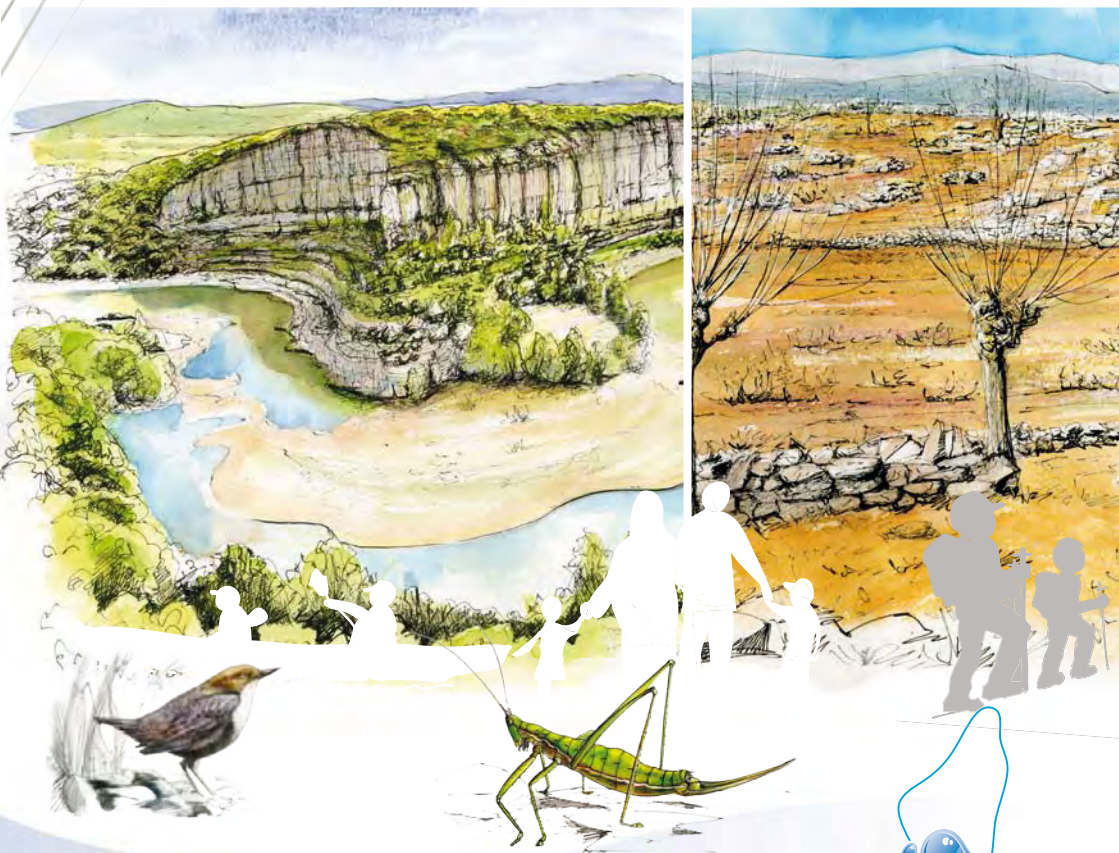




# THE ARDÈCHE RIVER VALLEY AND THE GRAS PLATEAU

A natural heritage to discover and protect together

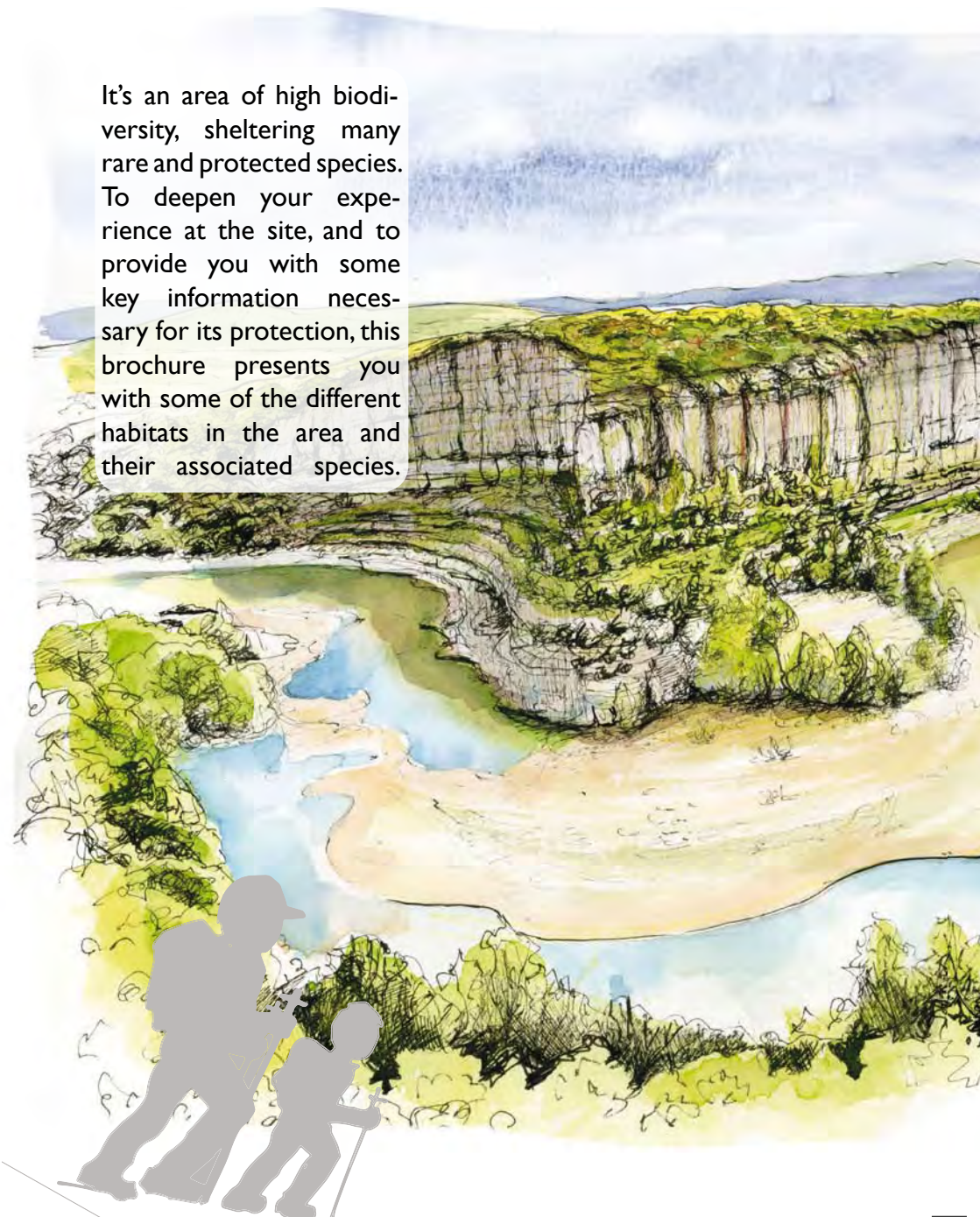


**ardèche**  
LE DÉPARTEMENT



# WELCOME TO THE ARD

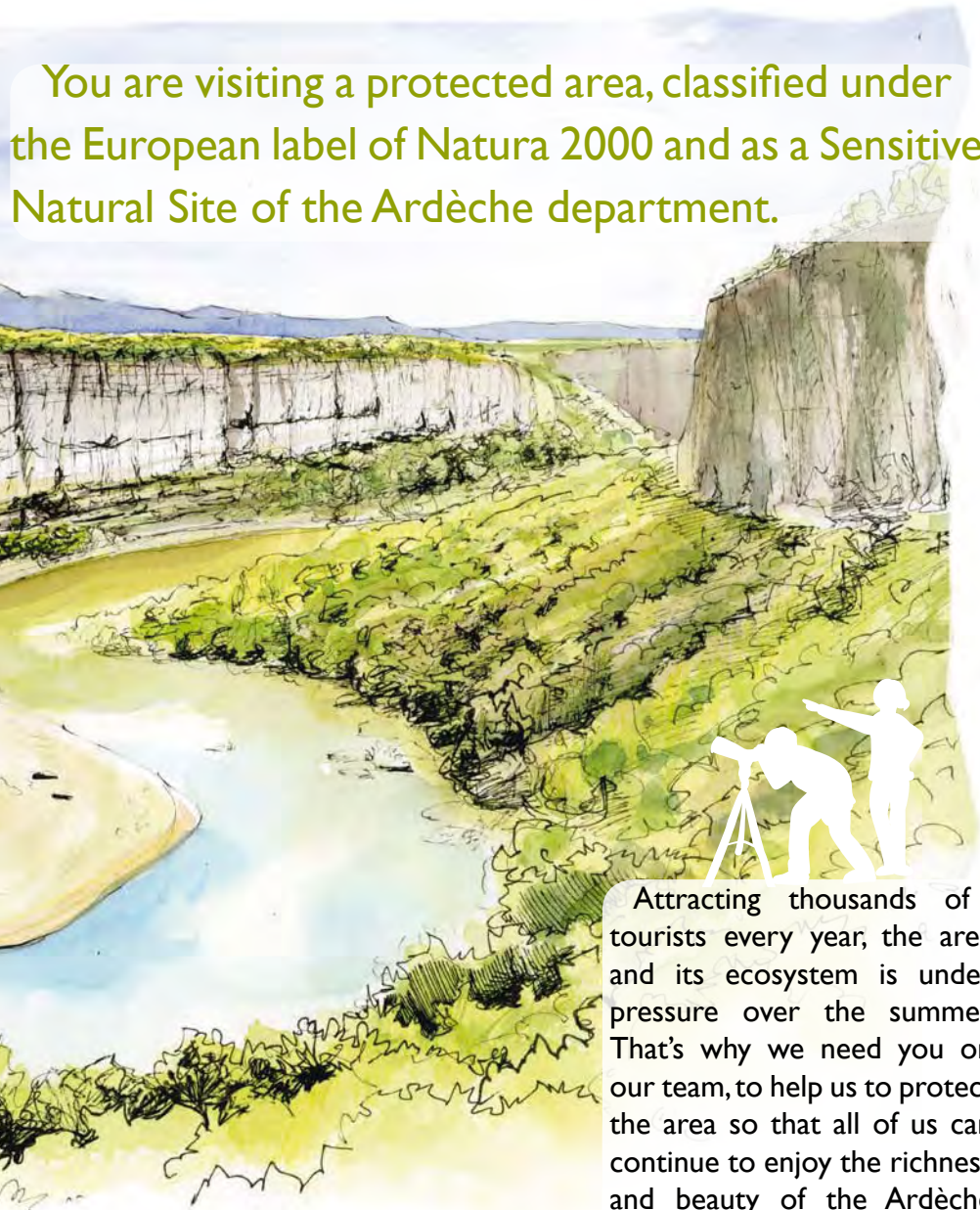
It's an area of high biodiversity, sheltering many rare and protected species. To deepen your experience at the site, and to provide you with some key information necessary for its protection, this brochure presents you with some of the different habitats in the area and their associated species.





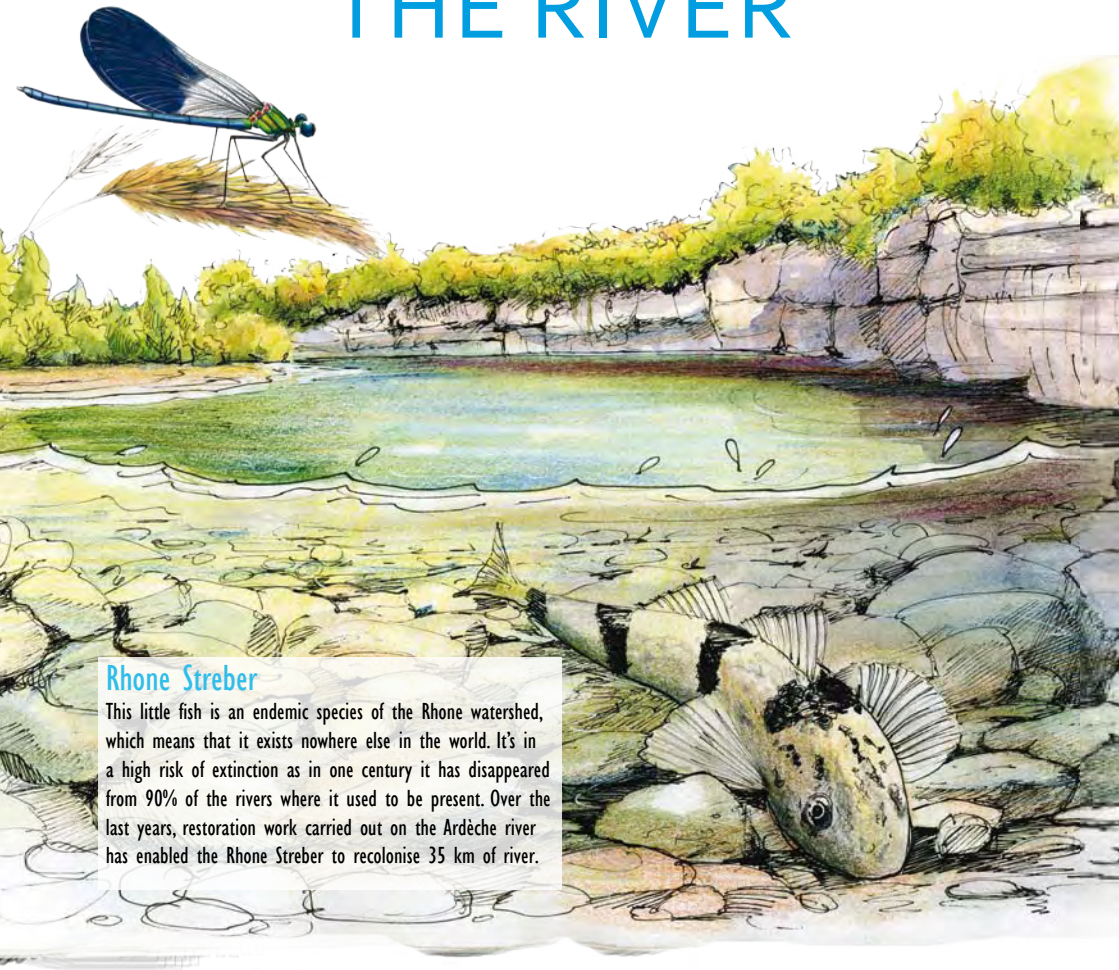
# ÈCHE RIVER VALLEY !

You are visiting a protected area, classified under the European label of Natura 2000 and as a Sensitive Natural Site of the Ardèche department.



Attracting thousands of tourists every year, the area and its ecosystem is under pressure over the summer. That's why we need you on our team, to help us to protect the area so that all of us can continue to enjoy the richness and beauty of the Ardèche river valley.

# THE HIDDEN LIFE OF THE RIVER



## Rhone Streber

This little fish is an endemic species of the Rhone watershed, which means that it exists nowhere else in the world. It's in a high risk of extinction as in one century it has disappeared from 90% of the rivers where it used to be present. Over the last years, restoration work carried out on the Ardèche river has enabled the Rhone Streber to recolonise 35 km of river.

The Ardèche river is a river of extremes. While the summers are hot and dry, leading to very low water levels, the autumns are often marked by heavy rainfall periods and intense flash floods. In spite of the sometimes harsh conditions, the river hosts a great variety of species of which many are protected. While the Ardèche river is perfectly suitable for water activities such as bathing, fishing or canoeing, it's also the home of many fish, insects, frogs, snakes and mammals.





### Aquatic invertebrates

These little «bugs», hidden under pebbles and stones on the river bed most of the time, are essential for the health of the river. These are mainly larvae of insects that live their adult stages out of the water. They form the base of the food chain, and are an important food source for many fish species. Furthermore, they recycle nutrients and filter the water, making them a key player in keeping the water quality high!

### Viperine Water Snake

A relatively common snake in our river, completely harmless and easy to see. Although non-venomous and harmless to humans, it's an efficient predator that preys mostly on small fish and frogs. Unfortunately, the snake is often killed by scared people, who mistake it for a viper, an extremely rare sight near the river.



### Mediterranean Brown Trout



### Eurasian Otter

This semi aquatic mammal is back in Ardèche after having almost completely disappeared in the 20th century. It's very territorial and one female covers around 5-15 km of riverbanks where it moves around to feed, mostly on fish. The otter is nocturnal which makes it difficult to observe but its distinctive droppings, known as spraints, are an excellent indicator of its presence.

## Take action !

- Save water, it's a scarce resource during the dry summers in Ardèche.
- Respect other river users, bathers, fishers, canoeists or snakes.
- Pebble dams, especially in high numbers on the river, can harm the river fauna, and diminish the water quality.

# BETWEEN LAND AND RIVER



The riparian zone is the transitional area connecting the river and the land. It can be visually defined by a greenbelt with characteristic suite of plants that depend on the shallow water table. While it holds a key role in regulating the river ecosystem (water temperature, velocity of flood water, breaking down organic and chemical pollution) it is also a very important wildlife corridor.



## White-throated Dipper

This is an aquatic passerine bird that you can easily observe at the river. It has a unique hunting technique as it dives or walks into the water, grips the bottom with its feet using its wings to effectively swim under water. This way it searches for caddis worms and other aquatic insects to feed on.

## European Pond Turtle





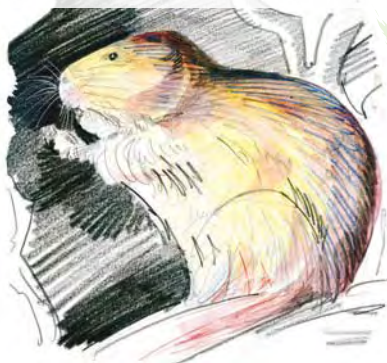


### Scarce Large Blue

A very rare and endangered butterfly species that lives in wet meadows where the Great Burnet flower is found. Its survival depends on the flower and one single species of red ant as they host the caterpillar at different life stages. After hatching from the butterfly egg the caterpillar feeds on the flower nectar until reaching a certain size. Then it gets adopted by a red ant to finish its growth and cocoon phase inside the anthill.

### Eurasian Beaver

This is the largest rodent in Europe, entirely vegetarian, feeding on plants and tree bark. It mates for life with the pair working as a team to survive and care for their young. It was hunted to near-extinction and had almost disappeared from France by the year 1900. Protection measures have allowed the species to recover so they are now quite common in Ardèche.



### Willow

A common tree on the riparian zone, resistant to flooding due to its flexible stem and well-developed root system. Its health benefits are well known as the bark contains salicin, an anti-inflammatory compound also known as natural aspirin.

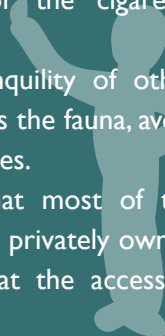


### Purple Loosestrife

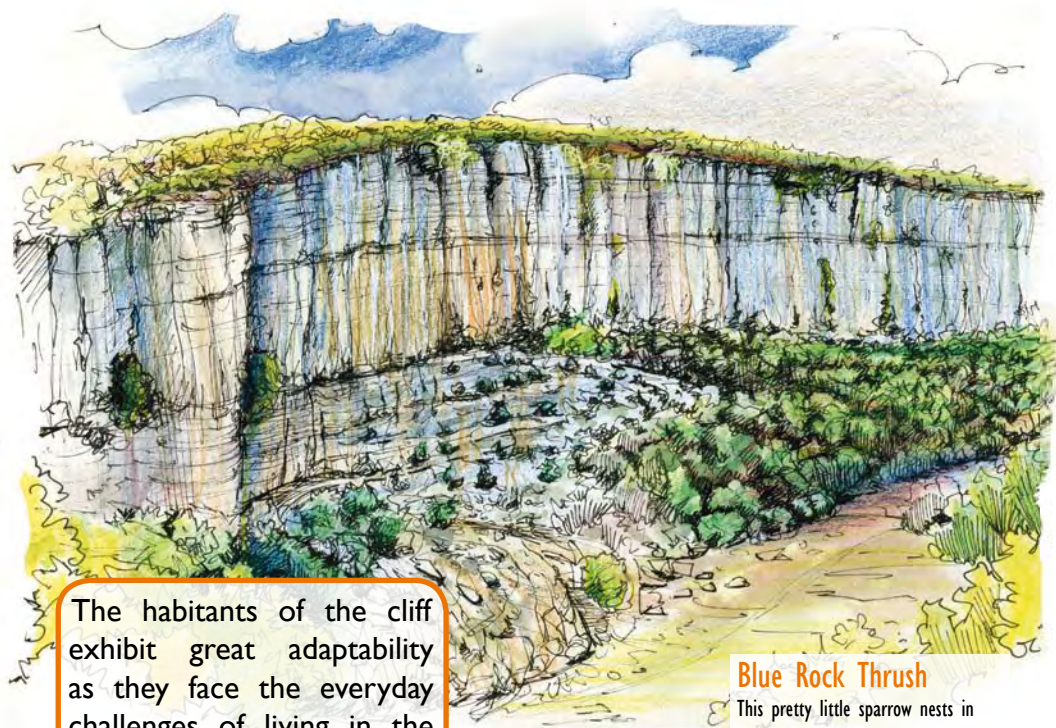


## Take action !

- Remember to bring back all your waste and recycle. Think of bringing pocket ashtrays for the cigarette butts.
- Respect the tranquility of other river users as well as the fauna, avoid loud noises and voices.
- Bear in mind that most of the river banks are on a privately owned land, make sure that the access is permitted.



# VERTICAL LIFE



The habitants of the cliff exhibit great adaptability as they face the everyday challenges of living in the vertiginous cliff in almost total absence of soil and water.

Despite this, the limestone cliffs above the Ardèche river are the habitat of a variety of slow-growing plants and bird species that find there the necessary tranquility they require to successfully breed and bring up their young.

## Blue Rock Thrush

This pretty little sparrow nests in crevices of the limestone cliffs that border the Ardèche river and its tributaries, but it can also nest in buildings. The male blue rock thrush sings a clear, melodious call and is easily recognizable by his blue-grey plumage.





## Lesser Horseshoe Bat

This is one of the world's smallest bat species, and its protected in France like all bats. Even though it has eyes it mainly uses high frequency sound (echolocation) to literally see in sound. It's a sophisticated form of vision making the bat an efficient hunter in the dark.



## Egyptian Vulture

This is a migratory raptor who is a carnivore and a scavenger, which means that it mainly feeds on dead animals (carriion). Setting up «carriion spots» in Ardèche, where farmers can dispose of carriion to feed vultures has turned out to be practical and economically beneficial for farmers while also favoring the return of the vultures in the area.



Thyme

Evergreen  
Candytuft



Navelwort



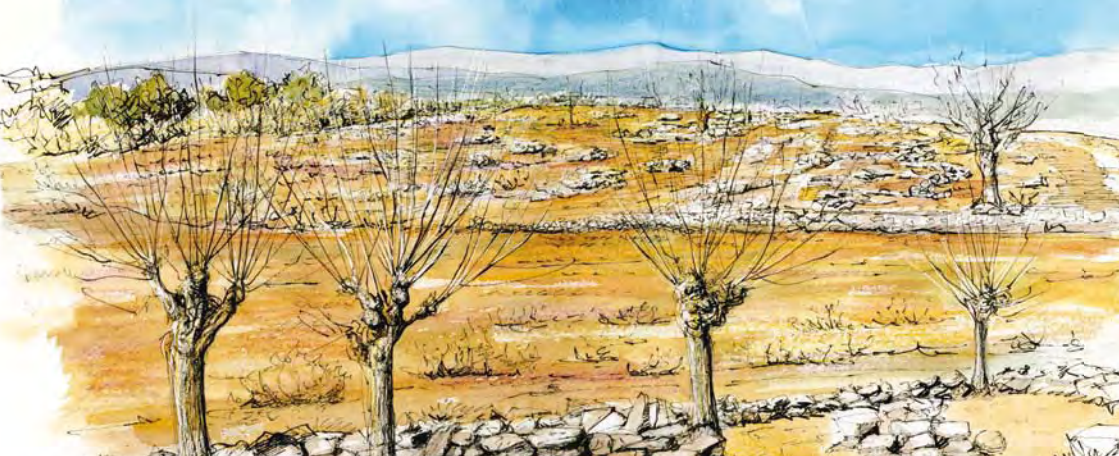
## Eurasian Eagle Owl

One of the largest owl species in the world nests here in the cliffs. It's an efficient nocturnal predator and not a picky one. It mainly hunts small mammals such as voles, rats, and rabbits but can also prey on other birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, and insects. This species is particularly sensitive to light pollution.

## Take action !

- Stay discreet, the wildlife will appreciate it and may in turn offer you some very nice observation opportunities.
- Climbers, be careful not to approach bird nests as it may harm the nestlings.
- Respect the site and try not to leave any trace of your passing.

# THE NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE GRAS PLATEAU



«Le Plateau des Gras» is a mid-altitude limestone plateau mostly vegetated by dry meadows and oak forests. The plateau has been occupied by humans since prehistoric times and it contains many dolmens, mainly from the 3rd millennium BC, as well as countless constructions of dry stone that indicate the importance of past human activities. The biodiversity in the dry meadows is remarkable and it largely depends on the maintenance of pastoral activities that prevent woody encroachment.



## Green Lizard

This large and colorful lizard is the victim of long-lasting myths about it being poisonous and dangerous. The male is easily recognizable by its characteristic turquoise throat. The green lizard can actively lose its tail in dangerous situations, i.e. when threatened by a predator like a marten, a weasel, a bird of prey or a house cat.



## Short-toed Eagle

After spending winter in Africa, this large raptor returns annually to Ardèche to nest and breed, and always with the same partner. It's particularly fond of the Gras plateau where it preys on its all-time favorite food: snakes.



## Predatory Bush Cricket

This strange cricket has no wings and does not need a male partner for its reproduction. Thus there are only female Predatory bush crickets! It lives up to its name, being a ferocious predator of the dry meadows where it hunts from a hide waiting for the next insect to grab and devour.



## Green Oak

This tree species is typical for the Mediterranean climate, having a short trunk and persistent foliage. The slow growth makes its wood hard and dense, which explains its traditional use for constructing tools and carts, and for the production of wood coal.



## Eurasian Hoopoe

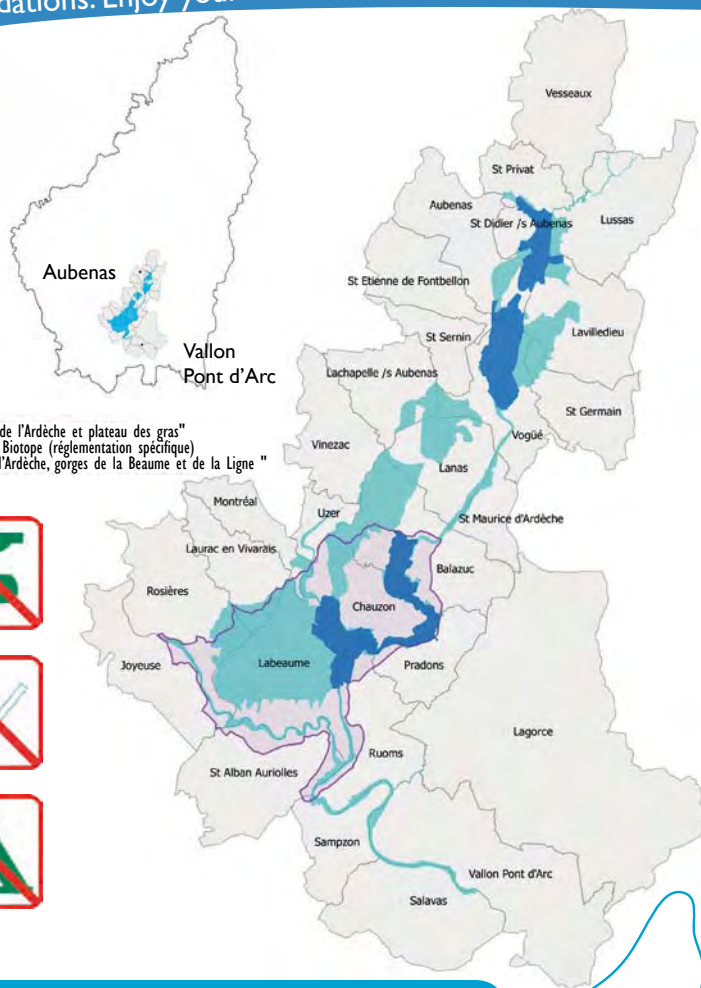
## Take action !

- Be very cautious, the Gras plateau is an extremely fire-prone land.
- The use of motorcycles or quads is strictly prohibited outside of the roads.
- Stay on paths and do not pick flowers, some of them are protected.

## Blue Aphyllanthes



You are now ready to continue to discover the wonders of the Ardèche river valley. Please bear in mind the sensitivity of the ecosystems and take action to protect the wildlife by respecting the recommendations. Enjoy your visit !



- Site Natura 2000 "vallée moyenne de l'Ardèche et plateau des gras"
- Arrêté Préfectoral de Protection de Biotope (réglementation spécifique)
- Espace Naturel Sensible "Vallée de l'Ardèche, gorges de la Beaume et de la Ligne "



The Territorial Public Institution of the Ardèche Basin created this brochure in the context of the Natura 2000 and Sensitive Natural Site management framework for the Ardèche river valley.

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