

3. A WALK AROUND AND TO THE TOP OF MOUNT CUCCO

“Meadows-pastures, fossils and panoramic views”

(TRAILS N. 226 – 240 - 239)

Lenght: 6,5 km, circular walk

Difference in elevation: 370 m

Time: 4 hours

Difficulty: E

Drinking water available: yes (Fonte Ghiacciata)

Note: A particular difficulty of the route is reported in the descent from the top of Monte Cucco to the entrance to the Grotto, due to the steep slope and the presence of treacherous and slippery rocks

Follow the road that leaves the Flaminia at Sigillo in the direction of Val di Ranco and ascends towards the mountain until you get to the south launching area for hang gliders. This is where hang gliding aficionados exploit the thermals on days when the winds are favorable to take to the air. Leave your car here and take the moderately steep Trail 226. After about 800 m, the barely visible Trail 240 on your left will lead you to vast, spectacular scenery. The path begins a gradual ascent and then levels out for a long stretch along the edge of a mountain ridge, from where your gaze sweeps over the green valley of the River Chiascio. From here you can see the villages in the foothills, surrounded by a circle of gentle hills, whereas in the distance you get a glimpse of Mt. Subasio, Mt. Terminillo and, on a clear day, of Mt. Amiata.

The path is rather exposed and at first is covered by turf, which disappears when the substrate becomes poor and increasingly rocky. This is where some very beautiful fossils appear on the rocks just before Fonte Ghiacciata, testimony to a long, fascinating, geological history. If you pick up a few stones and observe them closely, you'll see they consist of numerous, miniscule, white grains



Monte Cucco from the hang glider



Hang glider in flight

with concentric layers, known as oolites: this is carbonate sand deposited on the sea bed approximately 200 million years ago, when the story of the Umbria-Marche basin began, where the deposits were subsequently raised to become our Apennines. If you are careful and inquisitive, you can find fossilized ammonites (here you can find the largest examples of the grey ammonite), bivalves, gastropods and the remains of organisms alive millions of years ago and preserved intact, despite the numerous transformations their environment has undergone. A tangible testimony of a bygone past, which retraces the major geological steps, which Leonardo da Vinci called “Nature’s pranks.” After a brief stop at Fonte Ghiacciata, a karst spring where you can refill your water bottle, continue along Trail 240 until it meets Trail 226 coming up from Val Rachena. The route does not deviate downhill towards Pian delle Macinare. Instead, it continues around the peak of Mt. Cucco and plunges into a cool beech wood, which blends with maple and whitebeam at tree height, and with

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butcher's broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*), snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*), alpine squill (*Scilla bifolia*), crocus (*Crocus vernus*) and wild garlic (*Allium ursinum*) in the undergrowth. As you come out of the wood, after a short exposed stretch you meet Trail 239 on the right with a 100 m ascent over a stretch of about 300 m, which leads you to the top of Mt. Cucco (1566 m). An enchanting view opens up over the surrounding mountains and valleys. This is one of the best views in the central Apennines. On a clear day you can see: the Sibillini mountains, Mt. Terminillo, Monti della Laga to the south; the Conero and the Adriatic coast to the east, the Serre di Burano, the mountains of Catria, Nerone, Casentino and Falterona to the north; and the hills of Perugia and Lake Trasimeno, the Argentario and Mt. Amiata to the west. The meadows on the top of Mt. Cucco are secondary pastures, created by man who, since Roman



Ammonite

times, has deforested the mountain peaks to gain more space for pasture. Previously, they had been covered by forests which did not reach above the limit of the trees.

The practice of pasturing animals has led to a decline in the meadows, especially on the

very steep slopes and where the animal footprint has been above the acceptable level, and the rocky substratum of the geological outline of Mt. Cucco, consisting of considerably thick layers of limestone, has resurfaced. This formation prevents surface water streams from forming, so that rainwater is channeled underground and, together with the gradient and direction of the calcareous stratifications, the karst phenomenon has led to the formation of numerous sinkholes and caves, including the well-known Mt. Cucco Cave. The meadows on the summit have a rich



Walking on path 226

variety of important species of flora, such as the viola of Eugenia (*Viola eugeniae*), narcissus (*Narcissus poeticus*), orange lily (*Lilium bulbiferum*), Martegon lily (*Lilium martagon*), white asphodel (*Asphodelus albus*), fritillaria (*Fritillaria tenella*), oxlip (*Primula elatior*), crocus (*Crocus vernus*), spring gentian (*Gentiana verna*), elderflower orchid (*Dactylorhiza sambucina*) and many others, which put on an intense display of brightly-colored spring and summer blossoms. From the summit you can easily watch not only birds of prey flying overhead, such as the kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), buzzard (*Buteo buteo*), sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), but also the rock partridge (*Allectoris graeca*) and choughs (*Pyrrhoxorax pyrrhoxorax*).

Turn back from the ridge and go back down the same trail until you meet Trail 226 again and follow it to the right. After a short, high stretch, the path descends with tiny, uneven bends which, at a certain point, wind beneath a characteristic, natural archway leading to the cave of Mt. Cucco (1390 m), on the face of which grows the rare mountain cowslip (*Primula auricula*). If you stand just in front of the entrance to the cave, let your gaze wander to the horizon where, on a clear day, you can see the Adriatic Sea. In the foreground to the southeast, you can pick out Mt. Lo Spicchio and Mt. Culumeo with the valley of San Pietro in between. The route now continues along Trail 226 to the starting point.



Young whitetail



Orange lily