

Date: 15/07/2010 Place: i Prati Kms walked: not sure
Kms Left: Still don't know – one of these fine days I'll work it out!

It seems like quite a long time since I wrote last but in fact it's only been a week. So, “what's new?” I hear you ask. Well to start with I had another rather dramatic adventure – this time caused by terrain as opposed to animals!

From Rieti I headed to the St Francis Sanctuary of La Foresta where he is said to have finished his 'Canticle to the Creatures'. It was beautiful, peaceful and remote. Next day I headed off by road (there was no 'camino') to Terminillo where St Francis remains are now kept. It was a hard slog, 15kms (about 10 miles) to climb 1000m (3250feet) in altitude. Fortunately the road was mainly shaded. There was a campsite just before Terminillo which was where I was heading. By 15:00 I was less than half a km from the campsite but had to rest.

As I stood there, leaning on my trusty staff, I looked up and noticed a car had stopped ahead. It started to reverse down the road to me. I was just getting ready to either say “I don't know” if the person was asking for directions, or “Many thanks but I am on a walking pilgrimage” if they were about to offer me a lift, when who should it turn out to be but Giulio, someone I had met and chatted to the previous day after Mass at La Foresta. It seemed extremely churlish to refuse his offer so I gratefully climbed in. The campsite was literally round the corner! He took me in and we found the man in charge who looked doubtful at first, but then when Giulio explained I was a pilgrim and it was just for one night, he showed me a place I could set up tent, beside a parked caravan, adding that the people would be arriving the next day. I promised I would be away early. I thanked Giulio for his kindness in stopping and helping me and he was on his way.

Set up tent, showered, washed clothes and then set off to Terminillo Church, about 2kms and a further albeit short climb away, hoping there would be a Mass in the evening. I had not walked 50yards from the campsite but who should be coming the other way but Giulio again! He stopped, turned round and insisted on taking me up to the Church. This was not against my principles as I knew I would have to walk that distance the next day anyway. So he turned out to be a Guardian Angel twice over. I am fairly sure the chap at the campsite would not have let me stay had it not been for Giulio – the site seemed to cater for caravans and campervans/motorhomes, not tents. Also although I had now had a refreshing shower and had cooled off, I was still quite weary from the day's walk, so the lift to the Church was a real gift.

The Church was beautiful, peaceful. But somehow it seemed wrong for St Francis to be in this place which is actually a holiday resort, a ski centre. In the 'off season' it was lifeless, with no soul. The Mass was attended by only 7 people. On the other hand perhaps St Francis preferred it this way, there were no hordes of tourists with their ever flashing cameras, ignoring signs depicting 'No Photographs'. Who can say!

Anyway, stepping down from the soapbox, I met another Guardian Angel at the Church who showed me the start point for my next day's walk, Terminillo to Poggio Bustone, using the route which according to my map was part of the way marked Via Francigena de San Francesco. The fact that there were no actual waymarks from the Church should have been a clue. So should the fact that on the map, it indicated one followed a 'sentieri', a waymarked footpath similar to the GR paths in France. Also the map showed contour lines indicating that the path climbed to just over 1800m (5850 feet). In my innocence I didn't notice any of this!

Next day off I went and found the path easily. Initially it was a lovely, wide dirt track through shaded woods. After a time it became narrower and narrower and started to climb with a vengeance. Then it emerged from the woods and followed basically animal tracks up the mountainside. It was very well way marked and the views were stupendous but I am afraid of heights and unless I am on a safe, wide road, stupendous views can leave me ill at ease!



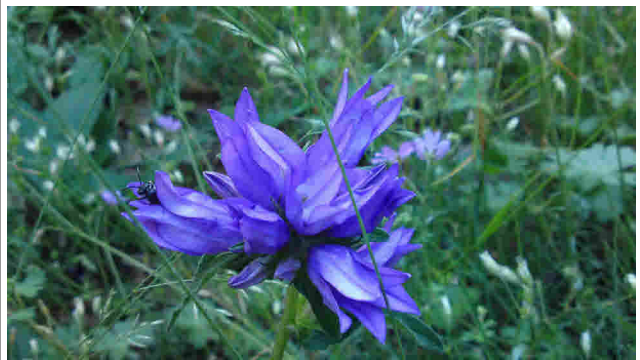
Pleasant track thru woods



.....becomes narrower and less distinct



Pause for prayer

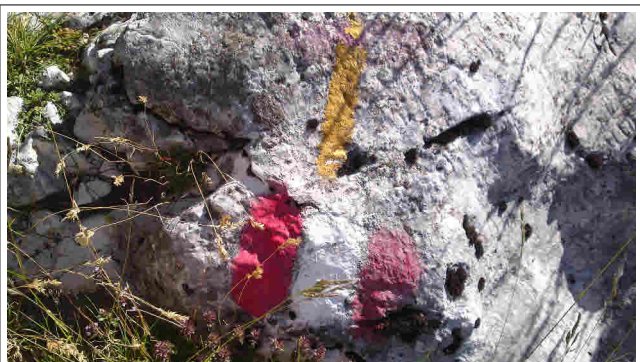


..... and photograph a flower

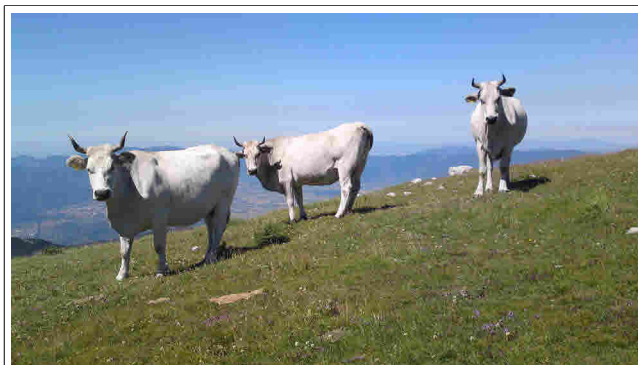
Up and up it climbed, then turning a corner I hit wind. Shortly the wind stopped. Eventually I reached a point where it flattened out and there was a water trough and could rest and safely take in the view. It was beautiful. But I was not yet at the top – I still had another 100m to climb. On it went and I passed a herd of grazing cattle, curious but not aggressive. Then I was nearly at the top. Every now and again as I rounded a contour I would feel the wind from the other side of the mountain. There was no path now, just waymarks on stones to follow.



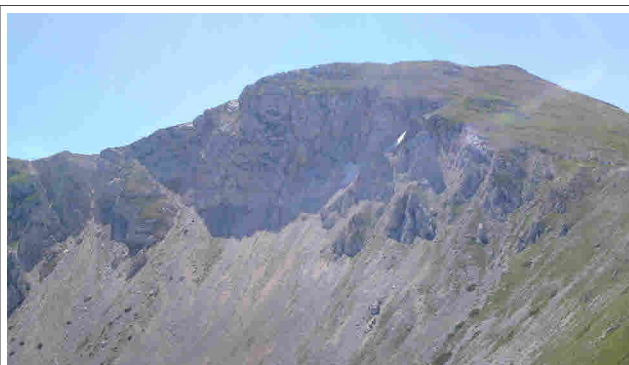
No actual path



..... just markings on stones



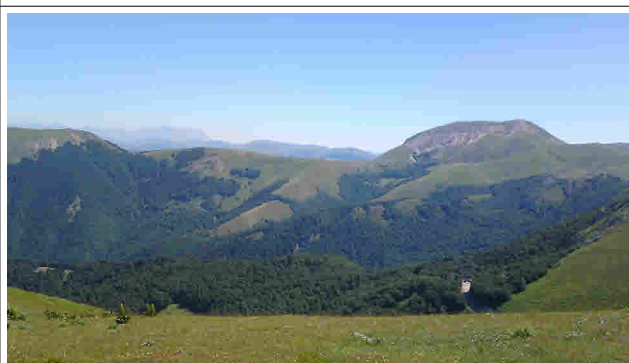
Curious mountain cattle



No, fortunately I was not going up there!



I was now so high I could see right across the Rieti Valley on my left, and beyond the mountains that mark the other side of it



The view on the other side, to my right

Then there was the final ascent. It was not much higher that I was already, and it was a small hummock over which I had to go. The sides were too steep to go round it. As I went to step onto it I could feel the wind. I'm sorry to say that yet again I was terrified! I put my staff into my left hand and leaned all my weight against it to stop being blown over. The hummock of rock was not narrow – about 6 feet wide, but the combination of height and wind rendered me almost rooted to the spot. I thought about turning back, but the way down was nearly as bad as the way forward – I dreaded to think what the way on from here might be like! I thought of Psalm 23 on which I have meditated a few times, the version with which I particularly have an empathy has the line

“Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death, I should fear no danger, for you are at my side.”

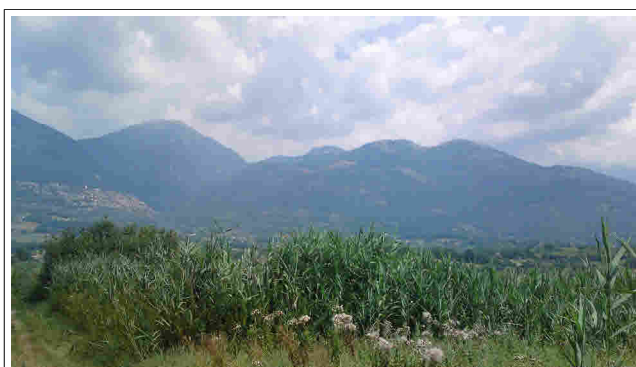
I told myself the Lord held me in his arms and I inched forward repeating “Baby steps, baby steps, baby steps, baby steps” and then I was over it and the wind dropped. The terrain flattened and widened out. But like the episode with the dogs I was not out of the woods yet!

I lost the waymarks, found them, lost them and found them again. There were steep descents – at one point I thought I would have to negotiate the route on my behind! For every descent I seemed to have another hard slog up again. And yet I knew that to get to Poggio Bustone I had to go down about 1000m again. Eventually I ended up on a dirt road that went down, down, down. It was very stony in places so you had to pick your way carefully. I had the distinct feeling I was not on the correct path. Actually I didn't care. I was so glad to be getting off the mountainside and away from steep, narrow paths and non-paths! I felt sure this road would take me somewhere!

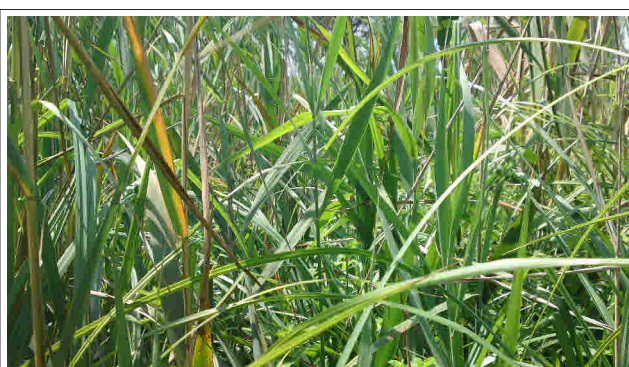
I was right – I was on the wrong path, and it did take me somewhere! I had passed wooden signs showing the direction for Terminillo (correctly) but it indicated Poggio Bustone to be straight on. I now believe that I should have turned right. The actual signs had become detached from the signpost and were lying on the ground. Anyway it transpired that the 'sentieri' I was on was taking me to Cantalice, so I had gone round half a circle! The waymarked Via F de San Francesco goes from La Foresta through Cantalice to Poggio Bustone. I found a place to pitch the tent and settled down for the night. Looking at the map and contour lines, I feel sure that the correct route entailed more steep descents, and having been walking for over 10 hours, would have been attempting them at a time when I was getting very tired which is when I tend to stumble. So I am quite sure that in taking the wrong route I was being protected yet again by God and your prayers. Next day I reached Poggio Bustone with no incident!

Lesson learnt was that I am not going to take any more 'sentieri' paths unless I know them and feel comfortable with them. As a result I have changed my route. There is a path I took in 2008, it only goes to a bit over 900m but I found it uncomfortable in places so I will not go that way this time.

From Poggio Bustone I set off for Greccio which I had visited in 2008. Poggio Bustone is 800+m up on one side of the valley and Greccio is 600+m high on the other side. It is a beautiful place, again quiet and peaceful. I did not think I would make it on one day. Again I was right! Although I was now again on the official way marked route I could not believe it when in the Nature Reserve thru which you walk I encountered not a path but a jungle! It was like bamboo cane stalks, about 8 feet high and no path! There was a post and rail fence which I (correctly) assumed marked the edge of the path so I followed it, feeling as though I was in the Amazon!



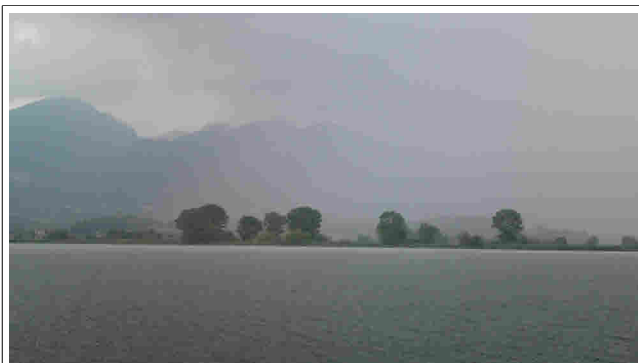
Approaching the 'jungle'
(notice the clouds!)



.... and in the jungle!

As I was fighting my way thru the vegetation, clouds appeared over the mountains near Terminillo and the humidity rose considerably. I suspected a storm was about to erupt. Again I was right. This being a nature reserve with lakes, there was a bird hide, a little hut at the waterside. I was by now absolutely drenched with sweat and although it was only just after 14:00 I had a strong feeling I should stop.

So I did, hoping the hut roof was watertight. Good decision! About 10mins after I stopped, the storm broke. Absolutely incredible thunder and lightning. It rained, though not as heavily as you would have expected. As I listened to the storm I was thinking about what might have happened had I been just 2 days later arriving at Terminillo. The morning had been clear and sunny, giving no warning of what was to come. So I would have set off up the mountain and been caught in that storm!



Storm over Terminillo

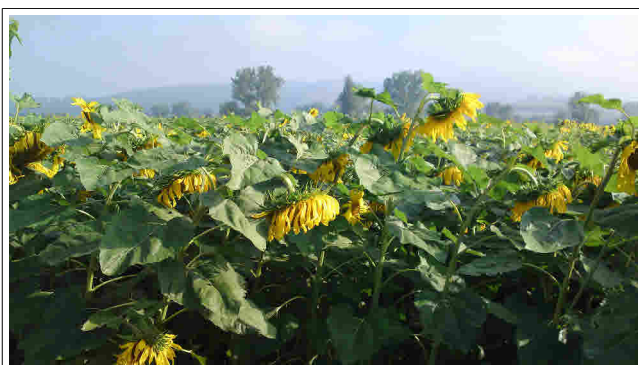


Unusual places to sleep No. 1!

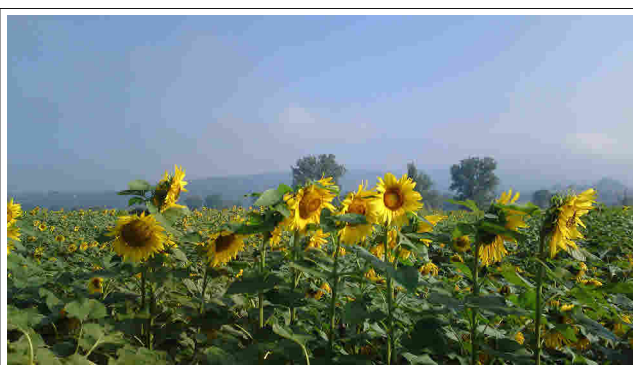
About 18:30, having written my diary entry and started to look at my ongoing route, I heard voices. "OK" I thought to myself "the game's up. It's the Nature Reserve Wardens arriving to tell me I can't stay here"! Wrong. It was a group, could have been a family, of what sounded like Russians who had arrived to do some fishing. They seemed amused at the sight of my clothes drying in the hut. They went about their business, I continued to study my maps. They left as it was starting to get dark. I settled down to sleep.

Next day I headed off to Greccio. En route missed a turning left I should have taken which cost me 1.5hrs though in my defence there was no waymark indicating the turn. I was lucky that I stopped to check a signpost to discover I was heading back to Poggio Bustone! (The route branches and then the branches rejoin). However the result was I met a couple of Italians who were doing part of the Rieti Valley route and I was able to warn them about the jungle.

But also en route I came across a field of sunflowers! Many were upright and open, but there were a few asleep, in the shadow of a tree where the sun's rays had not yet been able to wake them. I thought if I listened hard enough I might hear them gently snore!



Sunflowers waiting to be awoken by the sun's rays

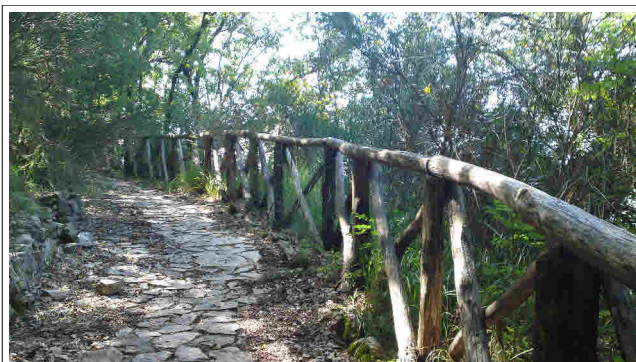


Sunflowers awake and greeting the day – though one or two look still a little sleepy!

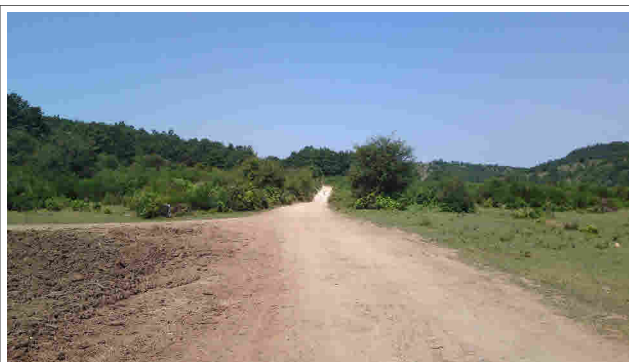


Sanctuary of Greccio	St Francis waits at the bottom of the steps (there are several flights!) to greet pilgrims
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But yesterday was magic. I knew from 2008 that there was a route from Greccio to Stroncone over the mountains, and although strenuous, was easy in terms of the path (it was wide with a fence in places). And one is rewarded for the steep climb by walking along a lovely, level plateau for a km or so. I walked along it listening to beautiful arrangements of Rodrigo's Guitar Concerto and Bach's Canon (I'm sure I have not spelt the names correctly!) on guitar and harp, thanking God for the beautiful blue sky, green trees, level route, my ears and ability to hear, my legs and ability to walk, the composers of the music, the arrangers of that version, the musicians that played that version, the people involved in the technology of recording the music, those involved with the technology that allowed me to put the music onto an MP3 player, and those who developed headphones that allowed me to listen to it.



The kind of path I like – wide, flat and with guard rails where necessary!



The beautiful plateau of Piani di Ruschio

At the end of the plateau is a small village, i Prati with a campsite. I wanted to stop there for two nights as I had been walking for 16 days and had counted on having 1 day off in every 14. The wonderful lady at the Information Office at Greccio Sanctuary had phoned ahead for me to make sure there was a place. Apparently they were not accepting people in cars but would accept someone on foot so another Guardian Angel had appeared for me. She also photocopied a part of the map to show me the route from here to my next destination.

It was quite a short journey so I arrived and had the tent up by 12:30. It's quite a novelty to be camping actually on a campsite! And it has a swimming pool advantage of which I took after sorting the tent out. Then I celebrated the start of my rest with a beer – the first I had had since leaving Rome. Also today is my birthday so I am going to push the boat out and eat out. There were 2 occasions when I was fed as part of being cared for as a pilgrim where I was given accommodation. Apart from that, I have not had a hot meal since leaving the Franciscan Friary in Germany where I stayed for a few days before coming to Rome. I shall probably have some wine as well – again the first since leaving Rome.

So again thank you for your prayers and good wishes.

Take care and God Bless

from a very blessed, happy, contented pilgrim :-)