

# Dragonflies of La Brenne & Vienne

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

|                |                                     |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Day 1</b>   | Eurostar/TGV to Poitiers            |
| <b>Day 2/3</b> | Montmorillon/Southern Vienne        |
| <b>Day 4</b>   | Montmorillon/Pinail Reserve         |
| <b>Day 5/7</b> | Montmorillon/La Brenne              |
| <b>Day 8</b>   | To Poitiers; Eurostar/TGV to London |

### Departs

June

### Focus

Dragonflies, birds, butterflies, other insects and flowers

### Grading

A. This tour involves easy walks only

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code FRA21) or brochure

### Highlights

- Travel by train on a flight-free holiday
- Over 1,000 lakes in La Brenne – rich in dragonflies, butterflies & bird life
- Up to 20 species of dragonfly at a single 'étang' in June!
- Many non-British species such as Dainty Whiteface & Orange Featherleg
- Many species of other insects not seen or rare in the UK
- Breeding birds & bird song of Nightingales, Golden Orioles & warblers



Yellow-spotted Emerald



Pinail Pond



Blue-eye



Naturetrek

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Wolf's Lane

Chawton

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## Introduction

This 8-day tour takes in both the well-known, and less well-known, wetland sites of the Brenne and Vienne – an area which is situated in central western France, south of the Loire. In this rich, gently rolling tapestry of habitats there are many small lakes, streams and rivers, as well as flower-rich grasslands, heathland and deciduous woodland. The older, more established lakes, together with associated reedbeds and fringing woodland, are prime habitats for dragonflies, many of which are not found in Britain. The larger rivers flow through picturesque scenery, often in ancient broad-leaved forest, and also hold dragonfly species absent in Britain.



The first two days will be spent in the southern Vienne, where we'll look at sites around Moulismes. On the third day, we'll visit the strange landscape of the Pinail Reserve in the northern Vienne to look for specialist heathland wildlife. The remaining days will be spent visiting various sites in the Brenne, to the north east of Montmorillon. La Brenne Parc Naturel is often called the 'Land of a Thousand Lakes', where numerous lakes or 'étangs', virtually all man-made, dot the landscape. These étangs have been managed over the centuries for commercial and course fishing, most are privately owned and some have developed into wonderful habitats for wildlife. We will picnic in the field each day and walk only short distances, sometimes traversing wet areas.

**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.**





## Day 1

## Train to Poitiers

We will leave London St. Pancras during the morning on the Eurostar service, either to Lille or Paris (depending on schedules – please check with the Naturetrek office), changing stations and then board our TGV service down to Poitiers, from where it is a short transfer south-east to Montmorillon.

## Day 2 – 3

## Vienne

Many species of dragonfly and damselfly can be found within a few kilometres of Moulismes and Montmorillon, mainly on the small étangs used for coarse fishing. We may find up to 20 species on a single étang, so we should quickly be able to familiarise ourselves with a good range of species, given favourable weather. The Étang de Plaisance holds several non-British species, including Orange Featherleg (*Platycnemis acutipennis*), Blue-eye (*Erythromma lindenii*), Western Clubtail (*Gomphus pulchellus*), Orange-spotted Emerald (*Oxygastra curtisii*), White-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum albistylum*), and Scarlet (*Crocothemis erythraea*) and Southern (*Sympetrum meridionale*) Darters, together with more familiar species like Small Red Damselfly (*Ceragrion tenellum*) and Keeled Skimmer (*Orthetrum coerulescens*). We may have our picnic lunch at this site, keeping an eye open for the Melodious Warblers and Golden Orioles that inhabit the scattered trees and shrubs hereabouts. Butterflies such as the Short-tailed Blue might also be found in the surrounding grassland. At the Étang de Moulismes we will check the water lily leaves and other floating vegetation for all three species of *Erythromma*, Large (*E. najas*) and Small (*E. viridulum*) Red-eyed Damselflies, and Blue-eye (*E. lindenii*). We will probably catch our first sight of Coypu here – this introduced species lives in many étangs in this part of France. Although the Small Pincertail (*Onychogomphus forcipatus*) breeds in rivers, like other members of the clubtail family the adults wander



Male Lilypad Whiteface



Red-crested Pochard

widely and here we may well find it sitting on forest tracks near another beautiful étang. These rides have colourful margins of Heath Lobelia and pinks, and are the best places to look for butterflies such as Wood White. High-pitched calls in the forest will alert us to the presence of Short-toed Treecreepers and Firecrests, which, like the much louder Black Woodpeckers and Golden Orioles, are easier to hear than see. At various other wetland sites we may encounter Dainty Damselfly (*Coenagrion scitulum*) – long extinct in Britain;

Willow Emerald Damselfly (*Lestes viridis*), which lays its eggs into branches overhanging still waters and

Large Pincertail (*Onychogomphus uncatus*) are other species found here. Several sand workings have Bee-eater colonies, so a visit to one of these is a must! Raptors like Black Kite, Short-toed Eagle, and Hen Harriers might be seen anywhere overhead, also Red-backed Shrike, Serin, Cirl Bunting, Tree Pipit and Hoopoe can be found.

We will also visit the River Gartemps, which flows swiftly through a wooded valley near Moulismes, to look for a quite different range of dragonflies. Walking alongside the river, we'll look out for members of the clubtail family, including Small Pincertail and the scarcer Yellow Clubtail (*Gomphus simillimus*) with its beautiful blue eyes. The familiar Banded Demoiselle and White-legged Damselfly are abundant here, while smaller numbers of Beautiful Demoiselles appear in the rockier sections, and Orange-spotted Emeralds fly over their territories in the calmer stretches. The Western Spectre (*Boyeria irene*), a western European endemic, occurs here, so we will keep a special look-out for this rather cryptic species. Their alternative vernacular name, Dusk Hawker, correctly indicates their crepuscular habit, which includes being attracted indoors by lights. As we sit on the rocks overlooking rapids at the narrowest part of the gorge, we can take in the dragonfly activity and watch the Wall Lizards scuttling around. Butterflies such as Marbled and Silver-washed Fritillaries, and Brown Argus often come to imbibe the salts along the river bank here, as does the Map, which in its second brood resembles a small White Admiral (also present here).



Naturetrek group in La Brenne

## Day 4

## Pinail Reserve

We say goodbye to the southern Vienne today and head for the Pinail Reserve, some 20 kilometres north-east of Poitiers. The Pinail is a peat-bog, where old millstone quarrying has left more than 3,000 small, deep, water-filled holes scattered among heathland. Unlike in British heathland, the heathers here grow



Yellow-spotted Whiteface male

to several metres in height and provide a myriad of sheltered spots for dragonflies and other heat-loving insects. A long list of dragonflies has been recorded here, but our particular quest today will be the Yellow-spotted Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia pectoralis*). The whiteface family is mainly northern and their few outposts in France are under considerable threat. A second species, the Lilypad Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia caudalis*) also occurs here, and there will be another chance to search for it later in the tour. Other new species to add to our list in this location could



include the Scarce Emerald (*Lestes dryas*) and Willow Emerald Damselflies, and Norfolk Hawker (*Aeshna isosceles*) is usually seen here.

The heathland at the Pinail is good for birds, with hunting Short-toed Eagles, Dartford Warblers popping up occasionally to investigate us, Grasshopper Warblers 'reeling' and Hobbys hawking overhead - usually for dragonflies! Large Chequered Skippers flit through the Purple Moor Grass with the more familiar, but less striking, Large Skippers. Some of the ponds have areas of Sphagnum bog-moss in association with the carnivorous Sundew, the latter not infrequently capturing damselflies on its sticky leaves!



Whiskered Terns and Pochard

After walking around the Pinail, and taking our picnic lunch en route, we will head east to the fortified town of Angles-sur-l'Anglin for some light refreshment. There may be time afterwards for a look at a nearby river site for odonata species before then making our way to our hotel base in La Brenne.

## Day 5 – 7

## La Brenne

A series of easy walks during our three days in La Brenne will take us to a range of superb wetlands and a few interesting dry areas too. Dragonflies to be found around the étangs include Common Winter Damsel (*Sympecma fusca*), the adults of which, unlike any British species, hibernate in wood piles or similar. We should find individuals of the new generation, along with up to four species of *Sympetrum* darters, including Southern Darter. Other new species, such as Small Spreadwing (*Lestes virens*), Migrant Spreadwing (*Lestes barbarus*), Yellow-spotted Emerald (*Somatochlora flavomaculata*) and Lilypad

Whiteface should also be seen. The Whiteface will be near the end of its flight period, but we should still be able to find a few territorial males perched on water lilies at a site in La Brenne.



Mezieres-en-Brenne

Not surprisingly, herons are numerous in La Brenne. These include Purple, Night and the occasional Squacco Heron, Little and Cattle Egrets, Great White Egret and sometimes Little Bittern, a rare breeding bird here. There will be more opportunities to see breeding Black-necked Grebes and Whiskered Terns on their nests, too. The Brenne is a stronghold for the latter species, which makes floating nests amongst the water lilies on many étangs. A few Garganey and Red-crested Pochard mingle among the hordes of waterfowl, whilst Black-winged Stilts are a scarce breeding bird. Amphibians include European Pond Terrapin, Agile Frog, Tree Frog, Grass Snake, Viperine Snake and Green Lizard.

We will visit an area of fenland that is home to the endemic Brenne Orchid. This and other orchids, indicate the alkaline nature of the wetland, as do Great Fen Sedge and Black Bog-rush. The ditches here are rich in dragonflies, including if we are lucky Southern (*Coenagrion mercuriale*) and Variable (*C. pulchellum*) Damselflies. Norfolk Hawker and Southern Migrant Hawker occur here, and sometimes Lesser Emperor (*Anax parthenope*) on a nearby etang. Marsh Harriers hunt over the reedbeds where Grasshopper Warblers sing, while a Honey Buzzard might fly over at any time. Thankfully, we can view the wildlife here from the comfort of a quiet roadside, rather than suffer razor cuts from the vicious Fen Sedge!

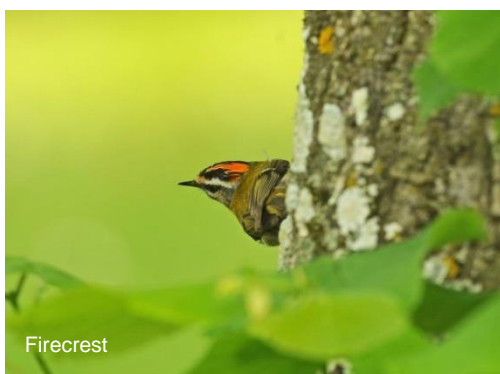
Amongst other orchids, Lizard, Fragrant, Bee, Greater Butterfly, Heath Spotted, and Pyramidal Orchids, and Common Twayblade, can be found along quiet roadsides. Other plants usually found include St Bernard's Lily, Columbine, Deptford Pink, Heath Lobelia and Meadow Clary. We might also disturb the leaf-like Great Banded Grayling – as it bursts into flight, it flashes broad white wing stripes, but ‘turns’ instantly into a leaf again when it settles! Other butterflies that frequent the flower-rich sites here include Scarce and Common Swallowtails, Black-veined White, Sooty Copper, Ilex Hairstreak, Adonis Blue, Pearly Heath, Southern White Admiral, and Marbled, Glanville, Knapweed, and Heath Fritillaries.

Other insects usually include Great Green and Dark Bush-crickets, Violet Carpenter and other bees, Stag and Blue Chafer Beetles, Fiery Clearwing and sometimes Hornet Clearwing.

## Day 8

## Train to London

Today we will have to pack and return to Poitiers to take the TGV/Eurostar service back to London St. Pancras, either via Paris or Lille, arriving late afternoon / early evening.



Firecrest



Male Large Whiteface



Brenne Orchid



Black-veined White

## Tour Grading

Grade A (easy). We will be on foot, typically around and sometimes in wet areas, for much of each day. Waterproof footwear is therefore highly recommended (Wellingtons can be purchased locally if you do not wish to bring them with you). We will walk only short distances each day and at all times move at a slow enough pace to allow full enjoyment of the wildlife, as well as plenty of time for photography. This tour is suitable for any age and level of fitness.

## Weather

Daytime temperatures should be in the range of 20-30°C. We should experience some fine weather, but cloud and rain is always a possibility, so waterproofs may be needed.

## Focus

This holiday focuses on the rich dragonfly fauna of the area, but we will also see some of the region's birds, butterflies, amphibians, orchids and other insects. This tour is timed to catch the flight season of early mid-summer dragonfly flight periods, particularly the two Whiteface species.

## Daily schedule

We will typically take breakfast at about 8 a.m. and aim to leave our hotel no later than 9 a.m. for a full day in the field. We'll break the day to relax and enjoy a picnic lunch, which will be varied, but may include pâté, terrine and cold meats as the main part, with lots of crusty French bread, together with olives, coleslaw, pickles and several sorts of cheese. To follow, fresh fruit, yogurts, and chocolate, all washed down with a glass of vin de table if required. We'll aim to return to our hotel at about 5.30 pm, depending on the weather and our success in the field. This should allow a little time at the end of each day to relax, shower and enjoy a drink before dinner. After dinner, for those with energy remaining, your leader will be keen to run through the wildlife seen during the day, and discuss findings with you before retiring to bed. There will also be opportunities for short walks early and late in the day for those who wish.

## Food & accommodation

All meals, from the evening meal on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 8, are included. We will be based in two hotels, which are clean and comfortable. As in most of rural France, rooms tend to be on the small side with quite spartan furniture.

## 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](http://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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One of the hotels we will stay at during this tour