Tulip Meadows of Kazakhstan & the Tien Shan Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 27 April 2008







Tulipa buhsiana



Tulipa kauffmanaina



Tulipa gregeii

Report & images compiled by John Shipton



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Day 1 Saturday 12th April

Travelling from the UK

Day 2 Sunday 13th April

LAKE KAPCHAGAI

We arrived at Almaty at dawn. I had to negotiate with the rapacious taxi drivers to take us to the Otrar hotel was booked ready for us, and Julia from the local agents office, phoned soon after to let us know the day's plan. This allowed us two hours rest before breakfast. At 10am Julia introduced us to Anna and Yerken and we drove with driver Yerlan two hours (80km) north out of town to Lake Kapchagai by the dam on the Ili River.

Starting from the rather dilapidated industrial scene and negotiating a crossing of the main road with two imposing policeman we started on the west side of the road. Almost immediately we saw *Tulipa kolpakowskiana* in flower and our first *Ixiolirion tartaricum*. Further up the bank we found wonderful specimens of *Tulipa albertii*, although many flowers had already gone over as spring apparently was unusually advanced. Our tally of Tulips was increased by *Tulipa buhsiana* but not in flower. By these were some Horsefield's Tortoises taking a stroll and then fine stands of *Eremurus cristatus*.

We then crossed the road and drove and walked through drifts of the less well known *Tulipa behmiana* in flower prevalent in this corner of desert steppe. Here we had a magnificent lunch and our position with sun, wine and tulips dispelled any malaise from jet lag and lack of sleep. After lunch we explored the pink granite landscape, coming across more tortoises and plenty of plants with our first of the host of *Gagea* species and the Fritillary *F. karelinii* under the Russian designation *Rhinopetalum*. By the lake the diminutive *Tulipa buhsiana* was in flower. Unfortunately this wonderful stand of Tulips is unprotected and threatened by hideous "development" of wealthy housing being put up around the lake.

Day 3 Monday 14th April

KURDAI PASS

An email a few days before had notified Naturetrek of an alteration of plans, changing the drive over the Kurdai Pass and stopover at Merke on the way to Aksu Dzabaghly to two days based in Almaty.

This allowed us the comforts of Almaty without losing two good field trips. We drove west 160 km to the Kurdai Pass which we would have crossed on the original itinerary.

After a couple of stops on the steppe to spot possible birds and for a Kazhak drink of fermented milk, Koje, we stopped by the path and headed up the steep hillside. This was covered near the road with Tulips. Predominant was *T.kolpakowskiana* in its yellow form but mixed with were the red *T. ostrowskiana*. The two species being in the same section cross frequently so the population contained hybrids of the two as well. The stony slopes were rich in plant species, *Iris* (Juno) kuschakeviczii and the borage Rindera tetrapsis being amongst the most memorable.

We moved on up the pass to the higher meadows for another fine lunch with sweeping views of rolling steppe. Dominating the ground around our lunch stop was a sweep of the yellow flowered *Podopyllum* relative in Berberidaceae, *Leontice eversmanii*. After lunch we wandered the meadows coming across our first *Tulipa gregeii* in flower and encountering the impressive borage *Solenanthus circinnatus* and our first *Eranthis longistipitata*. A long drive back to town allowed little time to enjoy the fleshpots.

Day 4

Tuesday 15th April

KASKELEN

Today we made a much shorter trip into the foothills of Ala Tau (Tien Shan) above the outskirts of Almaty and the satellite village of Kaskelen. By the village we stopped for the local pastie like delight Samsa. The moister ground in the hills was rich in stands of the endemic *Iris albertii* and here the dominant Tulip was *T.ostrowskiana* in reds and yellows with some hybridised with *T.kolpokowskiana*. We had a third fine lunch with wine and a table above the River kaskelen dotted with wild Apricot *Prunus armenaicum* all in flower. After lunch we explored the thickets of *Rhamnus, Acer, Berberis* and *Caragana* along the river.

Breaking off from our exploration we headed back to town to catch the night train westwards. We just had time to stroll around the market and the cathedral before being met at the station by Julia with porters and packed dinners, and the rather exciting start on the Blue Train into the night.

Day 5

Wednesday 16th April

RED HILL & MESHED GORGE

We got off the train in the morning at the small station of Tiulkubas and were collected by our new driver Rinat in a small mini bus and a surplus taxi. We were taken through the village of Dzhabaghly, and passed the guest house of Yevgenny, used on previous trips, to a new unfinished hotel complex (Assol), empty apart from us and the staff, near the entrance to the reserve, and at the beginning of the Dzabaghly Gorge. It rained heavily as we arrived and the mountains above were invisible.

With the weather as it was, Anna decided to start with lower areas and we drove across the Arys Valley towards the low range of Boraldai Tau. Crossing unpromising rolling cultivation we arrived at the stunning little rise covered in *Tulipa gregeii* in flower, nicknamed Red Hill. Here we find many other delights including our first *Fritillaria sewersowii* (the Russian botanists reclassify this in its own genus *Korokilovia*). As we gaze in wonder an Uzbek family came over to ask us to tea.

We then drove back across the valley to the Meshed River flowing off the main Tien Shan. In the gorge here we have lunch under a *Celtis caucasica* surrounded by *Gymnospermum albertii* in seed. The conglomerate rocks produced a rich range of plants. The most spectacular here perhaps being the globe flowers and luxurious leaves of a host of *Allium karataviense*. Back at our lodging we were served dinner by two local girls.

Day 6

Thursday 17th April

KARATAU

During the night the temperature dropped to at least -5. This was an unseasonably savage frost and foliage through the dense fog we could see the damage to new foliage everywhere. After breakfast (strongly featuring cream and buckwheat), we make a slow start to allow the fog to clear and stop first to visit Yevgenny and then the offices of the Reserve where Anna can take care of the extensive paperwork involved in entering the reserve, while we are shown round the surprisingly entertaining reserve "museum".

Finally we head off eastwards to explore the slope of the Karatau range. It is a long drive which takes us over the Kuyuk Pass. Here we stop by the busy road to look at a fine stand of *Eremurus lactiflorus* in flower along with *Iris caerulea* (in the Russian genus *Juno*) and find *Tulipa bifloriformis* in seed. Turning north of the main road we head into the steppe and along a very pot-holed road, a struggle for our van. Just short of the large lake, Billikol we head towards the Karatau ridge on dirt roads admiring Rinat's faith in Anna's navigation. At the track end we stop for lunch. At this altitude and position the weather is a lot warmer, an example of the surprising range of micro climates here.

After lunch we walked up the little valley. It was a very enjoyable walk with plenty of botanical interest although we were robbed of Anna's hoped for *Tulipa* show by an early spring. We came across both *Tulipa orthopoda* in seed a species endemic to Karatau, as well as the allied *T. bifloriformis*, whilst *T.gregeii*, although in profusion, was not in flower. Back on the main road passing a pond with Black Winged Stilts, in the evening and after a 20km diversion for fuel we crossed the Kuyuk Pass again, and stopped to view a spectacular series of flights of Desmoiselle Cranes. Vast groups were flying south of us and then directly overhead, where we had stopped by an "estakada" a curious Kazakh institution, a roadside car ramp in use.

Day 7

Friday 18th April

AK KOL

In the morning the whole of the Tienshan/Aksu-Dzabghly snow mountains were clear, the nearest ridge being called Kazan Shunkum locally. We retraced our steps over the Kuyuk Pass and by the large town of Taras turned north again along a much better road across the windswept steppe to the Ak Kol (white lake) a brackish little inland sea. Halfway across the steppe we stopped in a featureless patch to explore the flora which was surprisingly varied. Tortoises cruised amongst *Iris sangorica* and we spent time investigating more of the myriad *Gagea* and *Astragolus* species in an unrelenting deeply chilling wind from the east.

We had lunch crouched in a crevice in the red sandstone above the rather desolate town of Ak Kol.

The rocky slope down to the lake produced the orange blooms of *Tulipa borszczowii*, close to the *T.behmiana* of Kapchagai, as well *Tulipa buhsiana* and *T.albertii* in seed. On the lake Jenni our ornithologist recorded Great Crested Grebes, Black-headed Gulls, Caspian Terns, Great Cormorants, Grey Heron and Eastern White Pelicans.

On our road home just passed Taras we turned off to visit one of Kazakhstan's historical sites, the 12th Century Muslim shrine and Mausoleum of the ill fated Aisha Bibi.

Day 8

Saturday 19th April

AK SU GORGE

We had entered a period of fine warm weather, a massive contrast to a few days ago. We drive down to Dzabaghly village where Anna had to negotiate for a special reserve vehicle to take us to Aksu Canyon,. Eventually she succeeded and we transferred into a much more appropriate vehicle to negotiate the dirt road over the ridge south of the village. Our elation was nearly deflated when this bus started having problems and overheated but it reached the top and we had spectacular views over the valley and towards more mountains of the Tien Shan including Sairam Peak which we would encounter later.

Crossing a 1300m plateau we reached a point above the Aksu Gorge and had lunch with lovely weather and gorgeous views. The Aksu cuts its way through conglomerate strata which sit unconformably (my hypothesis at least) over highly fossiliferous carboniferous limestone. After lunch we work our way down the canyon filled with gorgeous flora, beautiful specimens of Fritillaria (Korokilovia)seversowii and Fritillaria (Rhinopetalum) stenanthera, Iris (Juno) caerulea, Eranthis longistipitata and Corydalis ledebouriana amongst much else dotted on the steep slopes dotted with Juniper groves. At the river floor 300 m below we found Scilla puschkinoides, but the star Tulip was T.kauffmaniana, wonderful in its many coloured forms.

Day 9

4

Sunday 20th April

KULAN LAKE

Today we head again across the valley to the foot of the Boraldai range, driving through the village of Kulan passed several abandoned Soviet enterprises set off round the artificial lake. The geology here was steeply dipping sedimentary strata of shale interspersed with limestone, and the slopes were dotted with groves of *Cratageous pontica* and *C.turkestanica*. *Ferula* spp and the feathery *Prangus pabularia* dominate and amongst the rich range of plants there was *Tulipa gregeii* in flower and *T.tukestanica* in seed, as well as our first *Iriodyctium kolpokowskianum* in flower. On the lake we had Ruddy shell Ducks, Black Winged Stilts and, flying over, a Black Stork We should have taken lunch with us as the afternoon was well gone by the time we had returned to the bus.

On our way back across the valley we stumbled on a game of Kokpar in progress, the Kazakh version of polo but with a dead goat! A further stop across the valley by a marshy pond revealed water rats, marsh frogs and moorhens.

Day 10

Monday 21st April

DZABAGHLY CANYON

Today we didn't have to drive anywhere but set off up the river from our residence. It took us a while to find a way out of the fencing of the unfinished enclosure and we struggled through some dense bush which some fine *Fritillaria sewersowii*, *Tulipa turkestanica* and *T. kauffmaniana* in flower and a Blue Whistling Thrush. We emerged in a meadow to be stopped by the ranger who Anna had known for decades but who was a little disturbed by our unorthodox entry to the reserve. With this sorted out a suitably assigned young man was to "accompany" us and we climbed up the hillside to eventually reach a point above the Dzhabaghly with a waterfall.

With the weather fine, and the snow ranges above us, it was a glorious walk through again an extremely rich flora. The *Tulipa kauffmaniana* got better and better and just before lunch we had a fine stand of *Iriodyctium kolpokowskianum* in flower, and actually where we sat for lunch looking across the gorge was a perfect patch of the pink *Fritillaria* (*Rhinopetalum*) stenathera in flower.

At four we reached the view over the waterfall where the river drops over strata of red sandstone. Here were fine stands of *Iris (Juno) caerulea* in flower with the two "bulbous" Corydalis species in flower, *C.nudicaulis and C.ledebouriana*. The walk back down as the sun set behind the mountain was delightful, and at the reserve entrance the ranger and his wife invited us to partake of a Samovar. After waiting for the tea to boil we were invited into the house where we were given a spread of freshly collected mushrooms, halva and inevitably vodka to toast with.

Day 11

Tuesday 22nd April

SAIRAM SU

The weather was still fine in the morning as we drove west through Aksu town and then back in towards the Tien Shan range, through Uzbeck as well as Kazhak villages. On reaching the Sairam Su we leave the asphalt and start a 20km on a dirt road which poor Rinat's vehicle was really not up to. The afternoon was well advanced by the time we reached the park entrance. Here our host Shamil who looked after the camp squeezed in and we reached the camp which consisted to the alarm of some of us of converted containers. The second we unloaded Rinat left hurriedly with his bus for Turkistan having finished his contract and compromising his van.

We had just organised ourselves into the fairly eccentric accommodation when the rain started and we ate a huge lunch under a tarpaulin cooked by Shamil's partner Victoria. After this some of us followed Anna in the rain for a first explore which revealed, in a *Iris (Juno) tubergeniana* in flower, a host of *Astagolus* and *Gagea* spp some endemic, and a fair stand of *Pyrola rotundifolia* on the banks of the river.

Day 12

Wednesday 23rd April

SAIRAM SU

The early morning started promisingly but by the time we emerged from our containers for a wonderful breakfast under the tarpaulin the rain set in. Diane, Anna Yerken and myself walked up the Sairam Su valley, whilst Jenni, Christina and Andew made forays from the camp in an attempt to avoid the heavy showers.

The valleys here ware full of meadows literally carpeted with *Tulipa kauffmania* in all shades, of yellow, pink and red. Further up the valley we found *Colchicum luteum* in flower and as well as *Tulipa turkestanica* in flower and the endemic *Tulipa dasystemonoides*. After a great lunch, for which our party were culpably late, Yerken and I were the only visitors to test Shamil's Sauna which was accompanied by a plunge in the Sairam Su.

As the evening progressed the weather improved and gave rise to a fine sunset colouring of the snow mountains around us including Sairam peak itself. About this Shamil had a long glorious tale to tell about a certain British god hero who frequented these parts.

Day 13

Thursday 24th April

SAIRAM SU & SHYMKENT

Showery weather in the end didn't prevent us taking a morning excursion up the hillside from the camp. Above the tulip meadows there was as usual a vast range of flora to examine, entirely revealed by Anna's encyclopaedic knowledge. We learnt more in disentangling *Lonicera*, *Astragolus*, *Juniper* and *Gagea* species and had to turn back by a good stand of *Polygonatum sewersowii*.

By this time a large very ancient but robust bus had arrived and after another fine lunch we all, including Shamil and Victoria, piled in for the ride to Shymkent and our evening train. We arrived at the station in reasonably good time and found our carriage. However our food shopping took a little time and Yerken had the wrong departure time in his mind so when Anna, Yerken and I got on the train we had seconds to spare. It was a pleasant evening rolling back across the country we had got to know quite well and we all had as good a sleep as could be expected.

Day 14

Friday 25th April

BOLSHOI ALMATINSKI LAKE & OBSERVATORY

We were met at the station by Julia, and with great efficiency taken to the Otrar Hotel for breakfast. We all felt slightly surreal, having been whisked from remote containers to the huge domed restaurant with its resplendent chandelier. The weather looked good as we struggled through Almaty traffic in another old sturdy Russian tank bus driven by Nicolay, and headed south to the mountains for the climb up to 2800 m to the old Soviet Observatory. We made a stop just before the climb to a stand of our first *Tulipa dasystemon*, and a little further up for a fine spread of *Crocus alatavica* in flower. On reaching the frozen artificial Bolshoi Almatinski Lake, we decided to make good use of the weather by exploring the shores of the lake before lunch higher up at the observatory.

Around the lake we found large numbers of both *Tulipa dasystemon* and new to us *Tulipa heterophylla*. Although they are in different sections in the Tulipa genus it took us a while to tell the difference between the two mostly yellow flowered species, but once the eye was in the could be told apart from a hundred paces. In amongst the Tulipas was the little pink *Primula algida* and of course a host of different *Gagea* spp. Families of Grey Marmots were sunning themselves outside their homes and provided lengthy distraction.

Late in the afternoon we arrived at the Observatory for a splendid lunch cooked by Rosa. The accommodation here was surprisingly good apart from the lack of running water.

In the evening we walked amongst a vast alpine meadow of *Crocus alatvicus* in flower. Finally after a late'ish dinner, the sky being perfectly clear, we had the chance to use the only telescope still working here run by an amateur astronomer from Moscow. He has the use of this very modest telescope, all the other great apparatus at the observatory having been abandoned or taken away at the demise of the USSR. Amongst other things we saw the rings of Saturn, a binary system in Lyrae and a gaseous Nebula.

Day 15

Saturday 26th April

OBSERVATORY / ALMATY

After breakfast we explore the slopes below the observatory. As well as a host of *T.dasystemon* and *T. heterophylla* we find more *Primula algida* and the exquisite *Viola altaica* in white and purple. Returning to the observatory we take in once more the spectacular stand of *Crocus alatavicus* now with flowers fully open in the bright sunshine. Anna phoned her photographer to come up poste-haste from Almaty to see this sight! Even on our trip down the hill we made two more plant stops, one for *Primula kaffmaniana* in flower, amongst the hordes of weekenders coming up from town.

Back in town, after saying goodbye to Anna by her apartment we have time for a quick shop at the Green Market behind the Otrar before going out to a restaurant that Julia recommends. In fact we end up at the wrong one which turned out to be much better called Gul Chattai, named after the heroine of a rather exciting Kazhak civil war film. As we go back to the hotel large numbers of people are gathered near the Zenkov Cathedral as it happens to be the Saturday before Orthodox Easter. Christina and I stayed up to watch the great midnight procession.

Day 16

Sunday 27th April

LONDON

Yerken and Yerlan are on time. Jenni stayed on for the next Naturetrek tour and four of us were taken to the airport for our flight home, a remarkably easy process apart from the roguish "porters" who tend to grab bags to gain a ludicrous tip. It is worth being prepared for that in the future! We had a smooth BMI flight home via Ekaterinborg again.

Summary

This was a great trip, and we were largely treated well by the weather apart from rain at Sairam Su. I think we all felt it to be a tremendous privilege to have been led by Anna Ivanshenko. Her knowledge of the natural history of Kazakhstan is profoundly unique and her unflagging enthusiasm deeply inspiring, and made this trip. Yerken our interpreter was great company and tremendously helpful throughout.

Thank you to all the participants for their good company and contribution to the success of this trip...

Species Lists

NB: Unfortunately due to personal circumstances, the tour leader John Shipton has not been able to complete the species lists for this trip – our sincere apologies.

Plant List (kindly supplied by tour participant Andrew Radgick)

Aconitum tulasicum Allium karataviense

Anemone almatensis

Anemone sp

Astragalus anisomeris Astragalus atrovinosus

Astragalus megalomerus

Astragalus sieversianus

Astragalus sp 1

Atraphaxis pinifolia

Barbarea planisliqua

Betula turkestanica

Cerastium bungianum Clematis orientalis

Corydalis ledebouriana

Crambe kotschyana

Dipsacus laciniata

Eremurus cristatus

Eremurus regelii

Eritrychium villosum

Euphorbia rapulum

Euphorbia sp

Ferrula tenuisecta

Fritillaria sewerzowii

Gagea divaricata

Gagea minutiflora Gagea turkestanica

Gentiana karleinii

Gymnospermum alberti

Hippophae rhamnoides

Iridodyctium kolpakowskianum

Iris caerulea

Iris tenuifolium

Iris tubergeniana

Kugenia karanznertis

Leontice eversmanii

Lonicera altmanni

Lonicera tianschanica

Megacarpa orbiculata

Nonea caspica

Oxytropis bisunensis

Padus mahaleb

Pedicularis juliensis

Polygonum sewerzowii

Potentilla orientalis

Primula algida

Prunus armenica – apricot

Prunus tianschanicus

Pseudoclausia turkestanica

Pulsatilla campanella

Ranunculus afghanicus

Ranunculus alganicus

Rheum maximowiczii

Rindera tetrapsis Rosa persica

Salix niedzwetzkiana

Scorzonera inconspicua

Allium atrosanguineum

Amaryllidacae

Anemone petiololusa

Astragalus angustissimus

Astragalus atrominosus

Astragalus lanugilosus

Astragalus nuciferus

Astragalus skorniakovii

Astragalus sp 2

Atrotaxus replicate

Berberis sphaerocarpa

Cardaria draba

Chrysoplenium nudicaule Corydalis glaucescens

Corydalis nudicaule

Crocus alatavicus

Eranthis longistipitata

Eremurus lactiflorus

Eremurus sobianus

Euonymus koopmannii

Euphorbia subcordata

Eutrema integrifolia

Fritillaria karelinii

Fritillaria stenanthera

Gagea emarginata

Gagea pseudoerubescens Gagea uganica

Geranium transversale

Haplophyllum latifolium

Inula macrophylla

Iris alberti

Iris kangorica Iris tianschanicus

Ixiolirion tataricum

Kunzia sideriensis

Linaria sp

Lonicera microphylla

Malus servicea Nepeta ucrainica

Onosma dichroma Oxytropis pillosissima

Pedicularis alberti

Pedicularis olgae

Potentilla desitorum

Prangos pabularia

Primula kaufmanniana Prunus serasus

Prunus sp

Seranea sp

Pseudosedum longidentatum

Pyrus heterophylla

Ranunculus alberti Ranunculus regelianus

Rhodiola linearifolia

Rosa kokanica

Rosularia tirkestanica

Scilla puschkinioides

Solenanthus circinnatus Tamarix ramosissima Thalictrum isopyroides

Tragopogon marginifolius Tulipa bhusiana Tulipa dasystemon

Tulipa greigii x kaufmanniana hybrid

Tulipa kaufmanniana Tulipa lehmanniana Tulipa ostrowskiana Tulipa turkestanica Veronica sp

Vicia sp Viola altaica Viola rupestris Spiraea hypericifolia Taraxacum sp

Trachelanthus korolkowii

Tulipa alberti Tulipa borszczowii Tulipa griegii Tulipa heterophylla Tulipa kolpakowskiana Tulipa orthopoda

Tulipa ostrowskiana x kolpakowskiana hybrid 22

Tussilago farfara Vicia subvillosa Viola acutifolium Viola collina Viola suavis

Birds List (kindly supplied by tour participant Jenni Tubbs)

1	Great Crested Grebe
2	Great Cormorant
3	Black Stork
4	Gadwall
5	Garganey
6	Black Kite
7	Egyptian Vulture
8	Marsh Harrier
9	Lesser Kestrel
10	Himalayan Snowcock (heard)
11	Common Moorhen
12	Demoiselle Crane (many thousands flying)
13	Northern Lapwing
14	Black-headed Gull
15	Common Tern
16	Wood Pigeon
17	Hoopoe
18	Barn Swallow
19	Grey Wagtail
20	Eurasion Dipper
21	Pied Wheatear
22	Blue Whistling Thrush
23	Yellow-breasted Azure Tit
24	Rufous-naped Tit
25	Yellow-billed (Alpine) Chough
26	Rook
27	Common Raven
28	White-winged Grosbeak
29	Rock Bunting
30	White Pelican
31	Grey Heron
32	Ruddy Shelduck
33	Mallard
34	Red-crested Pochard
35	Lammergeier
36	Eurasian Griffon Vulture
37	Long-legged Buzzard
38	Common Kestrel
39	Common Pheasant
40	Eurasian Coot
41	Black-winged Stilt
42	Common Sandpiper
43	Caspian Tern
44	Rock Dove/feral Pigeon
45	Eurasian Scops Owl (head every evening at Assol)
46	Calandra Lark
47	Tree Pipit

48	White Wagtail
49	Nightingale
50	Siberian Stonechat
51	Blackbird
52	Great Tit
53	Magpie
54	Eurasion Jackdaw
55	Carrion Crow
56	Common Myna
57	Corn Bunting

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