

A mosaic OF ENVIRONMENTS

The river, and its fast-flowing and sometimes turbulent water, shapes the natural environments along its valley. And each of these environments boasts specific landscapes and species for visitors to discover, as well as "nomads", such as certain species of dragonfly. Higher up, in the Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert hills, the Salzmann's pine is king.



1 The kingfisher, a tiny blue flash above the river.



2 The blue crab, not to be confused with the invasive Chinese mitten crab.



3 The long-fingered bat: a flying ace, it skims the water surface as it hunts insects.



4 Of all types of aquatic larvae, dragonfly larvae are among the most predatory.



5 The 7-centimetre-long Hérault chub, a very rare species, lives beneath stones in the tributaries of the River Hérault (the Buèges, the Vis, etc). Its presence is a bio-indicator of the water quality.

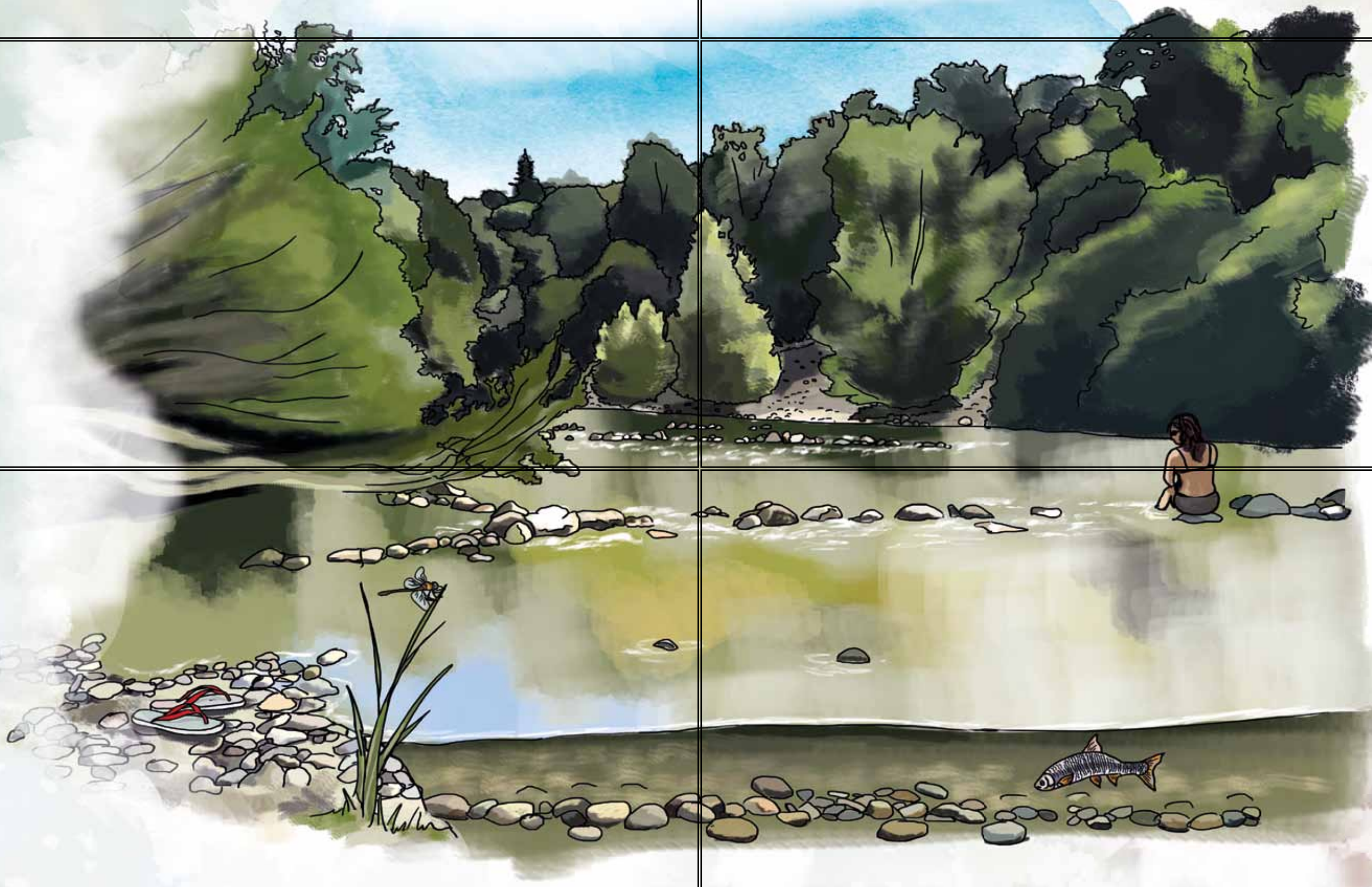


6 The narrow-leaved ash, whose flexible wood is used for tool handles.

THE RIVER AND ITS RIPARIAN

... sources of life, regulated by nature and all its vagaries. River-dwelling plants and animals enjoy the benefits of the water, but also need to be able to adapt: to the strength of the current (a destructive force during floods); to low water periods (in summer, when water becomes

scarcer!). At the water's edge, taking advantage of the moisture of the river water, a riverside forest lines the bank: the riparian forest. It serves several useful purposes: preventing soil erosion along the riverbanks and keeping them cool; creating a biological corridor, stopping-off point and feeding and living area; and reducing the severity of floods by widening the river channel.



THE ORGANISATION OF ENVIRONMENTS IN RELATION TO THE AVAILABILITY OF WATER

On the sun-exposed limestone hillsides, where water penetrates quickly, plants struggle... To survive the summer drought, they grow tough leaves, which are often shiny and fragrant or sometimes merely resemble scales or needles. Some retain their leaves for at least two consecutive years. Closer to the river, the water is nearer to the land surface and the vegetation contrasts with the neighbouring garrigue (scrubland): the leaves are bigger and more tender and fall in autumn...



We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry



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1 The short-toed eagle, scourge of snakes.



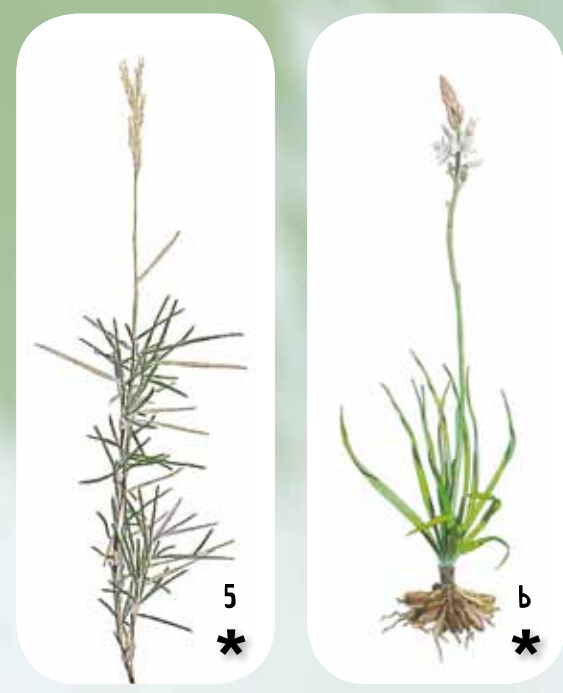
2 The holm oak, king of the Mediterranean forests.



3 The pronged clubtail (dragonfly) goes hunting in the garrigue, away from the river.



4 The ocellated lizard, France's biggest lizard!



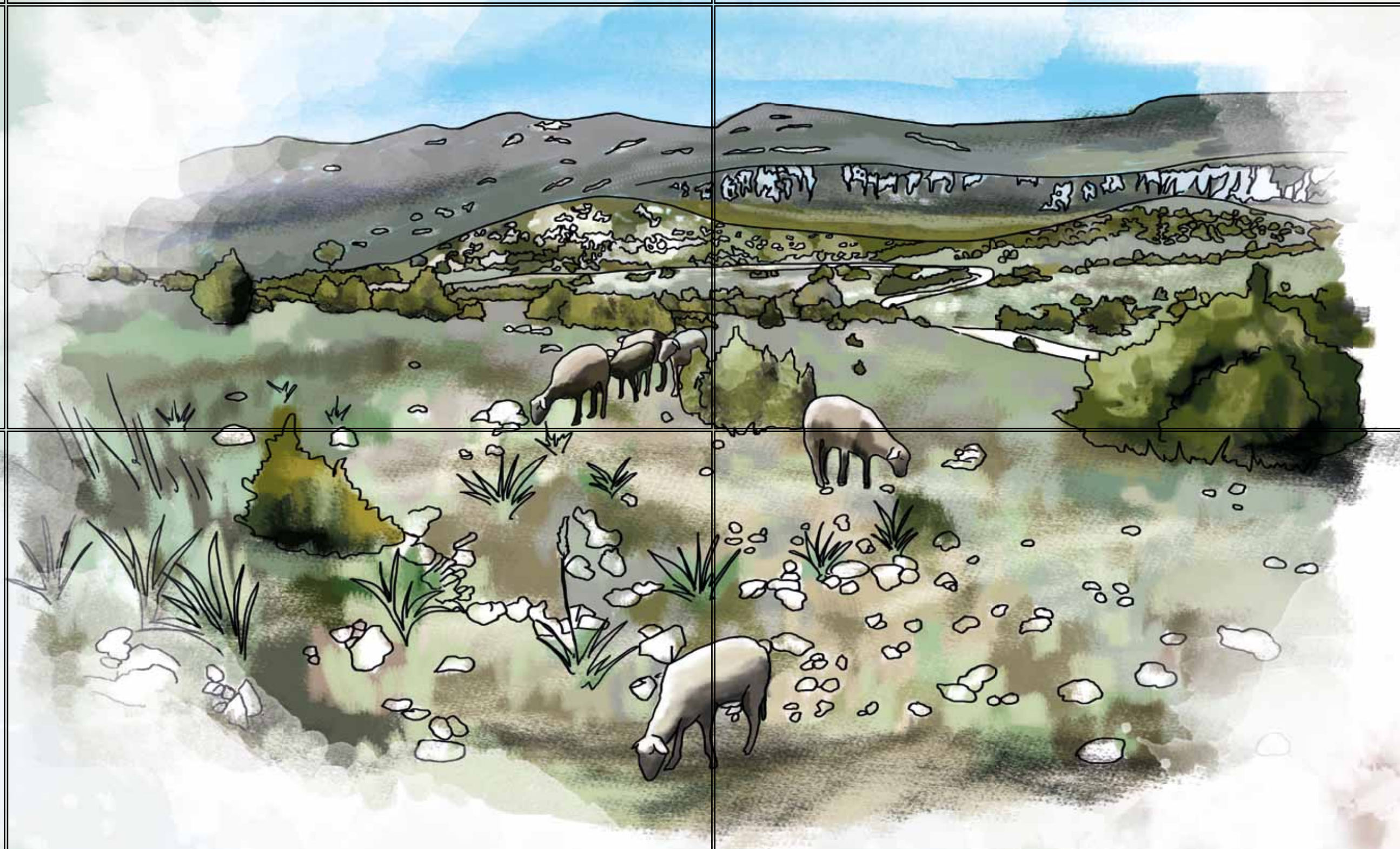
5 a Brachypodium retusum, also known as sheep grass or "baouque".

b Asphodelus, a magnificent member of the lily family, stoically withstands drought and other extreme conditions thanks to its abundant tuberous roots.

THE GARRIGUE

Here, the garrigues overlook the river. The vegetation has evergreen foliage and roots which penetrate the fractures in the limestone. It survives on a very small quantity of water.

The landscape was shaped by grazing sheep, now a rare sight, as are woodcutters and charcoal-burners. The small, sparse shrubs are replaced by trees and the garrigue becomes a Mediterranean oak forest.



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6 The Salzmann's pine, the only black pine native to continental Europe.



1 The long and elegant Aesculapian snake is an excellent climber which readily climbs trees to feed on nestlings.



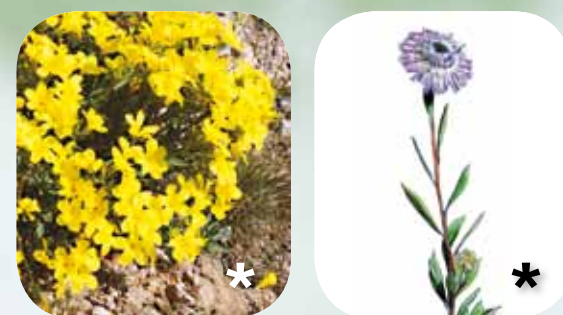
3 The yellow Ophrys orchid, with its 1 to 6 flowers, grows on dry grasslands and in open limestone woodland.



4 Erica multiflora, a common Mediterranean large heather with pink flowers, thrives in dolomitic limestone soils.



5 The European free-tailed bat, typically found in the Mediterranean, roosts in narrow fissures and hunts over the forests.



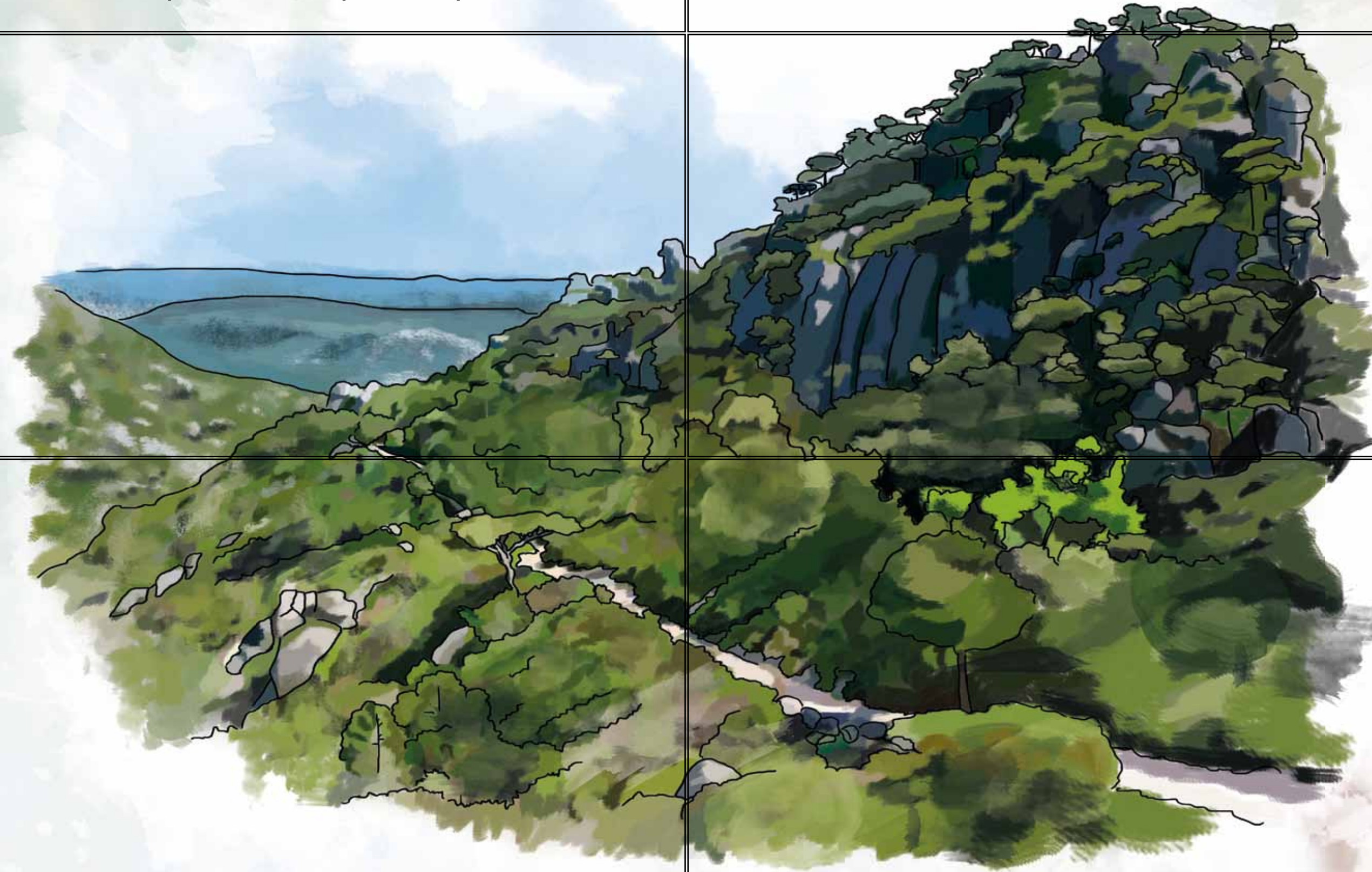
2 The linaceae and the Alypo globe daisy like dolomitic soils.

THE ST-GUILHEM HILLS AND

The Salzmann's pine, a native black pine, only exists in a few areas in the South of France. The forest in the St-Guilhem hills is the most extensive. It is an exceptionally important habitat which is recognised and protected by the European Union. Up on the poor dolomitic

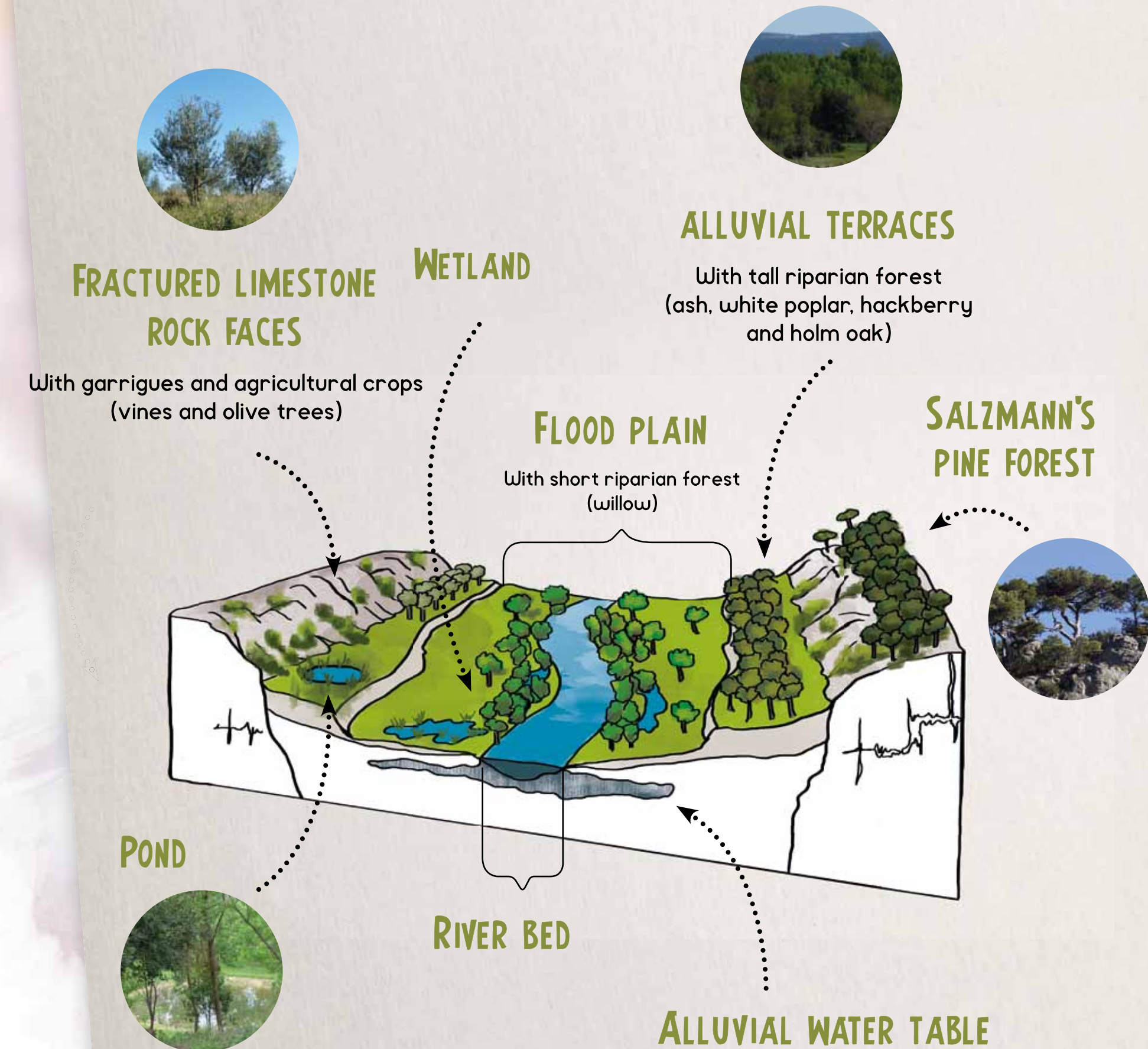
THE SALZMANN'S PINE FOREST

soils of the Saint-Guilhem hills, the Salzmann's pine clings to the rocks like a bonsai tree thanks to its ability to withstand drought. It faces the twin threat of fire and hybridisation with its close cousin, the Austrian black pine.



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