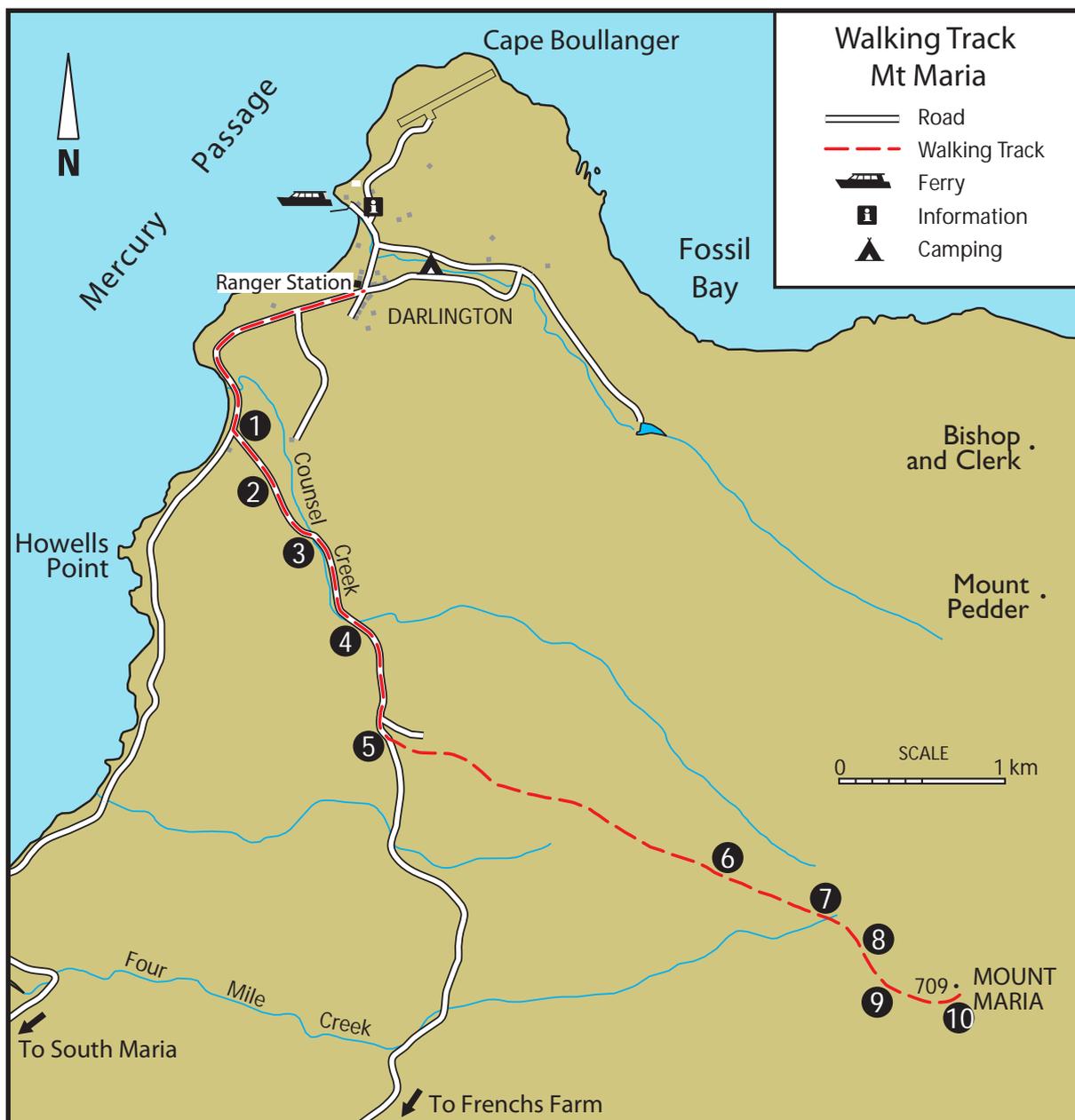




Maria Island National Park

MOUNT MARIA TRACK



Return Trip: 6 - 7 hours

Mount Maria at 711 m is the highest point on the island - a dolerite outcrop with sweeping views of the Tasmanian coast. The track begins south of Darlington near the mouth of Counsel Creek. It meanders through open woodlands ascending quite gently at first, and ends with half an hour of scrambling over rocky debris and boulders to reach the summit.

The track is marked with yellow arrows, and cairns (small piles of rocks). Take adequate clothing as the temperature at the summit may be much cooler. Wear sturdy shoes and carry enough food and water for the day. Take a map of Tasmania to help recognise some of the mountains and islands when you reach the top.

1. The beginning

Leave Darlington heading south along the coastal road. The Mount Maria track begins on the left hand side of the road just after Counsel Creek.

2. Pardalote country

Here you pass through open woodland, large blue gums (*Eucalyptus globulus*) dominating the landscape. This is wombat country and also one of the island's best spots for bird watching. Birds frequenting this area include cuckoos (fantailed, pallid, and golden bronze) and pardalotes (spotted, forty-spotted and striated). The forty-spotted pardalote is an endangered species, found only in coastal areas of Eastern Tasmania in association with the manna or white gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*).

3. First bridge

When crossing the creek you will notice a change in the understorey. Here it is wetter and you find plants such as blanket bush and dogwood.

4. Second bridge

Here you begin to see some tall stringy bark (*Eucalyptus obliqua*), fine leaved white peppermint (*Eucalyptus pulchella*) and underneath, some young blackwood and silver wattle. Birds you may see include green rosellas, wattle birds, and the grey fantail.

5. Mt Maria turn-off

Take the track on your left to Mount Maria. Continue ascending for another hour through open forest. During the early farming days of Maria Island (1900 to 1970) the forests were burnt regularly and grazed, resulting in a very open understorey with a low diversity of plants. Can you notice any change in the eucalypts around you? The place where the track forked marks almost exactly where there is a change from dolerite to siltstone in the underlying rock. In the past a major fault formed, dividing Maria from north to south and lifting the eastern side of the island. The dolerite bedrock associated with the soils will not be seen again until you reach the top of Mt Maria some 300-400 metres higher up. How can this be when the track just continues on its gentle incline? Thousands of years of weathering and erosion have smoothed away the edges of the softer rock formations leaving only outcrops of the harder one. White peppermint (*Eucalyptus pulchella*) is one type of tree that grows only on dolerite soils.

6. Sandstone outcrop

From here you can catch a glimpse of the sea through the trees. It's a good spot to stop for a break before the last steep part of the walk. Walking on you may notice a change in the understorey with shrubby plants such as pink mountain berry, silver banksia and pink heath.

7. Small creek

About 10 minutes walk from the sandstone outcrop is a small creek, although it may not be running during dry periods. You may be able to refill your water bottles. While you do, take a moment to look at this patch of vegetation. Here there is tea-tree, a good indicator of damp areas in dry forests, and cutting grass, so-called because it has tiny crystals of silica, a natural glass-like substance, on the surface of its leaves, which can cut like a blade. As you continue, the surrounding plants become more prickly and densely compacted. This is one of the ways they protect themselves from the elements as the altitude increases. Look for Hakea with its needle-like leaves and large wooden fruit.

8. Small scree

Mt Maria is capped with dolerite rock. This can crack when it cools, letting in water. About 20,000 years ago, at the height of the last glaciation, this water froze, expanding and shattering the rock. The once upright columns then fell, breaking and rolling down the side of the mountain leaving fragments of rock or rock debris, termed scree. The track here is marked by a combination of small cairns (piles of stones placed as landmarks) and orange poles with yellow arrows, or in some places yellow arrows affixed to the rock. Initially the rocks you encounter are small, but soon you will be boulder hopping.

9. Big dolerite boulders

Here the scree consists of bigger boulders and more scrambling is required as you approach the summit (about 30 minutes). Watch out for the next marker, as it can be difficult to see. Above you can see the skeleton-like outlines of dead Oyster Bay pines clinging to the rocky slopes. These were most likely killed by a major fire that swept this area in 1966. The track takes you through a patch of forest of Oyster Bay pine, richea, and banksia, which feels like a peaceful oasis after the barren and exposed environment of the boulder slope. The track then returns to the boulders, and soon turns to your left for the final climb to the top.

10. The summit

When you reach the summit it may be shrouded in cloud. The cloud occurs when warm air masses rise sharply at high altitudes and the water vapour condenses. If this water cannot evaporate, a cloud layer will form. Turbulence within this layer means that every so often there is a gap through which you can see the magnificent views — Tasman Island in the south, across to Marion Bay and southwest to Mount Wellington. To the north you can see Schouten Island and Freycinet Peninsula. Check your map of Tasmania and try to identify some of the landmarks before descending