



Île du Beurre

The Beaver Island



Discovery map





A remnant of the Wild Rhône

In the Rhône valley, the fight against flooding and the growth in human activities has put considerable pressure on the river Rhône and altered its landscapes. Evidence of strong river dynamics, the two islands (Île du Beurre and Île de la Chèvre), and particularly the secondary channels, are the remnants of the river's former course. These habitats have retained the features of the Wild Rhône, with its natural landscapes, home to rich vegetation and diverse animal life.



Lônes

A term normally only applied to the river Rhône, Lônes, or river channels, are secondary branches of the river, indicating its braided nature (when the river bed is divided into several channels). They were formed in the past during periods of flooding. The river eroded its banks, digging channels in the softest layers of the soil, and formed islands on each side of the main channel.



An ecological heritage of great interest

The site and its surrounding areas are made up of environments which are heavily affected by water: river channels, pools, ponds, open areas, and, of course, the Rhône. But it also features wooded areas of all kinds, including alluvial woodlands (wooded areas which are regularly flooded, now rare in the Rhône valley).

Meadows, hillsides with Mediterranean vegetation, and orchards and market garden areas can be found nearby.

This mosaic of environments is home to a considerable diversity of animal species (241 vertebrate species recorded) and plant species (currently, 441 plant species have been recorded), some of which have heritage value and are protected at the national or regional level.

The European beaver is the reason for the protection of Île du Beurre, and has now become its symbol.

Hérons come to the island to feed and reproduce. The site is also a step on the migration route of many birds. In the Lônes, fishes find a large spawning area and a place to hide. These habitats are home to a number of reptiles, amphibians, aquatic and terrestrial insects, mammals and plants. The discovery of a previously unknown species of orchid, *Epipactis fibri*, has also enriched the site's heritage value.



A protected site

In recognition of the rich natural heritage, its location in the historic bed of the Rhône and the presence of some remarkable species, Île du Beurre site has been protected by a prefectural biotope protection order (APPB) since 10 February 1987. The entire site has been classified as a Sensitive Natural Area (ENS) and a Natural Zone of Ecological, Floral and Wildlife Interest (ZNIEFF). The Lône du Beurre is classed as a fishing reserve and Île du Beurre is classed as a game reserve.



Discovery trail

The trail and hides are open all year round. We please the groups of more than ten people to inform the Wildlife Natural Centre of their visit, even if they do not want to be accompanied by a guide during their visit.

Welcome and events Centre

The welcome Centre features an information and exhibition area on the natural heritage along the Rhône: aquariums, permanent and temporary exhibitions, and more.

The Centre is open (free entry):

- > **During local school holidays (zone A)**
- > **Sundays and public holidays afternoon**

Activities and events

A variety of events are on offer all year round, aimed at the general public, leisure centres and school groups (half-day or day-long educational activities available). The programme of activities is available on request from the Centre and on the website (www.iledubeurre.org).

Code of good conduct

This site has been protected by a prefectural biotope protection order since 10 February 1987. The signs on-site ask that you follow the rules that apply in this protected area.



Discovery guidebook

To learn more about the site, a 48-page guidebook is on sale from the welcome Centre (available in French only).



The site

Environment and landscapes

- **Île du Beurre 1 and Île de la Chèvre 2**
With an area of 8 hectares, Île du Beurre is protected. This wooded area is one of the rare remnants of the Wild Rhône and does not have paved access. Île de la Chèvre features an area of ponds, orchards and market garden farms.
- **The hills of the right bank**
Extremely steep, the hills are a typical example of terrace farming, with some market gardening, and of course the famous Côte-Rotie vineyards. These extremely dry areas, with a slight Mediterranean influence, are home to trees characteristic of hot environments (hackberry and downy oak).

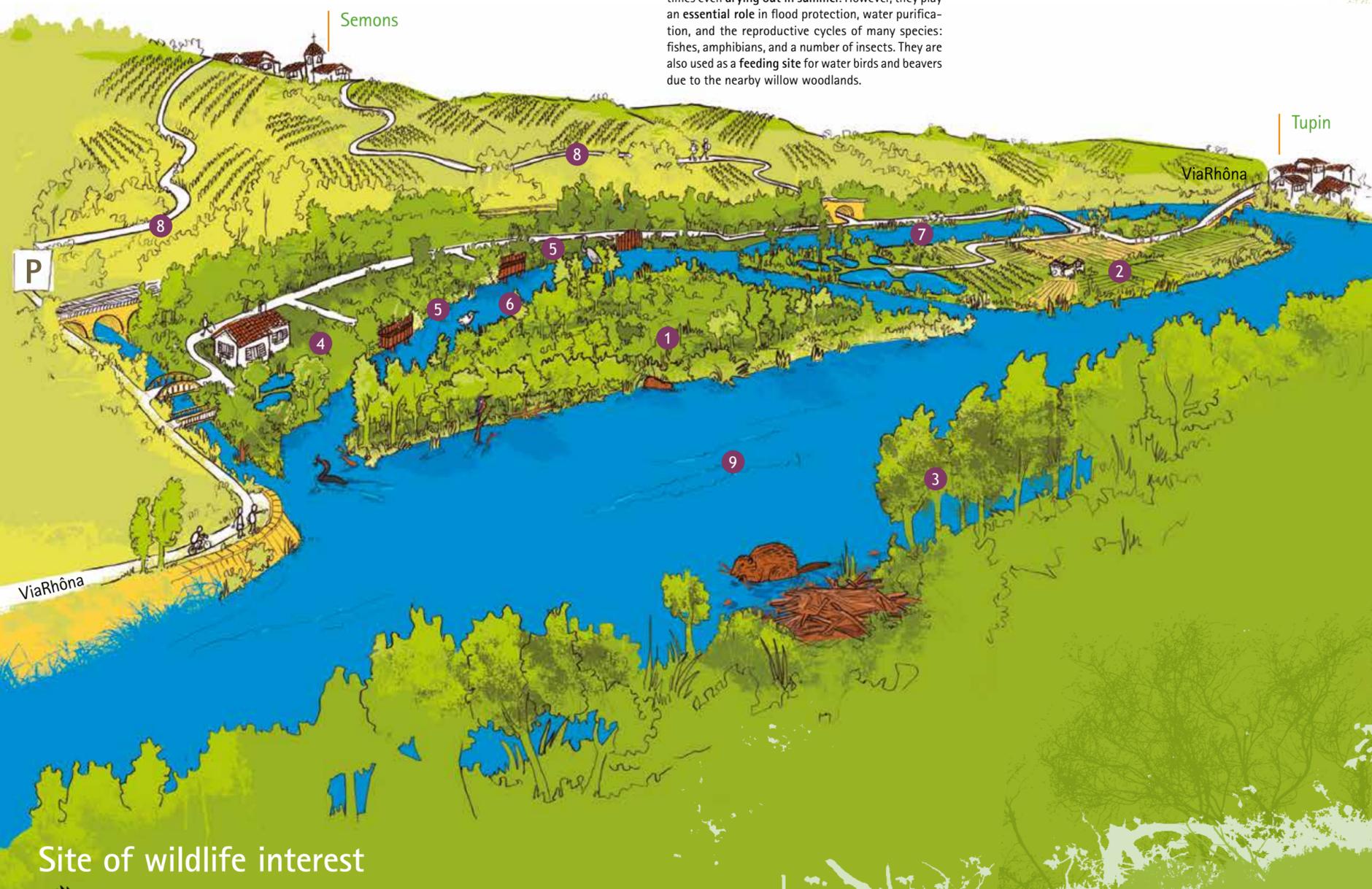
- **The Pilat Natural Park and the Rhône**
The islands and the hills located on the right bank of the Rhône fall within the Pilat regional natural park.
- **Gerbey alluvial woodland 3**
The presence of European beavers, a colony of night herons and the discovery of the orchid *Epipactis fibri* were the reasons for a prefectural biotope protection order being granted in 1995. The poplar plantation was abandoned to support the management of the Sensitive Natural Area, a task assigned to Île du Beurre Wildlife Natural Centre. The aim is to return the site to its former natural state and to welcome guided groups.

The role of water

- **The Rhône 9**
Measuring 250 m in width to the east of Île du Beurre, the Rhône is deep enough for transportation and leisure thanks to the reservoir created by the dam at Saint-Pierre-de-Boeuf.
- **The Lône du Beurre 6 and the Lône de la Chèvre 7**
Shallower (10 cm to 3 m) and narrower than the main channel, with a slower current, the lônes (secondary channels) provide homes for a variety of wild flora and fauna. As flooding is no longer severe enough to dig away at and scrape out the sediment, the secondary channels will disappear sooner or later. Consequently, management work is undertaken to preserve these relic habitats.
- **The ponds of Île de la Chèvre**
Dug by the Compagnie Nationale du Rhône to raise agricultural areas to the north of Île de la Chèvre, these ponds are in a permanent state of flux, sometimes even drying out in summer. However, they play an essential role in flood protection, water purification, and the reproductive cycles of many species: fishes, amphibians, and a number of insects. They are also used as a feeding site for water birds and beavers due to the nearby willow woodlands.

Facilities

- **Île du Beurre Wildlife Natural Centre 4**
This welcome Centre (free entry) hosts exhibitions and aquariums. Here, visitors can find out more information.
- **Hides 5**
Dotted around the discovery trail, the hides allow visitors to view wild animals in their natural habitat without disturbing them.
- **Marked trails**
The "lônes en terrasses" trail (from lônes to terraces) 8 leads to the village of Semons, which boasts a spectacular view of Île du Beurre and Île de la Chèvre, as well as of the Rhône valley. Another trail, the Arbuel river, which starts in the centre of Condrieu, lets visitors discover the ravines that cut through the hills, where streams create remarkable wetland habitats.



Site of wildlife interest



Black kite roost

The site's large poplars host several nesting pairs every spring. Later, in summer, the same trees are used as a roost: every evening, between 50 and 100 individuals come together before their migration.

Larger (wingspan: 135 to 155 cm) and with a more 'slender' appearance than the buzzard, the black kite is a carrion-eater that, on the site, tends to eat dead fish floating on the water's surface, along with other corpses. However, it can also catch living prey: small rodents, reptiles and amphibians.

Great cormorant roost

The species has spent the winter at the site and has used the poplars on Île du Beurre as a night-time roost since 1988. It is not uncommon, particularly in migration season, to see flights of several dozen to a hundred individuals (in a loose "V" formation).

The Great cormorant feeds on fish, which it catches by diving up to 6 m below the surface of the water. It has no oily layer protecting its feathers (unlike ducks), so it must dry them regularly. They can be seen perched in a tree with their wings open, shaking them lightly.

Heronry

Between February and June, around forty pairs of grey herons come to nest on Île du Beurre. A nearby hide allows visitors to watch them without disturbing the birds.

The Grey heron often wanders through river channels and ponds, its legs half-submerged. It eats aquatic prey (amphibians, insects, fish), small rodents and reptiles.

Beaver lodges

The Rhône's natural banks and its secondary channels allow the European beaver to dig dens with an underwater entrance. Sometimes, like the air vent on the bank, the entrance is camouflaged with sticks the beavers have collected. These dens are called "lodges".

The European beaver, Europe's largest rodent (measuring 1.30 m including its tail and weighing 35 kg), came to the site naturally. In summer, it eats aquatic plants, roots and leaves. In winter, it fells trees (in particular, willow and poplar trees) so that it can eat the bark. Although they are nocturnal, beavers can nevertheless be seen before sunset in spring and summer from around 7pm. They can be seen from the hides along the river channels or around Gerbey from the Condrieu dyke near stadium.

Luscious vegetation

Riparian woodland

Riparian woodland, the area of tree growth on riverbanks, is formed of native species (ash, alder, dogwood) and exotic invasive species (Box elder, False acacia, etc.). In order to preserve biodiversity, management work takes place to reduce the presence of exotic invasive species.

Poplar woods

Previously used as farmland, Île du Beurre was planted with hybrid poplars in the 1960s, as were some areas of the Île de la Chèvre and Gerbey. The way these habitats are managed aims to develop them into 'natural' alluvial woodlands formed of native species.

Very dense undergrowth

The dense vegetation of the undergrowth in the alluvial woodland resembles a 'tropical jungle'. The young trees and shrubs (narrow-leaved ash, elm, maple, field maple, blackthorn, common dogwood, hazel, hawthorn, bramble, spindle, dog-rose, and more) provide shelter and food for many animal species.

Thanks to the damp and fertile soil, climbing plants (clematis, ivy, etc.) grow quickly up trunks, climbing towards the light. They help to create the "virgin forest" atmosphere of the alluvial woodlands.

Willow woodland

Willow trees (white willow, crack willow, and purple willow) are found around the lakes of Île de la Chèvre in particular. These very dense, spontaneously-developed wooded areas appeared after the soil was bared when the ponds were dug. Willows are planted in other areas in order to recreate the natural riverbank vegetation (riparian woodland) and to maintain or even attract wildlife (beavers, for example).

Aquatic plant communities and spawning grounds

Aquatic plants (pondweed, hornwort, watermilfoil, chara species, etc.) have heritage interest (some species are protected at the national or regional level). In the calm, shallow environment of the lônes, they find the conditions they need to develop and carry out their key role: for fish, a place to spawn, hide and feed; for amphibians and several insects, a location to reproduce; and more.

Rare in the middle Rhône valley, *Phragmites reed habitats* (reedbeds) are preserved and encouraged on the site. They play an important ecological role, particularly for a number of birds.

Nanocyperion, a habitat that is a relic of the Rhône's dynamic past, develops on the shallow banks of some ponds. These rare and extremely rich plant formations have significant heritage value.

The Beaver orchid

Epipactis fibri was discovered and described for the first time ever in the poplar woods of Île du Beurre in 1992. It only grows in the middle Rhône valley (it is what is known as an 'endemic' species) and mainly grows in undergrowth in moderately acidic soil, near poplar trees.

Growing to between 10 and 24 cm, the Beaver orchid is late-flowering (July to October). Its alternating oval leaves are small and the flowerhead is generally formed of between 8 and 17 tiny, scentless flowers, ranging from pale yellow-green to white.

The Amur bitterling

One of the most remarkable species living in the lônes is the Amur bitterling, a fish whose habitat is protected, and which remains a vulnerable species. It is the only European species whose reproduction relies on aquatic molluscs, as it lays its eggs in the gills of freshwater mussels.

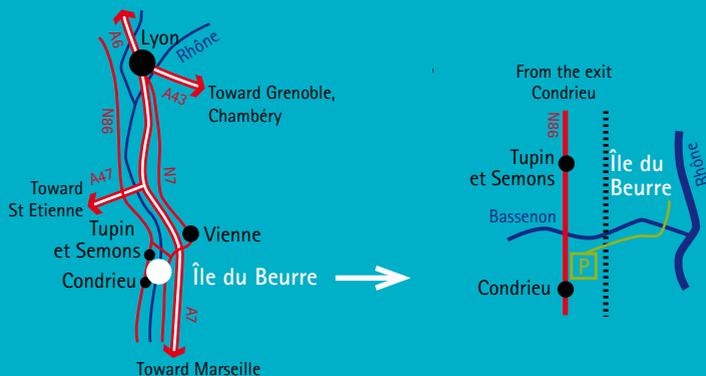


Île du Beurre Wildlife Natural Centre

Founded in 1988, the Wildlife Natural Centre's mission is twofold: managing and protecting the natural site, and promoting it by welcoming the public. Its work is built around five-year management plans, which include the site's ecological (management) and educational (events) plan for the site.



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Thanks

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