

El Montgrí, les Illes Medes i el Baix Ter Natural Park Guide



Parc Natural
del Montgrí, les Illes Medes
i el Baix Ter



Generalitat
de Catalunya

LOCATION



Credits

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Location

The Natural Park is located between the Alt (Upper) and Baix (Lower) Empordà, in north-east Catalonia, about 50 km from the French border and in the heart of the Costa Brava.

It extends from L'Escala in the north to Pals in the south, and covers over 8000 ha, 2000 of which are marine coast. The name indicates the variety of landscapes and unique elements that can be found there: the Montgrí Massif, les Illes Medes (both the islands and the submerged areas) and the Baix Ter plain. It is made up of 8 municipalities which are rich in heritage, nature and history, some of them markedly tourist-oriented.

EMPORDÀ COSTA BRAVA



MONTGRÍ, LES ILLES MEDES I EL BAIX TER NATURAL PARK

Protected surface

Land: 6155.20 ha | Marine: 2,039.99 ha

Municipalities

Torroella de Montgrí, Pals, Ullà, Gualta, Palau-sator, Bellcaire d'Empordà, L'Escala, Fontanilles

Regions

Baix Empordà and Alt Empordà

Population

26,866 inhabitants (Source: Idescat 2016)

Structural dependence

Generalitat (Government) of Catalonia

Acknowledgements

Natura 2000 network including SACs (Special Areas of Conservation) and SPA (Special Protection Area) SPAMI (Specially Protected Area of Mediterranean Importance) ECST (European Charter for Sustainable Tourism)



Creation

LAW 15/2010 of 28 May declaration of the Montgrí, les Illes Medes i el Baix Ter Natural Park as two partial nature reserves and one full nature reserve.

Web

parcsnaturals.gencat.cat/ca/illes-medes
 Montgrí, les Illes Medes i el Baix Ter Natural Park

Management Headquarters

Passeig del Port, s/n · Espigó de Llevant
 17258 L'Estartit
 Tel. 972 75 17 01 · Tel. 972 75 20 04
 pnmbt@gencat.cat

Interpretation and documentation centre

Can Quintana. Mediterranean Museum
 C/ Ullà, 27-31 · 17257 Torroella de Montgrí
 Tel. 972 75 51 80 · Fax 972 75 51 82
 info@museudelamediterrania.cat
 www.museudelamediterrania.cat

INTRODUCTION

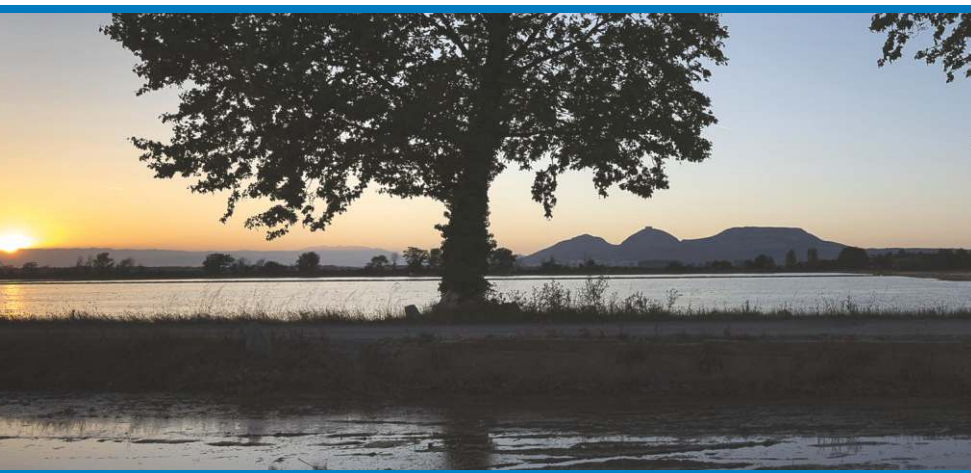


Photo: Vicenç Rovira - NP Photography contest

Take the coastal paths, the trails of the Montgrí Massif, the by-ways criss-crossing the plain and the historical routes. Enjoy the rich cultural heritage of the towns surrounding the Park, not to mention the local cuisine.

Introduction

Three landscapes in one park, although in reality we could say there are a few more than that. The Montgrí Massif, the Illes Medes and the Baix Ter provide us with a constant of this Natural Park: its diversity. This can be seen in the scenery, the habitats, the species, the towns, and the array of possibilities and ways to get to know the park and grow to love it.

Discover the Montgrí coast from l'Escala to l'Estartit, walk along the fine sandy beaches between l'Estartit and Pals which separate the sea from the wetlands, marshes and tidal salt marshes just a stone's throw away. You will also delight in seeing a rare continental dune, a unique phenomenon in which a forested island rises amidst the limestone massif with remarkable biological and geological peculiarities. Another must is scuba-diving immersion around the Illes Medes and the Montgrí coast, or take advantage of the natural view points offered by the Park, especially the Castle and Roca Maura where you can marvel in the patchwork of farmland that surrounds the park and the final stretch of the river Ter.

In the park there are 38 natural habitats, 17 of European interest and 4 considered a priority for their conservation. The Park includes 32 heritage sites which have been declared as a BCIN (Bé Cultural d'Interès Nacional - Cultural Heritage of National Interest). We recommend a visit to Can Quintana Mediterranean Museum, home of the Natural Park's Interpretation Centre, and that you discover the Park by taking advantage of the nearly 180 km of signposted walks and/or cycle routes. You are sure to enjoy yourselves and fall in love with the area!


The dolphin cave · Photo: Xavier Salont Moix



THE MUNICIPALITIES OF THE PARK



1 *Bellcaire d'Empordà*



Perched atop a small hill and crossed by the Rec del Molí Canal, the medieval Castle-Palace and the former lake, now mainly dedicated to the cultivation of rice, are the highlights. Good restaurants and rural tourism facilities are also available.

2 *L'Escala*



L'Escala is a historic fishing village. One of the town's attractions is the Mac-Empúries, a universally renowned archaeological site. It is full of fish and seafood restaurants and is famous for its traditional salted anchovies. Sport and leisure activities available.

3 *Fontanilles and Llabià*



On the banks of the river Daró, these towns sit on an alluvial plain of gentle hills, highlighted by the Church and Castle. Alfalfa, grain, vegetables and fruit trees are the main crops, plus livestock and poultry. Rural tourism accommodations and restaurants also abound.

5 *Pals*



An exceptional, well-preserved medieval town, it surrounded by wetlands where high-quality rice has been cultivated since the 15th century. It is noteworthy for its rice dishes and its accommodation services, shopping, and active tourism, such as golf and water sports.

7 *Torroella i l'Estartit*



This was once a Royal Town, evident in its historical heritage. Its agricultural and livestock-based economy remains to this day. Industry, commerce and tourism now play a more important role and L'Estartit offers a wide variety of nautical and nature activities.

4 *Gualta*



The Rec del Molí canal runs through the centre of the village, which is centred around the Church. It has a flour mill dating from the 17th century and a 16th-century bridge crossing the river Daró. Golf, lodging accommodations and restaurants are available.

6 *Palau-sator*



This municipality includes the villages of Sant Feliu de Boada, Fontclara and Sant Julià, Palau-sator, and the Pataleu district. It stands out for its medieval architecture, typical of the villages of Baix Empordà. It also offers a wide range of rural accommodation and restaurants.

8 *Vilà*



The arid lands of the Montgrí Massif and the fertile part of the plain make for quite a contrast in this town on the banks of the Ter. The economy is agriculturally based: vineyards, olive groves, vegetable cultivation and orchards, along with a few industries, not to mention rural tourism and restaurants.

THE MONTGRÍ MASSIF



Photo: Laila Martinez - NP Photography contest

Unique geology

The Massif is like an island of limestone between the plains of the Alt and Baix Empordà, known locally as the "dead bishop" for the shape of its silhouette seen from north and south.

Rainwater filters through the limestone and over the millenniums this has led to the creation of underground aquifers and torrents, which are dry for most of the year. Erosion has formed caves (underwater and terrestrial), dolinas, coves and natural ports.

Eagle-owls, orchids and dry meadows

In the dry grasslands, the variety of orchids, the eagle-owl, Bonelli's eagle, the European shag and the bats are just some of the living treasures of the Massif.

The garrigue and aleppo pines cover the largest area of the Massif, while the continental dune with its moss and pine trees is also noteworthy, something rarely seen in the Mediterranean. The birds of prey are among the more prominent species of birds that nest in Montgrí.



Eagle owl - Bubo bubo - Photo: Albert Burgas

The Montgrí traditionally served as a major food source to local inhabitants, but at the end of the 19th century the exploitation of its resources dwindled.

Now, management tasks include the recovery of the patchwork of different spaces and measures to conserve habitats and species of interest.

The castle and dry stone architecture

Crowned by the medieval castle (13th century), Montgrí has been home to Palaeolithics (Eagle-owl Lairs), Iberians and Romans, and has an extensive dry stone architectural heritage.

Such treasure include the Santa Caterina Chapel and the remains of dry stone architecture such as shelters (closing walls), refuges, huts, limestone ovens, fountains, wells, cisterns, stone water holes, animal pens and vineyard cabins.



Photo: Josep Pascual - NP Photography contest

Recovering the patchwork of areas

The Natural Park aims to bolster the patchwork of wooded and open spaces, as habitats of interest, the sustainable use of its resources and the enjoyment of its visitors.

Grassy pastures are promoted as a form of management of the open spaces, conserving the most sensitive flora and fauna and improving their habitats. Measures have been taken to regulate the impact of erosion and fight against invasive species.

Extra virgin oil made from the Argudell variety of olives

Recovering the olive groves with the Argudell variety of olives has enabled the area to produce a top-quality agri-food product directly linked to its heritage of dry stone architecture.

The extra virgin olive oil from the Argudell variety of olives is associated to the recovery of abandoned areas, and in addition, has improved protection against area wildfires; the Natural Park promotes the biological control of plagues affecting the olive trees.

Ecotourism, year round

The Montgrí offers an ideal setting for active, outdoor and ecotourism all year round. Various itineraries and suggestions are available.

Hiking, mountain biking and horse riding are just some of the many possible activities. Organised walks, races and activities must be authorised by the park and motorised vehicles can only circulate on certain trails where it is permitted.



Red Fox - *Vulpes vulpes* - Photo: Albert Burgas

ILLES MEDES AND THE COAST

Les Illes Medes consist of 7 islets which provide a beautiful landscape, unique in Catalonia. The marine environment makes them exceptional: the coralline walls, the Posidonia sea meadows and a network of underwater caves and tunnels.

Geology

The high coastal cliffs are the best example of limestone rocky coast in Catalonia. These cliffs clearly show the geological phenomena that have created the Massif.

On the Illes Medes there are cliffs that plunge underwater to a depth of 50 m, riddled with tunnels and underwater caves, also found on the coast. The caves above sea level along on the coast are home to some of the largest populations of protected bats.

Posidonia meadows and coralline

The Posidonia oceanica sea grass is one of the best preserved examples along the whole Catalan coast and serves as a refuge and a food source to a good number of underwater species.

Along 75% of the perimeter on the surface we find the "trottoir" ledge, with large array of algae and small animals. From a depth of 15 m onwards, coralline, violescent sea-whip and red coral can be found, all of which are very sensitive to human impact.

Mediterranean Showcase

Almost all underwater environments of the Western Mediterranean are represented here and this gives exceptional ecological value to the archipelago.

The presence of large fish, such as the dusky grouper, the eagle ray, the croaker, the zebra seabream or the Gilt head bream. Also, pelagic predators can be observed such as Mediterranean barracudas or the blue fin tuna and, occasionally, of bottlenose dolphins, attracted by the abundance of food.

Yellow-legged Gull chick
Larus michaellis - Photo: Alex Lorente



Photo: Manisa Marc - NP Photography contest



Red scorpion fish - *Scorpaena scrofa* - Photo: Yeray Delgado and Abigail Martín. MIMA contest 2015

Seagulls, herons and insects

The most prevalent inhabitants of the Islands are yellow-legged gulls and herons, but we can also find the European shag, the peregrine falcon and the swift.

A great variety of insects coexist among the Mediterranean saltbushes, the prickly parsnip, sea fennel and the mallow, as well as some exotic plants such as the cat's claw and the prickly pear. They keep the old 1868 lighthouse company, which has been renovated and modernised.

Complete and partial reserves

The emerged part of the Illes Medes is classified as a complete nature reserve and must not be accessed without authorisation from the Park.

The maritime portion is a Partial Nature Reserve and sailing, anchoring, and diving are regulated with the extraction of resources being strictly prohibited.

Diving and sailing

The best ways to discover the Illes Medes and the Montgrí coast are by sailing and diving, following the regulations in each area.

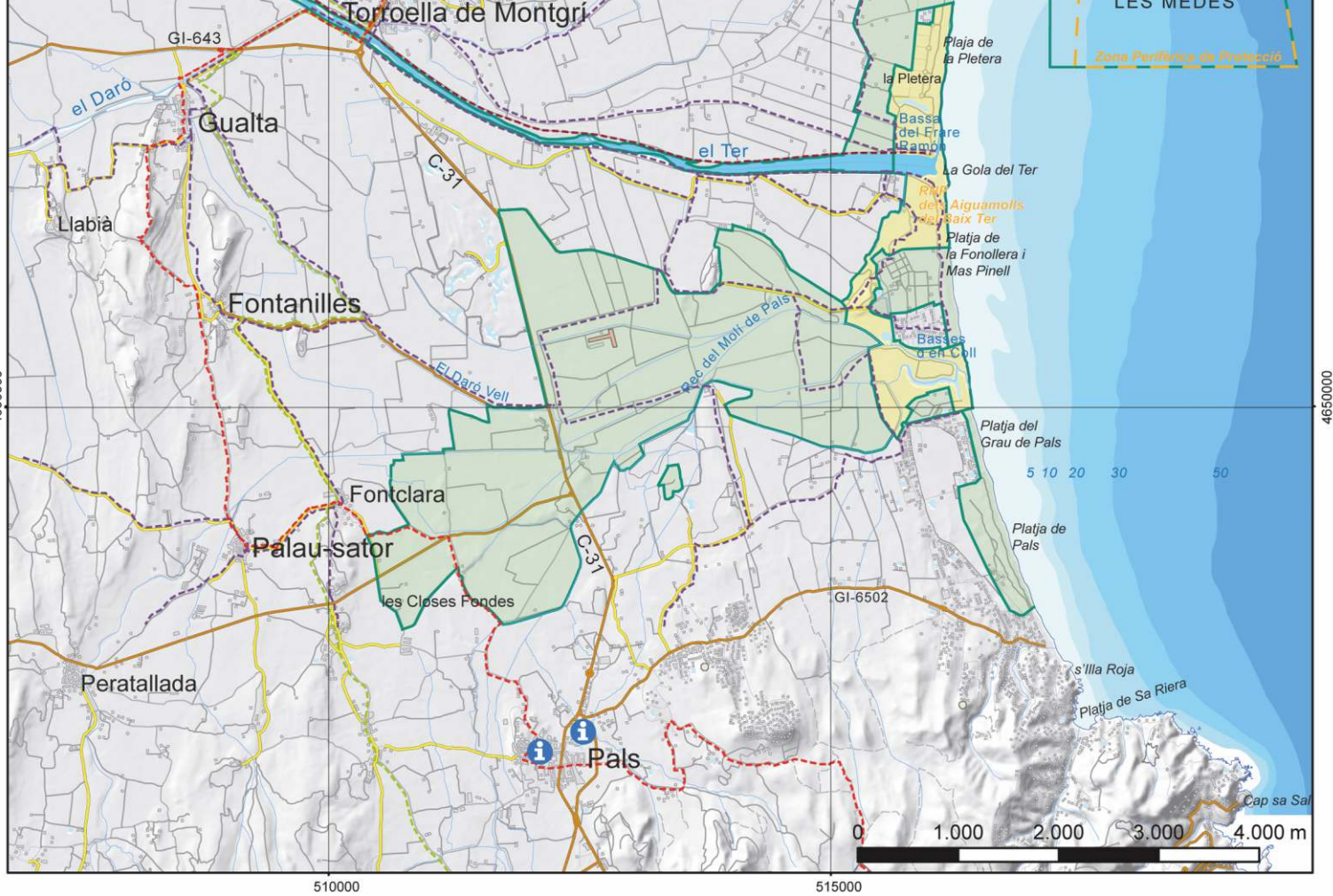
When underwater, touching the sea walls and bed should be avoided and the animals should not be touched or fed. On the surface, it is necessary to respect the safety distances and international maritime signal flags and not to disturb the wildlife.



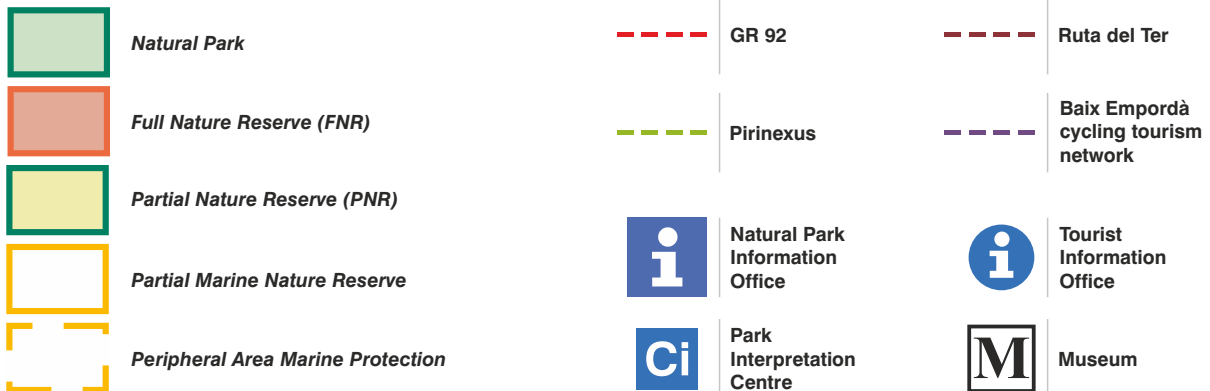
European shag - *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* - Photo: Àlex Lorente







PROTECTION SCHEMES



ACTIVITIES AVAILABLE

There are a wide variety of companies that offer many ways to explore, discover and enjoy the protected area, its culture and traditions.

- ✓ Interpretative hiking
- ✓ Guided tours
- ✓ Birdwatching
- ✓ Cycling and MTB tourism
- ✓ Horse riding
- ✓ Golf
- ✓ Nautical sports
- ✓ Scuba diving, snorkelling and free-diving
- ✓ Sailing
- ✓ Kayaking
- ✓ Boat rental
- ✓ Coastal walks
- ✓ Ultralight flights
- ✓ Nature school
- ✓ Visit museums and places of historical and cultural heritage
- ✓ Music festivals, culture and shows

Web sites of interest for your visit to the Park

parcsnaturals.gencat.cat/ca/illes-medes

www.visitestartit.com

www.visitlescala.com

www.visitpals.com

www.naturalocal.net

www.museudelamediterrania.cat

www.visitemporda.com

www.empordaturisme.com



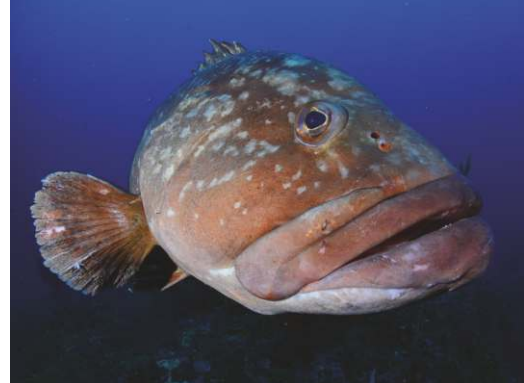
<https://www.facebook.com/pnmmbt/>



Eurasian Bittern · *Botaurus stellaris* · Photo: Joan Goy
NP Naturalist photography contest



Salema porgies, white and saddled seabreams · *Sarpa salpa*, *Diplodus sargus*,
Oblada melanura · Photo: Joan Pau Cassez, NP Naturalist photography contest



Dusky grouper · *Epinephelus marginatus* · Photo: Marc Casanovas · MIMA contest



Bonelli's Eagle · *Aquila fasciata* · Photo: Albert Burgas

European Roller · *Coracias garrulus* · Photo: Albert Burgas



Common bottlenose dolphin · *Tursiops truncatus* · Photo: Àlex Lorente



**More than 200 bird species
found in the Park**

**The diversity of fish, one of the main assets of the
Illes Medes. The dusky grouper, the symbol of the islands.**



Posidonia and the noble pen shell · *Posidonia oceanica*, *Pinna nobilis*
Photo: Joan Pau Cassez · NP Naturalist photography contest

**The posidonia, the noble pen shell and
the violescent sea-whip, three of the main
protected species of the sea bottom**



European crested tit · *Lophophanes cristatus* · Photo: Albert Burgas

**The Montgrí Massif is home
to rare species of orchids
such as the conical orchid**

Violescent sea-whip · *Paramuricea clavata* · Photo: Jordi Cantón



Conical orchid · *Orchis conica*
Photo: Quim Reverté



Sawfly orchid · *Ophrys tenthredinifera*
Photo: Quim Reverté



BEACHES AND DUNES



Sea daffodil · *Pancratium maritimum* · Photo: Miquel Jover



Kentish plover · *Charadrius alexandrinus* · Photo: Albert Burgas

The dune systems

The coastal sands are of great ecological value and represent one of the most extensive and well-preserved dune systems in Catalonia.

Formed from the sand provided by the sea, the rivers and the wind, the dunes are an ecosystem marked by the movement and dryness of its sands, where only a few specially-adapted species can survive.

European beachgrass and the Kentish Plover

Typical species include the Spanish psammodromus lizard, the Kentish plover, which nests there, European beachgrass, seen atop the ridges of the dune, and the sea daffodil.

This is a very specialised type of vegetation, with plants adapted to sandy soil, dryness and high salinity. There are insects, insectivorous birds, and the largest population of Spanish psammodromus lizards on the Girona coast.

A moving landscape

The strong northerly, south-westerly and easterly winds continually shape the appearance of the beach and the Ter estuary, where the river flows into the sea.

The storms and winds that carve the dune ridges turn them into a very dynamic system. The beaches remain very much in their natural state, which allows for a good transition from the coastal area towards the inland.

The natural park includes a practically uninterrupted 6 km stretch of natural beaches between l'Estartit and Pals, maintaining its functionality.

The beaches and dunes together form part of the same highly ecologically valuable system and constitute a natural reserve of sand which protects the coastline.

Protecting the Pletera

The dunes form a natural barrier between the sea and the wetlands of Ter Vell, the old mouth of the river Ter, and the tidal salt marshes of the Pletera; they are the subject of a Life programme to recover the natural area.

The recovery of the dune system along a approximately one-kilometre stretch 15 to 25 metres wide is one of the actions included in the Life-Pletera programme that aims to complete the restoration works which began in 2015.

Preserving the dunes

The Park has structured the access in order to reduce the indiscriminate number of trails which had caused the fragmentation and erosion of the dune areas.

Mechanical cleaning in the dune area has been stopped to enable growth and recovery, retention barriers have been erected to recreate the sedimentary layers that have suffered erosion and the perimeter has been signposted and cordoned off to prevent it from being trampled.

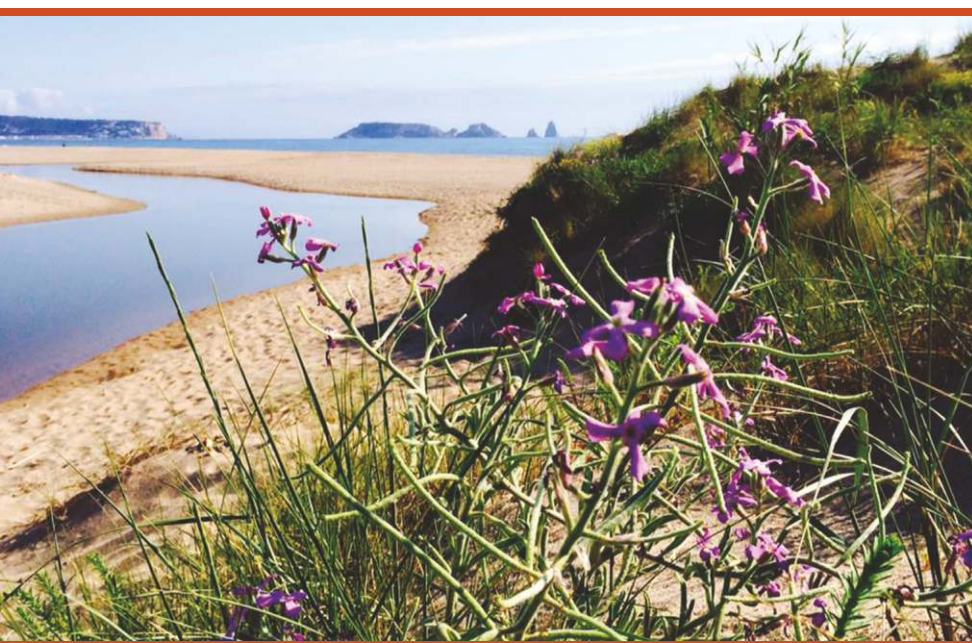


Photo: Esther Reig

Enjoying the beaches

The best way to access the beaches is to follow the set paths and not to cross the cordoned off areas that protects the dunes and the species there.

Vehicles must be parked in the assigned parking areas, accessing the beach on foot using the marked trails. Dog owners should ensure that their dogs do not go onto the dunes, where the Kentish plover nests, and keep them on a lead in areas where they are authorised.

Photo: Quim Arqués - NP Photography contest



Photo: Diego Escobar - NP Photography contest



WETLANDS AND MARSHES

Wetlands

The freshwater wetlands, created from the interaction of the rivers Ter and Daró as well as the affects of marine currents, are ecosystems which have great environmental value.

Most of these lagoons are remains of older riverbeds that have been separated from the main flow of the River, but in which a small supply of freshwater still flows, a precious asset for the area. The Ter Vell is one example.

The Baix Ter wetlands are a system resulting from the interaction between the rivers Ter and Daró and the sea. The area is under a great deal of pressure as regards the number of tourists visiting the area and therefore several natural space recovery programmes, funded by the European Union's LIFE project, have been carried out.



Photo: Francisco Surroca - NP Photography contest



Photo: Francisco Surroca - NP Photography contest

Reservoir of biodiversity

The wetlands are a reservoir of biodiversity and numerous species find refuge among the reeds and bulrush and also an abundant food supply.

It is easy to observe a wide variety of birds there, including the mallard duck, little grey heron, the cattle egret, the Eurasian bittern and the marsh harrier, plus turtles and other fish, reptiles and amphibians. Even some mammals, such as otters, can be found.

Marshes

The marsh is formed by a depression beyond the ridge of the beach dunes, so its low elevation causes it to flood during heavy rains or storms.

The clay substrate retains the water and salt brought in with the sea water during storms and raises the salinity of the soil. It forms a distinctive landscape carpeted with green and reddish brown of the saltwort meadows and rushes in areas where salinity is not so high.



Black-winged stilt - *Himantopus himantopus* - Photo: Albert Burgas

Rice fields

There is a long tradition of rice cultivation in Torroella de Montgrí and Pals, which is compatible with the conservation of wetlands. In the spring the fields take on the image of large sheets of water.

The rice paddies serve as a pantry that nourishes countless birds who have a ready supply of creatures to feed on. Herons, egrets and various waders pass through throughout the year. The varieties of rice grown in Pals are noted for their fine quality.

Restoration of habitats

The restoration of la Pletera, the conservation of the populations of Spanish toothcarp and Kentish plover are a special objective to be managed by the Natural Park.

The network of dunes need preserving, while the system of lagoons, the flooded paddocks and mudflats require maintenance, as do the wetland environments for the European pond turtle.

Life Programmes

These programmes have been an example of collaboration between the scientific community, the Government and the private sector to recover areas and habitats within the Natura 2000 network.

The restoration and structuring of the lagoons and coastal systems of the Baix Ter and the recovery of the amphibian and aquatic reptile habitats in the Baix Ter wetlands were milestones in the area's management and formed the basis for the creation of the Natural Park.



Little Grebe - *Tachybaptus ruficollis*
Photo: Albert Burgas



Foto: Josep Pascual

FARMLANDS



Photo: Alex Lorente

The backbone of the plain

The Ter River is both the origin and main support of the surrounding plain and together with the action of the sea, it is responsible for the creation of the water systems we find in the area.

The Daró and the Ter have yielded very fertile farmland with a complex system of canals and mounds. When the water flow rate is high, the nutrient contribution of the Ter is important in the maintenance of the Medes marine communities.

Photo: Pals Town Council

Vineyards and vegetable cultivation

Dry crops, such as vineyards and olive groves, are being recovered and can be found in non-irrigated areas, in the foothills and slopes of the massif.

The plain and the areas alongside the river banks are occupied by orchards and irrigated crops dedicated to fruit (mainly apples, peaches and pears), grain, fodder, rice and the cultivation of poplar forests.

The Vilanera spot connects the Park and the Wetlands of Empordà, as shown by the presence of otter trails along the Cinyana and Molí canals.

The area is home to Mediterranean false brome, protected flora, orchids and archaeological sites.

The Ter is life

In the final stretch of the Ter, the river functions like a typical Mediterranean estuary where freshwater mixes with the sea water, providing variable conditions of salinity and nutrients.

Freshwater blenny, a quite rare and protected small fish, live in the canals, along with naiads, a type of freshwater mussel. It is also an eel fishing area. Ash trees, elms, willows and poplars rise on the river banks. And where the level of salinity rises, tamarind and reeds can be found.

Photo: Lluïa Lluïa - Photo: Albert Burgas





Torroella de Montgrí - Estartit Town Council

The most characteristic feature of the landscape of the Baix Ter floodplain is the abundant crop land, a patchwork of irrigated and dry land, with farmhouses dotting the area, some with defence towers and many declared as a cultural heritage of national interest.

The moist conditions and the temperature are ideal for the cultivation of rice, a tradition which has been documented since the 13th century, especially in Torroella de Montgrí and Pals, though it is also grown in Sobrestany.

DISCOVERING THE PARK



Photo: Torroella de Montgrí - Estarrit Town Council

Photo: Landrea Roux

Nature Tourism

The wealth of landscapes of this area provides a wide array of sports and leisure activities on land, sea and air. Hiking, cycling and mountain biking trail networks, along with sporting activities managed by specialist companies, provide a wide range of nature activities. Visitors can go on walking or cycling excursions with varying levels of difficulty, or go horse riding, take a ride in an ultralight or a hot-air balloons, or enjoy a boat trip and other nautical and underwater activities.

The natural park provides visitors with signposted routes for exploring the area. Areas for walking and cycling, along flat terrain and mountain areas, have signposted paths with varying difficulty and length. A network of routes connects the various municipalities and the local trail network allows you to discover the area's most tucked away spots. Natural and cultural attractions, scenic routes that even allow you to travel from the Pyrenees down to the sea, encompass some of the most charming places of the Costa Brava: the Baix Empordà ciclotourism network, the Pirinexus route, the Ruta del Ter, the GR-92 and the network of walking, bicycle and car routes. The ports of L'Escala and L'Estartit are the departure point for boat trips, scuba divers, and many other nautical sports. There are a series of activities that can be practised in different parts of the Park: diving, kayaking, sailing, windsurfing, kite-surfing, paddle-surfing, among others.

Not to be missed!

Scuba-diving, free-diving and boat trips

The best way to discover the biological richness of the sea and the spectacular coastal scenery is going diving and/or taking a boat trip to Illes Medes and the Montgrí coast. The beaches of l'Estartit, Pals and l'Escala are especially well known for sailing sports.

The view from the Castle

A privileged view from the towers of the Montgrí castle overlooking the park provide panoramic scenes that can be admired from all angles.

The coast, by land and by sea

Views from the cliffs or the defence tower at Montgó, going for a walk along the coast, discovering the coves and natural ports... all make for a lovely visit to the coast or the sea.

The plain and the rice fields

Go horse riding, walking or cycling over the flatlands among the fruit trees, grain fields and vegetable gardens, or take a stroll beside the rice paddies, discovering the farmhouses and defence towers dotting the plain.

Gastronomy

The apple, anchovies from L'Escala, Argudell del Montgrí olive oil, rice from Pals, not to mention the fish and seafood from the coast and the meat raised right here in the Empordà all form part of some of the finest quality food products found anywhere.



Ajuntament de
Bellcaire d'Empordà



Ajuntament de
l'Escala



Ajuntament de
Fontanilles i Llabià



Ajuntament de
Gualta



Ajuntament de
Pais



Ajuntament de
Palau-sator



Ajuntament de
Torroella de Montgrí



Entitat Municipal
Descentralitzada
de l'Estartit



Ajuntament
d'Ullà



CONSELL COMARCAL
DEL BAIX EMPORDÀ



Consell Comarcal
de l'Alt Empordà



EUROPEAN CHARTER
FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN
PROTECTED AREAS



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