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Bödmeren, the primeval forest in the mountains of Schwyz

Strong, beautiful and secretive

As cultivated as Switzerland may be, it also hoards several natural treasures. Like the Bödmeren Forest.

The Bödmeren Forest is all light and density, colour and form. Its firs are slender, strong and beautiful. In many places their narrow tops allow light to filter down to the ground. Walking on the forest floor, your feet

Alice Baumann

sink into the moss of many an enchanted grove. Soft hollows invite you to slumber awhile. Stony troughs and dolinas bear witness to glacial retreat at the end of the last ice age. Water bubbles up and ebbs away again you know not where. The air is fresh and clear.



Again and again you have to climb over obstacles: decaying twigs and branches which lie strewn across your path like so many Mikado sticks. But it is the hollows and clefts in the karst, sometimes up to 80 meters deep, that protect this ten thousand-year-old primeval pine forest from man and beast. Walking here is both tricky and dangerous. Your knees scrape against smooth and sharp-edged rocks, while trees cling fast to fissures, grooves and furrows. This primeval forest, the largest in the entire alpine region, is situated in the Hölloch cave system at the far end of the Muota Valley.

Biologists, ornithologists and geologists first discovered the teeming Bödmeren Forest only 40 years ago. They were fascinated by this splendid natural laboratory and amazed at the wild, untouched nature of the forest. It had never been exploited by Man, since only a tiny proportion is accessible. The only exception was a pair of local

The Bödmeren is the largest primeval pine-forest in the Alps.

An introduction to the primeval forests of the Alps

The "New Year's Pamphlet of the Natural Research Society of Schaffhausen" (No. 51/1999) lists the following primeval forests in Switzerland:

- *Derborence VS*: Pine forest situated in the Valais south of the Diableret massif, with trees several meters thick in diameter. Protected as a reserve in its entirety. Roughly 22 hectares of inaccessible landslide terrain, 1400–1700 meters above sea level.
- *Scatlé GR*: Slow-growing primeval alpine forest above Brigels in the lower Rhine valley in the canton of Grisons. Located on the remains of a former landslide. 9.13 hectares, 1580–2015 meters above sea level.
- *Bödmeren SZ*: in the upper Muota valley in the Canton of Schwyz, growing on jagged limestone fields, 1400–1650 meters above sea level. 600 hectares, of which 70 are a protected reserve – the largest pine forest of its kind in the entire alpine region (see article).
- *Seldenhalde SH*: Reserve of water meadows and primeval forest on the Wutach near Schleithelm in the Canton of Schaffhausen, 10 hectares.

The Federal Office of the Environment, Forestry and Agriculture (Buwal) and the Pro Natura Environmental Association also include the old-growth forest reserves of the elevated Aletsch Forest in the Valais, the Combe-Grède in the Jura near Neuchâtel, and the Swiss National Park in the Grisons. Switzerland boasts a total of 88 forest reserves covering an area of 8500 hectares. Another 74 partial reserves cover an additional 4100 hectares. Full reserves account for 6700 hectares. **AB**

shingle-makers, who used to chop up branches on the spot and carry the wood out on their backs.

Nature was extremely slow to encroach on these bare limestone cliffs and it took many millennia for the primeval forest to grow. Because of this, a wide range of vegetation stages can be found cheek-by-jowl, which scientists can read like an open book. This makes the Bödmeren Forest one of Europe's most important natural and cultural landmarks, and a phenomenon of major scientific value.

But all that is beside the point: when you hike through the Bödmeren, you can see how magnificent the landscape and forests were before Man's arrival in the Alps. You can touch the long tendrils of 400-year-old pines and gain

an inkling of how severe the laws of life and survival are in the harsh alpine climate. With short, hot summers and long, cold winters, only the toughest trees, flowers, fungus and animals can survive.



As a guest of the Bödmeren you relish the peace and quiet of this wild, romantic region of the lower Alps. With renewed respect you contemplate the foaming Muota River down in the valley and gaze up in awe at the Silbern, a massive stone expanse of rare beauty and origins. And you feel very small, but wonderful. ■



(Photo: Ernst Seagnet)