

NATURE THAT INSPIRES LIFE

*A travel notebook through
the Guadarrama mountain*

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Less than an hour from the buzz of Madrid, where the city fades into the distance, another world begins. Here, among granite ridgelines and hushed valleys, nature writes its own story, a land where water, birds and forests speak of resilience, balance and life. We step into over 500 km² of protected wilderness, an open-air sanctuary where the majestic flight of the black vulture, the elusive Spanish festoon butterfly, the piercing gaze of the Spanish imperial eagle and the agile silhouette of the Iberian ibex all coexist.

This place doesn't just protect life, it inspires it.

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National park of the Guadarrama mountain

The soul of the summits

We climb to the rooftop of Madrid. The National Park unfolds like a geological poem across its 33,960 hectares of rocky outcrops, lingering snowfields and high mountain pastures. Towering above it all is Pico Peñalara, the giant of the range. At 2,428 metres, it watches over the ridges of Cuerda Larga, Siete Picos and La Pedriza, landscapes sculpted by time, ice and wind.

Water is born in these heights. From here spring the rivers Manzanares River, Lozoya River and Guadarrama River. Their journey south traces green corridors, gives life to reservoirs and wetlands, and sustains hundreds of species. In spring, streams sing; in winter, ice carves fleeting sculptures. Here, biodiversity isn't a concept, it's a living symphony, adapting and enduring, renewing itself after the cold and bursting back into bloom.

Biosphere Reserve of the Cuencas Altas

Where people and nature live side by side

Beneath the same sky stretches the Biosphere Reserve of the upper basins of the Manzanares, Lozoya and Guadarrama rivers, recognised by UNESCO. It is a model of harmony between people and their environment: a mosaic of holm oak woods, Pyrenean oak forests, ash groves and traditional dehesas, where mountain villages still breathe in step with the land.

The Manzanares River acts as the backbone of this reserve, flowing from the heart of La Pedriza to Monte de El Pardo. Along the way, it leaves a legacy of biodiversity: eagles, falcons, otters, amphibians, and an extraordinary wealth of waterbirds at the Santillana Reservoir, a year-round festival for birdwatchers.

Regional park of the Cuenca Alta del Manzanares

The green gateway to the mountain

The Regional Park, the oldest in the Madrid region, is a living testament to the balance between conservation and tradition. Since 1930, when La Pedriza was declared a Site of National Natural Interest, this landscape has successfully woven together walking trails, traditional grazing, environmental education and responsible tourism.

It is the threshold through which generations of Madrileños have first discovered the mountains. More than a park, it is an open-air classroom: a place where nature teaches, water restores, and the silhouette of a vulture gliding over granite reminds us just how fragile and precious wild life truly is.

Other Natural Treasures

Reservoirs, wetlands and monuments of stone

Across the region, water shapes the land and sustains life. Reservoirs such as La Jarosa Reservoir in Guadarrama, Navacerrada, Santillana in Manzanares and Pedrezuela in Guadalix are mirrors of the sky and havens for birdlife.

And among the rocks, legend still echoes. At the Peñas del Arcipreste de Hita, declared a Natural Monument, history and geology intertwine in a place of deep symbolic value.

In addition, three Sites of Community Importance — the basins of the Guadarrama, Manzanares and Lozoya rivers — form part of the Natura 2000 Network, reinforcing this territory as one of the Iberian Peninsula's most important ecological hearts.



A FRAGILE BALANCE, A SHARED HERITAGE

The landscape of the Guadarrama mountain is not only a natural spectacle; it is a finely tuned balance, patiently woven over centuries between rock, water, flora and fauna... and also between human hands and the wisdom of the land. This richness, as striking as it is delicate, has required careful protection. National and Regional Parks, Biosphere Reserves, Natura 2000... these are not labels, but shields. Each protection status is a promise: to preserve this living ecosystem for those who inhabit it, care for it, visit it... and dream of it.

Because here, on every summit, in every riverbed, in every outstretched wing, nature reminds us that living in harmony with it is not an option: it is the only way forward.



Five ecosystems Five ways of feeling the mountain

Landscape Unit 1

High Peaks, Valleys and Slopes

Water, rock and altitude: the breath of the clouds

These heights safeguard what matters most: the source of water, the birth of rivers, the sanctuary of wildlife. They are the ecological soul of the region.

Landscape Unit 2

Mid-altitude Forested Ranges

The forest that heals, the mountain that nourishes

Here, you can feel the benefits of "forest bathing": reduced stress, lifted spirits, a deeper connection with what truly matters. The pinewood is not just scenery, it's nature's own remedy.

Landscape Unit 3

La Pedriza del Manzanares. Living stone, cradle of giants

In La Pedriza, geology and life embrace. A place of wonder, refuge and flight. Where the earth itself became art.

Landscape Unit 4

Great Mountain Valleys. History flowing through pine forests

These valleys are the cultural lungs of the mountain, where landscape, history and tradition merge into a setting that breathes authenticity.

Landscape Unit 5

The Mountain Foothills. Where countryside becomes village

The foothills reveal the mountain's most human face. Here, simplicity, flavour and closeness are cherished. A natural balance between living culture and the land.

Chapter I

The Earth

“What holds the forest, what breathes beneath the moss, what lies silent under our feet...”

To walk slowly through the Guadarrama mountain is to tune into the ancient heartbeat of the land. On the slopes of La Najarra, the landscape doesn't impose itself, it reveals itself. Hardy mountain meadows, broom scrub and creeping juniper form a living mosaic that speaks of adaptation and memory. Beneath the surface, fungi act as the forest's master builders: creating mycorrhizal networks that nourish pinewoods, recycling organic matter and returning life to the system. In autumn, mushrooms burst through the moss in fleeting displays of beauty — visible signs of the hidden mycelium below.

More than 1,300 plant species inhabit this bioclimatic corridor between the Mediterranean and Eurosiberian worlds. Some are relics of colder eras, surviving only here, clinging to this suspended microcosm above the plateau. As you climb higher, lichens — pioneers of living stone — paint the rocks with subtle colours, as if the elements themselves were signing their work.

And among all this diversity stand the singular trees. They are not just trees: they are forest elders, keepers of time. Sitting beside their twisted trunks is like listening to the mountain's story in silence. In Guadarrama, the earth doesn't merely support life, it speaks.



Chapter II

Life in Motion

“It's not enough to look at the mountain: you must listen to it, and allow the life beating within to reveal itself, little by little.”

In the Guadarrama mountain, life unfolds in countless ways, often quietly, always profoundly. Birds rule the skies, with 133 recorded species. Among them are the black vulture, the Spanish imperial eagle, the alpine accentor and the red-billed chough, filling the air with majesty and aerial grace.

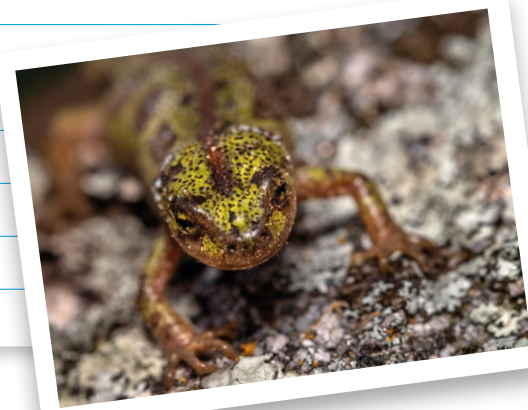
Mammals, more discreet, remain hidden in clearings and burrows. There are 58 species, including six endemic to the Iberian Peninsula, such as the Lusitanian vole, Cabrera's vole, the Iberian shrew and the Iberian hare. Their unseen presence is a reminder that the mountain is their refuge too.

Amphibians lend their voices to the water, with over nine species including the natterjack toad, the common midwife toad, the Iberian frog and the marbled newt. Their presence is a sign of a healthy, unspoilt ecosystem.

Reptiles such as the mountain lizard, the green lizard and the rock lizard come alive with warmth, most commonly found between 1,000 and 1,650 metres.

In the rivers live 17 species of fish, including the Iberian minnow, lamprey-like species and the Iberian barbel.

And in summer, winged invertebrates — Apollo, harlequin, large blue and Spanish festoon butterflies — colour the air, celebrating the brief, vibrant life of the forest.



Chapter III

Water

"Water never stops, never tires. It runs, it hides, it rises.

It is the mountain's liquid memory."

In the Guadarrama mountain, water is more than a resource: it is living history. Born on the summits as an icy sigh, it gathers into pools, sings through mountain streams and feeds the rivers that sustain millions of lives. Every current is a line in the natural poem this land continues to write.

Reservoirs: mirrors that hold life

Reservoirs are liquid landscapes where balance resides. Santillana Reservoir, with its neo-Gothic tower, forms the aquatic heart of the Manzanares. Navacerrada and Navalmedio lie hidden among mountains and forests, while La Jarosa Reservoir reflects both history and nature. Pedrezuela Reservoir, on the Guadalix River, is a true bird sanctuary. Valmayor, though beyond the comarca, beats as Madrid's vital water store. Each holds more than water — each holds the future.

The Guadarrama River: the river of sand

The Guadarrama does not spring from a single source, but from many. It threads through valleys and villages, gathers tributaries and eventually yields to the Tagus. Its course is dispersion and union, the backbone of the entire Sierra.

The Manzanares River: the river of Mayrit

Modest at its source, majestic as it reaches Madrid. The Manzanares is liquid history: understated, essential.



Chapter IV

Air

"The air in the Sierra de Guadarrama is not empty: it is a stage. Wings, songs and silences drift through it, telling the story of the land."

Protected air

The mountain's skies are full of wings because they are full of care. Much of this territory lies within the **National Park of the Guadarrama mountain** (since 2013), the **Regional Park of the Upper Manzanares Basin** (Spain's first, since 1985), and the **Biosphere Reserve** designated by UNESCO in 1993. **Special Areas of Conservation**, reservoirs, wetlands and even a **Natural Monument** ensure that the air here remains a refuge for dozens of bird species. It is within this protected setting that birdwatching finds its paradise: a place where each ecosystem hosts a different cast of birds, and every walk brings an unexpected encounter.

Birds of the high peaks

Above 2,000 metres, in places such as **La Maliciosa**, **Bola del Mundo** or **La Najarra**, the air grows colder, cleaner, thinner. Here you may glimpse remarkable species: **the wallcreeper**, a winged jewel that clings to rock faces like a miniature climber, flashing crimson as it flies; the **alpine accentor**, discreet dweller of snowy summits; the **red-billed chough**, painting the sky with impossible acrobatics; and the **citril finch**, singing among broom scrub and high meadows.

Birds of forests and dehesas

Descending into pine, oak and cork oak woods, the air fills with richer song. Here you'll find the mighty **black vulture**, one of the largest birds on the planet, spreading its three-metre wingspan above the forest canopy. The **golden eagle** reigns supreme, patrolling the skies in search of prey. Woodland birds such as the **red-backed shrike**, **chaffinch**, great spotted **woodpecker** and the delicate **firecrest** turn the air into a constant symphony.

Birds of wetlands and reservoirs

Near **reservoirs and wetlands**, the air changes its tune. Close to the water, aquatic birds fill it with calls and splashes: **the kingfisher**, a flash of colour skimming the surface;

the great crested grebe, performing courtship dances on the water; grey herons, great cormorants, black-headed gulls and mallards, moving endlessly between water and sky.

In places like **Santillana or La Jarosa**, the air smells of damp earth and sounds of wings beating over liquid mirrors.

Air that heals

Birdwatching is not just a leisure activity: it is an act of wellbeing. Science confirms that listening to birdsong reduces anxiety, sharpens attention and stimulates memory.

Watching their flight awakens a sense of wonder and deep connection with nature.

That's why walking through the mountain feels like therapy in motion: the air clears your mind, and the birds fill it with life.

The symbol of air: great birds of prey

If anything defines the mountain air, it is its great raptors. Watching a **griffon vulture** circling high above La Pedriza, or a **red kite** cutting the sky with its forked tail, is to feel that the air here truly belongs to them.

The Spanish imperial eagle, though scarce, also inhabits these skies. Its mere presence turns every sighting into a rare privilege.



Chapter V

Rock. La Pedriza

"La Pedriza is the Earth's memory, a block of magma turned into sculpture, a natural sanctuary where time became stone."

La Pedriza is a natural sanctuary carved by time itself. Its origins go back millions of years, when magma trapped beneath the Earth's surface cooled slowly, forming the vast granite mass we see today. Rain, wind, ice and sun then shaped this block into astonishing forms such as El Elefantito, El Camello and El Yelmo, among many others, giving the landscape a magical, almost mythical character.

Every corner of **La Pedriza** holds a geological and human story. Today, these stories can be uncovered at **the Visitor Centre in Manzanares El Real**, where the real journey into this "enchanted mountain" begins.

Discover its past and fascinating history by visiting:
El Rincón de La Pedriza, Manzanares El Real:
Opening hours: 9:00–15:00, Monday to Sunday
La Pedriza Visitor Centre

Camino de la Pedriza, s/n. Tel. 918 539 978

This unique setting captivates not only through its geology, but also through its natural and sporting significance. The Manzanares River rises here, flowing between granite and pinewoods and creating gems such as Charca Verde. La Pedriza is also the birthplace of climbing in the Madrid region and one of the world's leading destinations for friction climbing. With more than 150 years of history, its walls have witnessed legends, technical evolution and an enduring passion for the mountains.

