



# Les Cévennes

## Wildlife of France's Massif Central

Saturday 9 – Saturday 16 June 2012

(8 days)

*Join us as we follow in the steps of Robert Louis Stevenson and Rabelais's Gargantua in Les Cévennes World Heritage Site: flowers, birds, butterflies, extravagant landscapes and ... beavers!*

In the past few years' trips we have come to realise that Les Cévennes is the perfect place for a Travelling Naturalist's trip – something for everybody and a lot of everything! Orchid-rich steppe-like grassland and hay meadows, humid beech forests and rocky crags, all littered with vultures, endemic saxifrages, lady slipper orchids, fritillaries and a jumble of human and semi-natural landscapes make for a superb mix. And we should not forget either that the cultural heritage of the region is just as vast since Les Cévennes are the setting for Rabelais's legends of the giant Gargantua, the revolts of the protestant Camisards and Robert Louis Stevenson's Travels with a Donkey.

Strictly speaking the area known as 'Les Cévennes' only corresponds to the area of schists located in the southwest of the Parc National des Cévennes, where vast sweet chestnut forests tumble down into narrow river valleys and surround small areas of pasture. However, we will be spending most of our time on the other two main areas of the National Park – Les Grands Causses, the vast rolling limestone and dolomite plateaux scored open by the immense river gorges of the rivers Tarn and Jonte, and in the contrasting heather moorland and beech forests of the granite mountains to the north and south. Add to this mixture of habitats a diversity of Mediterranean and more Atlantic-type micro-climates, as well as centuries of respectful farming techniques, and you have a perfect recipe for a region of vast biodiversity.

Given the tortuous nature of the park's orthography, we will be using two bases: Florac in the centre, handy for the granite and schist regions to the north and west, and then Meyrueis in the south, with better access to the limestone cliffs and plateaux.



Lady's Slipper Orchid (Photo: Mike Read)

The woodlands, pastures and moorlands of the slopes of Mount Lozère, the highest peak in the Parc National, will be one of our main targets whilst we are based in Florac. We will also spend time on the calcareous pastures bordering Mt. Lozère, where the giant Gargantua emptied his clogs and created the rounded hills of Les Bondons. Besides being a fine area of habitats with rolling meadows hiding frog orchids, Short-toed Eagle, Quail, Montagu's and Hen Harriers and more nectaring butterflies, this site is also studded with standing stones and beds of ammonites and belemnites.

Part of one afternoon will be spent along the river Tarn, haunt of Dippers, Grey Wagtails, and Gomphidae dragonflies. On the first fine evening, we hope to see some of the region's Beavers and bats in the company of a local guide.

We will spend two days investigating Les Grands Causses and associated river gorges. The orchids will take centre stage, with over thirty species possible.

Pride of place amongst the birds here goes to the thriving Griffon Vulture colony, whose numbers include a number of pairs of Black Vulture and a single pair of Egyptian Vulture. The large Green Lizard is common here, while the vast numbers of flowering plants provide nectar galore for Provençal Short-tailed, Green-underside, Osiris, and Mazarine Blues, scores of Black-veined Whites, Glanville and Knapweed Fritillaries, Large Wall Browns and Scarce Swallowtails.

In sharp contrast, our other day out from Meyrueis will take us up to the granite slopes of Mont Aigoual, where beech woods hide wild tulips, May lily and elder-flowered orchids, and the meadows and peat bogs on the lower slopes are home to butterflies such as Cleopatra, Clouded Apollo and Piedmont Ringlet.

Late spring is probably the best time for overall wildlife observation. The spring butterflies and dragonflies will be on the wing and the upland spring flora will be reaching its best.

David Simpson, who lives in France and leads our tours in the Dordogne, will be leading the trip.

### Outline Itinerary

**Day 1 :** We take a morning flight from London to Toulouse or Montpellier and Mike will be waiting to whisk you off north to Florac. Evening stroll if time permits.

*Overnight Florac*

**Days 2 - 3 :** *Two nights Florac*

**Days 4 - 7 :** We travel to Meyrueis, stopping on the way to visit a couple of lavognes, permanent waterholes that attract mud-puddling butterflies, dragonflies such as Downy Emerald and Dainty Damselfly, and amphibians including Natterjack Toad.

*Four nights Meyrueis*

**Day 8 :** We return to Toulouse or Montpellier via the spectacular Viaduc de Millau for an afternoon flight home.

### TRIP DETAILS

**ACCOMMODATION :** We stay for three nights at a hotel in Florac in the heart of the Cévennes National Park. Dominated by tall limestone cliffs, Florac gives easy access to the northern section of the limestone plateaux, as well as to the granite hills of Mont Lozère. The next four nights will be at a hotel located in the centre of the attractive town of Meyrueis. All rooms are en suite.

**PRINCIPAL LEADER :** David Simpson

**NUMBERS :** Max. 12 clients

**PRICE :** £ 1,595  
**Single supp. :** £ 245  
**Deposit :** £ 300 per person

The price per person includes return scheduled flights from London – Toulouse or Montpellier, airport taxes, 7 nights' accommodation, all meals, transport and the services of the leaders.

The price excludes holiday insurance, drinks, and other personal expenses.

*\*For an ex-flight cost (ex- Toulouse/Montpellier) please deduct £ 175 from the tour cost.*



Griffon Vulture (Photo: Rebecca Nason)

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For any queries, or to make a reservation, please contact us on 01 305-267994