

An Alpine Odyssey
AGS Greece Tour 2011

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Friday 29th April

After a slightly bizarre Heathrow experience complete with the royal wedding on big screens, our smooth flight deposited us at Athens. Gathering the rest of the group we squeezed all the bags into the coach, met our driver, Paris, and headed for the hills. From the bustle of the suburbs we were up into limestone crags in a few hours, with flower laden Judas trees brightening the journey. It was dark by the time we reached Delphi and after a couple of circuits of the very narrow town streets we disembarked for our first taste of Greek cuisine, swiftly followed by a retreat to bed.

Saturday 30th April

Post breakfast botanising took place just a hundred metres out of the hotel, with our first taste of Greek flora on the roadside. Buzzing with insects flowers tumbled down the rocks and lined the verges. Silky flowers of *Papaver rhoeas* interspersed with the bright yellow of *Malabaila aurea*, with giant *Ferula communis* towering higher up the slopes. The grey foliage and purple bells of *Campanula topaliana* subsp. *delphica* adorned dry rocks and *Verbascum undulatum* stood as a sentinel, attracting insects and botanists alike.



Figure 1 *Papaver rhoeas* on the road verge.



Figure 2 *Verbascum undulatum* standing tall on rocky outcrops.

Livadia Plateau: When we did make it onto the bus and out of Delphi our first stop looked equally innocuous, a rough track leading up from the road, but over the first rise the waving petals of *Iris attica* were an instant attraction. Clumps of purple and yellow forms dotted amongst the rocks.



Figure 3 Purple form of *Iris attica*.



Figure 4 Yellow form of *Iris attica*.

Our tour leader, John, was stopped every few steps to identify new plants. From the diminutive *Myosotis suaveola* and *Adonis flamma*, to the distinctive carrot smell of *Orlaya daucooides*. *Euphorbia myrsinites* formed mounds throughout the area, how strange to see this garden plant in its native habitat. It was also time to take note of two rather spiky

perennials; *Astragalus sempervirens* and *A. angustifolius*, which are definitely to be avoided when looking for a comfy spot to sit!



Figure 5 View down onto the Livadia Plain with *Adonis* and *Taraxacum parnassicum* in the foreground.



Figure 6 Close up of flowers and new seed heads of *Euphorbia myrsinites*.

A short distance further we stopped behind rows of new ski resort houses, shut up for the summer. Clambering up behind them *Aethionema saxatile* brightened the base of rocks and *Prunus prostrata* showed off its' first flowers. Further down into larger limestone outcrops the first tulip of the day was spotted to great delight. A few flowers of *Tulipa australis* waved in the breeze, defying my attempts to photograph them! Other plants shown to best advantage by the light coloured limestone were the bright pink mats of *Aubrieta deltoidea* and deep purple stems of *Vinca herbacea*.



Figure 7 Emerging flowers on *Prunus prostratus*.



Figure 8 Rosette of *Verbascum delphicum*.

Big Bend - Snow had only recently gone from this area leaving very wet, claggy ground underfoot, with *Crocus* and *Scilla* emerging. Most of the crocus were *C. sieberi*, with a yellow throat and cup shaped flower. Only one tired flower of *Crocus olivieri* was spotted as it is quite scarce in this area. We hunted for the two *Corydalis* species found at this altitude, *C. solida* and *C. cava*, these are distinguished from each other by the division of their bracts. *Corydalis solida* was the main species flowering, though there were a few isolated plants of *C. cava* under the dark green *Abies cephalonica*.

Splashes of blue and white *Anemone blanda* dotted the ground from beneath the conifers to right out into the open ground. *Helleborus cyclophyllus* was also emerging from beneath the forest shade.



Figure 9 *Anemone blanda* emerging under shade.

Running through the damp ground were the tracks of voles, created during their winter under the snow banks. With the disappearance of the snow and return of warmth and light, insects abounded in the grass and dead bracken, and bird song filled the air.



Figure 10 Bombardier beetle with iridescent legs.

I saw my first couple of *Gagea* species (*G. peduncularis*, *G. minima*), and another beautiful yellow flower, which was a compact form of *Ranunculus millefoliatus*.



Figure 11 Shiny petals of *Ranunculus millefoliatus*.

Gerondovrachos Ski centre: Up higher now into the alpine zone and a true mountain environment, with a flock of alpine choughs wheeling and calling above us. Limestone outcrops, and crevices underfoot, along with the larger landscape feature of dolines. These are depressions in the limestone caused by the roof of underground caverns collapsing, creating a hollow.



Figure 12 View of the terrain, and examples of dolines in the middle.

One of the plants we were out to see was found within minutes of leaving the coach, *Colchicum triphyllum*, only metres from the snow, right on the hard trodden path. Bright yellow flowers of tiny *Draba parnassica* were nestled in crevices in the rock, along with sprawling *Juniperus communis* var. *Nana* and the blue of tiny *Muscari botryoides* amongst fine grasses. A climb up through the ski piste itself and onto the cliffs behind took us to the first 'true' alpine of the day *Saxifraga sempervivum*, with hanging mats of *Potentilla speciosa* on the cliffs behind it.



Figure 13 *Colchicum triphyllum* in full flower.



Figure 14 *Corydalis solida* with clearly dissected bracts.



Figure 15 Densely hairy stems and leaves of *Ajuga orientalis*.



Figure 16 *Saxifraga sempervivum* with emerging flowers.

Achladokambos: Heading back down the ski road the last stop of the day was on the other side of the Livadia plain. The area had a red, gravelly soil, with the scent of thyme and savory heavy in the air. Blue and pink mats of *Polygala nicaeensis*, and a white river of *Trifolium uniflorum* painted a really attractive scene. Higher up under the shade of *Juniperus* a number of different orchids were spotted including *Ophrys lutea*, *Barlia robertianum* and *Dactylorhiza romana*.



Figure 17 Giant orchid, *Barlia robertianum*.

Sunday 1st May

Tholos: With the main site at Delphi closed for May Day we headed downhill to this ancient site. Giant heads of *Ferula communis* dotted the slopes above the ruins, if hardy enough this would be such an amazing architectural plant for the Moon gate border in our garden at Leith Hall.

Early morning raindrops still glistened on flowers and foliage. The three stone pillars at the centre of the site were surrounded by a riot of colour. Purple heads of *Scabiosa tenuis*, *Vicia villosa* and the distinctive smelling *Psoralea bituminosa* were punctuated by the bright yellow flowers of *Chrysanthemum coronarium* and *Malabaila aurea*.



Figure 18 *Malva sylvestris* and *Coronilla emerus*.



Figure 19 Seed heads of *Malabaila aurea* and insect filled head of *Carduus thoermeri*.

John pointed out *Pisum sativum*, the ancestor of the cultivated pea. The flowers were long over, but we could taste the forming seeds. Quite a bit smaller than the garden pea, but they would be a good addition to any summer salad just as they were. Amazing to think how many centuries of plant breeding separates these from the garden cultivars. Other garden recognisable genera for me included *Reseda*, *Umbilicus* and a beautiful dark form of *Cerithe*.



Figure 20 Nola harvesting ancient peas!

Exploring this lush site further we came across cushions of *Alkanna orientalis* cascading down sections of wall. The bright yellow flowers contrasted against the pink and grey dressed stones. In knee high grass a spire of flowers of *Bellardia trixago* rose above the tangle, next to *Tragopogon porrifolius* in complementary lilac pink. Insect life was in evident abundance with jumping crickets, iridescent beetles and some odd looking snails with thin pointed shells.



Figure 21 Hairy green heads of two beetles gobbling pollen in a poppy.

Sheila finally rounded up us stragglers amongst to send us back up the slope to the bus and onto our next stop. Looking back down onto the site from above there was no sign of how rich this area was. It looked uniformly green, with the only colour coming from the yellow of the giant fennel flower heads.



Figure 22 Looking back down to Tholos.

Bypass west of Delphi: The contrast between this and Tholos could not have been more extreme. Just west of the town we stopped on a sharp bend and walked onto an abandoned road, lined surrounded by high cliffs of pinkish limestone. In contrast to the earlier lush greenery this was a hot, dry environment. *Phlomis fruticosa* dominated much of the lower slopes, buzzing with insects visiting the bright yellow flowers. Other small shrubs and stunted trees provided a dusty green backdrop. The star of the show was the mats of prostrate *Daphne jasminea* sprinkled liberally with pinky white flowers.



Figure 23 *Daphne jasminea* and *Cistus creticus*.



Figure 24 Lacy flower heads of *Orlaya daucooides*.

Just as we emerged back onto the road a herd of goats scrambled past on the cliffs above, bells pealing and busily chomping on greenery. Easy to see why the *Daphne* clings to the inaccessible rock faces, with these omnivores about.

Almond grove west of town: We wandered through the grove of trees, into another herb rich grassland. Low rocky terraces lay hidden in the long vegetation. Alan found a magnificent specimen of *Ophrys spruneri* with lower lips of the darkest red black velvet, and shoulders of dark pink. Inspiration for a truly magnificent ball gown!

The tulips that John had hoped to find were nearly over. A couple of stems of *Tulipa undulatifolia* remained in the grass, with a couple more neatly bitten off stems showing that herbivores also appreciated these treasures.



Figure 25 Stunning flowers on *Ophrys spruneri*.

Path from Delphi to the Corycian Cave: After lunch the bus did the hard work taking us to the top of the town, where a short pull up a zigzag path started us on this ancient footpath. Gaining height through almond trees lower down, and old terraces we were soon into meadows filled with swathes of colour. White lacy *Orlaya* topped the grasses, with sections filled with vivid purple *Vicia* and pink specks of *Silene colorata*. On ahead of the group I stopped to enjoy the meadow flowers with an orchestra of insect noise, while the identity of a group of orchids was debated below.



Figure 26 *Orlaya* and *Vicia villosa* in the terraced meadows.

Gaining more height and progressively shedding group members we continued to climb onto a well defined path, which zig zagged up the slope towards limestone cliffs. The vegetation started to thin out slightly, revealing a dark red soil. Ants abounded, carrying and dragging seed heads underground. Powdered Brimstone and Southern Swallowtail butterflies swooped back and forwards, not stopping long enough to get a close look, never mind a photograph.

Within a few feet we found a number of local endemics including *Hypericum spruneri* and *Genista parnassica*. Tiny flowers of *Anchusella variegata* and *Malcolmia flexuosa* were dotted among the rock faces. Near our high point another new orchid *Ophrys argolica*, was spotted, a striking flower of pink and deep red. Eventually we called a halt and started back downhill, enjoying the sight of Delphi spread out before us. Going through the back streets, May Day wreaths could be seen hanging from house doors and railings, a very visual reminder of the use of wild flowers within the Greek community today.



Figure 27 *Smyrniium orphanidis* and *Fumana thymifolia*.



Figure 28 Close up of *Euphorbia acanthothamnus* and clumps of it on the hillside.



Figure 29 May Day wreath in Delphi.

Monday 2nd May

Delphi Ancient Site: We joined the multiple coach loads of tourists to look round the ancient site. Free to explore the ruins, I wandered up from the entrance to the running Stadium at the top of the site. The ancient walls were adorned with trailing *Campanula topaliana* subsp. *delphica*, and some were fringed on top with *Centranthus ruber*. The carved pillars spearing the deep blue sky stood amongst waving poppies. Despite the crowds this was a truly inspiring place.



Figure 30 Delphic column with tapestry of wild flowers.

Kellaria ski resort: After the heat of Delphi this was a shock to the system. At 1800m, with snow still lying and a stiff breeze, it was time to hunt out the woolly hat. We climbed up the slopes behind the car park, in between limestone outcrops. Many of the plants were familiar from Gerondovrachos, but new species included *Aubrieta gracilis*, *Sedum magellense* and side by side at our lunch spot *Campanula rupicola* and *Edrianthus parnassicus*. Without seeing these last two together I would be hard pushed to tell the difference from their foliage. In amongst the debris of the ski slopes there were also magnificent specimens of *Crocus sieberi*, with huge frilly stamens.



Figure 31 Large and showy specimen of *Crocus sieberi*.

After lunch we quartered a hillside lower down, looking for *Fritillaria*. We found plenty of emerging stems with flower buds, but they were all resolutely closed, a casualty of the late lying snow.



Figure 32 Tour members searching for *Fritillaria*.

Just further on down the road we stopped to walk down into the 'Big Doline'. It was like a different world down in this depression, with a microclimate a couple of degrees warmer than anywhere else we had been on the mountain. The bottom of the depression was carpeted with multicoloured forms of *Anemone blanda*. The red soil was again tracked with vole pathways, and ants were busily at work. John Good explained how this continual creation of fresh soil is good for all these bulbous plants, as it means they suffer from less competition from grasses.



Figure 33 The bottom of the 'Big Doline' covered with *Anemone blanda*.

Achladokambos: Back down on the Livadia plains we revisited the site opposite the taverna where we had stopped on day 1, this time with more time to explore further afield. In the gravelly open areas between *Abies cephalonica* more orchid species were discovered, including *Orchis purpurea* and *Ophrys tenthredinifera*. In a grassier site the pale lemon yellow of *Orchis pallens* was a stunning sight. *Iris tuberosa* and *Romulea bulbocodium* continued the yellow flowering theme.

A new *Saxifraga* was spotted waving under small shrubs, *S. bulbifera* near to *Geranium macrostylum*. However, my favourite spot was the gently rolling slopes filled with multi coloured forms of *Iris attica*, accented by mounds of *Euphorbia myrsinites*, with diminutive *Myosotis*, *Adonis annua*, *Muscari neglectum* and *Viola kitaibelliana* dotted amongst them.



Figure 34 Slope of *Iris attica* interspersed with *Euphorbia myrsinites*.

Tuesday 3rd May

Drive from Delphi to the Corinthian Gulf: Leaving Delphi the coach took a winding road down to the coast. Passing the bauxite quarry at Itea, a large boat sat in the clear blue water loading up with ore. The tortuous road and a developing cold meant that I claimed a front seat with John Good, so had excellent views, which was a real bonus.

At a coffee and cake stop just before the Patra bridge the rough ground next to the car park proved amazingly fertile botanizing. I think our driver, Paris, and the other motorists passing on this busy road, thought we were absolutely bonkers, as we clambered over a low wall and through some discarded rubbish into an uncultivated part of a field. There were giant spikes of *Orobanche crenata*, at least a couple of feet high and the first, and only, sightings of *Gladiolus italicus*, *Allium roseum* and *Nigella arvensis*. It was interesting to see *Briza minor* and *Briza maxima* in their native habitat, heads nodding in the breeze.



Figure 35 *Nigella arvensis* and *Tragopogon samaritinii*.

Once over the elegant Patras bridge we soon turned off the main road onto another very winding road into the hills. This time we were into an area of conglomerate rock, rather than the limestone of Parnassos. Paris managed to park the bus on the narrow road and we climbed up into a wet area, very rich in flowers. Three new orchids were spotted; *Ophrys delphinensis*, *Ophrys hebes* and *Orchis italica*. The area was rich in herbaceous plants such as *Cynoglossum creticum*, *Linum perenne* and *Dorycnium hirsutum*. Stuart found the weirdest plant of the whole trip here, a parasitic plant *Cytinus ruber*, which lives on *Cistus* roots.



Figure 36 White and crimson scales of *Cyrtus ruber*.

Our lunch stop was at an isolated tavern, literally in the middle of nowhere. With 30 minutes to wait for the wood fired oven to heat up, we wandered along the road and saw the first specimens of *Cephalanthera longifolia*. We came back for greek salad, pork souvlaki and freshly cooked chips, served outside on a long table. I think this was the most delicious meal of the trip!

After lunch our drive took us further into the hills, and higher into the pine zone of Aleppo and Black Pine. Down below the hillsides were full of walnut trees, only just emerging into leaf, with the white blossom of wild pear, *Pyrus amygdaliformis*, giving splashes of colour. Slowly winding down into the valley we saw our first glimpses of *Cyclamen peloponnesiacum* in shady spots. Swathes of pink *Crepis rubra* and bright purple *Geranium brutium* brightened the verges, flowers wide open in the sunshine.

The village of Zarouchla was definitely shut for the season, tavernas shuttered and no vehicles on the road. In the middle of the village a large plane tree provided shade from the sun. Hotel Aroania was a solid stone and wood building, a scaled up mountain chalet, with huge rooms, and balconies looking out to the mountains at the head of the valley.

Zarouchla: A short walk before dinner took us to the banks of a small stream, with blue grey rushing water. On the bank, flowers of *Cyclamen peloponnesiacum* hung their heads in the early evening sunshine. Seeing other members of the group ahead, Chloe and I followed a track up through what looked to be abandoned fields. An alarming encounter with a very cross, elderly greek lady soon had us convinced that whatever their appearance, the fields definitely weren't to be walked on!

It was strange to see UK natives such as *Primula vulgaris* and *Viola riviniana* in the shady spots, with *Galium cruciata* in the rough grasses. John Richards showed us the difference between *Cyclamen graecum* and *C. hederifolium*. The leaves of *C. graecum* all come from the top of a round corm, while *C. hederifolium* has flatter corm with leaves from the side.



Figure 37 *Cyclamen peloponnesiacum* in the evening sunshine.

Wednesday 4th May

Kastraki to the Styx River: A short drive from hotel took us to the end of a forest track which led down to the banks of the Styx. Under grey skies we headed along the forest track, lined with mixed woodland of *Pinus nigra*, *Pinus halepensis*, *Quercus coccifera*, *Juniperus oxycedrus*, *Fraxinus ornus*, *Carpinus* and *Ostrya*. The tracks of wild boar were obvious in muddy scars running through the undergrowth, and snatches of song from a robin, a deep forest bird in central Europe, filled the air.

The damage caused by Pine Processionary Moth had been visible whilst driving, but I saw caterpillars and the larval tents close up for the first time in this wood. Thirty to forty caterpillars in a line, moving nose to tail across the path, and many white cocoons and evidence of feeding damage on the pines.



Figure 38 Clockwise from top left *Pinus halepensis*, *Pinus nigra*, tent of Pine Processionary Moth larvae, Pine Processionary Moth caterpillars.

This area was on schist and gneiss, so the flora was poorer than on more alkaline soils. We still saw new orchid species; *Orchis anthropophorum* and *Orchis simia* on the shaded banks. The bright yellow daisy flowers of *Doronicum orientale* were a vivid reminder of the woods at Leith Hall, where Leopard's Bane has naturalised in large patches. In wet areas *Primula vulgaris* and bracken fronds presented another familiar scene. Sometimes with roots even sitting in running water, the brilliant purple flowers of *Viola elatior* made an eye catching show.



Figure 39 *Viola elatior* in a wet, shaded area.

Emerging from the woodland onto the river bank the contrast was striking. The bright white grey of the limestone river gravels was a noticeable difference from the red brown woodland soils. We split up as a group to explore the area, most folks picking a way across the river to get to the wider gravel banks upstream. This was a very odd looking terrain of boulders and fine gravel. Some areas were well established with small stunted pines, whilst others were obviously more disturbed by the rushing river.



Figure 40 Established gravel bank on the River Styx.

We were looking for alpinists brought down by rock fall and water from the mountain of Chelmos above. With no clear paths it was easy to lose track of where people were, and I just listened for the calls of 'over here' when a plant find was made. Chloe made one such discovery, judged to be the plant of the day, *Saxifraga scardica*, a true alpine washed down from the mountains above.



Figure 41 *Saxifraga scardica* in flower.

Other alpine interlopers include *Thymus teucrioides*, *Teucrium aroanium*, *Potentilla speciosa* and *Draba lasiocarpa*. There were plenty of other plants of interest that weren't from high altitudes; *Listera ovata*, *Dactylorhiza romana*, *Anchusa hybrida* and *Achillea umbellata*. The late spring meant that the area was not as rich in flowers as John Richards had previously seen it. My favourite plant was another find by Chloe, at the furthest point upstream that we got to, a clump of *Pinguicula hirtiflora* nestled at the base of a large rock. It was made even more memorable as I got the genus correct, without recourse to the experts.



Figure 42 Pale cream flowers of *Pinguicula hirtiflora*.

A shower of rain and rumbling stomachs made us head for shelter at the forest edge for a rather wet lunch. The rain cleared quickly and we headed upwards into the woods on a muddy path, apart from good clumps of *Listera ovata* we saw little else new and headed back to the waiting bus.

Back at the hotel a small group of us went for a short walk before dinner up a gravel road leading out of the village. Past small cultivated fields, we were soon surrounded by pine forest again, where we came across wild liquorice, *Astragalus glycyphyllos*, *Saxifraga chrysopleuifolia* and a mass of *Orchis pineorum* high up on a bank. Susan's eagle eyes spotted the emerging shoots of *Limodorum abortivum*, purple spears pushing up through the soil. Not much to look at just now, but apparently an amazing sight in full flower.

Thursday 5th May

Chelmos: We had breakfasted, packed and left our alpine retreat by 9.30am for the drive over the high Chelmos pass. After passing areas of schist and conglomerate lower down, we were back onto the more familiar limestone. We made extremely brief stops on the hill, at the first stop I hadn't even got all my waterproofs on, before the rain forced the more intrepid back on the bus. However, speedier donning of jacket, trousers, hat and gloves at the next stop meant that I did actually get outside. Paris definitely thought that we had all taken leave of our senses at this point. We were wandering around taking photos of plants in the driving rain, with the swirling cloud reducing visibility to a minimum.

In this brief stop we found *Malcolmia orsiniana*, *Gagea chrysantha*, and a ground hugging bright yellow *Alyssum*. Grazing must be a major pressure on some plant species as the only examples of the pretty *Viola aetolica* were sheltering in the middle of spiny bushes.



Figure 43 Rain washed *Viola aetolica* high on Chelmos.

Heading down out of the clouds we made a brief detour to look for tulips in a site recommended to John by a colleague who had previously visited the area. No tulip flowers were spotted but these fertile fields were full of annual flowers, such as *Crepis rubra*, *Centaurea mixta* and *Anthyllis vulneraria*, unfortunately mostly closed due to the lack of sunshine.

Back over to the other side of the hill we came down into Kalavrita, with the first sight of the striking war memorial, a prominent reminder of the town's history. Through the town we were soon winding uphill again, heading back towards the coast.

North of Kalavrita: We stopped at a sharp corner on the main road beside a taverna and headed back down the road. This was a real highlight of the trip, huge globes of *Asperula arcadiensis* with tightly packed pale to dark pink flowers, clinging to fissures in the conglomerate rock face. On the slope down to the road there were clumps of *Helianthemum hymettium*, another chasmophyte. A colony of *Orchis quadripunctata* was waving in the breeze, up on the top of the cliffs.



Figure 44 Clockwise from top left; *Asperula arcadiensis*, *Astragalus spruneri* and *Orchis quadripunctata*.

After a delicious lunch in the taverna we explored a small rocky outcrop below it. There were more orchid finds; *Ophrys cornuta*, *Orchis pauciflora* and more examples of *Ophrys lutea*. On the shadier side of the hill there was a good clump of *Saxifraga bulbifera*, and pink and red forms of *Anemone pavonina* in amongst bushier undergrowth. Chloe and I ventured to the end of the short section we were exploring, to find a sheer drop to the valley beneath. Thankfully the thorny tangle of bushes had slowed our approach to a crawl.



Figure 45 Chloe and me on a rocky outcrop.

On a rockier section there was a classic example of a natural crevice garden, with a scree river running through it. Conglomerate rock with vertical fissures and a mixture of brightly coloured annuals, gnarled juniper and the odd grass for good measure, inspiration indeed!



Figure 46 Natural crevice garden.

Heading back towards Kalavrita our final stop was at the monastery of Mega Spileo. Shrouded in cloud and hugging the huge cliffs this was an oddly atmospheric place. Some of the group ventured in, but I just wandered back down to the bus wondering at the tenacity of the plants, clinging to the sheer rock faces.

Friday 6th May

Chelmos: With better weather forecast we headed back onto the mountain of Chelmos. The mountains on this side of the Gulf of Corinth seem to be more heavily forested than around Delphi, although there was evidence of the processionary moth here too.

Our first stop was in an area of small limestone hummocks, easy to become disorientated and lose sight of the bus or other members of the group with the swirling cloud. Prostrate juniper hugged limestone pavements and rain drops hung from the pendulous flowers of *Arabis alpina*. There were more examples of the dense bushes seen yesterday, beginning to come into leaf, identified as *Crataegus heldreichii*.

We got a good look at a very odd looking member of the borage family, *Solenanthus stramineus*. It was unflatteringly compared to a toilet brush by some people, but the rain glistening off its pinkish added to its appearance. This is the only location for this species in Europe, otherwise it is found in the mountains of Asia, an oddly disjointed distribution.



Figure 47 *Arabis alpina* dripping with raindrops, and *Solenanthus stramineus* .

Chelmos Ski Centre: Gaining height quickly on the ski access road we parked up in the empty ski centre car park. The swirling cloud cleared to sunshine, but it was still cold enough for hats and gloves in the breeze. We explored the meadow below the car park, finding *Crocus sieberi*, *Muscari neglectum*, *Ornithogalum oligophyllum*, *Viola graeca* and *Gagea villosa*. Stunted *Abies* and *Juniperus* were dotted on the rocky outcrops surrounding the grassy bowl.

Heading up the ski piste the cloud cleared and the sun emerged. We were soon into patches of old snow, with a host of *Crocus* and *Ranunculus ficarioides* flowering in the newly exposed ground. A large colony of *Fritillaria graeca* were found, flowers still tightly closed. A few of us continued higher, John, Susan and Beth soon disappeared from sight, in search of more plants. However the late lying snow meant that some of the other plants John had hoped to see were not yet out.



Figure 48 Clockwise from left; view down the ski slope, *Malcolmia orsiniana*, and *Ranunculus ficarioides*

After a windy lunch outside we headed back down into the heat of Kalavrita, stopping once on the road downhill at a colourful patch of *Onosma erecta*. The hanging yellow heads bright against the reddish soil, with accompanying flowers of *Saponaria calabrica*, *Asperula arvensis* and *Acinos arvensis*.



Figure 49 Slope dotted with *Onosma erecta* and *Saponaria calabrica*.

Agia Lavra Monastery: Driving through Kalavrita, we headed to the monastery of Agia Lavra. A destination our driver Paris had tried to take us to yesterday by mistake. It is regarded as the birth place of modern Greece, where the revolution against the Ottoman Empire was launched in 1821. I think Paris was a bit disappointed when the first thing we did was head back down to the main road to look at the colourful flowers along the verges.

Above the road, ants crawled into the flowers of *Symphytum ottomanum*. Clinging to a rocky slope *Chamaecytisus hirsutus* was flowering in profusion. While on the flat grassy verge, in full sunshine, a flowering mass of *Crepis rubra* finally obliged by being open for a photograph.



Figure 50 View through *Crepis rubra*, back towards Kalavrita.

The hillsides were dotted with the reddish new leaves of *Quercus cocciferus* and the silvery leaves and white blossom of *Pyrus amygdaliformis*. The flower rich grass included *Lathyrus venetus*, *Geranium asphodelensus*, *Veronica praecox*, *Onobrychis caput-galli* and *Anchusa italica*.

Heading back to the monastery the women donned the obligatory skirt, over trousers, to gain entrance. The chapel was rich in colourful frescos, elaborate metalwork, and the air heavy with incense. The small museum upstairs housed many more ancient relics, sacred translations, banners of war, and pre Christian clay objects, an odd mixture of religion, war and ancient artefacts. The massive *Platanus orientalis* outside the main gate was as an impressive testament to the longevity of human occupation of this area of Greece.

Saturday 7th May

Saitas Pass: Leaving Kalavrita, this time we drove round the side of Chelmos, onto a high upland plain. We passed a young boy cycling up the steep road with his herd of goats on the grass above. Heading down into the foothills, the verges were full of poppies glowing red amongst the white lace caps of *Orlaya* and the lime green of *Smyrniium orphanidis*. Winding up to the high pass the bus caused a small traffic jam of sheep and goats in the narrow streets of the final village we passed through.

At the top of the pass we emerged into bright sunshine with two contrasting scenes laid out either side of the mountain. A flat plain of large, intensively cultivated fields lay to the east, while behind us the more rugged topography restricted agriculture to hillside grazing and a small patchwork of fields. We headed up a good stony path that zig zagged up the forested hillside, looking to find a site of *Adonis cyllenea* and *Biebersteinia orphanidis* that John had searched for on a previous trip.

Only a few metres up the track John was confident of good finds as the dandelions were already seeding here, indicating that the flowering season on this mountain was much further on compared to Chelmos. *Ophrys spruneri*, *Ophrys hebes* and *Ophrys aesculapii* were all spotted on the banks above the path. A few metres higher the speediest of the group had found the first *Adonis cyllenea* flowering. A single stout plant, standing a couple of feet high with a bright shiny yellow flower, the feathery leaves had a pungent, rather unpleasant smell. Climbing higher the path levelled off and down below us in a grassy doline there was a host of *Adonis* in full flower. Stopping for a much needed breather, Chloe and I also found emerging leaves of the Madonna Lily, *Lilium candidum* and *Colchicum graecum*.



Figure 51 Close up of *Adonis cyllenea* and view of main colony.

Violent gesticulations from folks ahead urged us to carry on up through this meadow to another grassy doline higher up. Once over the lip, we found that the second rare plant, *Biebersteinia orphanidis*, had been discovered. Both the *Adonis* and *Biebersteinia* had been thought to be extinct in Greece for over a hundred years, before being rediscovered in 1976 and 1995 respectively (Tan *et al.*, 1997).

Curiously, all three European sites of *Biebersteinia* also have populations of *Adonis cyllenea*. *Biebersteinia orphanidis* is certainly not as stunning as the *Adonis*, the hairy flowering spike a dull pinkish red, with sturdy serrated basal leaves. While the *Adonis* seemed to prefer the base of the dolines, the *Biebersteinia* was on the sloping sides.



Figure 52 *Biebersteinia orphanidis* just above the *Adonis* colony.

It was great to see the excitement of John Richards and the other knowledgeable plants-people to these two species, a first sighting for all of them. Not knowing the background to quite how rare these two species are, I was more thrilled to see the first, fully open *Fritillaria* of the trip. In amongst the long grass, on the side of the highest doline that we reached, the hanging flowers of *Fritillaria mutabilis* were fully open. Marked with wide stripes of matt red and thin strips of pale green these were a beautiful sight.

Getting concerned about the damage that our heavy feet might do to the colonies of these rare plants John called us all back onto the track and we started off back downhill. There were plenty of other gems to spot on the way down, including the tiny endemic *Viola mercurii*, *Erodium cicutarium* and *Ranunculus brutius*. Back at the bus in a shady spot for lunch, Chloe found another new orchid *Ophrys mammosa zeusii*.



Figure 53 The beautiful markings on *Fritillaria mutabilis*.

Agios Georgios Monastery and Feneos Lake: Back onto the bus we headed down over the pass towards Feneos, across the plain and up towards the lake. We had a brief stop on rough ground at the edge of a village for the best clumps of *Anemone pavonina* seen yet, and then carried up to reach the bright blue lake encircled by mountains.



Figure 54 *Anemone pavonina* on waste ground.

Rounding the lake we stopped to explore the grassy edges of an almond grove. On the terraces itself the air was noisy with bees buzzing above flowering *Thymus sibthorpii*, while in the adjacent woodland there were more new orchids, *Orchis lactea* and *Orchis provincialis*. The most unexpected find was a small tortoise game fully making its way uphill through the leaf litter and small branches.



Figure 55 Tortoise in the woodland near Lake Feneos.

Up at the monastery there were a few stalls selling local produce, walnuts, honey, dried herbs and bags of *horta*, the wild collected greens that a few brave souls had tried for our evening meals. On closer inspection these looked like dandelion leaves, perhaps explaining the bitter taste to this dish.



Figure 56 Stalls of local produce and the entrance to Agios Georgios monastery.

This monastery couldn't have been more different to the others we'd visited. The monks were friendly and welcoming, and the atmosphere very relaxed. The small dark chapel was covered in painted fresco's, with the adjacent room dedicated to teaching the art of painting these works of art. Encouraged to climb a set of wooden stairs I reached a veranda on the second floor looking out over the lake, where I was offered rose petal jam to taste, which was extremely sweet and very squeaky to eat.

After a quick stop at the lake, with time for Joy and me to have a quick paddle, we were back onto the bus for the long drive back to Kalavrita.

Sunday 8th May

Lake Stymfalia: Leaving Kalavrita for the last time we retraced our journey of yesterday over the Saitas pass, this time heading south east across the flat plain for our final full day of botanising. Bus loads of Athenians passed us, heading the other way for a Sunday outing. Climbing up from the plains we were soon down into another valley at Lake Stymfalia.

Exiting the bus the first noticeable thing was the constant chattering of the bullfrogs, in the reeds of the lake below. Along the baked road side various orchids were found, including *Ophrys argolica* and *O. reinholdii*. Looking up to the cliffs three lesser kestrels swooped past, intent on chasing away a raven. On the pinky orange cliff clumps of *Asperula arcadiensis* were clinging to the face, with *Aubrieta deltoidea* cascading downwards. The terraces criss crossing the slope looked like hanging gardens, with the yellow heads of an *Alyssum* were blowing in the breeze.



Figure 57 Limestone cliffs alongside Lake Stymfalia.

Lower down, next to the road the parti coloured flowers of *Onosma frutescens* were attracting insects galore, with the spires of *Verbascum daenzeri* providing a complementary colour scheme.



Figure 58 *Onosma frutescens* and *Verbascum daenzeri*.

Nemea: Back onto the bus we headed away from the lake down into another flat valley, full of small fields of vines, the verges coloured with poppies and a yellow flowering crucifer. Through this narrow valley and down into the next one, we were suddenly into much more intensively farmed vines and olive groves. Our final stop was at the ancient site of Nemea, a sun baked, dusty site with the occasional group of visitors exploring the stadium and columns of the Temple of Zeuss. After lunch we explored the area above the stadium, which was rich in orchids including *Orchis fragrans*, *Ophrys fusca*, *Serapias vomeracea* and *Ophrys delphinensis*.



Figure 59 Flowering spikes of *Orchis fragrans*.

With the site due to close for lunch we hurried out and drove down to the main site, expecting it to be shut already. A friendly lady let us in for a quick tour of this impressive area, large temple columns still standing, and extensive excavation of the bathing area. This was our final official stop of the trip and then we were off to Nafplio, a busy port town, with the walls of medieval fortresses protecting the upper slopes of the town. A quick repacking of bags, a trawl of the shops for suitable sweets for tea time in the garden bothy and a final convivial meal together was the finale to the trip.



Figure 60 Sunset over the Bourtzi fortress protecting the harbour entrance at Nafplio.

Conclusions: This was a valuable and memorable experience for many reasons. To be surrounded by such a diversity of plant species, both completely new and familiar from a garden setting was exciting, invigorating and at times exhausting! Latin names, spellings and pronunciation were a muddle at the start of the trip, but by the third day it was satisfying to be able to name previously seen genera correctly. The knowledge and patience of John Richards, John Good and other members of the party was immense, and they never seemed to tire of distributing information on request.

For the first few days it was enough to see the plants, get a good photo and the correct name written down. By watching and speaking to other group members I began to appreciate their interest in gathering more information on plant ecology and habitat. It is such a useful skill to be able to transfer this knowledge to horticultural situations. I will never look at *Crocus* in quite the same way, having seen their flowers emerging directly from old snow banks, and the sodden looking ground it leaves behind. It was also fascinating to see the pollinators and seed distributors at work. I hadn't realised what a crucial role ants played in the lifecycle of so many Mediterranean species.

Looking at plant associations, the way colour, form and structure interact in some of the natural displays has practical uses in garden design. I would love to be able to put to use even a small part of the inspiration gained from these meadow and roadside floral shows.

Plant identification, ecological awareness and horticultural inspiration were all tangible benefits from this trip. So a huge thank you to The Merlin Trust for enabling me to join the AGS Greece Tour 2011!

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