

CONSEJERÍA DE AGRICULTURA, GANADERÍA,  
PESCA Y DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE



Visitor's Guide

# Visitor Centre Santa Rita



## The Sierras Subbéticas Natural Park

The Sierras Subbéticas Natural Park lies in the south of Córdoba province. The principal attractions in this protected area are its geological features, which include the Cueva de los Murciélagos, or Cave of the Bats, a veritable natural and archaeological jewel.

The vegetation in the Natural Park is typically Mediterranean, with holm oak and Portuguese oak woods distributed according to orientation. These woods shelter a rich variety of fauna, including both birds and mammals. The higher areas even provide a habitat for endemic species, whilst the vast rocky heights are the home of great birds of prey such as the golden eagle and the griffon vulture.

These lands have been inhabited since prehistoric times. Some villages here occupy the site of ancient Roman settlements, whilst others were founded during Moorish times. Many fascinating heritage sites are conserved from this rich history.



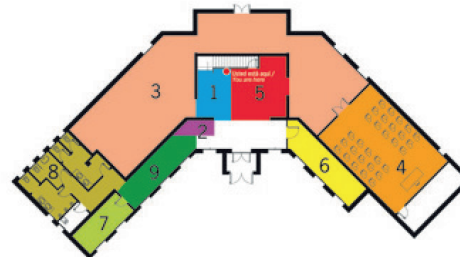
## The Santa Rita Visitor Centre

The Santa Rita Visitor Centre is the ideal place to learn more about the outstanding value of this protected area, its role as part of the Andalusia Network of Protected Natural Spaces (RENPA) and its importance to nature conservation in Andalusia.

Visitors to the centre will find: a central space containing the Natural Park reception area and shop, where they can obtain information and buy souvenirs from the Park; an information area devoted to enabling visitors to learn about the Network of Protected Natural Spaces (RENPA); and a small area where younger visitors can play and enjoy themselves.

Facilities at the Centre also include a series of museum exhibits of different types from which visitors can learn more about the geological features in the Natural Park and the plant, animal and fungi species that live in the region, as well as the rich historic and cultural heritage to be found here.

A visit to the centre, then, provides the ideal starting point for the adventure of discovering the many beauty spots in this Natural Park.



1	Recepción / Reception	5	Tienda del Parque Natural / Natural Park Shop
2	Zona RENPA / RENPA Area	6	renpanet
3	Exposición / Exhibition	7	Zona Infantil / Children's Area
4	Audiobusca	8	Aseos / Toilets
		9	Salas de actividades / Activity Rooms





## UNESCO Global Geopark much more than a Natural Park

UNESCO defines Geoparks as areas with a certain number of important geological sites or a series of geological elements that are particularly rare, beautiful or of outstanding scientific value, and which are representative of a region and its geological history.

On 19 September 2006, in Belfast (United Kingdom), UNESCO included the Sierras Subbéticas Natural Park in the Global and European Networks of Geoparks. With an area of approximately 32,160 hectares, the Natural Park is one of the most representative areas of the geology of the Cordillera Bética.



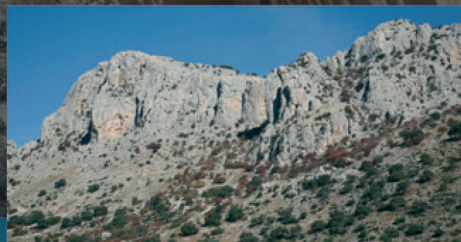
## Witnesses from the past



The Sierras Subbéticas Natural Park is recognised worldwide as one of the most interesting areas for studying ammonites, prehistoric sea creatures that are near relatives of squid and which inhabited the seas and oceans during the Mesozoic Era. They had a spiral shell divided into chambers filled with gas whose pressure they could regulate, just like the Nautilus snail today. Ammonites are amongst the fossil groups that enable the rocks containing them to be dated to the greatest precision.

## Limestone: the refuge of water

Part of the landscape in the Natural Park (particularly the northern areas) features what is known as "karst relief or modelling". This phenomenon is caused by the action of water on limestone. When it rains, the water reacts with carbon dioxide in the air, dissolving the calcium carbonate (calcite) of which limestone is composed.



## In the entrails of the Earth

Flowing through the cracks in the limestone, water creates underground formations such as caves, galleries and cavities. In them, this water, with its heavy load of calcite, forms stalactites and stalagmites. Notable examples in the Sierras Subbéticas Natural Park include the Simas del Esparragal caves in Sierra Alcaide and the Sima de Cabra cave, the latter made particularly outstanding by its great depth (116 metres).

The Cave of the Bats (Cueva de los Murciélagos) in Zuheros is impressively adorned by columns formed by percolating calcite-loaded water.





## A natural treasure

Forming a rich and varied patchwork of different habitats and environments, the Sierras Subbéticas Natural Park boasts a huge diversity of natural heritage. This protected natural area is the most interesting in the province in terms of botany, due to the high diversity of species unique in the world that grow here (many classified as endangered) and the existence of 29 endemic species (found only in specific areas). Particularly outstanding amongst these is the cat's ear Hypochaeris rutea.

Several endangered animal species also live in these mountains, which provide their last refuge in the province. Similarly, the Natural Park is home to interesting communities of fungi and truffles, their diversity favoured by the diversity of environments.



## Mediterranean forests: refuges for life

The Mediterranean forestland that originally occupied these mountains is now scarce, restricted to just a few specific areas. The different civilisations and cultures that occupied these lands destroyed it almost completely. However, there remain a few woods of great beauty and ecological importance. Some have been cleared and transformed into pastureland.

Holm woods, which are the most extensive type here, occupy both the sunny slopes and the stony, exposed north-facing mountainsides. On the other hand, Portuguese oak and maple woods are found in damp, shady areas. Mediterranean woodland provides a habitat for a large community of animals that, as in a block of flats, occupy all levels, all floors.



## Pinewoods: artificial forests

The pinewoods in this Natural Park are formed by Aleppo pine and are found exclusively in the Sierra de Rute mountains. Originally part of replanted forests, they are inhabited by certain species of fungi, animals and plants characteristic of this type of forest.



## Scrubland: a paradise of sensations

The Natural Park contains several important patches of scrubland formed by bushes adapted to climate and pasturing. These scrublands are dominated by larger shrubs such as retama, thorns, maple, lentisk and juniper, and by smaller plants such as rosemary, thyme, rockrose and gorse. Particularly interesting amongst these, due to their adaptation to the mountain peaks and their restricted distribution, is the mountain broom *Cytisus galianoi*, thorny, cushion-shaped shrubs.



## Pastureland: the domain of livestock

A huge variety of plants, providing food for herbivores both wild and domestic, grow in the pastures here. Many species of bulbous plants, amongst which the most outstanding is the orchid, are frequently found in pastureland and in clearings amongst the scrub.

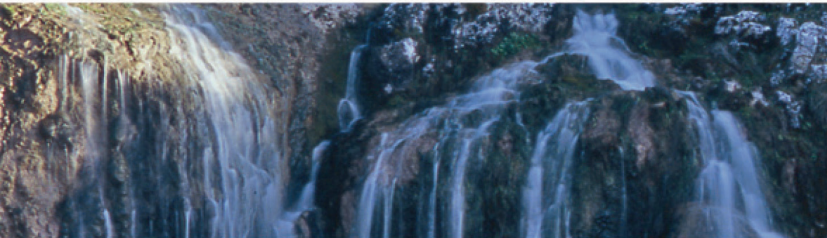




## Rivers and streams: life-giving arteries

Along the banks of rivers and streams here grow the so-called riparian galleries, tunnels formed by deciduous trees. Where these galleries are absent, their place is taken by shrubs, beside which grow rushes and reeds. It is also possible to observe various types of fern here, including horsetail (*Equisetum giganteum*), used in traditional medicine as a diuretic, as well as mint, wild celery and other plants of ethnological interest.

Several animal species of great natural interest live in the rivers and streams in the Natural Park. Exemplars of the autochthonous river crab, an endangered species, can still be found here, for example. Cabrera's shrew is another species with great biogeographic importance, as the Natural Park marks the southernmost point in its world distribution.



## Crags: survival amongst the rocks

There are in the mountains of the Natural Park many cuts and rocky areas where plants of enormous interest thrive. At the foot of such crags are outstanding stony landscapes characterised by instability and mobility, such as screes and boulder-strewn areas.

Moreover, peregrine falcons and other birds of prey nest in the high rocks and crags of the Natural Park.



## Olive groves: forests of liquid gold

Much of the land formerly occupied by holm oak and wild olive forests is now covered in olive fields. Olive farming provides a good balance between biodiversity and economic profitability. Various species of birds nest in the olive trees here, whilst the fruit also provides food for small migratory birds during the winter.

A community of fungi also finds a habitat in the olive fields, some of them appreciated for food (*Morchela conica*), though others are poisonous (*Omphalotus olearius*).



## Humans in the Natural Park

The landscape we find in the Natural Park today clearly reflects the marks left by different cultures and civilisations that have settled here over the course of history. These distinctive marks can be seen in the local architecture, cuisine, festivities, crafts and the different lifestyles typical of the region.







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