

## = Gran Paradiso National Park =

Gran Paradiso National Park ( Italian : Parco nazionale del Gran Paradiso , French : Parc national du Grand @-@ Paradis ) is an Italian national park in the Graian Alps , between the Aosta Valley and Piedmont regions . The park is named after Gran Paradiso mountain , which is located in the park , and is contiguous with the French Vanoise national park . The land the park encompasses was initially protected in order to protect the Alpine ibex from poachers , as it was a personal hunting ground for king Victor Emanuel II , but now also protects other species .

## = History =

In the early 19th century , due to hunting , the Alpine ibex only survived in the Gran Paradiso area . Approximately 60 individual ibex survived , here . Ibex were intensively hunted , partly for sport , but also because their body parts were thought to have therapeutic properties : talismans were made from a small cross @-@ shaped bone near the ibex 's heart in order to protect against violent death . Due to the alarming decrease in the ibex population , Victor Emmanuel , soon to be King of Italy , declared the Royal Hunting Reserve of the Gran Paradiso in 1856 . A protective guard was created for the ibex . Paths laid out for the ibex are still used today as part of 724 kilometres ( 450 mi ) of marked trails and mule tracks .

In 1920 Victor Emmanuel II 's grandson King Victor Emmanuel III donated the park 's original 21 square kilometres ( 5 @,@ 189 acres ) , and the park was established in 1922 . It was Italy 's first national park . There were approximately 4 @,@ 000 ibex in the park when it was protected . Despite the presence of the park , ibex were poached until 1945 , when only 419 remained . Their protection increased , and there are now almost 4 @,@ 000 in the park .

## = Geography =

The park is located in the Graian Alps in the regions of Piedmont and Aosta Valley in north @-@ west Italy . It encompasses 703 square kilometres ( 173 @,@ 715 acres ) of alpine terrain . 10 % of the park 's surface area is wooded . 16 @.@ 5 % is used for agriculture and pasture , 24 % is uncultivated , and 40 % is classified as sterile . 9 @.@ 5 % of the park 's surface area is occupied by 57 glaciers . The park 's mountains and valleys were sculpted by glaciers and streams . Altitudes in the park range from 800 @-@ 4 @,@ 061 metres ( 2 @,@ 624 @-@ 13 @,@ 323 ft ) , with an average altitude of 2 @,@ 000 metres ( 6 @,@ 561 ft ) . Valley floors in the park are forested . There are alpine meadows at higher altitudes . There are rocks and glaciers at altitudes higher than the meadows . Gran Paradiso is the only mountain entirely within the boundaries of Italy that is over 4 @,@ 000 metres ( 13 @,@ 123 ft ) high . Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn can be seen from its summit . In 1860 , John Cowell became the first person to reach the summit . To the west , the park shares a boundary with France 's Vanoise National Park . Combined , the two parks form the largest protected area in Western Europe . They co @-@ operate in managing the ibex population , which moves across their shared boundary seasonally .

## = Flora =

The park 's woods are important because they provide shelter for a large number of animals . They are a natural defence against landslides , avalanches , and flooding . The two main types of woods found in the park are coniferous and deciduous woods . The deciduous European beech forests are common on the Piedmont side of the park , and are not found on the dryer Valle d 'Aosta side . These forests are thick with dense foliage that lets in very little light during the summer . The beech leaves take a long time to decompose , and they form a thick layer on the woodland floor that impedes the development of other plants and trees . Larches are the most common trees in the forests on the valley floors . They are mixed with spruces , Swiss stone pines , and more rarely silver firs .

Maple and lime forests are found in gulleys . These forests are only present in isolated areas and are at risk of extinction . Downy oak woods are more common in the Aosta Valley area than in the Piedmont area because of its higher temperatures and lower precipitation . Oak is not a typical species in the park and it is often found mixed with Scots pine . The park 's chestnut groves have been affected by human cultivation for wood and fruit . It rarely grows above 1 @, @ 000 metres ( 3 @, @ 280 ft ) , and the most important chestnut forests are in the park 's Piedmontese side . The park 's conifer woods include Scots pine groves , spruce forests dominated by the Norway spruce , often mixed with larch . Larch and Swiss stone pine woods are found up to the highest sub @-@ alpine level ( 2200 ? 2300 metres ( 7 @, @ 217 @-@ 7 @, @ 546 ft ) ) .

At higher altitudes the trees gradually thin out and there are alpine pastures . These pastures are rich in flowers in the late spring . The wildflowers in the park 's high meadows include wild pansies , gentians , martagon lilies , and alpenroses . The park has many rocky habitats . They are mostly located above the timberline and alpine pastures . These areas have rock and detritus on their surface . Alpine plants have adapted to these habitats by assuming characteristics like dwarfism , hairiness , bright coloured flowers , and highly developed roots . About 1 @, @ 500 plant species can be seen at Paradisia Botanical Garden near Cogne inside the park .

### = = Fauna = =

Alpine ibex graze in the abundant mountain pastures in summer , and descend to lower elevations in winter . Gran Paradiso 's pairing with Vanoise National Park provides year @-@ round protection to the ibex . Along with the ibex , the animal species found in the park include ermine , weasel , hare , Eurasian badger , alpine chamois , wolf ( recently arrived from Central Italy ) and maybe even lynx . The ibex and chamois spend most of the year above the tree line . They descend to the valleys in the winter and spring . Alpine marmot forage on plants along the snow line .

There are more than 100 bird species in the park , including Eurasian eagle @-@ owl , rock ptarmigan , alpine accentor , and chough . Golden eagles nest on rocky ledges , and sometimes in trees . Wallcreeper are found on steep cliffs . There are black woodpeckers and nutcrackers in the park 's woodlands .

The park supports many species of butterflies including apollo , peak whites , and southern white admirals .