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Wildlife and Fauna of Cyprus

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Introduction

Cyprus, situated at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa, is a land shaped by both its strategic location and remarkable natural diversity. Despite its relatively modest size, the island harbors a striking array of ecosystems that foster an abundance of unique flora and fauna. Its mountainous heart, fertile valleys, sun-drenched coasts, and enigmatic wetlands together paint a landscape of continuous ecological intrigue. For naturalists, scholars, and casual observers alike, Cyprus offers both the familiar and the extraordinary, encapsulated in its rich wildlife heritage.

The island's biogeographical history, marked by isolation and a complex geological past, has resulted in the emergence of many endemic species—plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth. Dense coniferous forests in the Troodos Mountains, aromatic maquis and garrigue in its lowlands, rare peat grasslands, and vibrant salt lakes each serve as specialized habitats supporting this exceptional level of biodiversity. The intricate tapestry of Cyprus's natural environment has made it not just a cradle of endemism but also an important stopover for millions of migratory birds journeying between continents.

However, Cyprus's wealth of wildlife is not immune to the forces of change and the pressures of modernity. Urbanization, agricultural intensification, pollution, the introduction of invasive species, and the looming specter of climate change collectively threaten habitats and species. The Mediterranean Monk Seal seeks refuge in hidden coves; endangered sea turtles nest perilously on its beaches; and the illustrious Cyprus Mouflon navigates shrinking forest domains, all testaments to both the island's uniqueness and its vulnerability.

Yet, alongside these challenges, there exists a robust movement to document, understand, and protect Cyprus's natural treasures. National parks and a network of EU-protected areas, progressive conservation programs, and the passionate involvement of non-governmental organizations underscore efforts to mitigate the loss of biodiversity. Through scientific research, community engagement, and cross-sectoral policy development, Cyprus is working to secure a harmonious coexistence of human activity and thriving ecosystems.

This book, *Wildlife and Fauna of Cyprus: A Guide to the Wildlife and Fauna of Cyprus*, endeavors to provide a comprehensive exploration of the island's extraordinary biodiversity. It guides the reader through the mosaic of Cypriot habitats, delves into the lives of its endemic and migratory species, examines the ecological pressures they face, and introduces the ongoing conservation efforts meant to safeguard this natural legacy.

Whether you are a student, traveler, conservationist, or someone with a keen appreciation for the wild, this volume invites you on a journey across one of the Mediterranean's most fascinating and ecologically significant islands. Through its pages, we hope to inspire a deeper understanding—and a stronger commitment—to the study and preservation of Cyprus's wildlife for generations to come.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Island's Canvas - Geography and Climate

Nestled in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, like a stepping stone between continents, lies the island of Cyprus. It holds a rather remarkable geographical position, sitting south of Turkey, west of Syria, and a comfortable distance northwest of Egypt and southeast of mainland Greece. This unique placement, at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, has profoundly influenced not just its history and culture, but also the intricate tapestry of its natural world.

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, surpassed only by Sicily and Sardinia. Its total area is approximately 9,251 square kilometers, a modest size that nonetheless contains a surprising diversity of landscapes, packed closely together. Traveling across the island, one can quickly transition from sun-drenched coastlines to rugged mountain peaks, and through fertile plains in between.

The topography of Cyprus is largely defined by two prominent mountain ranges and a wide plain situated between them. Dominating the southern and western parts of the island is the sprawling Troodos massif. This rugged range covers roughly half of Cyprus's land area and is its most conspicuous geological feature.

The Troodos Mountains stretch from near the northwest coast almost to Larnaca Bay in the east, though their main bulk lies in the southwest. Formed largely of igneous rock, they are a complex system of peaks, subordinate ranges, and spurs dissected by steep-sided valleys. The highest point on the entire island, Mount Olympus (also known as Chionistra), proudly stands within the Troodos range, reaching an elevation of 1,952 meters (6,404 feet). These mountains are a significant ecological refuge and a crucial water catchment area for the island.

Along the northern coastline runs the narrower Kyrenia Range, also known as Pentadaktylos, meaning "five-fingered" in Greek, owing to a distinctive peak. This range is a limestone ridge that rises abruptly from the northern coastal plain. While not as high as the Troodos, its jagged and seemingly inaccessible slopes offer a dramatic backdrop to the northern coast. The Kyrenia Range extends for about 100 miles (160 km) and continues eastward into the elongated Karpas Peninsula, which points towards Asia Minor. Geologically, Cyprus is considered part of the Cyprus Arc, connected to the Anatolian Peninsula.

Between these two mountain systems lies the Mesaoria plain. The name "Mesaoria" fittingly means "between the mountains" in Greek. This broad, flat, and low-lying plain

stretches across the central part of the island, from Morphou Bay in the west to Famagusta Bay in the east. Historically, the Mesaoria was heavily forested, but much of this woodland was cleared centuries ago. Today, it is primarily the agricultural heartland of Cyprus, though its productivity relies heavily on winter rainfall and irrigation. Nicosia, the capital city, is situated within this central plain.

The coastline of Cyprus, extending for approximately 648 kilometers (400 miles), presents a varied character. The northern coast tends to be more indented and rocky with numerous coves, while the southern and eastern coasts feature long, sandy beaches. These coastal areas, where the land meets the sea, are vital ecological zones, but also face significant pressures from human development.

The island's rivers are a network of watercourses that primarily originate in the Troodos Mountains. Rivers like the Yialias and Pedhieos flow eastward across the Mesaoria towards Famagusta Bay, while the Serraghis flows northwest. However, a defining characteristic of Cypriot rivers is their seasonal nature; they are largely dry during the hot summer months, flowing mainly in winter when rainfall is higher. An extensive system of dams and waterways has been developed to manage this limited water supply for agriculture and other needs.

Moving from the physical landscape to the atmospheric conditions, Cyprus is blessed with an intense Mediterranean climate. This means the island experiences a strongly marked seasonal rhythm, characterized by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. These dominant seasons are separated by relatively short, changeable periods of autumn and spring.

Summer typically arrives in mid-May and lingers until mid-October. During these months, the island is bathed in abundant sunshine, averaging over 11 hours per day during the peak summer months. Temperatures soar, particularly inland. The capital, Nicosia, in the central plain, often sees average daily maximums around 37°C (99°F) in July and August, making it one of the hottest areas in the Mediterranean. Coastal areas are slightly cooler, with average maximum temperatures around 30-35°C (86-95°F), often tempered by refreshing sea breezes. Heatwaves from Africa can occasionally push temperatures even higher, exceeding 40°C.

Winter, generally running from November to mid-March, brings cooler temperatures and the vast majority of the island's rainfall. While coastal regions remain mild, with average daily temperatures in January around 10-12°C (50-54°F), conditions in the mountains are significantly colder. The Troodos Mountains receive considerable snowfall during winter, and temperatures can drop below freezing for several weeks, making it a destination for skiing. The contrast between the mild coast and snowy mountains in winter is quite striking on such a relatively small island.

Autumn and spring serve as transitional periods. Autumn, from October to November,

sees temperatures gradually decrease, and the sea remains warm enough for swimming into late November in some years. Spring, from March to May, brings rising temperatures and the island becomes covered in wildflowers after the winter rains.

Rainfall in Cyprus is highly seasonal and variable from year to year, a crucial factor for the island's water resources and agriculture. The wettest months are typically December, January, and February, while the summer months are virtually rainless. The amount of precipitation varies significantly across the island due to the topography. The Troodos Mountains receive the highest average annual rainfall, sometimes exceeding 1,000 mm, while the central Mesaoria plain receives considerably less, averaging around 300-400 mm per year. This uneven distribution contributes to the distinct ecological zones found across Cyprus.

The island's climate can be broadly categorized into several zones, influenced by elevation and proximity to the coast. These include the Mediterranean zone (covering large parts of the island, with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters), semi-arid zones (in the central and eastern parts, with hot, dry summers and cooler, wet winters), subtropical zones (southern coastal areas with hot, humid summers and mild winters), and alpine zones (in the Troodos Mountains, with cold, snowy winters and mild summers). Coastal and mountainous regions are also often cited as distinct climatic areas. This mosaic of microclimates, shaped by the island's diverse geography and the prevailing Mediterranean weather patterns, creates the varied conditions that support the rich array of wildlife we will explore in the following chapters.

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