

The habitats and sites of Community interest

The European Union, with the Habitat Directive, identified a list of environments and species considered to be of community interest and whose conservation was essential for maintaining biological and ecosystem diversity in our continent.

Some of these habitats and species are of priority interest, for their conservation is under particular threat.

In the Montevocchia and Curone Valley Park there are many animal and plant species and habitats of community interest. Three habitats are of priority interest: the petrifying springs, the dry meadows and the wet woods.

The European Union intends to set up a network of areas across the continent to ensure the conservation of its environmental heritage (Natura 2000).

The areas with habitats and species of community interest form part of this network as "Sites of Community Interest". A huge area of our regional Park has been proposed as a Site of Community Interest.

The wet woods habitat (Alno-Ulmion)

The hygrophilous (wet) alder and elm woods habitat is one of three habitats in the Park of priority nature conservation interest to the European Union.

These woods grow on soil rich in water and sometimes subject to stagnation. Like most wet areas, these woods have frequently been drained over the years by the construction of ditches or similar techniques. Man tried to drain away the water to dry out the soil.

For this reason only a very few hygrophilous woods have escaped the attention of man, and this is why they are of prime importance for European nature conservation.

Woods of this kind are normally found in the periodically flooded areas along the major rivers in the plain, or at the foot of mountains where water collects.

The European alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) is the main species in such woods, because it can survive in permanently flooded areas.



European alder
(*Alnus glutinosa*)

Where conditions are less severe and the soil still wet but less prone to stagnation, other species, prime among them the Field elm (*Ulmus minor*), are found.



field elm
(*Ulmus minor*)

Historically this imposing tree characterised the woods in the Lombardy plain, but in recent decades it has been drastically reduced in numbers by a parasitic fungus, and today only a few specimens grow to maturity.

Other trees you can find in the wet woods are the black poplar (*Populus nigra*), some species of willow and the bird cherry (*Prunus padus*).

But here too the black locust tree (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) has penetrated. An allochthonous species of North American origin, this tree is very useful for producing quantities of timber but unfortunately is extremely invasive.



Guelder rose
(*Frangula alnus*)

Several bushes are found in the undergrowth, and conspicuous among them when in flower is the Guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*). Also common, especially at the edges of the woods, is the Alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*).



Alder buckthorn
(*Viburnum opulus*)

But the most characteristic species in this habitat are to be found above all at the herbaceous level. These include Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*), Cabbage thistle (*Cirsium oleraceum*), Weeping sedge (*Carex pendula*), Remote sedge (*Carex remota*) and Valerian (*Valeriana dioica*). Horsetail (*Equisetum* spp.) too is frequent.

The main animal species in the wet woods tend to be concentrated around the many pools. They include Lataste's frog (*Rana latastei*), a species endemic to the Lombardy Plain, the Salamander (*Salamandra Salamandra*) and the Great crested newt (*Triturus cristatus*). Bird life includes the Marsh tit (*Parus palustris*) and the brightly coloured Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*).



Kingfisher
(Alcedo atthis)



Lataste's Frog
(Alcedo atthis)

The LIFE Natura 1998 project

The wet woods in the Park are today reduced to a few small strips, located:

- in certain small, narrow valleys of little agricultural interest;
- in narrow strips alongside streams where the water slows, meanders, floods and forms marshes;
- in abandoned quarries, where the clayey soil tends to hold water;
- in former agricultural land that is no longer drained.

These environments thus need to be carefully protected, and deterioration and adulteration combatted. With European Union support, the Park is acting to protect these habitats as part of the LIFE Natura 1998 project "Santa Croce and Curone Valleys: protecting habitats of priority interest".

Along the streams and narrow valleys, small barriers are being built to slow the flow of the water and increase soil humidity.

In the woods, exotic species are being eliminated, and felling is also used to prevent trees falling and allowing excessive sunlight to penetrate. Alder and other species typical of these habitats are being planted on the edges of the wet woods and in the larger clearings to increase the size of the wood ecosystem and make it more stable.

Where to find the wet woods

The most interesting places to observe wet woods are along the Curone brook:

- in the upper part of the valley;
- north of the upper Fornace farmhouse;
- below the Valfredda farmhouse;
- close to the Montevicchia sports field.

Along the Molgoretta brook, wet woods can be seen alongside the road leading from Lomaniga to Santa Croce Valley.

Translated by Martyn Drayton



the Wet Woods

(Alno-Ulmion)

in the Regional Park
of Montevicchia
and Curone Valley

