



WoodPACA grew from a personal journey. After an illness, I came to **Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur (PACA)** seeking a change of lifestyle and a chance to reconnect with the passion for nature I had known in my youth.

As I explored the region’s wildlife and remarkably varied landscapes, I began to understand PACA as an ecological journey from the Mediterranean Sea to the high Alps. I also found that much of the knowledge needed to make sense of that journey was fragmented, specialised and difficult to access in English.

WoodPACA was created as the **gateway** I had been looking for: not a catalogue of species or sites, but a way to explain how geology, altitude, climate, water and land use create habitats and how those habitats determine which plants and animals occur.

PACA is a connected ecological gradient

As I travelled through PACA, what first appeared to be a collection of separate natural places gradually revealed itself as an unusually compressed and connected sequence of environments. Within one region, the landscape runs from submarine canyons around 2,000 metres below sea level to the 4,102-metre Barre des Écrins, passing through marine habitats, islands, rocky and sandy coasts, wetlands, plains, Mediterranean forests, limestone and crystalline massifs, river valleys, Prealps, montane forests and alpine peaks..

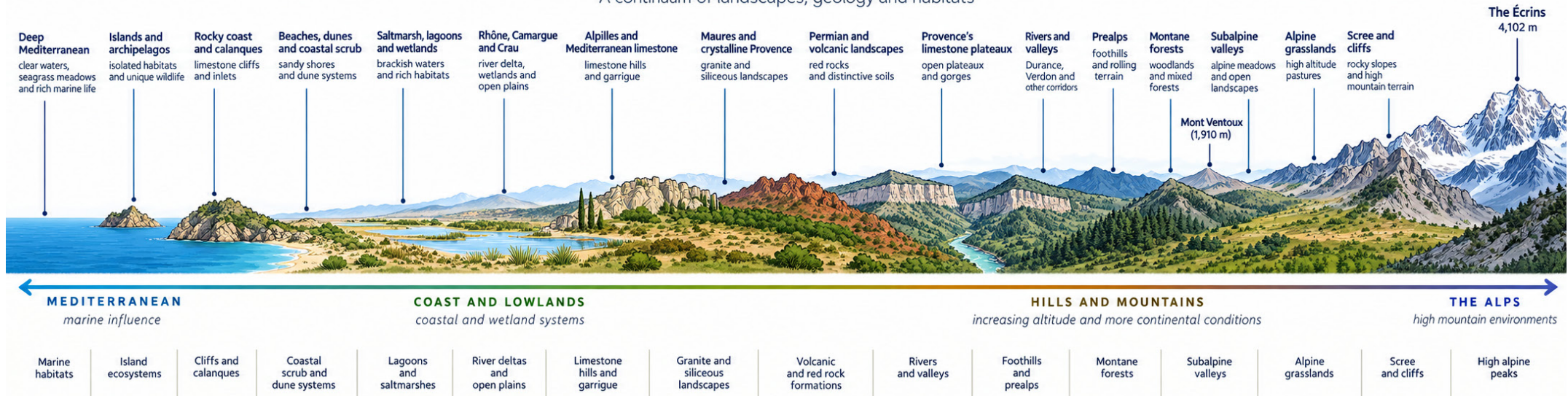
This gradient produces sharp ecological contrasts over short distances:

- Offshore habitats include **Posidonia meadows, coralligenous communities, caves, rocky seabeds and deep canyons**, supporting marine mammals, turtles, seabirds, fish, rays and invertebrates.
- **The islands** add another dimension to this transition. Lérins, Frioul and Riou, Port-Cros, Porquerolles and Le Levant form distinct ecological systems shaped by isolation, geology, salt exposure, shallow soils, freshwater availability and centuries of human use. Their habitats range from Mediterranean pine and holm-oak woodland and maquis to exposed rocky shores, wetlands, cultivated landscapes and shallow marine habitats. Around them, Posidonia meadows, rocky reefs and deeper waters extend the ecological gradient beyond the shoreline.
- The **shoreline** runs from the Italian border to the Rhône Delta, changing markedly along the way: **the famous Riviera, the red volcanic rocks the Estérel, the chic Côte d'Azur and the St Tropez Penninsula**, the **limestone Calanques around Marseille**, and finally the **low-lying delta** of the Camargue..
- Coastal lagoons, salt pans, mudflats and reedbeds form major migration and wintering areas; the **Camargue** is used by approximately **300 bird species**.
- Immediately inland, the dry, stony **Crau** is about **57,000 hectares** it supports steppe specialists such as Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and the Crau Grasshopper, in striking contrast with nearby wetlands and irrigated meadows.
- **Central Provence** is dominated by limestone landscapes containing cliffs, karst, caves, scree, garrigue and Mediterranean woodland. Small differences in exposure, moisture and geology can create very different microhabitats only kilometres apart.
- The **Massif des Maures and Tanneron** form an important exception: ancient crystalline rocks, roughly **350 million years old**, produce acidic soils and characteristic cork-oak woodland, chestnut, maquis and heath. The neighbouring **Permian depression** and the red volcanic rhyolites of the **Estérel** add further geological and biological variation.
- Rivers including the **Durance, Verdon, Var, Bléone, Asse** and **Ubaye** are treated as ecological corridors rather than simply waterways. The Durance provides a natural north-south spine, linking alpine landscapes with warmer foothills, Provence and the Rhône basin.
- The Prealps are overlap zones rather than merely lower mountains. **The Préalpes d'Azur**, extending from roughly **300 to 1,800 metres** and containing more than **2,000 recorded plant species**, combine Mediterranean and alpine influences.
- **Mont Ventoux**, at **1,910 metres**, illustrates a vertical ecological journey from Mediterranean woodland through beech, fir and mountain pine to subalpine and summit vegetation, with a temperature difference of almost **10°C** across its elevation range.
- At the alpine end, the **Écrins** contain around **150 peaks above 3,000 metres**, while the Mercantour combines strong Mediterranean and alpine influences and supports more than **2,000 plant species**.
High-altitude habitats support specialised wildlife including ibex, chamois, marmots, ptarmigan, Golden Eagle and Bearded Vulture.

The PACA Ecological Gradient

From the Mediterranean Sea to the Écrins (4,102 m)

A continuum of landscapes, geology and habitats



Departments as the visitor's first point of discovery

I decided that the homepage should begin with PACA's departments because they offer visitors the most recognisable starting point. Someone travelling to France is likely to know the destination they are visiting, Nice, for example, which is in the Alpes-Maritimes department (06). Starting with that destination makes discovery intuitive: the visitor first identifies the relevant department, then explores the landscapes and protected areas within it.

The departments therefore provide the website's practical navigation. From a department page, visitors can explore its landscapes, habitats and protected areas, then discover where those landscapes continue into neighbouring departments. Some protected areas and natural landscapes cross departmental boundaries, so a visitor exploring one area may naturally move into another department as part of the same excursion. WoodPACA can use those connections to help visitors discover more of the region without losing the sense of where they are starting from.

This became the organising principle for WoodPACA: start with the visitor's destination, then follow the landscape beyond it.

The problem WoodPACA intended to solve

As my interest deepened, I discovered that PACA does not lack natural-history knowledge. Extensive information is held by national and regional parks, reserves, LPO groups, conservation bodies, scientific databases, botanical conservatories, local associations, monitoring programmes and specialist publications.

What I struggled with was fragmentation and accessibility. The information was spread across many organisations and websites, was often highly specialised, and was predominantly in French. As an English-speaking resident trying to understand the region as a whole, I found that each question led to more searching, translation and cross-referencing. That experience showed me the need for a clear English-language starting point that could connect the pieces without replacing the expertise behind them.

I therefore created WoodPACA with a deliberately focused role:

- provide a coherent English-language starting point;
- connect species to the habitats and landscapes that explain their distribution;
- show how protected areas fit into the wider ecological picture;
- retain French place names, terminology and common names where appropriate;
- use accepted scientific names;
- work from original French sources rather than recycled English descriptions;
- direct readers towards specialist organisations and local expertise.

It is explicitly not intended to replace conservation organisations, compete with scientific databases or claim specialist authority. Its value lies in connecting existing knowledge and making the regional landscape understandable.

Start planning your next Provençal wildlife adventure.

