

Galanthus elwesii, Tahtali Dagı Turkey.

JINGLE BELLS



Clematis cirrhosa, Termessos, Turkey

It's that time of year again (already). My children are counting down the days, Santa's list grows longer by the day and we all have to run the gauntlet of Christmas songs on endless loops in every shop we enter, nowhere is safe, not even Turkey, where they have neatly packaged (the economic side of) Christmas into New Year, so trees, presents and of course Saint Nicholas who did after all herald from these parts (near Demre, a mere 100 kms from where I sit) all feature.

No doubt I'll be cursed for putting now Jingle Bells into everyone's heads, but let's be cheerful about it. I apologise in advance for writing this entirely from a northern perspective, but that is the season I'm looking at. In the north, we'll be welcoming in that herald of spring the snowdrop, in fact my local population of *Galanthus peshmenii* has barely stopped flowering when some colonies of *G. elwesii* begin (there's even a peculiar intermediate taxa that grows in the woods with characters of both and flowers exactly on 25 December every year). During January, some areas of macchie are coated in a thick dressing of *Clematis cirrhosa* followed by masses of fuzzy fruits. The preceding species all have variations of bell-shaped flowers and it is a common type of flower, found in many genera in many families, though a few do rather stand out. Another bell-oriented genus is *Fritillaria*, one that shows more variation in form and colour than any



Fritillaria biflora, southern California.



Fritillaria eduardii, Batken, Kyrgyzstan



Fritillaria eduardii, Batken, Kyrgyzstan



Codonopsis clematidea, Spiti Valley, India



other, everything from tessellated such as *F. lusitanica* and *F. whittallii*, to canary yellow in *F. carica* or the shining dark brown chocolate lily of California; *Fritillaria biflora*. A rather prosaic name for such as beauty, I would have preferred *F. scelerisquii* or at least *F. cadburyii*. In California, their breadth of colour is stunning with white, pink and the fiery cupules of *F. recurva* lighting up the woodland edges in May with floriferous *Cercis occidentalis* all around. However, it is rather eclipsed by the positively volcanic outburst of *Fritillaria imperialis* and *F. eduardii*, both capable of colouring rocky slopes with jaw-dropping displays in April. The former ranges from central Turkey through Iran (to the western Himalaya) and the latter is found in Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan, mainly in the Pamir Alai and Hissar Ranges.

And, if we rumble on through Asia and fast-forward a month or two one of the loveliest bell flowers appears commonly in damp places and beside streams; *Codonopsis clematidea*. The outward appearance of the flowers is nothing special, a rather washed out pale blue, but inside it is fabulous with rings of colour. The genus is found mainly in China and the Himalaya, where the various species exhibit some exotic interior designs, which neatly highlights what many bells are about. They are not intended for us to look at at all. The wonderful interior patterns of many bells be it *Fritillaria*, *Codonopsis* or gentian are aimed squarely

Fritillaria recurva, northern California



Fritillaria lusitanica, Ronda, Spain



Codonopsis nervosa, Sichuan, China



Campanula af. *choruhensis*, near Yusefeli, Turkey

at guiding their pollinators to nectaries and anthers to ensure pollination and seed set. It makes photographing interiors tricky, though it is easier now with rotating camera screens. Nonetheless, to get real results the photographer has to get down and dirty. No excuses. The image I took of *Codonopsis clematidea* en masse was achieved lying on my back on the side of wet ditch in Himachal Pradesh, India. I received more than one quizzical look from the locals working hard in the adjacent fields, but I was working hard too, it was exhausting, but I've yet to surpass it so it was worth every discomfort.

Fortunately, bells often look great as bells. None more so than the perfectly named bellflowers; *Campanula* (the main genus in campanulaceae, which is also home to *Codonopsis* and other lovely genera such as *Canarina*, *Adenophora* and *Cyananthus*). Latin for bell is *campana*. They are most diverse in the Alps, Balkans and east through much of Turkey and the Caucasus. Outliers occur much further east such as *Campanula punctata*, including this sumptuous deep violet form I photographed in central Japan. Greece has an abundance of species including 45 endemics, but few countries have the range of forms found in Turkey, from stunning Mediterranean endemics such as *Campanula tomentosa* (confined to a small area in the far west) to the gorgeous rose-tinted ivory of *C. choruhensis*. The image of the latter may

Campanula tomentosa, western Turkey



Campanula punctata, Japan



Campanula lactiflora, Kackar Mountains, Turkey



Megacodon stylophorum, Baima Shan, Yunnan, China.



Gentiana asclepiadea, Kackar Mountains, Turkey

even represent a new taxa, as *C. choruhensis*, *C. trojana* and *C. betulifolia* all occur in the same area and can sometimes be found alongside one another, raising the distinct possibility of hybrids. There are over 100 species of *Campanula* in Turkey. Perhaps the best place to see a good number and in a broad range of shapes and sizes in the north-east and neighbouring areas of the Caucasus. Here there are the aforementioned white species as well as garden classics such as *C. latifolia* and hefty stands of *C. lactiflorus*, that latter flowering well into summer and shown here high in the Kackar Mountains as mists drifted across and hid bellowing bulls from sight. If the threatening livestock were not enough the weather was and unsurprisingly, a heavy thunderstorm broke shortly afterwards.

The same areas are also excellent for gentians (I realise I'm probably stretching the bell theme a touch here, but let's consider them long bells, even though strictly speaking they are infundibular) in mid- to late-summer, including familiar species such as *Gentiana asclepiadea* and *G. septemfida*. In the Alps (and Pyrenees) we have these as well as the classic *Gentiana acaulis*, but overall the western regions pale to what can be seen in China where around 250 species (or two thirds of the world's gentians) can be found. During the summer many annual species with more starry flowers appear, for example *G. asterocalyx* and *G. chungtienensis*, and these flower



Cassiope pectinata, near Shangri-La, Yunnan.



Gentiana acaulis in the Spanish Pyrenees.

alongside the delightful dwarf shrublet *Cassiope pectinata*, festooned in little white bells. These were in Yunnan next to the black-brown bells of *Lilium souliei* and not so far from where one could see the remarkable *Megacodon stylophorum*, a member of the gentianaceae with gently-patterned yellow-green bells and real giant of species reaching up to 100 cms tall. This is all a prelude to the autumn when the same locations burst with gentianaceae and late campanulaceae such as *Cyananthus* and *Codonopsis convolvulacea*. Of the gentianaceae there are many *Swertia*, *Lomatogonium* and of course *Gentiana*. It is possible to see a dozen or more species in some locations where drifts of *Gentiana sino-ornata* fill marshy areas next to drier turf with stunning patches of *G. arethusae*, one of the loveliest of all species. There are many of the large flowered species, typically prominently-marked with stripes or lines inside to direct pollinating insects. Yunnan at this season is surprisingly flowery, with edelweiss, louseworts, many different yellow saxifrages, orchids and the fiery tints of autumn colouring a landscape golden with ripe rice fields.

And, yes by the time you've finished looking at these in situ it will be time to get on with shopping for gifts and writing cards and humming Christmas songs, whether you want to or not.

Happy Christmas and New Year
from Vira Natura Tours.

Gentiana arethusae near Shangri-La, Yunnan



Gentiana hexaphylla on Baima Shan, Yunnan