



A large part of the region of Achaia is covered by hills and mountains accompanied by legends, stories, myths, tradition and rich history, as they have been staring points of uncompromising residents wanting to see Greece free. Either during Turkish occupation or during German occupation those mountains provided shelter to the passion of Achaioi and their desire to free their land. In any case, Achaia's mountains are a superb "mosaic" of flora and fauna and a field of expression of a great architecture.

At eastern Achaia sierra of **Helmos (Aroania mountain)** is situated. Mountain Helms covers the greater part of Akrata, Kalavryta and Lefkasio municipalities and includes some of the highest peaks of the prefecture, such as

Psili Korfi

(2355m.),

Neraidorachi

(2341m.), Prophet Ilias or

Kokkinovrachos

(2282m.) and

Aetorachi

(2252m.). At the center of the mountain Kalavryta Ski center is situated, whereas at

Neraidorachi peak the visitor will see the famous "Aristarchos" telescope. Also, part of the wider Helmos area, is the

Vouraikos canyon

with the unique (in Greece) rack railway.

River Krathis

springs originate from the high peaks of Helmos and runs Akrata municipality from south to north.

Around Helmos there are many lower mountains such as **Skepasto** at the north of Kalavryta city, **Rouskio** at the border of Kalavryta and Diakopto,

Klokos

and

Marmati

situated at the mountainous areas of Aigio and Aigeira. At the west of Kalavryta mount

Erymanthos

and

Kallifono

(1996m.) are placed. The peaks of Erymanthos are

Mougila

(2169m.) and

Lepida

(1894m.) where the springs of

river Selinountas

originate at Vlasia region. The river crosses Krania hill and after the Monastery of Makelaria, enters the the canyon that is formed by mountains Klokos east and Mpampas west. Mountain

Mpampas

(1613m.), at the border of Aigio city and Leontio municipality is the east ending of Panachaiko mountain.

Natural Environment **FLORA** The greatest part of the region's mountains is made of limestone, featuring pointed peaks, steep slopes, gorges as well as hospitable plateaus that have been populated since primeval times. In the diversity of shapes of this mountainous landscape the polychromy of the flora is added. Local climatic variations allow the vegetation to develop in various forms, especially in forests that are irrigated by frequent rainfall and snow.

fortunately, the upland part of eastern Achaia still hosts rich forests. The commonest and best known forest species is the Grecian fir (*Abies Cephallonica*) that forms pure stands in the greatest part of the region. However, there is also the Austrian pine (*Pinus nigra*), Hungarian oak (*Quercus frainetto*), and Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*). All these species form their own stands or even complete forests (Kanisika oak forest). Beautiful mixed forests spread especially to the east along the borders with Prefecture of Corinthos, such as the surrounding Tsivlos lake and continuing on along the valley of Krathis.

Many more species of woody plants are to be found in forests or take part in other types of vegetation, such as maquis, riverside galleries or nice-looking cultivations of walnuts, around Kalavryta and Kleitoria. The remaining species, the so-called herbaceous, constitute the major part of the vegetation. The study of this apparent chaos discourages or leaves most people indifferent. But no one can be left unmoved by the full blooming sight offered by e.g. the gorge of Vouraikos in spring.

The majority of the rare plants - including local endemic species- are found on Helmos, especially at the higher elevations. The catalogue of flora on Helmos includes at least 1000 species. Of these, 127 are endemic to Greece while 14 exclusively endemic at Helmos.

Whoever manages to reach the

Waters of Styx

will be able to watch spring in action, as the snow begins to retreat and enjoy the some of the following rare and beautiful species: *Aquilegia ottonis*, *Geranium asphodeloides*, *Globuria stygia*, *Pinguicula hirtiflora*, *Saxifraga sibthorpianae* as well as asiatic *Arnebia densiflora* and *Solenanthes stamineus*, for which Helmos is one of the few sites where they appear on European soil. The spectacular flower of *Aquilegia ottonis* has been selected as the emblem of the Management Agency established in 2001 for the protection of Helmos-Vouraikos region. Easier to see plants which grow in forests at a lower level, are the spring cyclamens (*Cyclamen repandum*) and the tulips (*Tulipa orphanidea*) that blossom in April, while many types of orchids sprout from bulbs inside the Vouraikos gorge, such as the rare *Orchis delphinensis*.

Besides true plants, fungi are also represented through a large variety that includes several edible types. Examples from the forests of Souvardo are the oyster mushroom (*Pleurotus ostreatus*) and *Pleurotus eryngii*, while the Zarouchla forests include the *Amanita caesarea*, *Cantharellus cibarius*, *Lactarius deliciosus* and other dangerous species such as *Amanita muscaria* and *A. Pantherina*. The northern section of **Erymanthos** that forms part of the region (Mouggila and Lepida peaks) can be grouped together with the neighboring ranges of Kallifonian Treis Gynekes, at least with respect to botany. Firs form vigorous pure forests, such as those around **Vlasia**.

Above the edges of these forests under the peaks we see clumps of the rare stinking juniper. Even though the study of the flora in Erymanthos is still incomplete, quite a few species endemic to Greece are also found there, including the renowned aromatic mountain tea (*Sideritis clandestina* subsp. *Peloponnesiaca*).

Fir-covered

Barbas

and

Rakita

plateau with its lake are part of the Panachaiko range. Opposite them lies Klokos, which together comprise an area which the ancients called mountains of Keryneia.

FAUNA

The above mentioned plant world provides shelter and food to a wildlife that includes quite a few protected species, such as the otter (*Lutra lutra*). It dives in the rivers of the region searching for crabs, frogs and especially fish such as the local forms of barbel (*Barbus peloponnesius*) and chub (*Squalius Peloponnensis*). Other carnivorous mammals are the rare wildcat, the fox, the badger, the stone marten and the weasel.

The biggest mammals found in the region is the wild boar that has been reintroduced in recent years. The only other herbivore of significant size is the hare, which is also a popular game animal.

Among the smaller and less well known mammals, there is an interesting variety of bats, like the ones finding refuge in the caves of Kastria, creating a mixed colony of five species (horseshoe and mouse-eared bats).

Rare **birds** of prey are also to be seen, such as the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and the peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*). In the area there have been observed about 150 species of birds, 2/3 of which nest here. Many of the birds are naturally attached to forests such as for example four woodpecker species, the woodpigeon, the blackbird, the mistle thrush, thrush, the chaffinch, the robin, or the coal tit and the crossbill that are found exclusively in coniferous forests. Of the highland species, the ones that stand out are the alpine accentor (*Prunella collaris*), the rock thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*) and the horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris*). It walks under the surface of the cold water, holding on to rocks with its claws while searching for insect larvae. Its prey requires clean waters and the presence of the dipper may be used as a bio-indicator.

A large variety of reptiles and amphibians complement the fauna. They are by their nature active only during the warm periods and when snow covers large areas, they survive by hibernating in safe places. This largely misunderstood group of animals also includes lizards endemic to the Peloponnese, such as the *Podarcis peloponnesiaca*, which is quite common throughout the region. The alpine newt (*Triturus alpestris*), is a rare for the Peloponnese amphibian found in Rakita and Klokos, forming two small isolated populations, among the southernmost in Europe.

Singularities in the local fauna should also be looked for in the little known microcosm of the invertebrates. Some of the rarest

butterflies in Greece can be found in summer at the higher altitudes of Helmos. Certain little blues of the Lycaenidae family belong to Asiatic species, which in the cases of *Agrodiaetus coelestinus*, *Agrodiaetus Iphigenia* and *Turanana panagaea* exist here in a few other sites in the highlands of the Peloponnese, making it their only foothold on European land. *Cyaniris Helena*, which is related to the aforementioned, is a species endemic to the Peloponnese and restricted worldwide only to Helmos and Taygetos. In addition, the pastures high up on Erymanthos is possibly the only place in the Peloponnese where the spectacular *Parnassius Apollo* butterfly is to be seen.