



## **The Saint Francis Walk: Natural Elements**

By Bianca Maria Landi, naturalist and expert in the Rieti territory

The vista is open and spacious, marked by rows of poplars that break up the planted fields. The surrounding hills lead the eye skyward, towards the peaks of the Terminillo in the background. This is how the Rieti valley appears today, where centuries ago St. Francis first set out the Walk.

When St. Francis explored this valley, he discovered an extraordinarily varied nature, alive with multi-hued colours, varying from the valley to the hill. Enormous **oaks** define the landscape bordering the lake regions, and the areas where the Saint once walked must have been cloaked in **forests and brush** that are still present in large part today.

Despite repeated attempts to reclaim the area during Roman times, mining in the travertine bank of the Marmore Falls from the ancient **Iacus Velinus**, which dates to the Quaternary period, extended across the Rieti plain. Ancient sources claim that the Saint was forced to use a boat to cross the basin to get from one side to the other.

At the time, large mammals populated the area, including **deer** that subsequently found refuge in the hills before indiscriminate hunting wiped them out altogether. St. Francis used to converse with the elements of nature that surrounded him on a daily basis. But what does the area that prompted the Saint's mystic fervour look like today? It's certain that St. Francis knew the towns of Poggio Bustone, Greccio, Fonte Colombo, La Foresta, the best-known Franciscan localities in the Rieti area. But there are others worth noting, either because they are the site of miraculous events - like St.'Elia - or because they are linked to legends passed down through the ages, like the legend of the Beech tree on the mountain above Cepparo di Rivodutri. The Saint Francis Walk includes Pian de' Valli on Mount Terminillo and the village of Posta in the high valley of the Velino.

The vegetation one encounters on the various itineraries is extremely rich and mutable according to the seasons. Species variety is so abundant that it's rare to encounter it elsewhere. The **lakes of the plain** (at 370 meters above sea level) are in a good state of preservation, lush with the vegetation typical of areas that are both perennially submerged and dry in other parts.

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**Saint Francis Walk – Province of Rieti Tourist Board**  
**via Cintia, 87 02100 Rieti**

[www.camminodifrancesco.it](http://www.camminodifrancesco.it) [info@camminodifrancesco.it](mailto:info@camminodifrancesco.it)

tel. +39 0746 201146      +39 0746 201147      +39 0746 201011      fax +39 0746 270446

Surrounding the lakes of Ventina, Ripa Sottile, Lungo or Cantalice, Fogliano, to name the most important, are **forests** mostly populated by willow trees, white poplars, black alders and black elders, along with travellers-joy, bramble bushes and hop, which ensure a large degree of diversity.

In certain periods of the year these are inhabited by cormorants, egrets, grey herons, marsh harriers, buzzards and the like.

The riverbeds are framed by vegetation typical of marshy areas. The **water irises** are especially beautiful during the spring bloom.

The marshy areas provide home to many **birds** that find their ideal habitat here and come to nest.

Thus little grebes, whistle ducks, mallards, teals, pochards, spoon-billed ducks, tufted ducks, bulls of the bog, little egrets, moorhens and other birds live in these areas where land, water and plants seem to merge into one extraordinary ecosystem.

But similar woods are present along the rivers Velino, Salto, San Susanna. This is the ideal environment for **porcupines, foxes** and other wild game.

Beyond the fields, the geometry of the bushes and the unique woods defined by olive groves, the mixed **broad-leaved forest** becomes the protagonist.

Normally these are deciduous species that lose their leaves after autumn's bright palette of colours, dulling the landscape into depressing tones. **Oak trees**, the friendly giant of the forest, spring up here and there. Up higher, **chestnut trees** form woods that have always been planted and cared for by man. Known as the tree of bread and good wood, the broad-trunk Chestnut brings us into an enchanted fairytale world that's not just in our imagination.

Surrounding the Sanctuaries, at times forming a crown around the walls, are **holm-oak woods**. They have been here from time immemorial and with their dark green foliage they confer an air of solemnity to the environment.

Higher still a **beech forest** dominates the landscape, the tall column-like trunks decorated by multi-coloured lichens stand silhouetted against a winter's sky or against the warm green of the hot seasons or against brilliant autumn colours.

The territory belongs to **animals** that take shelter from man, but make their presence known especially once the sun goes down. It's the land of the fox and badger, the squirrel and dormouse, the woodpecker and jay, the wise old owl and hoot owl with its sad song along with hundreds of other song birds.

To sum up, along the paths trodden by St. Francis one finds the simplest – hence the most sublime – spirituality. One climbs with the trees, following the changing

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landscape. Below the fields speak of ancient history, of a **farming community** that for centuries lived off the resources of the land, at times generous mother, at times hostile antagonist. A history written by pollard willow trees, elms used to steer vines, oaks that provided shade to herds, poplars that towered along the ditches.

Up higher, the path becomes a forest that varies and changes in form and colour; the maple, ash, sorb, oak, laburnum, and splashes of juniper and broom that alternate with the high pastures, beech groves and of spires of St. Francis' rocky cathedrals.

Following the Walk, **panoramas open up unexpectedly**: high plateaus and deep valleys, thick forests and immense isolated trees. The rough and gnarly trunks seem to announce that for centuries these natural fortresses were the custodians of the Franciscan Rule.

So the centuries-old **Saint Francis Beech**, with its imposing and twisted trunk, so different from others of the species, appears to be the entranceway to God's temple on earth.

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