

Chapter 10

Main animal groups and their influence on plant communities

10.1. Wild ungulates

Seven native and one introduced (*Cervus nippon* Temmink, 1838) species of ungulates inhabit the Northwestern Caucasus (Sokolov & Tembotov 1993). Two of them (roe – *Capreolus capreolus* L. and elk – *Alces alces* L.) are extremely rare or absent in the vicinity of Teberda. Two other species (bison – *Bison bonasus* L. and red deer – *Cervus elaphus* L.) are typical woodland animals and they rarely occur in the alpine belt. So, only three species of ungulates, namely Caucasian goat - *Capra caucasica* Guldenst., chamois - *Rupicapra rupicapra* L. and wild boar - *Sus scrofa* L., spend significant parts of their life in the alpine area. These three species will be discussed in this chapter.

10.1.1. The Caucasian goat (ibex) (*Capra caucasica* Guldenst.)

This species is a symbolic ungulate for the alpine belt in the Great Caucasus (Fig. 10.1). These big animals reach 155 kg in weight. Their mean life span is 14-15 years, but individual animals live more than 20 years (Sokolov & Tembotov 1993). When it was protected from illegal hunting the density of the Caucasian ibex was about 63 animals per 10 km² in the Teberda Reserve (Tarasov 1973). Ibexes can be found from 800 to above 4000 m. They inhabit deciduous and dark-coniferous forests, and the subalpine, alpine and subnival belts, especially where cliffs and rocks provide sufficient refuge from carnivores. The total number of animals in the

Teberda Reserve is about 500, but in the 1980s there were about 2000 ibexes in the Reserve.

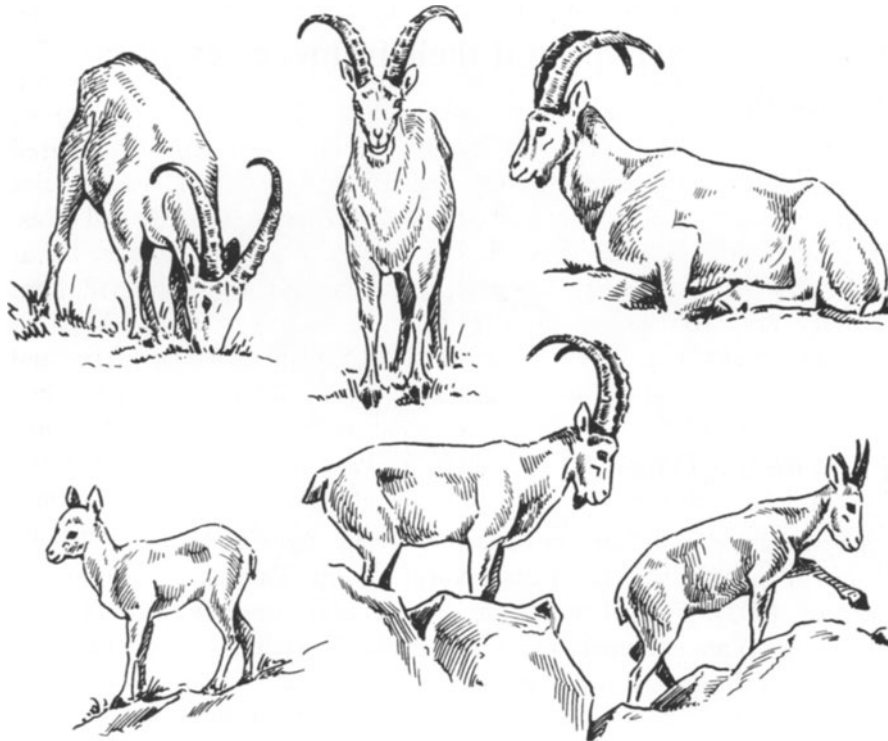


Figure 10.1. *Capra caucasica* (Picture by V.M.Smirin from Sokolov & Tembotov 1993)

Availability of winter pastures is one of the most important limiting factors for the population density of that animal. In summer only a small part of the abundant plant biomass is consumed by ibexes within the Natural Reserve, but outside the protected area domestic stock is a serious competitor for summer feed.

The Caucasian ibex uses a various set of plants for food. His diet includes 195-256 plant species (Kotov 1968, Abdurakhmanov 1977). Grasses are the main component (80-90%) of the diet. A list of some alpine food species is represented in Table 10.1.

The most preferred food species are *Alopecurus* spp., *Bromus variegatus*, *Festuca* spp., *Hyalopoa pontica*, *Phleum* spp., *Senecio taraxacifolius* (Kotov 1968, Grishina et al. 1985, Sokolov & Tembotov 1993, Bobyr' et al. 1999).