

THE MOUNTAINS OF VALCUVIA

We have reached a protected site where the beech woods and the wide flowery meadows prevail and where limestone rocks emerge on which we can observe the footprints left by karst processes! Due to its peculiarities, this area has been included in the sites of community interest (SCI), called SCI "Mountains of Valcuvia" or in Italian "Monti della Valcuvia" and identified by the code IT2010019. This SCI has a territorial extension of approximately 1600 hectares and extends between 200 and 1235 meters above sea level.

This protected naturalistic area has particular habitats for this area of Middle Verbano, such as modest beech woods, to which are added lime and maple trees, especially along the slopes of Mount Nudo. There are also oak woods, mostly concentrated in the sunniest areas of the Sasso del Ferro massif.

Furthermore, the area of Valbuseggia, in the locality of Vararo, hosts extensive meadows which are distinguished by the presence of rare floral species, such as the orchid, among low peat bogs and scree.

This peaceful protected environment offers the opportunity to discover the peculiar characteristics of the local fauna, represented by the black woodpecker, numerous species of birds of prey and the crayfish.

Moreover, the limestone formations of the area are important, similar to those typical of the nearby Mount San Martino.

The Valcuvia is crossed by the Margorabia stream, which arrives there after a modest journey and which is of great interest to speleologists and lovers of karst phenomena. The Margorabia stream originates from Mount Martica and, after having crossed the Valganna feeding the lakes of Ganna and Ghirla, with a considerable jump at Cunardo it descends into Valcuvia until it flows into Lake Maggiore together with the River Tresa, just south of Luino. The Margorabbia is a stream that carries large volumes of water thanks also to the fact that it crosses humid and karst areas. For this reason, various manufacturing activities such as hammers, mills and factories were born in the past along its path.

This stream has been mentioned over the centuries by many writers such as Piero Chiara in the story "When the Luino market began" and Carlo Amoretti in his "Journey from Milan to the three lakes" of 1814.

In the jump between Cunardo and Ferrera, at the "Pont Niv" the Margorabia has dug a notable rocky step and formed two caves which are separated by a siphon. This system generated the Orrido, a cave consisting of two underground paths of 180 and 120 meters with a single horizontal split entrance about twenty meters wide. Due to its access, which makes it similar to a passage to the Underworld, this ravine has also been called "Lair of the Dead".

Immediately upstream of the upper cave, the water of the stream forms a small artificial lake built for hydroelectric purposes -called Ferrera Valcuvia power station, and the beautiful Ferrera or Fermona waterfall as the locals call it more simply.

The ravine is of great interest from a speleological point of view. Inside there are stalactites, small streams and boulders that collapsed long ago. The Orrido can be reached from the provincial road that connects Cunardo with Ferrera, through a path that in a few minutes leads directly to the first tunnel. Visiting the Orrido is simple as far as the first gallery is concerned. You can access from the main entrance and safely walk the entire length of the cave in its portion away from the stream. The path is equipped with a ladder and a handrail chain. The cavity is very large and it is always possible to advance by walking without having to bend down or crawl. The path is accessible in any season as long as you are equipped with adequate footwear and a torch. The second cave is reserved for expert speleologists and requires professional accompaniment. In this cave it is almost never

possible to proceed by walking and it is necessary to crawl into the cavities. The path runs alongside the underground stream and it is therefore only possible if the upstream dam is closed.