

ITALY

The king's last park rangers

by Alessandro Gandolfi



At the Castello Reale di Sarre (Sarre Royal Castle), in Lalex (Aosta), several rooms are decorated with thousands of horns and skulls of ibex and chamois, hunting trophies from the many hunting trips that King Umberto I embarked on in the now protected areas of the Parco del Gran Paradiso.



A JOURNEY THROUGH ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST PARKS, CELEBRATING ITS 100TH BIRTHDAY IN 2022

They are one of the oldest teams of rangers in the world, established two centuries ago in the Piedmont Alps as gamekeepers of the king of the House of Savoy.

Today there are 44 of them, a carefully selected elite whose task is to safeguard Italy's first protected area: the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso (Gran Paradiso National Park), which in 2022 will become 100 years old.

"Each of us is assigned a specific area, which over time we get to know like the back of our hand" explains Claudia Linty, 43, one of seven female park rangers.

Her patch is now the Orvieille area, two thousand hectares of lakes, valleys and peaks standing over three thousand meters high: "The environment must be protected – continues Claudia – but sitting at your desk and reading books isn't enough: you have to get out there and truly experience nature".

Hence why these park rangers, heirs of those ancient Savoy gamekeepers, some of whom are even direct descendants, work from dawn till dusk, sleeping in high altitude huts, to carry out a long series of tasks: patrolling the area, helping tourists, assisting with rescue operations, combating poachers and conducting a census of the wide ranging fauna that call the park home. Like wolves, for example, which have returned to inhabit the valleys, or the legendary ibex, which is threatened

by epidemics and climate change. Considered sacred and hunted for their meat and their "aphrodisiac" horns, at the beginning of the nineteenth century there were less than seventy remaining in the glacial areas of Valsavaranche and Val di Cogne. Indirectly, it was King Victor Emmanuel II who ended up protecting them when he established an exclusive Royal Hunting Reserve: only he could kill them, and so he saved them from extinction.

Sometimes, when Claudia is in the hut preparing coffee, she catches some ibex standing outside observing her: "Ours is a lonely job, but I like it, I don't feel alone. And seeing an ibex peeking through the window makes me feel even more a part of this nature that us park rangers are helping to defend and protect".



Valsavarenche (Aosta), the veterinarian Liliana Costanzi (centre) tagging and taking biometric measurements of an ibex.



Many historical photos of King Umberto I (centre) hunting in what was to become the Parco del Gran Paradiso are preserved at the Castello Reale di Sarre (Sarre Royal Castle), in Lalex (Aosta).

In the heart of the Parco del Gran Paradiso, park ranger Mattia Colombo is making his way up to the Lasin cabin, situated at an altitude of over 2,100 metres; here he is observing some ibex from a rock next to the lake that shares its name with the cabin.





In the Lasin cabin, a mountain lodge situated at an altitude of over 2,100 metres in the heart of the Parco del Gran Paradiso (Turin), park ranger Mattia Colombo is lying in bed looking through some photos he took during the day on his phone.



On the Grand Etr  t glacier, park ranger Claudia Linty makes her way towards the top to survey the snowpack.



Degioz (Valsavarenche, Aosta), ibex horns and skulls in the studio of the vet who works with the Parco del Gran Paradiso; the studio is in one of the park rangers' headquarters.



Near the Santuario di San Besso (San Besso Sanctuary - Valle Soana, Turin), in the heart of the Parco del Gran Paradiso, a procession of worshippers carry the saint's statue up to an altitude of over 2,000 metres during the San Besso festival, which takes place on 10 August.



Inside the Santuario di San Besso (San Besso Sanctuary - Valle Soana, Turin), in the heart of the Parco del Gran Paradiso, park rangers – from the left Stefano Cerise, Renzo Guglielmetti and Dario Rigaldo – enjoy lunch together during the San Besso festival, which takes place on 10 August.

The hairpin bends of Provincial Road 50, in the Parco del Gran Paradiso, wind their way up to Colle del Nivolet (the Nivolet Pass), passing Lake Agnel on the way.





Degioz (Valsavarenche, Aosta), an old photo of the Gran Paradiso park rangers (many of whom are still operational) hanging on the wall in one of the park rangers' headquarters.



Pont (Valsavarenche, Aosta), park ranger Stefano Borney (wearing the yellow helmet) working with other colleagues, during the summer, to load essential supplies onto a helicopter for transportation up to the mountain lodges.



On the Grand Etret glacier (Parco del Gran Paradiso, Aosta) park rangers are getting ready to carry out a survey of the snowpack.



Valsavarenche (Aosta), vets tagging and taking biometric measurements of an ibex near the hamlet of Tignet.



Outside the Lasin cabin, a mountain lodge situated at an altitude of over 2,100 metres in the heart of the Parco del Gran Paradiso (Turin), park ranger Mattia Colombo is trying to get a phone signal so that he can call his family.



Valsavarenche (Aosta), park ranger Claudia Linty studies the remains of a chamois in the Orvieille area, it was probably eaten by wolves.

Valsavarenche (Aosta), ibex on the mountainside near the hamlet of Tignet. On the right, an ibex has just been shot with a tranquilliser gun: it will be tagged and its biometric data recorded.





Valsavarenche (Aosta), every day before leaving, park ranger Claudia Linty fills out the logbook in the Lavassey cabin, her lodge/base.



Degioz (Valsavarenche, Aosta), the equipment used by the veterinarian Liliana Costanzi to examine the ibex.



Valsavarenche (Aosta), park rangers (from the left) Stefano Cerise, Dario Favre, Claudia Linty and Stefano Borneya observing ibex near the hamlet of Tignet before they're captured to be tagged and have their biometric measurements taken.



S. M. Umberto I
in partenza alle cacce
di Valsavaranche
Altezza m. 1541
(Vallée d'Aoste)

Riviera, al F.lli Alessio - Aosta 1914

Many historical photos of King Umberto I (centre, on the horse) hunting in what was to become the Parco del Gran Paradiso are preserved at the Castello Reale di Sarre (Sarre Royal Castle), in Lalex (Aosta).

The Teleccio reservoir situated in a side valley of the Valle dell'Orco, in the south-eastern section of the Parco del Gran Paradiso.





Valsavarenche (Aosta), various footprint tracks left in the snow by animals.



Valsavarenche (Aosta), park ranger Claudia Linty, during a moment of downtime, looks in the mirror in the Lavassey cabin, her lodge/base.



Park ranger Enrico Casetto looks out towards the Nivolet lakes while sitting in a blooming meadow. The lakes, situated between Valle dell'Orco and Valsavarenche, are in the westernmost section of the Parco del Gran Paradiso.

