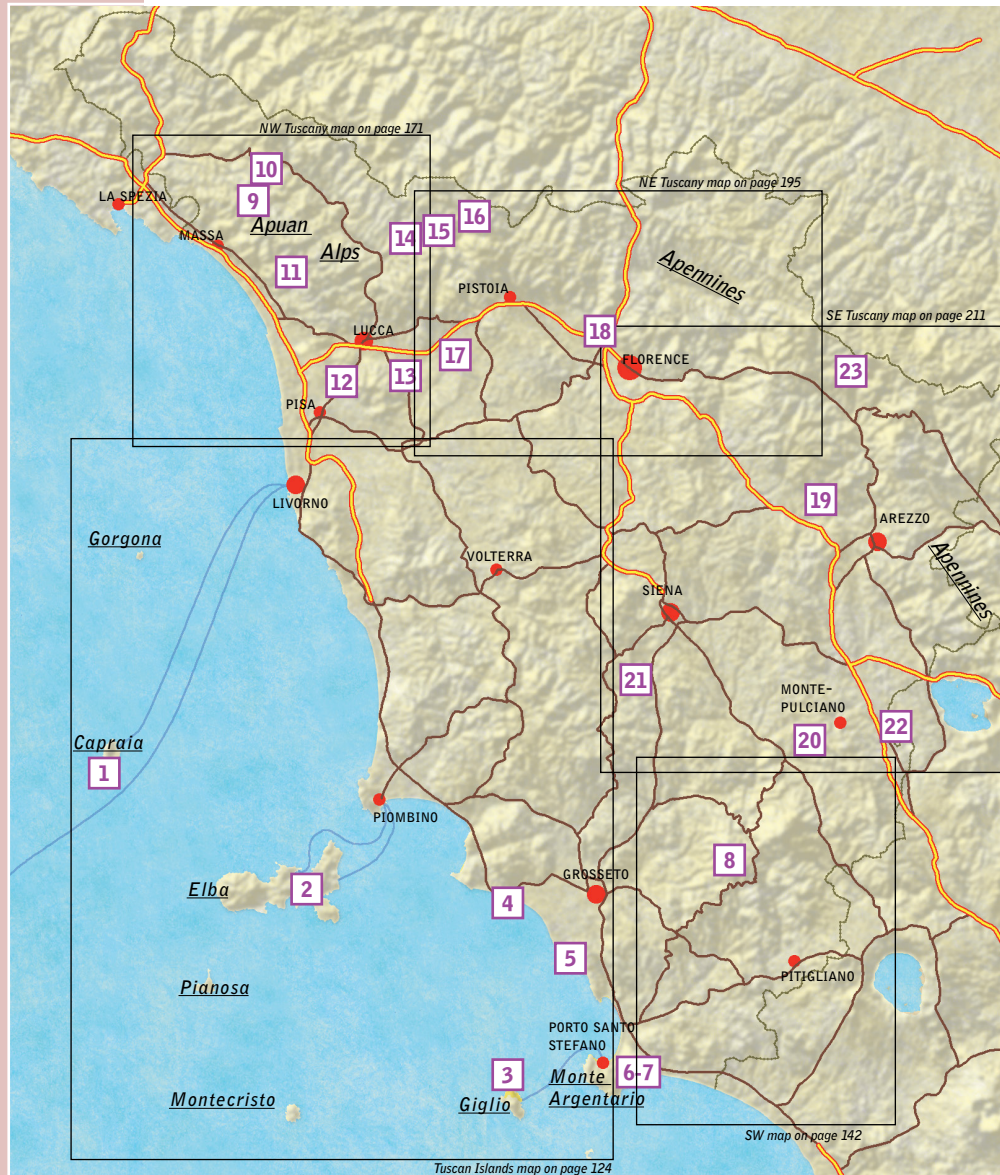


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## Geographical overview

Tuscany is a large triangular province in central Italy covering some 23,000 square kilometres. It is bounded in the west by a scattering of islands lying in the Mediterranean Sea, and by a mountainous arc on the northern and eastern sides formed by the Apuan Alps and Apennine mountains. Southwestern Tuscany is slightly more arid and shares hilly country with the adjoining regions of Umbria and Lazio.

Topographically Tuscany is quite varied with a series of coastal hills and interior ridges that create a series of northwest to southeast trending ridges prior to reaching the Apennine mountains. The neatness of this picture is interrupted by some formerly marshy valleys and a series of rivers that cut through the hills to reach the sea.

Roughly speaking Tuscany consists of three large sections: the islands and the coast, the hills and valley landscape (which covers the larger part of the province) and higher and wilder mountains in the north and east.

### The coast

Tuscany boasts over 300 kilometres of coastline with a specific section of the Mediterranean Sea, referred to as the Tyrrhenian Sea, which stretches out between Corsica-Sardinia and the Italian mainland. For geological and ecological reasons, this area boasts a unique flora and fauna (see page 71). The Tuscan shoreline hosts multiple small estuaries, rocky headlands and large expanses of sandy beaches and dunes. Some of Tuscany's finest nature reserves are found here, including of course offshore, the Tuscan Archipelago National Park.

The northern third of Tuscany's coast is a sandy shoreline bordering the Versilia Plain and coastal floodplains

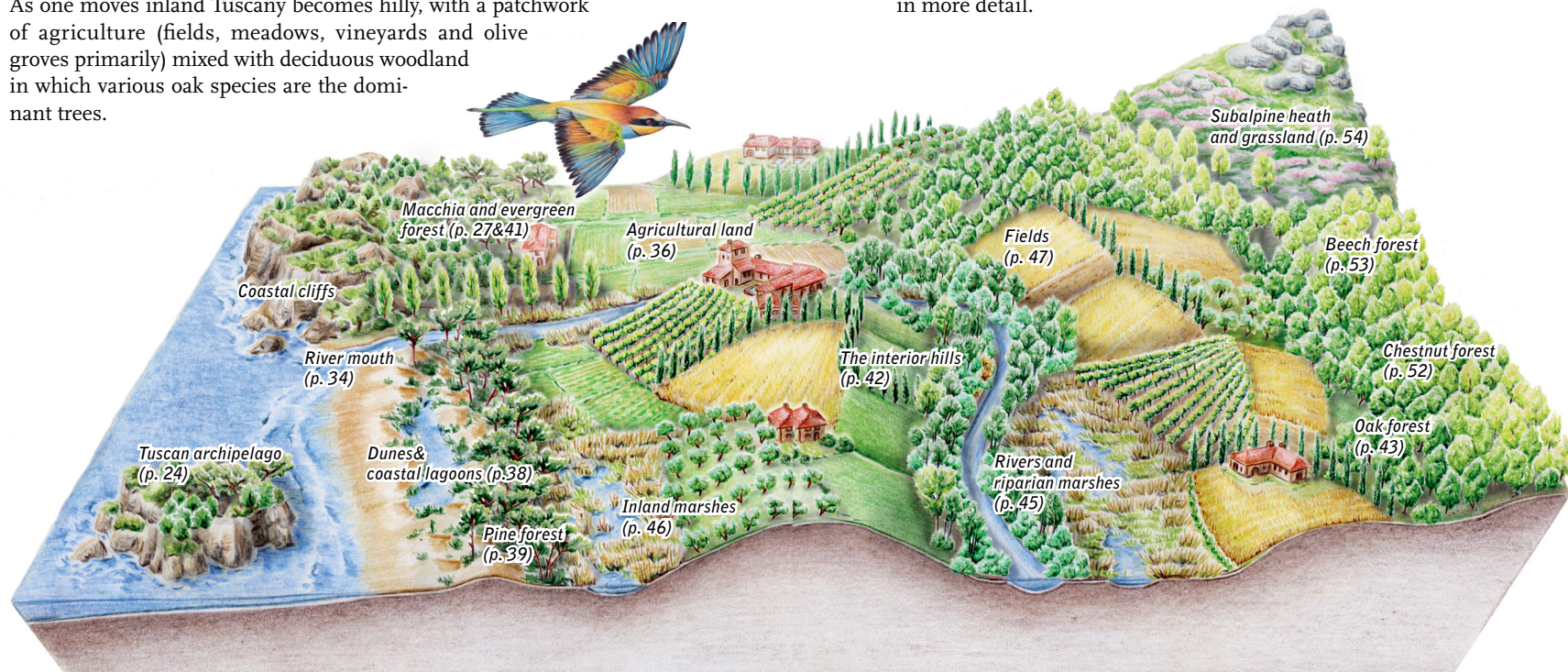
The coast at Monte Argentario (route 7).



## Habitats

Tuscany has a wide variety of habitats, from islands with evergreen scrubland to coastal wetlands, river valleys, small scale farmland, forests and subalpine meadows at the highest elevations. True Mediterranean habitat with evergreen macchia, cork and holm oak forest is limited to the coast and the Tuscan Archipelago. Coastal Tuscany is relatively flat, with a belt of dunes that is interrupted by river estuaries and rocky promontories. Locally, there are marshes and lagoons. Such places (best developed and seen at the Maremma Natural Park and at Orbetello) have an extraordinary wildlife. Just inland from that are extensive fields and wet grasslands – all fragments of the once vast wetlands that were drained for agriculture and public health reasons (see page 37). There are a series of coastal hills or small mountain ranges characterized by holm oak forest which has considerable overlap with macchia vegetation.

As one moves inland Tuscany becomes hilly, with a patchwork of agriculture (fields, meadows, vineyards and olive groves primarily) mixed with deciduous woodland in which various oak species are the dominant trees.



Idealised cross-section of the Tuscan landscape. The various habitats are described in the chapters on the following pages.

These trees shed their leaves and, as a result of the fertile soils, grow rather tall, giving them a temperate rather than Mediterranean look, although many of the shrubs are Mediterranean species (Tree Heath, Sage-leaved Cistus).

Cutting through the Tuscan hills are a series of rivers that form valleys of varying widths and bands of riparian ash and willow forest. Southern Tuscany is home to Monte Amiata, a relic volcano dome, and the adjacent lovely limestone ridges around Monte Labbro.

To the east and north, the slopes of the Apuan Alps and Apennine Mountains are covered in oak, chestnut (at higher elevations) and beech forests and small pockets of remnant Silver Fir (higher still). The upper slopes have subalpine heathlands and grasslands, with the heathlands dominating in the predominantly acidic Apennine Mountains and the grasslands in the limestone Apuan Alps.

The next chapters will describe these habitats and their flora and fauna in more detail.

## Birds

Seabirds are best seen from the ferries to the islands and vantage points on those islands. Mediterranean scrubland birds easiest to see on the islands as well (routes 1-3), but also on Monte Argentario (route 7). Your best chance on seeing wintering alpine species (e.g. Wallcreeper) is on routes route 8 and 12, whilst bird migration is most noticeable on Giglio (3) and various coastal marshes and headlands (routes 4, 5, 6, 7, 11 and site C on page 193). Wetland birds are found both on the coast (best 4, 6, 11 and sites A-C on page 168-169 and A, B, D and E on pages 193-194 and in the broader valleys inland (route 13, 17, 18, 19 and 22). Birds of dry, agricultural plains are most common on route 20. High mountain species are best observed on routes 9 and 10 (Apuan Alps) and route 16 (Apennines).

Tuscany is not one of the classic top birding destinations in Europe, so it may come as a surprise that, with over 400 species recorded, this region is a remarkably good birdwatching destination. Tuscany holds a fine range of wetland birds, mixed with species of Mediterranean and temperate European scrublands, forests, agricultural land and mountains. The coastal wetlands are perhaps the top destinations due to the plentiful water birds, yet the forests and agricultural lands of the Tuscan hills provide an excellent diversity of raptors, warblers, larks, pipits, buntings and Mediterranean birds such as Bee-eater, Roller and Hoopoe. The Tuscan islands are a magnet for migrants, including numerous vagrant species.

One of kind, the Hoopoe occurs in open country, orchards, parks and gardens and often its *oop-oop-oop* call is heard before it is spotted.



The islands hold specialties like Marmora's Warbler, Corsican Finch, Tyrrhenian Spotted Flycatcher (a subspecies of Spotted Flycatcher), as well as the shearwaters and other marine birds. The scrubby *macchia* holds Sardinian, Dartford, Moltoni's and other warblers. Moltoni's Warbler is one of a recent three-way split of the Subalpine Warbler group (Western Subalpine occurring in the extreme northwest of Italy and Eastern Subalpine occurring in the Tuscany's interior southeast). The montane areas are not particularly diverse but hold their special treats such as Alpine Chough, Golden Eagle and migrant Dotterel and Ring Ouzel.

## Seabirds

The Tuscan coast, archipelago and surrounding waters hold two Mediterranean specialties that are worth searching for. Because the taxonomic status of both of them is disputed, several names are used. The smallest is the Yelkouan Shearwater (which beautiful name derives from the Turkish word for wind-chaser), which is increasingly regarded as a race of Balearic Shearwater, whilst



the larger Scopoli's Shearwater is often considered to be a race of Cory's Shearwater. Both species nest and forage around the Tuscan Archipelago. These shearwaters are relatively easy to see from off-shore ferries. Both species declined strongly in the 20th century due to feral rats and cats on their island breeding colonies. These invaders eat the eggs and young and the shearwaters have no defence against them. Fortunately, recent programs to eliminate rats and cats from the uninhabited islets are paying off and the shearwater numbers are rising again.

Scopoli's Shearwater, a form of Cory's Shearwater primarily found in the Mediterranean.

Montecristo island is of international importance for Yelkouan Shearwater, whereas Scopoli's numbers have increased on an islet off Capraia due to the eradication of rats.

The Audouin's Gull, a threatened species that occurs exclusively in the Mediterranean region, can be found around the Tuscan islands, although the familiar Yellow-legged Gull is much more common. The Mediterranean subspecies of Shag and European Storm-Petrel also occur though the latter is difficult to find.

The Serchio, Arno and Ombrone river mouths are excellent sites for seawatching as the rivers' nutrients create a rich feeding zone for both marine and coastal species. Scan the sea and shoreline for shearwaters, gulls (Audouin's and, in winter, Mediterranean and Caspian) as well as Sandwich and Little Terns. During the winter months, seawatching near one of the major river mouths or one of the piers along the northwest coast can yield Northern Gannet, shearwaters, grebes, Red- and Black-throated Divers, as well as Velvet and Common Scoter and perhaps other surprises such as Razorbill.

## Route 5: Maremma Regional Park

**UP TO FULL DAY  
EASY-MODERATE**



*Three walks in a splendid, unspoilt coastal area. Steep limestone cliffs rise up from the Umbrella Pine forests. Marshes with a rich birdlife and many orchids in spring.*

**Habitats:** Mediterranean macchia, pine woodlands, dunes, river estuary  
**Selected species:** Early Spider, Bertoloni's and Naked Man Orchids, Porcupine, Two-tailed Pasha, Italian Festoon, Common Crane (winter), Short-toed Eagle, Roller, Greater Flamingo, waders

Parco Regionale Maremma is the gem of Tuscany's coast. Both its scenery and its wildlife make it a must-visit area for naturalists. This park includes 25 km of largely unscathed Mediterranean coastline. The Uccellina, a

small limestone range of up to 400m forms the park's backbone. They are clad in thick macchia and Mediterranean woodlands. The lower parts to the north and south have unspoilt beaches, wild areas of sand dunes and bird-filled marshes (both brackish and fresh). On the inland side, there are pastures and umbrella pine forest. The Maremma is a popular place. Especially during the (summer) holidays, you won't be alone. In order to protect the sensitive environment, access is regulated strictly (see box for access details). There are numerous walking and cycling routes in the park of which we describe two self-guided, easy-to-moderate half-day walks, which are in our opinion the most attractive for wildlife. They are both situated in the northern part of the park and their starting points are very close to one another.

### Access regulations Maremma Regional Park

The place to start your visit is at the Maremma Natural Park Visitor Centre in Alberese (Via Bersagliere, 7/9; GPS: 42.669278, 11.103912; tel +39 0564 407098; [www.parco-maremma.it](http://www.parco-maremma.it)). This where you get oriented, find maps and books as well as sign up for a guided trip. Between April and September, the Centre is open daily between 8:00 AM and 8 PM; hours will vary in other seasons. There are numerous walks and cycle tours in the regional park and for most of them you must buy an admission ticket (€5-€10 per route). Some of the routes require joining a guided walk. Only during the winter season (October 1st to March 31) it is possible to visit the park for free. You buy your ticket for a specific itinerary, either at the Visitor Centre or on the website (which has English pages and is easy to navigate). With your ticket you can either cycle or drive to the main trail-heads or take the shuttle bus from the Centre. It is always best to reserve your proposed itinerary online as there are limits on the number of daily visitors on each itinerary.



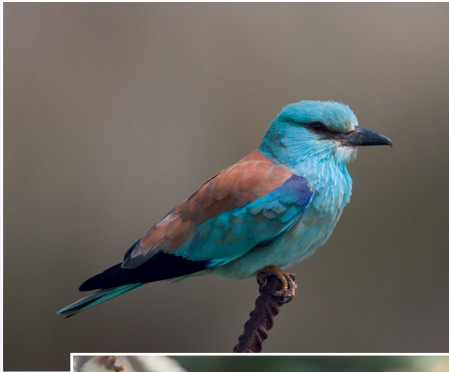
### The Torre Walk

(Walk A2; € 10; 7.2 km; 200m elevation gain; easy-moderate)  
 Note that in the case of online purchase, it is mandatory to make two copies of the voucher and one must be affixed to the dashboard of your vehicle, while the other must be brought with you. To get to the starting point, drive north (cycle or take the shuttle bus) out of Alberese following signs toward Marina di Alberese and turn left in 1.9 km. In 1.4 km you will reach the toll booth that provides access to the heart of the park (two tokens for entry are provided with the ticket; save the second token for your exit). The parking area at Casetta dei Pinottolai is another 3.4 km which is also the start of the walk (GPS: 42.663321, 11.043133).

**I** You first pass through a pine woodland, that was planted in the 19th century when the former marshes which were drained to fight malaria. These woodlands and their thick understory of Mastic Tree, Myrtle and junipers (both

Coastal lookout towers harken back to times when Pisa and Genoa were maritime powers and raiders of all stripes sought opportunities to plunder coastal communities.





Large-fruited and Mediterranean) are good areas to look for Roller and Hoopoe. The woods are home to numerous mammals including Porcupine, Fox, Fallow Deer and Wild Boar, though unless you're early, they are challenging to see.

**2** In 1.6 km you'll reach a wood bridge (*Ponte Tartarughe*) where there is a sign marking the start of the A2 trail toward the Castel Marino Tower (12<sup>th</sup> century). The trail abruptly reaches the edge of the Uccellina mountains and crosses an old artificial channel of water. In late spring and summer, it is worth lingering by the channel to look for European Pond Terrapin, Violet Dropwing, a Mediterranean dragonfly, along with more widespread species like Broad Scarlet and Scarce Chaser. The forest opening also provides a good vantage point for spotting a Hobby.



**3** Once across the bridge, you follow the trail up the rocky slope for about 200m. After the initial climb, the path flattens out and follows the ridge. The shrubby forest features Mediterranean woodland, including Holm and Cork Oak, Strawberry Tree, Manna Ash, False Green Olive, Myrtle, Common Smilax, Mediterranean and Tree Heath, Rosemary, Montpellier Cistus, Christ's-thorn and Shrubby Germander. Among the common songbirds are Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Sardinian Warbler. Italian Wall Lizards are quite numerous and easy to spot, whereas finding Western Whip Snake will require some luck. Among the butterflies, you may spot Southern White Admiral in spring while Large Wall Brown and Two-tailed Pasha are mostly seen from late spring to autumn. A side path goes out to the Torre del Castelmario (GPS: 42.646494, 11.066086) from which more views are to be had over the pinewoods, coastline as well as the islands of Elba and Montecristo. Mediterranean Dwarf Palm grows on the cliff by the tower. This is Europe's only native

The Mediterranean offers a host of colourful species, like Roller (top) and Two-tailed Pasha (bottom). The latter is partial to Strawberry Trees.

palm and is rare in Italy. This vantage point is also a good place to keep an eye out for Short-toed Eagle, Alpine Swift and Bee-eater. Return from the spur to the main trail.

**4** Continuing on the path you will begin a descent and finally reach the Collelungo. The path ends at the beach and it is worth exploring the beach and dune vegetation. The beach cliffs hold Red Valerian and Silver Ragwort\* (*Jacobaea maritima*).

After exploring the beach, return on the trail 100m and now follow the path along the water through the pine woodlands back to the car park.

**5** Explore the brackish channel at regular intervals to look for European Pond Terrapins, dragonflies and birds. Little Grebe, Little Egret and Water Rails can be found foraging in the channel, whilst Turtle Dove, Hoopoe and Roller occur in the open pinewoods. The frog you may hear calling so loudly is the Italian Tree Frog.

**The Foce Ombrone walk** (€ 5; 4.9 km; easy)

This walk starts from the car park at the end of the road in Marina di Alberese, just a little further on than the previous one (GPS: 42.649394, 11.034615). Parking here requires paying the 5€ fee to enter the park and can be very popular with beachgoers (in summer, refreshments are available at a small café). The walk to the mouth of the Ombrone River starts off the northern loop of the parking area.

**6** The walk the path through the low dunes leads you where you turn left onto the path that parallels the beach and the brackish wetlands (dry in summer and autumn). In spring this stretch provides a good opportunity to see migrating flycatchers and warblers among others. In addition, scan the sea for Scopoli's and Yelkouan Shearwater (spring to autumn) and Gannet (winter).



The freshwater channel along the base of the Uccellina Range is fed by clean seepage water and attracts many dragon- and damselflies, butterflies and amphibians.



Umbrella Pines are evocative of the Tuscan coast, including Maremma (top). Short-toed Eagle can be seen foraging over these open pinewoods and the nearby macchia (bottom).

**7** The trail leads to the mouth of the Ombrone River, where a hide offers views of the river and adjoining habitats and is an ideal place to view the sandbars. While quieter in summer, various herons and egrets, including Squacco Heron are possible. The Spring and

Autumn migration (starting in late summer) can offer a good variety of shorebirds (Golden Plover, Whimbrel, Curlew, Ruff, Spotted Redshank and many others). Gulls, including Audouin's Gull, and Little, Sandwich and Common Terns are also attracted to the river mouth. Late in the year small numbers of waterfowl can be found including Ferruginous Duck. The vegetated shorelines attract migrating pipits, wheatears and wagtails.

**8** The trail routes to the north and then turns right to return via the inland path through the wetlands and pine forest. During the summer months, Rollers can be seen in foraging flights over the pines, while Greater Flamingos, Cranes (winter) and Osprey (summer) are possible to see in flight. The Osprey is the result of a reintroduction that brought birds

from Corsica to the coast of Grosseto. This path will take you to the main road and the parking area. During the drive out, especially at dusk, there is an opportunity to spot Crested Porcupine.

### Additional Sites

Besides the two walks described above there are a few roadside locations just outside Maremma Nature Park which are attractive and have the advantage of being easily accessible.

**9** The roadsides just south of Alberese are in April and May excellent spots to search for orchids. They grow in the mowed parts right next to the tarmac and include, besides many thousands of Early Spider Orchids, good numbers of less common species, like Bumblebee, Bertoloni's Orchid and Naked Man Orchids. From the central square in Alberese follow the main road south toward Roma. Once you pass the intersection of the Strada Valle Giardino look for small turnoffs along the next 3 kilometres to park and explore.

**10** During the winter months, the fields north of Alberese on both sides of the Ombrone River provide excellent opportunities to see flocks of Crane, Greylag, White-fronted and Barnacle (rare) Geese, as well as other waterfowl and raptors. In summer, look for Greater Short-toed Lark in these fields. Drive north out of Alberese toward the park entrance and explore the small roads on the south side of the river, then drive in the direction of Grosseto and cross the river at Grancia before turning left to explore the roads on the north side of the river. It is much safer searching on small roads as the main roads have frustratingly few turnoffs.

**11** The beach on the north side of the Ombrone River is accessed by walking 8 km roundtrip from the parking area in the small community of Principina a Mare. The walk provides unrestricted access to the coastline that avoids the Maremma Park entrance requirements and is an opportunity to explore the beach and edge of the coastal dunes and juniper thickets for coastal flora. You can access the north side of the Ombrone River mouth for birding.



Bumblebee Orchid, a Mediterranean specialty that is always found close to the coast, is just one of the orchid species that can easily be spotted along unmowed roadsides or in unploughed olive orchards at point 9.