



Alpine ibex

Capra ibex ibex

Formerly abundant throughout the European Alps, this magnificent animal was once brought to the brink of extinction by overhunting. By the end of the 19th century, it had totally disappeared in many countries, including Switzerland. Since then, a series of protective measures and reintroductions have saved the species – at least temporarily – and has allowed the ibex to reconstitute localized populations along the entire alpine chain. In Switzerland alone, there are now more than 11,000 wild ibex.

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Where to look: Alpine ibex are found as high as 4000m, preferring cliffs and sheer rocky areas above the tree line. In summer they graze on the rich high-alpine flora, descending in winter and spring to lower, southward-facing cliffs.

What to look for: the Alpine ibex is powerful and stocky with a brown coat, greyish-white stomach, and a short beard and tail. Adult males measure 130 to 150 cm, weigh as much as 100 kg, and bear large, ridged, backward-curving horns up to 75 cm long. Females are smaller, lighter in colour, and have much shorter, pointed horns.

The ibex is usually found in groups of 5 to 50. Solitary males can be seen around December at the onset of rut; the resounding crack of clashing horns indicates a battle for the possession of females.

Threats: Alpine ibex are at the mercy of their own habitat, with its precarious rocky slopes and adverse climate. They are susceptible to diseases and parasites, and their young face predation from golden eagles and lynx.

Ibex require large grazing areas – up to 3,000 ha, according to habitat quality – over a wide altitudinal range. This often brings them into close contact with human settlements, especially in spring, and carries the additional danger of cross-breeding with domestic goats.

The successful reintroduction of the ibex in Switzerland has meant that, in some areas, the population has outgrown its available habitat, making selective culling necessary.

What we can do:

1. **Preserve ibex habitat.** We should make sure that adequate foraging areas, spanning sufficient altitudes, are available to ibex herds throughout the year.
2. **Maintain reintroduced populations.** This includes careful culling of reintroduced ibex populations when necessary to prevent habitat destruction, starvation and disease.
3. **Support international programmes.** We should contribute to international conservation efforts which are reintroducing ibex and improving their genetic variability throughout Europe.

Based on material provided by Dr David Stone, consultant to IUCN – The World Conservation Union