

With open eyes

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WITH OPEN EYES

(F. Wenger)

YOU CANNOT speak about hiking in the mountains without mentioning the flowers, the animals, the crystals and fossils and rocks. The edelweiss, or lions foot, and the chamois have become symbols of the mountains and the marmot, the gentianella, the eagle and the ibex have always thrilled the hikers. Each year more and more people are coming to these mountains. They come not only to strengthen their legs and to exercise their heart, but for other, quite specific reasons:

To see the flowers

They come to see the flowers perhaps, the beautiful miracles of nature, struggling for survival among the rocks and cliffs, sometimes covering vast areas, and strong enough to push through the snow. Some of them, the glacier ranunculus — a species of the buttercup — of the Matterhorn, climb to a height of over 13,500 feet!

It is of course a well known fact that you will pass through a number of quite distinctive regions of plants, trees and flowers as you climb to the top of a mountain, or make your way to the saddle of a pass. Botanists and naturalists have divided these regions into the following zones:

The colline zone reaches to the upper limit of the vine culture. Some of the grapes grow at an astonishing height, up to 3600 feet. Those of Visperterminen in the canton of Valais are the "highest" in Europe.

The main feature of the second zone, **the montane zone**, are the Beech, Oak and Chestnut forests. The upper limit of the deciduous woods at a height of about 5600 feet is also the beginning of the third, **the subalpine zone**. This region is generally divided again: the zone that reaches to the limit of the coniferous woods and the so-called fighting zone, which reaches up to almost 8000 feet in the Alps. The fighting zone lies between the forest limit and the tree limit, which, by the way, is not only caused by the low temperatures but by the short growing season and the lack of soil. Here in this zone you will find the monarchs of the mountains, the rugged, wind-torn trees, often resembling mere skeletons but always with one or two green branches. Sometimes the forest still pushes higher and the trees are dwarfed, one hundred years old and only three feet high. To these belongs the Alpine rhododendron.

The Alpine zone is the region of the mountain pine, followed by the dwarf shrubs and then by the Alpine meadows, and reaches from 5600 to 9200 feet. It is here where you will find that incomparable splendour of the alpine flowers; the anemones, gentias, bluebells, asters, primroses and many, many more.

The snow zone, next and last in line, lies above the climatic snow line and is the region of the pioneer-grass-heath communities, the cushion plants and the cryptograms. There are still more than 200 different plants in this zone and nine of them climb to a height of over 13,000 feet.

One of the best works on the subjects of Alpine flowers is surely the book "Bergblumen" (Mountain flowers) by Meierhofer/Baumberger. The Swiss Federation for the Preservation of Nature wrote about it: "Perhaps it takes first of all the right guidance to even see and understand the beauty and the wonder of the Alpine flowers. And in this the book is on the right road. Whoever looks at the close-to-life pictures in the quiet of his home, whoever reads the accompanying words on the life of the flowers and begins to understand them and the role they play in the whole of nature, will never again want to pick them to bring home where they only wilt. He will enjoy them where they are". And that is the key to the full enjoyment of Alpine flowers.

To see the animals

Flowers and plants are but one part of the Alpine regions. Amongst them and often hiding there are the animals. They too, help to lure the visitor to this world of forest, rocks and Alpine meadows. It sometimes takes a good deal of patience, mind you, to see them, but when you do it will be reward enough. It is true, and sad at the same time, that you will no longer find the wolf and lynx and bear in the Alps, even though some of the country would surely be wild enough to harbour them. But man, being what he is, has killed those long ago. There are others, however, perhaps not as wild but equally beautiful. You may see, if you are lucky, the varying hare, often called the snow hare, living at 4500 to 9000 feet. He, like the white grouse or snow hen,, changes to a white coat in the winter and both represent a true relic of the Ice Age, left behind on an "island", the Alps, as the glaciers retreated.

The beasts of prey are also represented, easily take fright and are hard to observe. It takes a good deal of time, and knowledge of the animal to see the fox, the weasel or the stoat and badger. But there is one animal that almost any hiker knows, the marmot. Often resembling a little man, it grows to two feet tall and lives among the piles of rocks and alpine meadows. You have to get up early to observe other species, the ibex, chamois or lower down, the roe deer and, in a few places, the red deer; in the fall the welcome prey of the local hunter.

Of special beauty are the birds. There are the rock partridge, the ever present alpine chough, the water pippit, the wall creeper and the snow finch, all "left over" from the Ice Age. There are more, many more and if you are especially lucky you might even surprise a group of heath cocks some fine spring morning, going

through the ritual of their mating dance. If you do, you will not forget it and will agree that a little time and a few sore muscles were well worth the trouble.

To see the rocks

They call them rock-hounds in Canada, that special breed of hikers who are forever looking for beautiful stones and rock crystals. Here they call the crystal hunters Strahler. They may be called a dozen names, but they have one thing in common, their love for rocks and minerals. They all spend their free time hiking on the slopes gathering specimen, hammering, looking. They pack them down come night, and spread them on the work bench to cut and clean and polish and to throw most of them out. When they meet, they talk of quartz, almandite, andalusite, kyanite, brookite and dolomite. Of iron roses and ilmenite roses, of quartz again and of Tessin habit and sceptre habit and hornblende. In short — they got the bug. And watch it, it's catching!

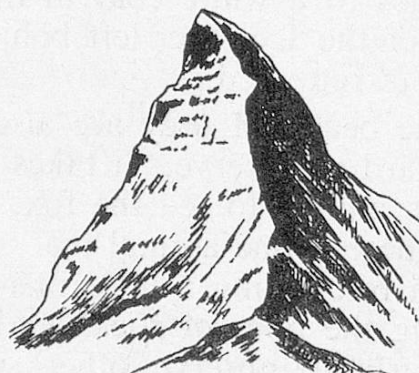
Equally catching perhaps is fossil hunting. And with good reason. For where else can you get a look at life as it was 500,000,000 and even 1,000,000,000 years ago? It is the fossils which reveal the concepts of a continuity of life on our earth, the patterns that have produced the plants and animals of past geological ages and are seen alive in our own brief passage of time, if you only go with open eyes.

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