

marvels of the Maritime Alps



1 Sella

Rio Meris falls towards S. Anna in a string of bubbling pools and waterfalls. It flows from the lower Sella lake, the kings' and queens' favourite for trout fishing when they were staying in Valle Gesso. Above an outcrop of red rocks lies its twin, the upper Sella lake, whilst higher still, to the west towards the Paur and south towards Matto we find two archipelagos formed of a score of pools and lakes of all sizes; this is a wonderful watery landscape.



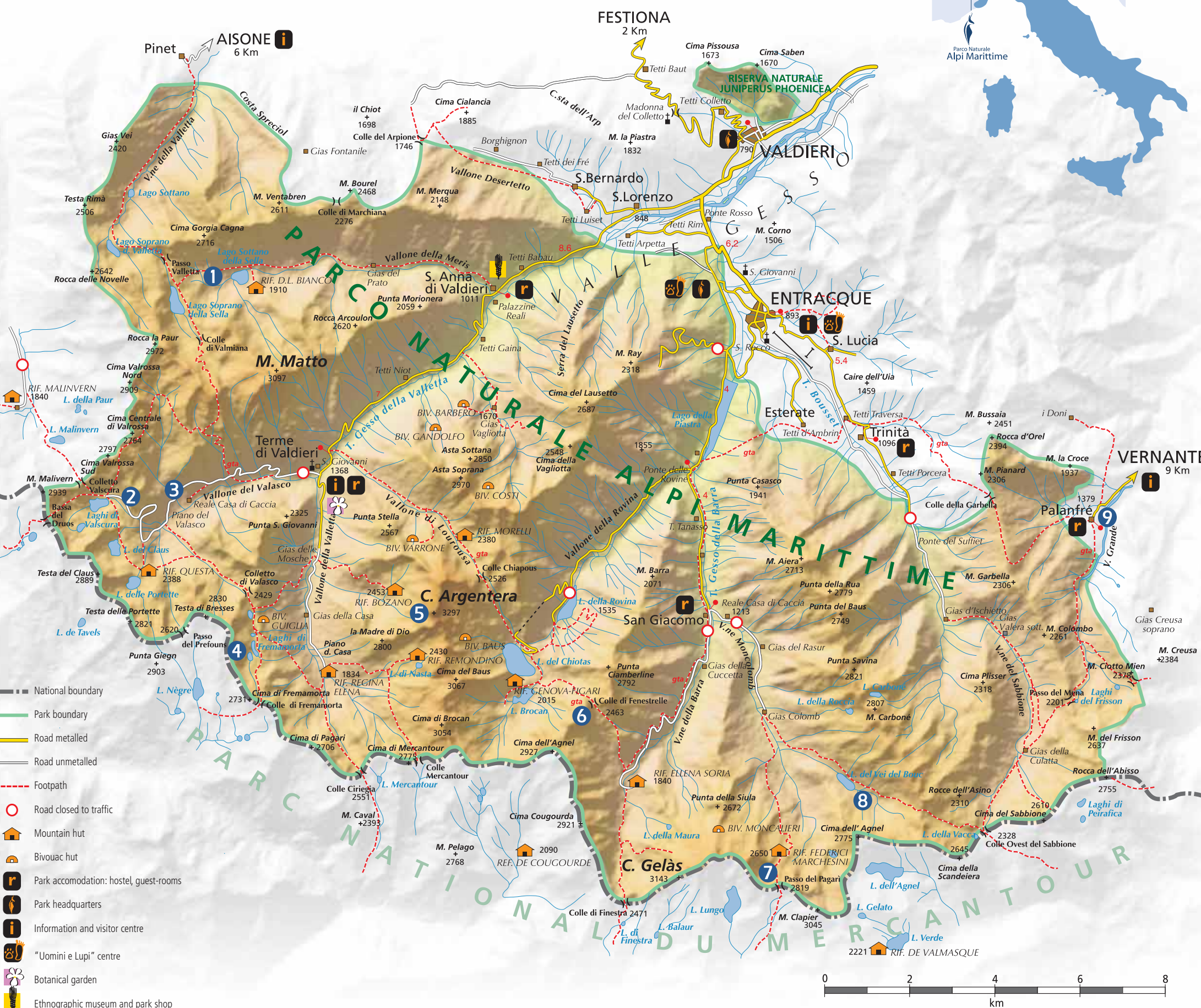
2 Valscura

Ancient salt routes, drove roads, mule tracks for hunting and military roads: they form a network that covers hundreds of kilometres throughout the Park. The most remarkable sign of human presence here is the road built at the beginning of the twentieth century between Valscura and Claus lakes: it was built by the Alpine regiments who paved a road over some of the roughest terrain imaginable. It is still intact a century after its construction.



3 Valasco

This vast green plain surrounded by broken rock faces and snowy peaks is the heart of the park. It was here that Vittorio Emanuele II had his hunting lodge built in the middle of the nineteenth century, it is an unusual fortress laid out in a square, with crenelated turrets. Animals grazing, marmots whistling in alarm, lazy water and scattered larch trees: the Valasco is an oasis of tranquillity that opens out magically from a narrow valley flanked by Monte Matto and Rocche di San Giovanni.



Take nothing but photographs. Leave nothing but footprints. Let your memories be your souvenirs.



9 Palanfré

A handful of stone-built cottages sit on the edge of a grassy amphitheatre rising to the Costa di Pianard. Palanfré is surrounded by gentle and friendly mountains. The smell of grass, the echoes and sounds of animals out in the meadows. An ancient beech wood protects the hamlet from avalanches. It was abandoned in the seventies, but since 2002 it has come back to life. This winter for the first time the family whose milk herd grazes on the slopes between Garbella and Pianard in the summer did not leave to winter in the plains.



8 Vei del Bouc

A calm lake stretching out in a basin closed in on its west side by ribs of granite rounded and scarred by glacial activity. The name "Vei del bouc" in local dialect means "the old man with the billy-goat", legend has it that the remains of an old mountain dweller are lying on the bottom of the lake. Vei del bouc has prehistoric origins. Man has inhabited the area since the dawn of civilisation, as can be seen from the prehistoric rock engravings found by a stone enclosure at the edge of the lake; but today it is a quiet corner of the park.



7 Maledia

Dawn sets the northeast face of Maledia on fire and the flames reflect in the slopes of the Pagari glacier. It is a moment that is as intense as it is short-lived, to be savoured while it lasts. The environment and atmosphere are typical of high mountains: rocks and ice, perennial snow fields and rock faces four hundred metres high. The watchtower for this rocky world is the Pagari refuge, which despite the height, 2650m, offers the warmest of welcomes.



4 Fremamorta

"Fremo" in Provençal means woman, and "morta", in Italian means dead, so maybe an ancient alpine tragedy lies behind this name? Despite the images the name invokes, this is an open place with no sinister overtones; an easy wide mountain pass leads to France, a row of five small lakes, each one prettier than the last, lie in the bottom of a depression hanging above the Valletta valley. The view from here is breathtaking, ranging from Gelas di Lourousa to Brocan.



5 Argentera

The west face of Argentera has no rivals in the southern Alps. Majestic and imposing, it forms a semi-circle, ragged at the edges where the Madre di Dio and Catena delle Guide ridges join it, solid and compact in the centre, where a solid wall of gneiss rises for over eight hundred metres to the North and South peaks of Argentera. In climbing circles Corno Stella is the best known rock face in the Maritime Alps, but it pales next to such an imposing mountain.



6 Fenestrelle

In the spring, just below the Colle di Fenestrelle a small pool forms, reflected in its perfectly still water is the snowy outline of Gelas. Fenestrelle offers a spectacular vantage point: south the view opens over Gelas and its glaciers, opposite it, to the northeast the massive shape of Argentera appears with its east face towering over the artificial lake Chiotas. Old male ibex can be found grazing here for much of the year.

how to get there

Alpi Marittime Nature Park is in the south west Piedmont, on the border between Italy and France, to reach it you get off the Torino-Savona motorway at the Fossano junction and follow the signs for Cuneo and then Borgo San Dalmazzo. The latter is a small town at the junction of three valleys that the park touches. From here you can reach the four villages that play host to the park: Vernante (in Valle Vermentagna), Entracque and Valdieri (Valle Gesso) and Aisone (Valle Stura). Vernante is 25 km from Cuneo on the SS.20 Colle di Tenda road, coming from the coast it is easier to come up the Roya valley from Ventimiglia through the Colle di Tenda tunnel which brings you out in Vermentagna valley, this is the best way to reach the park from the south. Vernante can also be reached by train on the Torino-Cuneo-Ventimiglia line. Valdieri and Entracque are 18 km and 25 km from Cuneo respectively you follow the SS.20 to Borgo San Dalmazzo, to turn off here for Terme di Valdieri-Entracque. Aisone in the Stura valley is 32 km from Cuneo through Borgo San Dalmazzo along the SS.21 for the Colle della Maddalena road.

services in the park office and visitor centres

- Valdieri, Director's office and Administration Piazza Regina Elena, 30 – 12010 Valdieri tel. 0171 97397 – fax 0171 97542 e-mail: info@parcoalpinmarittime.it – website: www.parcoalpinmarittime.it
- Entracque, Operational Headquarters Strada Provinciale per San Giacomo, 12 – 12010 Entracque tel. 0171 978809 – fax 0171 978921
- Entracque, "Uomini e Lupi" Centre and Information Centre Piazza Giustizia e Libertà, 3 – 12010 Entracque tel. 0171 978616 – fax 0171 978637
- Entracque, "Uomini e Lupi" Centre Strada Provinciale per San Giacomo, 3 – 12010 Entracque tel. 0171 978007
- Terme di Valdieri, Visitor Centre and Information Seasonal opening – tel. 0171 974208
- Terme di Valdieri, Botanical gardens "Valderia" Open mid-June to mid-September: 10 - 18



hospitality

- "Locanda del Sorriso" – refuge for hikers Trinità, near Entracque – tel. 0171 978388
- "L'Arbergh" – refuge for hikers Palanfré, near Vernante – tel. 340 6973954
- "San Giacomo" – refuge for hikers San Giacomo di Entracque – tel. 0171 978704 – summer opening
- "I Bateur" – tavern and parkshop S. Anna di Valdieri – tel. 0171 976718



self guided paths

- Valderia, nature trail in the Botanical gardens at the Terme di Valdieri
- Bosco di Faggio, nature trail in the beech wood at Palanfré
- La Via di Teit, a culture trail from Vernante to Palanfré
- Sant'Anna di Valdieri, ethnographic trail starting from the Ecomuseum



an oasis of protected nature

Parco naturale delle Alpi Marittime was created in 1995 by the merger of Parco naturale dell'Argentera (instituted in 1980) and Riserva del Bosco e Laghi di Palanfré (instituted in 1979).

A large protected area was thus born covering 27.945 hectares, spreading over three valleys (Gesso, Stura, Vermentagna) and four council districts (Aisone, Entracque, Valdieri, Vernante). The Maritime Alps form the southern tip of the Alps, they divide the Piedmontese plains from the Nice coast, lying between two mountain passes (the Colle di Tenda and the Colle della Maddalena), which have been in use as trade routes for centuries.

The Maritime Alps are protected on both sides of the border.

The French side is managed by the Parc National du Mercantour, famous for its Vallée des Merveilles, a site containing thousands of rock engravings, mostly from the Bronze age.

The two parks share a border for over 35 km and together protected an area of over 100.000 hectares, which could in the near future become the first European park.



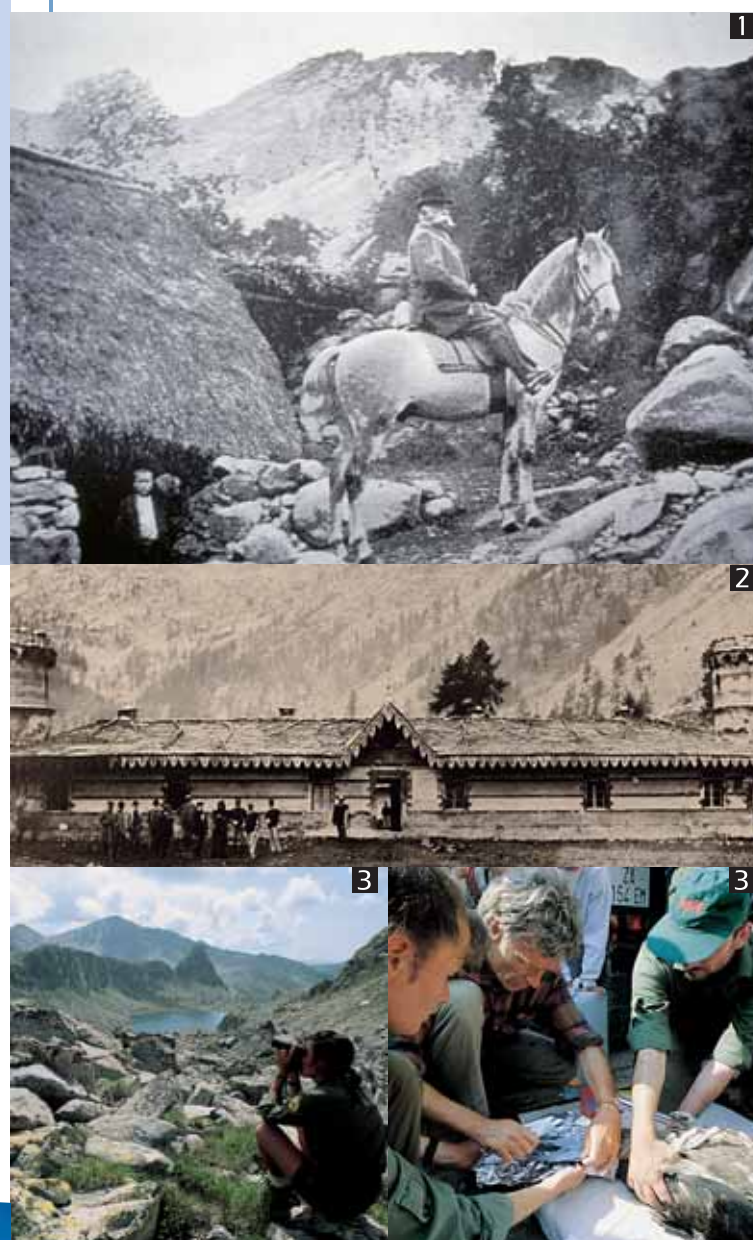
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a park fit for a king

The beauty of these mountains, the abundance of chamois, trout and the lush vegetation made a strong impression on Vittorio Emanuele II, King of Sardinia, when he came to visit the Gesso valley and its thermal baths.

the hunting lodges

His approval did not go unnoticed and the mayors of the valley's villages, knowing the king's passion for hunting and the advantages that the royal family's summer visits would bring to the valley, made over the hunting and fishing rights of most of the area to him. And so the Royal Hunting Reserve was born.



Between 1865 and 1870 the House of Savoy built a summer residence in Sant'Anna di Valdieri, the hunting lodges in San Giacomo di Entracque and at Valasco. At Terme they built four "d2swiss style" d3 chalets, one of which is still known as the house of "Bela Rosin" as it was built for Rosa Vercellana, the commoner who gave Vittorio Emanuele II two children.

The Royal family's presence in the valley made it a popular destination for many politicians, nobles and sovereigns of Europe. This had a very positive influence on the economy of the area, since the families of the game-keepers could count on a steady job and many other locals did seasonal work to supplement their meagre earnings, either as beaters or maintaining paths, or cooking and cleaning. The older local folk remember the royal family with affection, in particular queen Elena, wife of Vittorio Emanuele III, who loved to fish in the streams and the lower Sella lake.

There are over eighty lakes, set into the rocks, or surrounded by alpine meadows, each with his own particular shape, size and colour, they are a jewels in the Park's higher mountain scenery.

lakes and glaciers

The surrounding peaks reflected in them adding to their uniqueness. There are little lost lakes like Valcuca and Maledia and deep lakes full of fish like the Sella Lakes. There are also two with a much more recent history, the artificial reservoirs created at the end of the 70's to produce electricity, Piastra and Chiotas. Some have fantastic legends attached to them like Vei del Bouc above San Giacomo di Entracque.



A careful observer will notice the glacial origin of most of the Park's lakes.

The glaciers of the Maritime Alps, the southernmost glaciers in the Alps, which had a fundamental role in shaping the landscape, today risk disappearing as the climate changes: Monaco with the highest average temperatures on the Côte d'Azur is only 45 km away as the crow flies.

The Maritime Alps are world famous for their botanic wealth. It is estimated that there are 1500 species present, roughly a third of the number found in Italy.

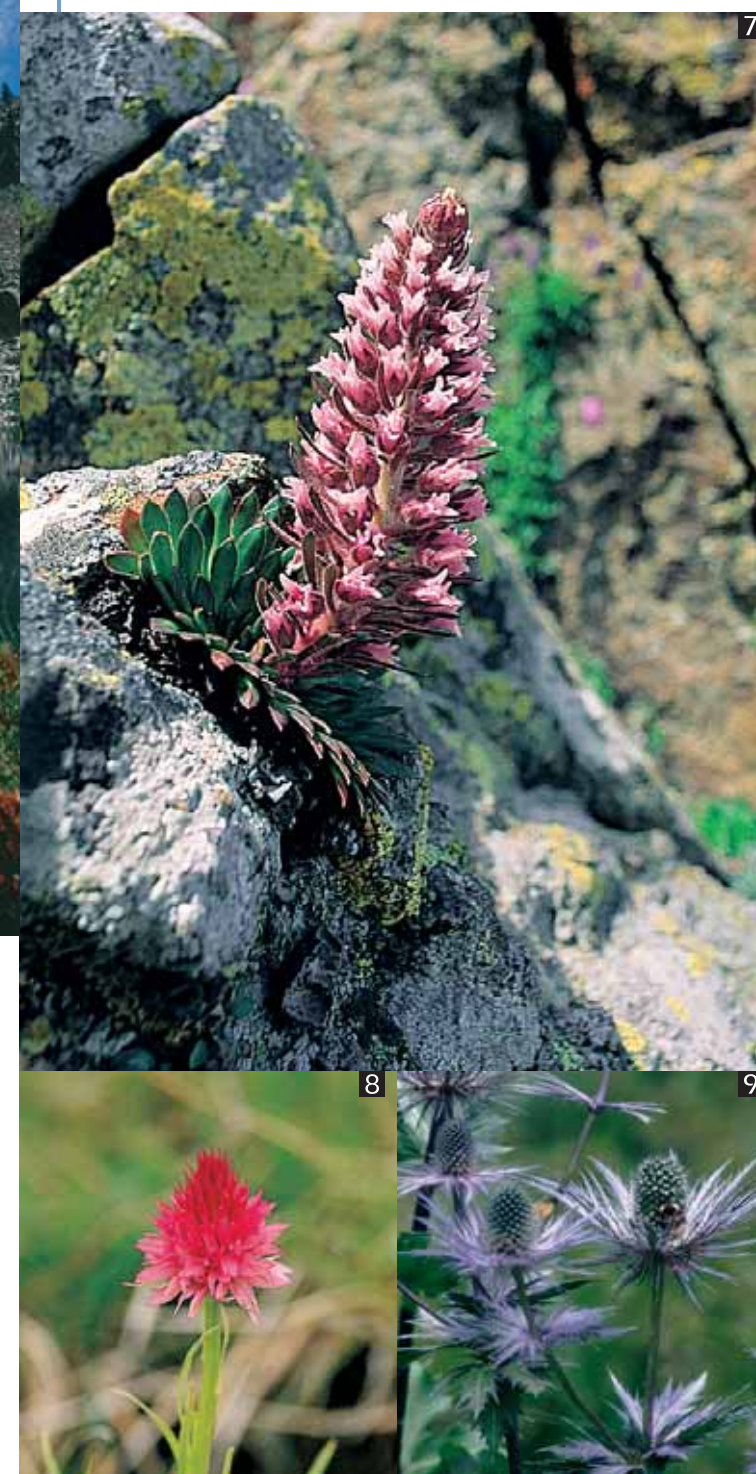
The Orchid family, for example, to which some of nature's most spectacular flowers belong, is represented by some 40 species in the Park of the 80 species known to be present nationally.

flowers

The distinctive botanical features of the Maritime Alps can be explained by their geographical position, between the mountains of Piedmont, Liguria and Provence and the fact that they were once joined to the Pyrenees, Corsica and the Balkans and still show a surprising floral affinity with these areas.

The climate, and consequently the flora, is influenced by the proximity of the sea and the fact that several peaks in the Maritime Alps are over 3,000 m. amongst these Argentera 3297 m. stands out as the highest. These conditions mean not only a large number of species but also numerous endemic species (species that only grow in a certain area).

Of the thirty or so endemic species in the Maritime Alps the best known is the Saxifraga florulenta: a long pale pink conical inflorescence emerges (after around thirty years) from its basal rosette of leaves; after flowering the plant dies. To help people familiarize with the Park's flora the botanical gardens Valderia have been set up at Terme di Valdieri. They are at the same site that in the mid-19th Century hosted what were known as the "English gardens".



Few areas can boast the richness of fauna that Parco Naturale Alpi Marittime has.

animals

The easiest animals to see, particularly in the early morning and evening, are chamois. There are about 4500 chamois in the Park, making it one of the most densely populated parts of the Alps.

The ibex, reintroduced in the 1920's by Vittorio Emanuele III, from the twenty or so animals brought in from Gran Paradiso are now over 500, these can be seen close up, particularly in spring.

Other ungulates present in the park are roe deer and wild boar, these animals are shy and more difficult to see because they keep to the wooded areas. In summer mouflon coming from the neighbouring Mercantour Park can be seen.



The marmot with the way it poses on rocks and its clumsy-losing but agile run makes it a favourite with visitors, particularly the younger ones.

There is an extremely rich and diversified bird-life comprising almost all the species typical to the western Alps from black grouse to ptarmigan and a large number of migratory birds. There are seven couples of golden eagles living in the park, and many other raptors can be seen, including the bearded vulture which has reappeared in the Alpi Marittime, thanks to a European reintroduction project. The wolf on the other hand has made a spontaneous come back after centuries of persecution.

There are dozens of kilometres of military roads, mule tracks and paths running along the Park's valleys.

Many of these mule tracks, now considered classic outings, were built to reach shooting hides where the king and his followers would wait for the chamois to appear pushed on by a line of 200-300 beaters.

a paradise for walkers



Before the second world war Italy fortified the border with France and the valleys of the Maritime Alps became huge building sites.

The ancient "salt routes" used for commerce with the other side of the Alps and the Nice coast became the connection between the valley bottom and the barracks and bunkers built at the mountain passes. This tragic period has left us the testimony of a vast network of paths and military roads. In many places these are paved, elevated, or cut into the rock, they are architectural masterpieces.

The most significant example of this is without doubt the road from Piano del Valasco which climbs through a tunnel in the rock to reach Lago Inferiore di Valasca and on to Lago delle Portette and Fremamorta.

Cover photo: Argentera seen from Valasca
1 The King hunting in the Valdieri-Entracque royal hunting reserve
2 The hunting lodge at Valasco at the end of the 19th century
3 Rangers at work 4 Gelas glacier
5 Argentera valley with Mt. Matto in the background
6 Valcuca lake 7 The Ancient King 8 Vanilla Orchid
9 Queen of the Alps 10 Chamois 11 Marmot 12 Ibx
13 Black grouse 14 Valasco plain 15 Towards Gelas
16 A pool by Claus lake