San Juan de la Peña, looking for creative ways to develop our landscape photography.

The plants on our way to San Juan de la Peña include Wild Tulip, Green Winged Orchid and Pink Rock-rose, as well as Pyrenean specialities such as Pyrenean Hyacinth, Pyrenean Iris and Pyrenean Violet. Though landscape is the main theme of the day, if the sun is out, butterflies (as well as wild flowers) will be very prominent along the way and amongst the variety of butterfly species found here are: Dark Green Fritillary, Silver-washed Fritillary, Orange Tip, Scarce Swallowtail and Spanish Gatekeeper.

We'll return in the late afternoon to analyse our day's photographs and for dinner at our guesthouse.

Day 4

Yesa Reservoir & Lumbier Gorge

Color temperature & white balance; water & sky;

Colour touches us deeply on an emotional level, and we all see and respond to it differently. Today Sergio will talk about how to manage colour in our cameras, making it warmer or cooler at the time of shooting if you wish to, and afterwards on the computer as well. You'll also be encouraged to have a go at revelling in colour as a subject in itself. On a digital camera, white balance solves the problem of colour casts without the need for filters that are used with film. Sergio will help you to see how to use the white balance button to set the colour according to the light.

Our theme for the day is water and sky, and the first stop is the man-made Yesa reservoir. Flooding the whole Aragón valley, the reservoir was built in the 1950s to provide water for irrigation. The water levels vary at different times of year, but normally the snowmelt of spring floods grasslands at the tail of the reservoir, providing a bountiful seasonal wetland for all sorts of wildlife. Amongst the shimmering reflections of partially submerged poplar trees, we might even catch glimpses of Black Kites fishing as if they were Ospreys.

We continue westward to visit the spectacular limestone gorge of Foz de Lumbier, which is cloaked in beech and Holm Oak woodland and low Mediterranean scrub. The gorge is home to such bird species as Short-toed Eagle, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Rock Sparrow, Black Redstart, Alpine and Common Swifts, Crag and House Martins, Spectacled Warbler and Red-billed Chough; butterflies abound, and we'll search for species including Ilex Hairstreak, Cleopatra and Scarce Swallowtail, as well as flowers such as Tassel and Grape Hyacinths, Rock Soapwort, Narrow-leaved Valerian and Pyrenean Saxifrage.

Once back at Casa Sarasa and our evening 'debrief' we will enjoy dinner and perhaps an evening stroll, camera in hand, to try and capture the fading light.

Day 5

Foz de Binies & Anso y Linza

Filters & lenses – wide-angle, telephoto, zoom & macro;

Today Sergio will explain how you can use filters to correct and enhance colour, shoot in soft focus, or, add a range of special effects to transform your photography. He'll also give an overview of the lenses you may want to experiment with in your photography – wide-angle, telephoto, zoom and macro being the most common. These can be used to achieve images of extreme sharpness for a wide range of subject matter. With them we can also create special effects such as distorted perspective, unusual angles, creative portraiture, zoom movement, close-up photography and more.

Our first stop will be the Foz de Biniés, a very spectacular lowland gorge close to Berdún with a good variety of plants, birds and butterflies. The river banks leading to the gorge support Pyramid Orchid and the Pyrenean Pink Rock-rose, while growing on the spectacular gorge face are large bright clumps of Pyrenean Saxifrage, Pyrenean Golden, Large Yellow Restharrow, Ramonda, and several species of *allium* including Yellow Onion. Birds such as Alpine Swift, Dipper, Golden Oriole, Blue Rock Thrush, Hoopoe and Bonelli's Warbler are found here, plus an excellent range of birds of prey, including Golden Eagle and Egyptian Vulture.

We continue to the mountain village of Ansó, with multiple examples of local vernacular architecture. Beautiful carved doorways and windows, and steep roofs with 'roman' tiles and stone façades combine to provide plenty of urban subject matter on which to practise our newly acquired skills.

Further up the valley we reach the high mountain pastures, pine and beech forests of Linza. Spectacular limestone crags form the backdrop, while in the foreground we will find all sorts of alpine flowers, including Spring and Trumpet Gentians. There is a good chance of seeing Marmots and Izard, while amongst the trees we might see Black Woodpecker or even the very elusive White-backed woodpecker.

We'll return to our guesthouse in the late afternoon to go through the day's photos and what we have learnt, and for another delicious dinner of local cuisine. If the evening is fine, tonight we may head back outside after dinner to photograph the stars, which show as a fantastic display on clear nights in this remote location. Night photography opens up a whole new world for you to photograph. Sergio will provide guidance on how to make the most of what light there is, what shutter speed to select and how to create a striking pattern of colour and light.

Day 6

Aguastuertas, Selva de Oza & Gabardito

Putting together a story; rivers & forests;

This morning's classroom session will be a chance to draw on what we have learnt so far on the holiday, and today we'll be aiming to produce an illustrated report of our time so far in the Aragón Pyrenees. This will be an ideal time to consolidate what you have learnt, ask questions and test out your knowledge and skills, as well as to enjoy viewing some of the results of your photography, taking pride in your achievements.

We head off today to the Hecho Valley. Right at the top of the valley, almost in France, we come to the spectacular meanders of the Aragón-Subordán River known as Aguastuertas (literally 'twisted waters'). Against the musical backdrop of clinking cow bells we find mountain water meadows, while Marmots cry out as the mighty Lammergeier cruises overhead. Here are ruins of shepherds' huts and long-abandoned mines – plenty of material for composing a photographic story. Further down the valley we stop at the Selva de Oza, which as the name implies is a veritable jungle of beech and pine forests. The river charges over enormous boulders as it crashes into the Hell's Mouth Gorge; the cliff faces rise vertically on both sides, as there is barely enough room for the river and the road. Water sprays off the rocks, the gorge alternates deep shadow and bright sunlight, and vegetation clings to the walls as best it can – some ideal conditions for testing our knowledge of light conditions to get those perfect shots.

Our last stop of the day is at Gabardito, a mountain refuge above the main valley. Here we walk through mixed pine and beech forest, before reaching a spectacular rock face known as a great place to spot Citril Finch, Mistle Thrush and the elusive Wallcreeper. As the light fades towards the end of the day, we have a great view over the whole valley.

Once again we'll meet after dinner to analyse the day's work, and to share our photographs and personal discoveries amongst the group.

Day 7

Jasa y Lizara

Time of day; Picture composition; landscape photography 2

On one day of our holiday, if there is a day when light conditions are poor, we'll explore the topic of 'time of day' and how the photographer can best cope with light conditions which are far from ideal! Light has been described as the 'magic ingredient of photography'. Painters have always been obsessed with it and today we'll start to learn how to read light in photography terms and how to take advantage of the light we find. The quality of light changes throughout the day, so the time of day has a dramatic effect on your photographs. The terms 'good light' and 'bad light' are relative, but today Sergio will help you to understand the differing effects

various qualities of light are likely to have on our photographs and what can be done to ensure we get the result we want, and as good a result as possible given the prevailing light conditions.

On today's excursion we head up to the village of Jasa and the mountain refuge of Lizara. It is an irony that in mountain meadowland man's intervention has enriched biodiversity. Grasses and flowers are more varied and abundant in areas which sheep and cows have been grazing for centuries than in the areas where they have not been intensively grazed. Our first stop will be in the paddocks and drystone walled fields near Jasa, where we can enjoy a rich carpet of meadow flowers with all the accompanying invertebrates and insects, while butterflies such as Swallowtail, Adonis Blue and Small Tortoiseshell will add to the photographic interest.

We continue up to Lizara mountain refuge. Once again we are surrounded by spectacular mountain scenery. After a short walk we'll come across a splendid waterfall, while nearby we will also find a dolmen – silent witness to the fact that man has been using these mountain pastures since the dawn of time. Orchids and narcissi are abundant here, as are Citril Finch, Serin and the ubiquitous Griffon Vulture.

This evening we will look back at some of our favourite shots from the week-long course and discuss the results as a group over a convivial dinner and perhaps a glass or two of local wine.

Day 8

Loarre y Riglos: London

This is our day for travelling home, but as our flight doesn't leave until evening we shall make the most of the day, continuing our photographic exploration of the Pyrenean foothills. There will be a last chance to let Sergio know if you have any particular subjects you wish to try and photograph, any special flower species or birds, for example, and he will do his best to accommodate your wishes. As it is our last excursion, it's a chance to try and bring together everything you have learned over the week, concentrating on improving anything you have found more challenging, or you can simply relax and enjoy photographing your subjects with far greater confidence and the higher skill levels you have acquired during the holiday. We leave the high alpine habitats of the mountains and head down to the more Mediterranean influenced area of the Huesca depression. Here we visit the colossal sugarloaf rocks known as the Mallos de Riglos, a haven for all sorts of different bird, flower and butterfly species. The vegetation is dryer, almond and olive trees are cultivated in the nearby fields, while gorse and wild rosemary cover the rocky terrain. Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush and Subalpine Warbler are to be found, as well as a massive Griffon Vulture breeding colony. It is a little warmer here than the high mountains. Our final stop before we head down to the plains of Zaragoza and the airport will be the 11th century castle of Loarre. Built as a border stronghold to dominate the plains from possible Moorish incursions, it lost its strategic importance as the frontier separating the Christian kingdoms of the north from the Muslim south gradually moved southwards as the Reconquista gathered strength. Since none of its subsequent owners ever thought to 'modernise' the castle, it still retains its earlier medieval atmosphere, along with a splendid Romanesque church and keep. There are plenty of architectural details to capture, while the panoramic views on a clear day give vistas of almost 100km. Short-toed, Bonelli's and Booted Eagles are all often seen here.

With our final shots taken, we'll pack up the camera equipment for our journey down to

Zaragoza Airport and the homeward flight to Stansted.

Tour grading & wildlife/photographic focus

Grade A (easy). From our outstanding base in Berdún we will explore the nearby foothills, valleys and mountains of the Spanish Pyrenees on daily outings, enjoying photographing their natural history by means of gentle day walks.

'Mobile' wildlife photography focusing on mammals and rare birds is a very specialist area requiring appropriate equipment and facilities (hides), time, camouflaging and patience. The nature of this holiday means that the photography will inevitably focus on 'fixed' specimens, e.g. flowers and butterflies, together with landscapes and people.

Weather

We have chosen June as an ideal month for appreciating the plants, birds and butterflies of this region. Light conditions are particularly pleasing for the photographer. 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.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday; wine and coffee is included with the evening meals.

Cameras and equipment

You will need to bring your own camera on this holiday, along with any lenses, filters and other camera-related equipment you wish to use. There is no specific type of camera needed. Excellent results can be obtained with compact cameras as well as SLRs. Indeed, there is no reason why you shouldn't bring a film camera if you have one.

You must bring your own memory cards, memory sticks, spare batteries, chargers, cables, film (if used) etc. If you have a tripod and are prepared to take it on the plane, then that would be useful, but not essential.

The emphasis of this holiday is on taking photographs. In the evenings we will share our work and discuss what we have learned. There is a computer and a screen at Casa Sarasa for viewing our photos, and Sergio will talk us through the day's achievements. Work on photo editing (such as Photoshop) will be kept to a minimum, as it is a separate skill in itself and requires computer software and equipment for all participants, as well as a common level of computing skills. However if you wish to bring your own laptop, notebook, iPad or equivalent for viewing and organising your own work, then you are very welcome, and Sergio will do his best to offer assistance and advice should you need it.

All photography tuition and transport are included in the prices of this holiday.

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.

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