

GRAN PARADISO NATIONAL PARK

# FOUR SEASONS IN PARADISE

Italy's crown jewel among its protected areas is the stunning and yet accessible mountain kingdom of the ibex, alpine chamois and endangered bearded vulture





■ *Alpine ibex*  
*Capra ibex.*  
*On the opening*  
*spread a clump of*  
*Alpine anemone*  
*Anemone*  
*pulsatilla in bloom*  
*against the scenic*  
*background of the*  
*Lago del Serrù.*



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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

Italy, the Country where we live, is rightly famous worldwide for many reasons such as art, history, food and culture - but sadly wildlife is not one of them. However, at the very least two of its National Parks deserve global recognition and world-class status: the Abruzzi and the Gran Paradiso, which is the subject of this issue's *On the Trail* story. This spectacular alpine area sited on the North-West precipitous mountain border between Italy and France is just a few hours' driving from our place, so this offered us the unique opportunity to visit it on several occasions at different times of the year

at a relatively low cost, enabling us to fully document its dazzling beauty during the coming and going of four seasons. From quiet, warm, sunny alpine meadows in summertime to icy, blizzard-blasted steep mountain slopes in winter, we were able to witness the National Park's spectacular landscapes and wonderful fauna in a variety of conditions. And the Gran Paradiso truly is a stunning destination - easily reached, comfortable to stay at, easily and safely trekked around, devoid of dangerous animals, seasonally greatly different and almost deserted of visitors at some times, and

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■ *Alpine marmot*  
Marmota marmota  
keeping watch in  
a summer, flower-  
studded mountain  
meadow.





■ *Alpine  
buttercups  
Ranunculus  
montanus  
in bloom on the  
slopes above  
Lago del Serrù,  
Ceresole Reale.*





■ Soaring subadult bearded vulture or Lammergeyer Gypaetus barbatus.

last but not least easily photographed. Its wildlife is supremely confident due to its long - and lately peaceful - interaction with the human inhabitants of the mountain valleys, and if the number of species which can be sighted during the average visit is not exceedingly high, the ease of approaching most of the animals more than makes up for that. Add to the Park's assets exceedingly comfortable accomodation at every valley village, impeccably maintained and well mapped-out mountain trails and an abundance of mouth-watering food, and you'll see why the Gran Paradiso really deserves the legendary reputation it enjoys at home and why it really should get more visitors from abroad. Wildlife photographer and Gran Paradiso specialist Luca Giordano - who has been our guide during our visits to the Park - gives us more details: *"Turn after turn, the road climbs sinuous and steep. Warning signs on the sides of the road indicate the possible, sudden crossing of wild animals, inviting the driver to maintain a reduced cruising speed. Finally the little village of Cogne, with its charming wooden houses with characteristic slate roofs, is now in sight. We just reached the true heart of the Gran Paradiso National Park,*

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■ *Alpine marmot*  
*Marmota marmota*  
basking by their  
burrow entrance  
on a mountain  
meadow.





established in 1922 as the oldest Italian National Park. However, the history of this incredible protected area, which covers five different valleys of Piedmont and Aosta Valley, began many years before, at the time of "The Hunter King". This nickname, that the inhabitants of the mountains gave to Italian king Vittorio Emanuele II, leaves no doubt about the activities that His Majesty enjoyed the most, when he came to visit these mountains. In fact, from the second half of the 1800s, in love with this wild corner of nature, the king visited the Royal Hunting Reserve that he established in this area several times, in order to collect trophies that he then used to decorate the opulent rooms of his fortresses. Even today, in the magnificent castle of Sarre, it is still possible to admire thousands of alpine ibex's horns hanging on the walls, lifeless memories of those ancient deeds.

**FROM HUNTING RESERVE TO PARK**

Fortunately for the ibex, those difficult times are gone and the splendid ungulate, now protected by strict

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Ermine or Stoat stoat ■  
 Mustela erminea in summer livery (photo by Luca Giordano).





Left, Alpine ibex *Capra ibex*; right top, a rare migrant in mid-flight, the Griffon vulture *Gyps fulvus*; right bottom, Alpine chaffinch *Montifringilla nivalis*.





Alpine meadows in summer offer a dazzling flowerbeds display: here white Alpine anemone *Anemone pulsatilla* in the foreground, with yellow Alpine buttercup *Ranunculus montanus* and blue *Gentiana verna* in the background.





Alpine marmot ■  
Marmota marmota.

legislation, has become the undisputed symbol of the Gran Paradiso National Park. Nevertheless, it would be dangerous to lower the guard: in various circumstances over the centuries, in fact, ibexes have found themselves on the verge of extinction. The low genetic variability characterising the population and resulting from these continuous demographic collapses, obliges researchers to keep monitoring this unique species: the sudden and unexpected appearance of a contagious disease with a high mortality rate could in fact jeopardize the survival of the species. A census carried out in 2013 within the Gran Paradiso revealed the presence of 3,000 individuals. A considerable number, but if we compare the data to the one collected in 1993, when 5,000 ibexes were counted, we can't stop asking ourselves the reasons behind the thinning that occurred over the last two decades. There are many theories

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■ *Left, a subadult Alpine ibex Capra ibex demonstrates its unique prowess as a mountain climber; right, melting ice in summertime originating a scenic waterfall.*







A bachelor group of ■ Alpine ibex *Capra ibex* resting in the sun in summertime.





■ Far left,  
adult male  
Alpine ibex;  
*Capra ibex*;  
left, subadult  
Bearded vulture  
or Lammergeyer  
*Gypaetus*  
*barbatus*.



Red fox  
*Vulpes vulpes*  
in summertime  
(photo by Luca  
Giordano).



trying to provide an explanation for this umpteenth decline, but apparently the most accredited one is linked to climate change. A marked decrease in the winter survival rate of the cubs seems to be at the base of the problem. At the end of June, when the small ibexes are born, the grass they feed on has more and more often been exposed to the light of the sun for too many weeks, due to a lack of snow cover. The reduced quality of this scorched forage does not allow the baby ibexes to accumulate the energy they need to face the cold, freezing winter, which more and more often kills them before they reach their first year. The sexual dimorphism in alpine ibexes is very evident: while adult males can weigh up to 120 kilograms, females rarely exceed 40. Moreover, while the horns of female specimens appear thin and not particularly developed, those of males assume a pronounced curvature and can reach a meter in length. Like all goats, ibexes are endowed with hollow and perennial horns, which keep growing every year thanks to the production of new tissue at the base. This process is usually interrupted in September by the action of hormones, that cause the appearance of growth rings on the horns of the animals, revealing each individual's age.

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■ *Alpine marmot*  
*Marmota marmota*  
by the entrance  
of its burrow  
on a mountain  
meadow.

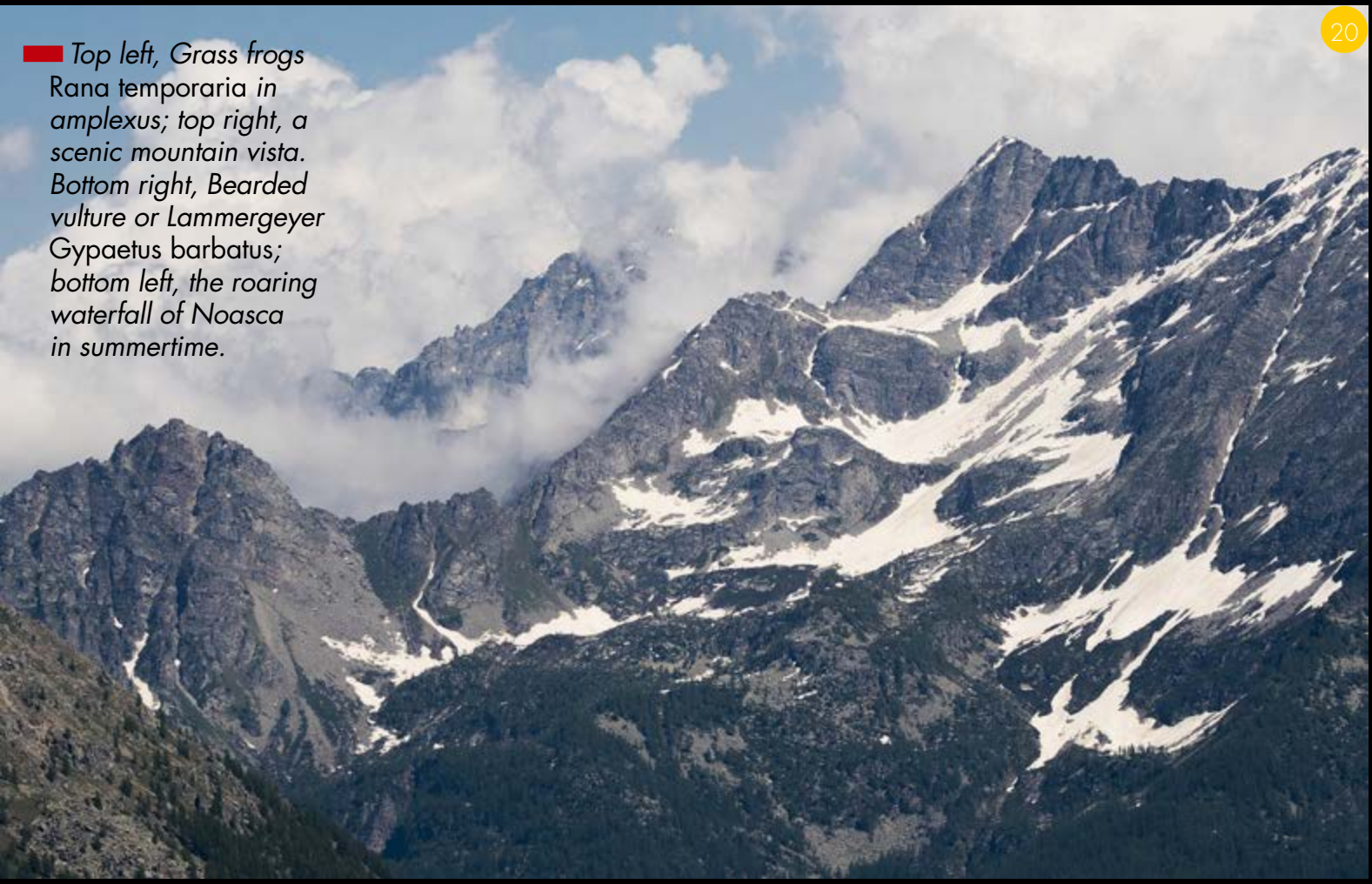






Spectacular alpine lakes come back to life during summer thaws with the melting of ice and snow at the Pian del Nivolet.





■ Top left, Grass frogs *Rana temporaria* in amplexus; top right, a scenic mountain vista. Bottom right, Bearded vulture or Lammergeyer *Gypaetus barbatus*; bottom left, the roaring waterfall of Noasca in summertime.





■ In summertime the alpine heights of the Gran Paradiso National Park offer spectacular panoramas.





Alpine chamois ■  
*Rupicapra rupicapra* in  
the first colors of autumn.




### **KING OF THE ROCKY SLOPES**

Another fascinating ungulate shares ibex's habitat, contending for the rank of king of the crags. We are talking about the Alpine chamois, forged by millions of years of evolution to become the lord of the rocks, a perfect climbing machine. Each of its limbs is provided with two fingers covered with a hoof, an extraordinary climbing tool with an outer ridge and a fleshy pad that ensures perfect adherence to the ground. Two more fingers called spurs, now regressed, are also essential to make the chamois move confidently on vertical rock faces. The speed and the confidence with which this ungulate moves, however, is not only related to the peculiar characteristics of its paws. In fact, also the circulatory system plays a prominent role in this sense. The red blood cells of these animals, twice as numerous as those found in human blood, allow them to sustain sudden and incredible efforts even at high altitudes, where oxygen is scarce.

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Top left, Black Redstart   
Phoenicurus ocruros;  
top right, Eurasian wren  
Troglodytes troglodytes;  
bottom right, Golden eagle  
Aquila chrysaetos;  
bottom left, Alpine chamois  
Rupicapra rupicapra.





## A VARIETY OF SPECIES

30 other species of mammals, as well as 101 species of birds, share with ibexes and chamois the daily struggle for life in the Gran Paradiso National Park, that becomes a particularly harsh habitat during the winter season. While ibexes and chamois contrast the low temperatures by changing their thin summer coat with a thicker and darker one which helps them retain the warmth of the sun, the Ermine stoat, the Mountain hare and the Rock ptarmigan, thanks to a surprising change of colour, become almost totally white, trying to better camouflage in the surrounding environment now dominated by a blinding coating of snow.

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In late summer and early autumn the Gran Paradiso mountain massif offers colorful, dramatic opportunities to the landscape photographer.







■ *Alpine chamois*  
*Rupicapra*  
*rubicapra*  
*in a typically*  
*colorful autumn*  
*landscape.*





Far left and left, dazzling autumnal colors and patterns; right, Red or Eurasian Red squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*.





Truly gigantic glaciers are found at altitude - compare to the size of the mountain hut at the lower left corner for reference.





■ *Left, a fully mature and quite imposing male Alpine ibex *Capra ibex* in autumn; right, one of the many waterfalls cascading down the steep mountain slopes in late summer and early autumn.*





## OF MOUNTAINS AND MARMOTS

The case of the Alpine marmot is different. During the coldest months this large rodent hibernates, gradually consuming the fat deposits stored in summer. Marmots are the largest Italian representatives of the Sciuridae family, which in Italy includes another native member only: the Red squirrel. Marmots live in family groups and never move too far away from their underground burrows, which represent a perfect escape from predators such as the Golden eagle. The hypogeum shelters used by marmots in summer are shallow and provided with many entrances, while the winter ones are characterized by a single long access tunnel that leads to a spacious room, where thick layers of hay act as a natural thermal insulator. During winter season marmots are able to decrease their body temperature from 35 to 5 degrees Celsius and to reduce their heart rhythm from 130 to 15 beats per minute. An extraordinary adaptation, which allows them to waste as little energy as possible and to wait for the arrival of spring without having to feed. Anyway, dangers for marmots do not arrive just from the sky. Another predator walks around the mountains in search for a inattentive marmot, but it has no curved bill or long claws. It has triangular ears, capable of picking up the most subdued of noises, a nose

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The Red or Eurasian red squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* is a fast-moving, shy, very active and difficult subject to photograph.





Late summer and early autumn are the best times of the year for landscape photography in the Gran Paradiso.





with an extraordinary sense of smell and bright eyes capable of seeing in the thickest darkness, instead. We are talking about the Red fox, a small, agile and adaptable animal, that has all the necessary skills to survive on the Italian Alps, where urbanisation and both climate and geomorphological harsh conditions leave no much space for large specialized carnivores, such as the bear and the wolf. The fox's diet includes small mammals, birds, carrions, invertebrates and fruit: nevertheless, this omnivorous opportunist does not disdain to supplement its diet with anything it is able to find inside the trash bins or with the unhealthy food provided by unwary tourists.

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Alpine chamois  
Rupicapra rupicapra.



*Alpine chamois* ■  
*Rupicapra rupicapra*  
*between two images of*  
*the stunning autumnal*  
*landscapes offered by*  
*the Gran Paradiso.*





■ *The Devil in the Woods - a male Alpine ibex Capra ibex must have been an almost supernatural sight to mountain villagers in ancient times.*







■ Left, a beautiful late summer waterfall; right, an Alpine ibex *Capra ibex* shows its prowess as a mountain climber negotiating with ease an almost vertical slope.

## PEOPLE MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

Luckily for the foxes, there are actually people who spend their working days trying to help them not to get bad habits like these. Under dark green jacket, often slightly hunched by the weight of the backpack, the 58 guards of the Gran Paradiso National Park walk around 71,000 hectares of territory monitoring the animals and promoting useful public education. Felice Berthod was among the first who dedicated their lives to this delicate and important role. Once a poacher, he joined the team of guards under the management of the illuminated director Videsott, finding his own personal redemption and the inner peace that a youth of war and deprivation had not allowed him to discover before. Although the tools supplied to the modern guards are much more sophisticated than those of the past and despite the fact that long nights chasing hunters are not on the agenda any more, the passion of the former guards still lives in the new levers. They live out there on the field, regardless of the snow, the rain, the wind or the burning sun, protecting this natural jewel of the Alps in order to give us the opportunity to enjoy its colours and its unique biodiversity in all the four seasons". ●





*Ice-clad mountain massifs are bathed in pink at dawn. This is a view from the small village of Cogne.*







■ Left, Alpine chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra*. Right, waterfall in early autumn, before the freezing cold of winter sets in.





Adult male  
European roe deer  
*Capreolus capreolus*  
in velvet, at the coming  
of winter and  
the first snowfalls.

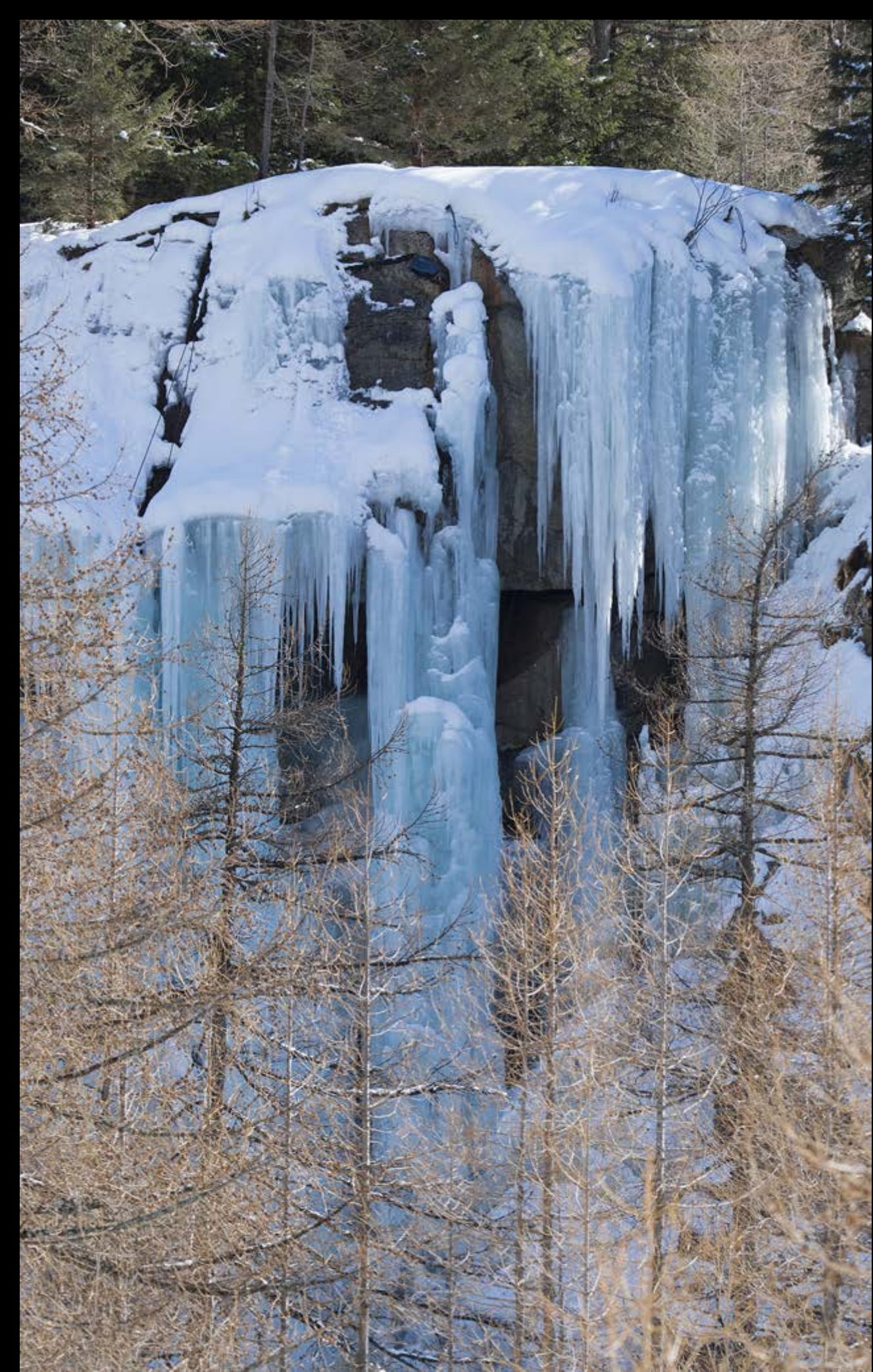




Alpine chough ■  
Pyrrhocorax graculus in winter  
landscape, Valle dell'Orco,  
Gran Paradiso National Park.







■ Left, the spectacular sight offered by iced waterfalls in winter time; right, the remains of an Alpine chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra* have provided much-needed nourishment to Red foxes, Bearded vultures and probably wolves.







The Bearded vulture or ■ Lammergeyer *Gypaetus barbatus* is a gigantic and sadly severely endangered bird. It has been successfully reintroduced in the Park where three-four pairs are currently residing.





*Alpine chamois* ■  
*Rupicapra rupicapra* in a  
crisp winter landscape.



Severe snow blizzards occur very often in winter, and the risk of dangerously blinding white-outs is always present when trekking, as this image of an Alpine chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra* in a snowfall clearly shows.





■ Iced-up, snow-clad landscapes have a magical atmosphere about them in the Gran Paradiso valleys.







■ Top left, Ermine or Stoat *Mustela erminea* in winter coat (photo by Luca Giordano); top right, Rock partridge *Alectoris graeca*; bottom right, European roe deer *Capreolus capreolus*; bottom left, Alpine chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*.







■ A beautiful portrait of a Red fox *Vulpes vulpes* in a snowy winter landscape (photo by Luca Giordano).





Trekking and photographing in winter requires the use of snowshoes to negotiate the snow-covered terrain.







*Alpine chamois* ■  
*Rupicapra rupicapra*  
*in a peaceful winter*  
*landscape.*



■ *Visiting the Gran  
Paradiso during  
winter offers  
stunning vistas  
and wonderful  
landscape  
photographic  
opportunities.*







■ *Left, Alpine chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra* grazing in a blizzard; right, the majestic snow-clad peaks of the Gran Paradiso National Park Alps.*







■ *Alpine chough*  
*Pyrrhocorax*  
*graculus* feeding  
on ibex carcass in  
winter landscape,  
Valle dell'Orco.  
Winter is an  
extremely harsh  
time for ibex and  
chamois, and  
many fall victims  
to ruinous falls  
or avalanches.





■ *Left, Alpine chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra*; right, the beautiful sight offered by iced waterfalls in winter time.*





■ Spruce forest  
in a snowfall,  
Gran Paradiso  
National Park.





■ Alpine chamois *Rupicapra rupicapra* under a snowfall; right, photographing another individual on a sunny winter day. Notice the use of snowshoes, a necessity in deep snow.







Left, winter ■  
landscape; right,  
Alpine chamois  
*Rupicapra rupicapra*  
on a mountain slope  
during a blizzard.





Avalanches ■  
and snowslides present a  
constant danger to trekkers on  
sunny winter days, and one  
has to keep a careful eye on  
the coming day's atmospheric  
conditions and weather  
forecasts.

