

## HIKING IN PARADISE

### The Wildest Park in the Alps

by Michele Vacchiano



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**Landscape of the Alps:  
Mount Avic in spring**

Although the western Alps occupy an area including France, Italy, and Switzerland, they define a region with a common history and a common civilization. The Duchy of Savoy (chief town: Turin), which once included all lands around the western Alps, was politically independent from the Middle Ages until 1861. Then its territory was divided. Today Savoy belongs to France; Piedmont and Aosta Valley belong to Italy. For these historical reasons, the local people speak a variety of languages: French (spoken in Italy, France, and Switzerland), Italian, Piedmontese, Provençal (spoken in southwestern Piedmont) and Franco-provençal (spoken in northwestern Piedmont, Aosta Valley and Savoy). To complicate matters still further, in the Gressoney Valley people speak Walser, a German dialect. In fact, on regional maps, different names can designate the same place or mountain. This linguistic tapestry is often difficult for foreign tourists to understand and may cause misunderstandings. However, a photographic visit to the Grand Paradise National Park is worth coping with considerable challenge.

**Grand Paradise National Park. Valnontey (Aosta Valley) Grand Paradise and Herbetet with Ghiacciaio della Tribolazione**



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The Grand Paradise National Park, between Piedmont and the Aosta Valley, covers a vast area of mountainous territory, rising from 2,600 feet on the valley floor to 13,324 feet at the summit of Grand Paradise itself. It is the oldest and wildest park in the Alps, a park which--despite the inexhaustible assault of economic exploitation--is still able to offer scenery of primordial beauty. Credit for this extraordinary preservation must certainly be given to the administrators of the park itself. Despite management difficulties and continual opposition (overt and covert), park officials have prevented this area from being transformed into a huge playground, complete with ski-lifts, roads, and luxury multi-storied buildings (the sorts of developments which delight tour operators and local administrators who are, perhaps, the only people still blindly investing their energies and hopes in increasing mass tourism).

The kind of damage suffered by the environment at the foot of Matterhorn, in the range of Mont Blanc, and in Val d'Isere (in the very heart of the neighboring Parc National de la Vanoise) is as yet unknown in this region. Excursionists and

skiers hungry for real contact with nature, instead of another chance to practice their athletic performance, can find it here.

Of course, we could debate at length about the timeliness of creating uncontaminated oases in a world that is galloping toward ecological catastrophe. Some could argue that the existence of parks and natural reserves actually legitimizes the destruction of the environment outside them. But until respect for nature becomes a part of our way of viewing the world (until now dominated by a logic of depredation), parks alone are left to care for the remaining wilderness. Thus, scholars and lovers of nature can observe and appreciate what we are relentlessly destroying on the rest of this planet.

Even if a national park can protect the environment and preserve it intact for future generations, it can do nothing to prevent the gradual yet unrelenting destruction of the local civilization. This degeneration has tangled roots. It's a sort of cultural colonization which is difficult to identify and impossible to stop. As each old man dies, the languages, beliefs, and traditions of the mountains are disappearing forever. The clumsy, superficial attempts made by folk groups cannot bring them back to life. A culture is not a collection of dances, songs, and proverbs, but a way of understanding the world, an extremely complex semiological code that cannot be reproduced by anyone who isn't a living part of it.

Perhaps this extinction, too, is an ineluctable phenomenon, part of world evolution. Like many greater and better known past civilizations, the mountain communities and their culture are going to die out. Their deaths will come without too much ado, in silence, with discretion, as is the custom here.

A priority goal of current park policy is the education of people toward a new way of relating to the environment. Teaching programs in schools and summer activities for children and adults (such as workshops about nature photography) are helping both foreign and native tourists alike to understand the complicated interactions underlying the territory even before their first approach to the park. A photographer looking for impressive images can find them easily here. The beauty and magnificence of these valleys and mountains, their evocation of a still uncontaminated nature, plus the emotions stirred by their wildlife will remain in his soul (and on his film) as an indelible memory.



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**Grand Paradise National Park. Valnontey (Aosta Valley).  
Rocciaviva and Glacier du Money from east ridge of Herbetet**

The mountains of Grand Paradise group were sculpted by glaciers during the Quaternary glaciations, which created the valleys we see today. Above the larch forests, you can find high alpine meadows bright with flowers in summer (when you can spot very rare species of flowers) and dominated by the highest peaks of the massif. Here you can walk above the clouds among myriad glacial lakes, cross a mountain pass while surrounded by steinbocks, and--if you sit down to admire the landscape--marmots may come to inspect you. In front of you, the glaring splendor of glaciers or the austere majesty of towering peaks spread out in an almost overwhelming panorama.

Obviously, you'll need serious photographic equipment. Here are my suggestions:

- Wide-angle lenses for the human environment. I suggest a simple 28 mm (45-55 in medium format) for the little villages with their dry-walled houses or the "baite" (alpine huts) for summer pasture. In large format, I use a 90 mm Super-Angulon.
- A normal lens for scenery. (Do not use wide-angle lenses, or the mountains will appear exaggeratedly small and faraway.)
- A telephoto lens for animals. In the park, you can get close to steinbocks (*Capra ibex ibex*) quite easily. They are accustomed to human presence, so--as long as you move slowly and quietly--you don't need extreme focal lengths. From 200 to 300 mm in small format, from 300 to 500 in medium format will allow you to capture excellent photos.

**Orco Valley (Piedmont).  
Male steinbock**



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Some of the animals you may encounter include the following:

Chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*) are fearful and suspicious. If you're lucky, you might be able to approach a lonely young male, but when you reach a distance of about 60 feet from your subject, it will run away headlong. So you need a very long telephoto lens--500 mm or more.

The marmot (*Marmota marmota*) is a curious and lively fur-ball that runs, plays, and gobbles close to the burrows when it isn't hibernating during the winter. At the first sign of danger, a marmot sentry blows its piercing whistle and all the furry creatures disappear into their holes. To photograph marmots, you have to lie down, wait, and hide. You can also place your camera in front of a hole, go away, and watch through binoculars. When the marmot emerges from his burrow, you can take your photo by remote control. Marmots also like searching in dustbins. If you leave your rucksack on the ground, a marmot may come to check if you've brought him something to eat.

The eagle (*Aquila chrysaetus*) is not rare in the park. There are a few pairs that build their nests on inaccessible rocks. You can spot eagles circling the valleys, but it's very difficult (and strictly forbidden) for anyone to approach the nests.

The bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*) feeds mainly on the bones of carrion. It disappeared from the western Alps in 1912. However, a few years ago, an international project reintroduced *Gypaetus* in the neighboring Parc National de la Vanoise. It's no longer hard to see one of these magnificent birds.

The Tengmalm's owl (*Aegolius funereus*) lives in coniferous forests. You can often hear the "hoo-hoo" of this nocturnal bird of prey. To photograph nocturnal birds, you have to lie down, waiting close to the nest, and watch attentively in the dark. Infrared equipment will help you. Autofocus lenses are recommended, if they can work together with an infrared-operating flash.

The effects of flash photography on nocturnal birds is a matter of debate among nature photographers. Some say no harm is done, but I'm not so sure. Bird retinas can tolerate the sunlight. Even owls and other nocturnal birds can look at the sun without damage, compared with mammals that are less fortunate. Sunlight is certainly brighter than that produced by an electronic flash. However, a retina requires about thirty minutes to adapt to the dark after being exposed to a sudden light. This fact could be crucial for the survival of nocturnal birds.

The crossbill (*Loxia fulvirostrata*) uses its cross-over beak to snatch seeds out of pine cones. The male can be recognized by its red-orange feathering.

The Grand Paradise woods and meadows shelter the homes of many birds. To photograph them, you'll need a long focal length--600 mm or more. You can obtain superior results by hiding under a camouflage sheet. Do not use tents. Camping outside authorized areas is forbidden.

- A macro lens for flowers and insects. The focal length of your macro lens should be higher than normal. 100 or 200 mm allows you to work without frightening your subject. You'll also need a pair of little flashes to compensate for the light decrease due to the magnification.



Flowers and insects are good subjects in the summer. Butterfly *Parnassius apollo* is one of the emblems of the park. At high altitude, above the tree line, the summer rejoices as thousands of little flowers, as well as gaily colored butterflies and grasshoppers intoxicated with love, flood the meadows with a symphony of life. You have to look carefully in the grass to spot the myriad



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**Grand Paradise National Park.  
A butterfly (family: Lycaenidae)  
on a thistle.**

forms of life we so often unwittingly crush underfoot. You can photograph insects very easily when they're either feeding or mating. However, if you like photographing insects, you must be ready to be stung, bitten, or sprinkled by irritating fluids whenever you cross the animal's safety limit. But it's not important.

Nature photography is an absorbing activity you cannot give up, because when you're hiking in the mountains, perhaps standing on a glacier to photograph the thousand faces of nature, to inhale the thousand smells of life, *then* you feel alive! Then you can create a message of love. You can openly reveal your respect for all forms of life. And if someone understands your message and shares it, then your work will be successful. It will be a sign you will leave in the world--a little footprint that will remain on the path when your journey comes to an end.

### SOME INFORMATION ABOUT THE PARK

*Head offices:* Parco Nazionale Gran Paradiso - Via della Rocca 47 - 10123 Turin (Italy) (Phone: +39 11 8171187)  
"Paradisica" Alpine Botanical Garden - Valnontey-Cogne AO (Italy) (Phone: +39 165 74147)

*Visitors Centers:*

**Ronco Canavese (Soana Valley, Piedmont).** The center is in the Old Town Hall. There is a permanent exhibition on the chamois.

**Noasca (Orco Valley, Piedmont).** In the Town Hall, this is the Park Tourist Secretariat, and houses a permanent exhibition on geology, a teaching laboratory and a projection room.

**Ceresole Reale (Orco Valley, Piedmont).** This center houses a permanent exhibition on the steinbock.

**Rhêmes Notre Dame (Aosta Valley).** Permanent exhibition on the bearded vulture.

**Dégliez Valsavarenche (Aosta Valley).** Permanent exhibition on the lynx and other predators.

*About Michele Vacchiano*

Michele Vacchiano was born in Turin (Piedmont, northwestern Italy) in 1951. He holds a Master of Arts degree earned from the University of Turin in 1979. He has written several books about nature photography for important Italian publishers. He usually works in the western Alps, and especially in the Grand Paradise National Park, about which he wrote the photographic book *La roccia incantata (The Enchanted Rock)*. He also made some documentary audiovisuals about mountain life.

From 1986 to 1995 he taught Techniques and Aesthetics of Photography at the Journalism School and at the Superior Institute for Communication Sciences of Turin. He wrote an essay entitled *L'ordine apparente (The Seeming Order)* about the semiology of visual communications. He was promoter and president of the Association for Nature, Photography and Alpine Culture Research (ARNICA). He is a member of the World Field Photographers Association. He contributes to several newspapers and photography agencies. His pictures were exhibited on several occasions and have achieved a considerable success.

Michele Vacchiano presently lives with his son near the center of Turin, but as often as possible, he leaves town for a lonely sixteenth century house at the foot of Monte Rosa. At the moment, he is writing some new books.

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