

Pine and spruce woods

Pine woods are plenty and made up of three pine species: Scots, Austrian and Maritime Pines. All 3 species are (probably) native, but most pine woods are far from natural, being planted in the second half of the 19th century (see page 65).

Pine Forests have been planted throughout the region, but plantations are particularly in evidence in some parts of the Causses (primarily Austrian Pines here), the eastern foothills of the Cévennes (Maritime Pine), the Bougès (Scots Pine) and, with 40% the highest amount of planted forest, on the Mont Aigoual. Here, on acidic soils at higher altitude, Spruce, Larch, Fir and some other conifer species are more common.

Ecologically, they are an impoverished version of the natural woodlands. However, the plantations are not totally devoid of interest to the visitor, since there are always still some of the species and natural features that make the natural forests so interesting. (see also page 87).

Natural pine stands are common in the gorges, like here in the Gorge du Tarn. Orchids abound here, with Common Spotted Orchid (left) and Violet Limodore (right) as two of the more frequent species.



Subalpine meadows, heath and bogs

The subalpine zone is only reached on the Mont Lozère, routes 7, 8 and 9 and the Mont Aiguoul, route 5. The Mont Lozère is larger and has a much more diverse range of mountain habitats than does the Aiguoul.

Walking through the hot, Mediterranean scrub on the edge of the Cévennes, it is hard to conceive that a little further up, on the Mont Aiguoul and Mont Lozère, little cold streamlets cut through fresh meadows, surrounded by cool and mossy beech woods.

Large, rounded boulders and granite sediment characterise the rounded hills of the Lozère. This is a cold bedrock with very little nutrients, which is reflected in the vegetation. The hillsides are covered in broom thickets and meadows, while peat has accumulated over the years in the little depressions, which soaks up the rainwater like a sponge and releases it slowly in countless little streamlets.

Together with Mont Aiguoul, Mont Lozère forms the highest, coldest and most 'Alpine' part of the Cévennes. These upper parts belong to the subalpine zone, with several plants and animals that are typical of mountainous areas. Don't expect to find an Alpine landscape on the Lozère, though. The maximum altitude of only 1,699 metres and the rounded gentle slopes of the upper parts are nothing like the jagged heights of the Alps.

The most prominent feature of the Lozère and Aiguoul is the fact that their summits rise above the tree line. On the southern slopes the tree line almost reaches up to the ridge, but on the northern, colder slope, the treeless area is much larger. Fierce winds and high precipitation (with about 1600 mm annually, the Lozère ranks among the wetter places of France) are typical on both mountains. Together with the cold, impenetrable granite core this creates a distinctive northern feel on these high slopes. Particularly in summer, the gurgling streamlets, raised bogs and flowery meadows that form the backdrop of any walk on the Lozère couldn't be more at odds with the hot and dry lowlands.



A Large Red Damselfly got tangled up in the leaves of the insectivorous Round-leaved Sundew.