

# Witnesses of a Bygone Era

## Flora and fauna trails through the province of Segovia



### Start

The route starts at the car park on the outskirts of the village of Prádena, km 147.2 of the N-110. There is a panel here providing information about the facilities in the area.

### 1 Recreation area

On exiting the car park, take the first path leading off to the right. Leave on your right the El Bardal recreation area, of which we can see the fence. Ascend following the signposts for the Cañada Real Soriana Occidental. Along the left-hand side of the path the Cuarto Perdido stream flows down from the mountains.

### 2 Resting place

At its highest point, the path reaches an area of more open meadowland, it is the resting point on the drovers' road. A panel informs us of the uses of the drovers' road and provides information about some of the wildlife in the area. Cross the rest site along the path, which continues to ascend. This joins another which leads to the right, following a stone wall. Opposite, on the slopes of the mountains, the intense green of the holly grove can be observed.

### 3 Cuarto Perdido stream

We come to a green metal gate which we pass through. Then take the path to the right which follows the stone wall. Here, the first scattered holly trees can be found. A little further on, we come across a stream which we cross, the water level will depend on the time of year. Having crossed the stream, the path turns sharply to the right, after which we follow a path which is not clearly visible, which runs south, parallel to the mountains.

### 4 The holly grove

We are now within the holly grove, which we can advance into by following the path which crosses it from start to finish. Along the path, the areas most densely populated with holly are interspersed between meadowland in which ancient oaks still thrive. We should be alert for possible sightings of wild privet or rowan.

### 5 The rangeland

On leaving the holly grove we reach a fork in the path. Turn to the right to begin the descent towards the west. At this point we have the opportunity to observe something extraordinary: oaks and junipers together. Some 500m further down, pass through a gate to enter a cattle field. We are now in the juniper grove, in which the ancient trees with wide trunks and twisted bark are noteworthy. Always following the downhill path, we come to a second gate through which we exit the field.

### 6 Return to Prádena

Continue walking downhill until coming to a clearly visible path, at some 750m, which we take to the right. A little before this we walk along the drovers' road again and for the last time. Finally, we come to a gate to prevent cattle from escaping which we pass through. We will then come to the path which we followed at the beginning of the route, which descends to the car park.

### Features of the route

Route: circular  
 Starting and finishing point: car park near the El Bardal recreation area in Prádena.  
 Distance: 6 km - 2 h 30 min  
 Difficulty: medium  
 Incline: 200 m  
 Best time to visit: all year round  
 Level of conservation: Espacio Natural de la Sierra de Guadarrama y Red Natura 2000

### Good practice

- After passing through gates they should be closed to prevent cattle from escaping.
- Leaving the route marked out in the holly grove can damage vegetation and disturb fauna.
- It is important to remain silent in order to observe the fauna.
- The vegetation along the route is of **great ecological importance**; picking or gathering it causes the loss of biodiversity as well as shelter and food for animals.
- It is best to **keep all rubbish** and dispose of it at home in the appropriate bins.
- Dogs which are **not held on a lead** may disturb the wildlife.

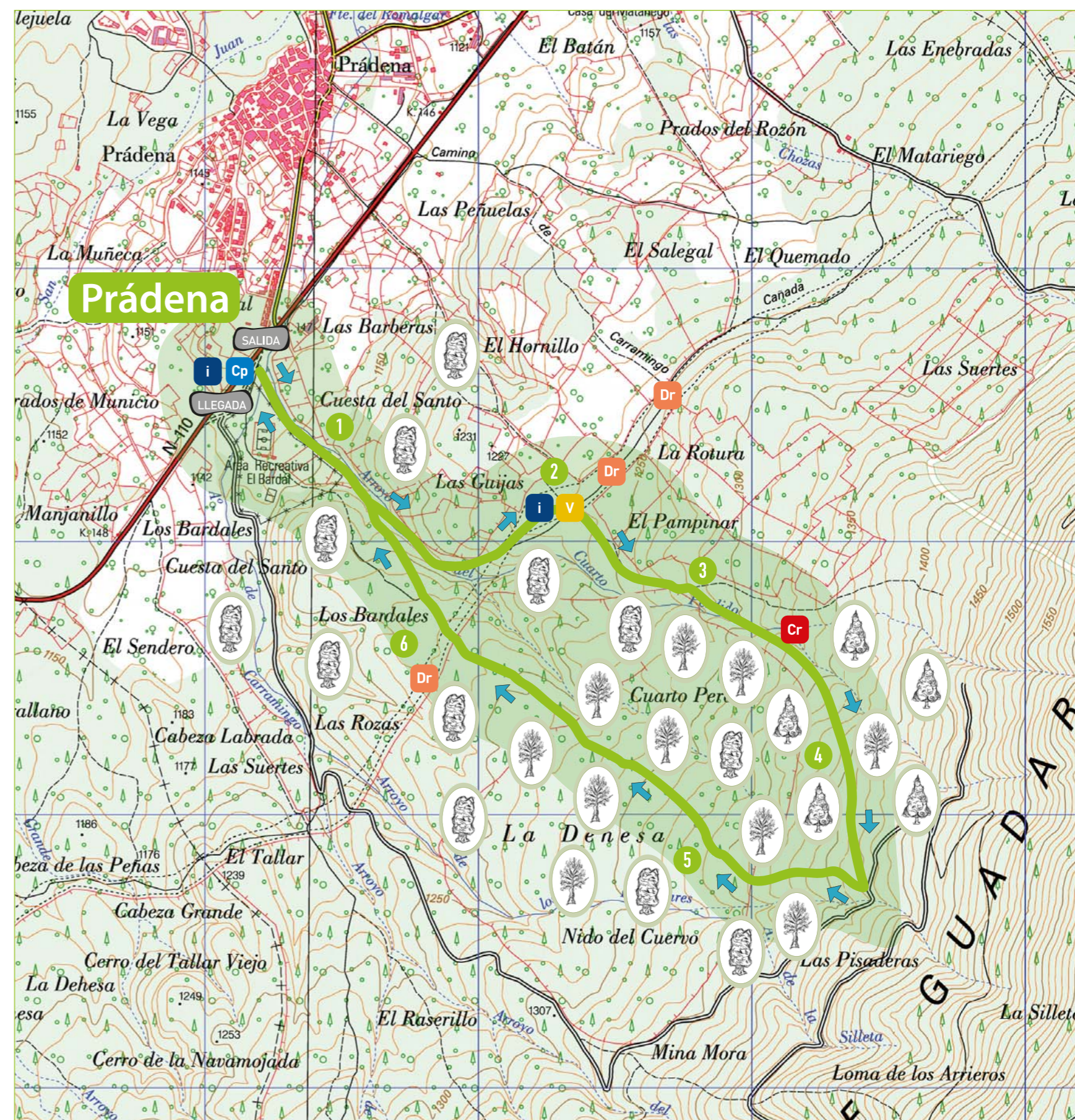
### Recommendations

- Along certain stretches the route is **not signposted**, we therefore recommend you follow the directions in this leaflet.
- To see the red berries on the holly trees, the **best time to visit** is between November and February.
- There are no fountains along the route. It is advisable to **carry water**.

### How to get there

Three buses run from Segovia on weekdays and one at weekends.

By car take the N-110 Soria to Ávila road or the SG-V-2346 from Valdesaz.



Cartography: National Topographical Map of Spain scale 1:25.000 Hojas 458-I y 458-II. Centro Nacional de Información Geográfica



Dr Drovers' road Cr Poorly visible crossroads i Information panel Cp Car park V Views ROUTE

Junipers Holly trees Oak

### Recommended reading

- W.A.A. 2005. *Los bosques ibéricos. Una interpretación geobotánica*. Ed. Planeta.
- BLANCO, E. 1998. *Diccionario de etnobotánica segoviana*. Ed. Colección hombre y naturaleza.



# The holly and the juniper

On the slopes of the Prádena mountain range groves of **holly trees** (*Ilex aquifolium*) and **junipers** (*Juniperus thurifera*) proliferate. Their origins date back to a time in which the climate was different to that of today. They have witnessed a bygone era.

## The holly tree

It is a short tree which, in Prádena, does not reach more than 10m in height, even though there are some very old specimens. It is **easy to distinguish** by its dense, dark and lustrous foliage. **Its leaves are dark green and extremely glossy.** They are also very rigid, oval-shaped, with wavy edges and very sharp, spiny teeth. These serve to protect them from herbivores; although in the higher parts they tend to disappear. Another characteristic is their **bright red berries**, which ripen from October and dress the holly grove in a handsome winter cloak. It is a **dioecious tree** with both male and female varieties.



Holly

For a long time, until about approximately 40 million years ago, Europe was dominated by a subtropical climate. It was in these conditions that the **holly tree emerged**. Later, it adapted to colder and drier periods sheltering in the moist and shady areas of the mountains, above all to the north of the peninsula.

It has been put to several uses in the mountains. Its tender shoots have been used as **fodder** for cows; the bark was used to produce **adhesive** for bird trapping and the branches are still used today **for protection against evil**. Its wood is **highly valued** as it is strong and hard. In fact, the sticks used in the Gallician stick dances were made of holly wood. Nowadays it is **protected** by the regional government.



Holly leaves and berries

## The juniper

It tends to reach between 4 and 12m in height. Older specimen **have a short, wide, twisted trunk**, and in Prádena may be up to 300 years old. **The leaves of adult specimen look like scales**, arranged so that the tip of one covers the base of another. **The juniper fruit is a berry**. Depending on how ripe it is, it changes from green to bluish-black.



Juniper leaves and berries

Botanists consider the **juniper wood to be a relic**, a remainder of the landscape which dominated Europe millions of years ago, when the climate was cold and dry. Remains of this species over 65 million years old have been discovered. However, it has survived until today, as if brought to the present through a tunnel in time.

The juniper is beloved by the inhabitants of this part of the mountains; given that every part can **be put to good use**, above all the wood. The wood is very hard and resistant, and was hence used in **construction**. It is also fragrant and can be used as **moth repellent** and, in **incense**, to disinfect the air. For this purpose, large bonfires were made in town squares, including the Segovian capital, on which juniper was burned to prevent the propagation of pests.



Juniper

# Forests of great botanical value

## The holly wood

The holly tree usually lives in isolation or in small groups, and hence it is very rare to find forests of this species. The largest holly woods can be found in the mountains in the north-east and the centre of the peninsula, including that of Prádena. Such uniqueness affords it great botanical importance.

The holly tree forms a dense forest with little light penetration. Therefore, it houses a poor undergrowth, in which the few plants that grow are adapted to the shade. This is the case of the **herb Robert** (*Geranium robertianum*), a small wild geranium with pink flowers.



Herb Robert

Mixed among the more dense areas of holly grove, areas of pasture can be found in which cattle often feed. Within these the holly trees mix with **ancient oak specimen** (*Quercus pyrenaica*), as well as certain bushes unusual in Segovia. Among them are **wild privet** (*Ligustrum vulgare*) and **rowan** (*Sorbus aucuparia*). The first has white flowers which grow in panicles and later become black berries. The rowan also has white flowers, but these are grouped at the same height and change into eye-catching orange or vermilion berries.



Wild privet



Rowan

## The juniper wood

Unlike the holly tree, the juniper grows in forests in which the trees are quite widely spaced. Such clear terrain was favoured by the Castilian hero El Cid, as related in "El Cantar del Mio Cid" (The Poem of the Cid), which states that the warrior travelled through juniper woods until reaching his place of exile in Valencia, thus avoiding ambush.

The openness of this woodland allows a variety of bush species to thrive which we can observe along the route:

The **common juniper** (*Juniperus communis*) can be recognised by its needle-shaped leaves, with a white stomatal band running along the inner surface. They can be confused with young specimen of *J. thurifera*, which also have needle-shaped leaves.



Common juniper

**Holy flax** (*Santolina rosmarinifolia*) is very common throughout the mountains. It is easy to distinguish by its bright flowerheads in the form of a yellow button.



Holy flax

**Sauce thyme** (*Thymus zygis*) can be distinguished from others of its class by its characteristic smell, its low stature and bright white flowerheads. Its name is derived from its culinary use as a condiment in stews.



Sauce thyme

# The winter pantry

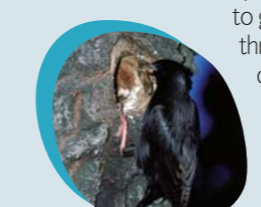
Both the holly grove and the juniper wood are places where abundant fauna can be found. The berries of these trees provide vital sustenance during the winter, a time in which food is scarce.



Common blackbird



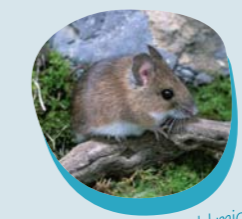
The great grey shrike



Spotless starling

The bright red berries of the holly tree attract the attention of a multitude of animals during the cold days of winter as they have a high nutritional value. The holly tree also benefits as its seeds, found inside the berries, are dispersed over a great distance. One such animal is the **common blackbird** (*Turdus merula*), which can be observed in a number of places, although the forest is its natural habitat. Another bird which tends to feed on holly berries is the **great grey shrike** (*Lanius excubitor*), distinguishable by its curved beak. The juniper, in order to germinate, requires its berries to pass through the digestive tract of a bird. One of these is the **spotless starling** (*Sturges unicor*), which form large groups in winter and feed on these.

Among the mammals are small **field mice** (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) which scuttle among the trees, hiding seeds in reserve throughout the forest. These sometimes fall prey to the **beech marten** (*Martes foina*), a small carnivore which also eats berries and in whose excrement seeds can often be found.



Field mice



Beech marten

# Interesting species

If we walk this trail on a summer's evening, bats, the hunters of the night, may rapidly swoop past us. This area is inhabited by the **lesser horseshoe bat** (*Rhinolophus hipposideros*). Its name is derived from the shape of its snout. These are highly beneficial animals as they consume a large quantity of insects, above all flies. Nowadays they are protected as, among other factors, their population is in decline due to lack of shelter.



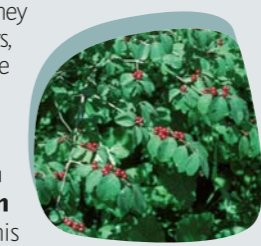
Lesser horseshoe bat

Another winged hunter, but in this case by day, is the **northern goshawk** (*Accipiter gentilis*). This bird of prey typically dwells in the forest, given its abundance of prey. It usually nests in pine forests, but uses other forests such as the holly or juniper wood for hunting. It normally feeds on small birds and even pigeons. They are highly sought after by falconers, which has led to problems due to the removal of their nests.



Northern goshawk

This area of the mountains, through which our route passes, is characterised by its diversity of ecosystems and plant species. Some of these are uncommon in the province of Segovia, as they require very specific conditions.



Fly honeysuckle

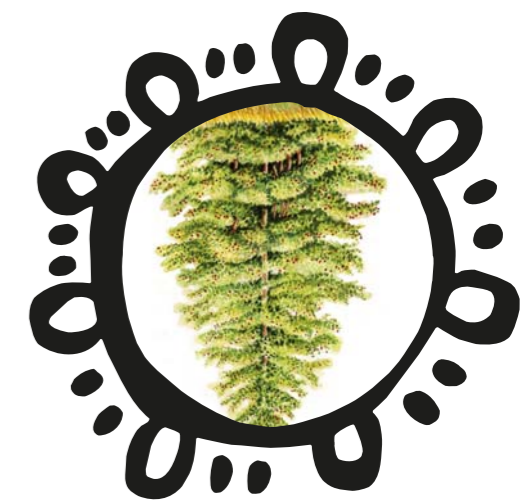
**Flyhoneysuckle** (*Lonicera xylosteum*) is a bush with reddish branches and rounded leaves. Its bright red berries are highly toxic. They can be found on the edges of the holly grove, in moist and shady areas.

The **common buckthorn or purging buckthorn** (*Rhamnus catharticus*) is a bush with thorny branches, oval leaves with a serrated edge and black berries. From these the base of the green colour in watercolours is extracted. It requires moist areas on the edges of the forest or on river banks. It can be found on the banks of the Cuarto Perdido stream.



Common buckthorn

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