

ACROSS THE SHANS TRIP REPORT 2017



Rheum nobile

Day 1 8 June – To Dali, Yunnan

There were various arrivals from different corners of the globe and despite the odd hiccup in arrangements we all met up safely and convened at our comfortable hotel in Dali. The first of many delicious Chinese meals got us off to a good culinary start.

Day 2 9 June – Cang Shan

Rising up steeply behind Dali is the forest cloaked Cangshan, a relatively low range by western Chinese standards, but one which proved both an ideal way to start the botanical side of the trip and began our acclimatisation to the rarified heights we would encounter later in the tour. A cable car whisked us swiftly to 3900 metres having passed through various vegetation zones on the way and seen the Yunnan Pines, give way to Delavay Fir, rhododendrons and subalpine turf. We passed over great hummocks of *Diapensia purpurea* (cream form) and colonies of deep red *Rhododendron haematodes* and exited the cable way below slopes clad in flowering *Rhododendron lacteum*. A wide boardwalk meandered through the ancient fir forest, rhodos and turf and although this was in some ways a less than ideal way of exploring this area, the sheer weight of visitor numbers (and their behaviour) made it necessary. At times, it was a little frustrating not being able to move freely across the area, but in truth we found close specimens of almost all plants during an enjoyable few hours. Drifts of *Primula calliantha* were spread out beneath the gnarled boughs of the rhodos and as we walked there were the broad corymbs of *Megacarpa delavayi*, streams lined with blue-veined white *Pegaephyton scapiflorum* and yellow *Caltha scaposa* and then the attractive purple *Omphalogramma delavayi*. All around was magnificent mountain scenery, in many ways a classic Chinese landscape, with jagged ridges peppered with architectural conifers. We stopped at a new visitor centre and enjoyed a cup of tea before continuing. Bushes of *Rhododendron taliense* were common and there were superb populations of *Megacarpa delavayi*, a sprinkling of *Primula sikkimensis* and quite a few of the sinister *Arisaema elephas*. Stopping by a lake most of the group went up higher but Francis, Susan and I stayed below and ate some lunch seeing a Tibetan Weasel scamper across the rocks in front of us. Mists were flowing over gaps in the mountains and adding to the drama of the landscape as we descended to the cable car for our return journey after a productive first day.

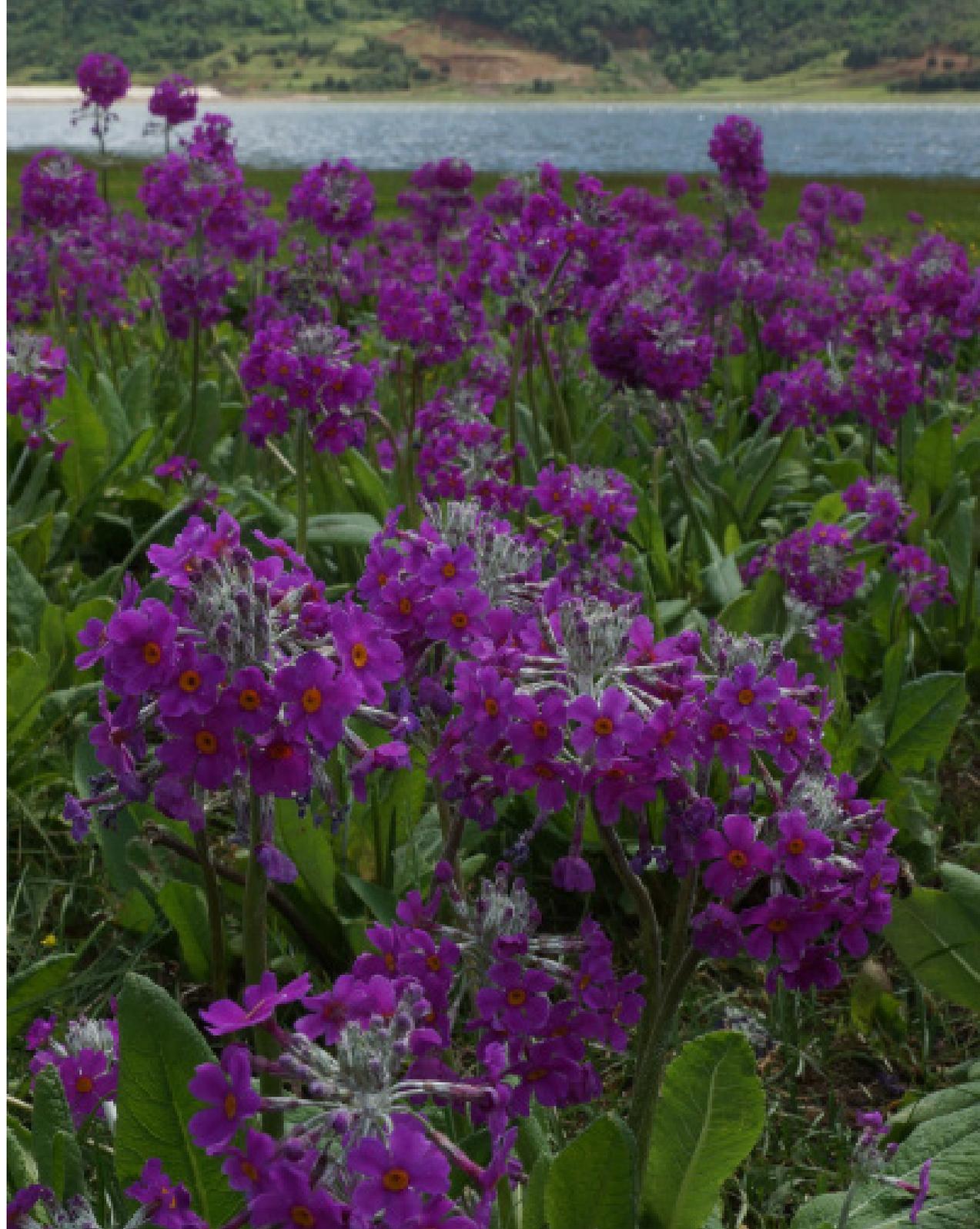


Abies delavayi on Cang Shan

A cultural interlude saw us driving, bright and early, to the famous Three Pagodas, and arriving early proved the smart move. There were few people about and the light was superb on these iconic buildings as we wandered about the complex more or less by ourselves. After a couple of hours, the crowds were flowing in and we were leaving driving north out of Dali and taking the fast road to Lijiang. China's new roads are appearing faster than you can blink and the modern concrete flyovers ride above traditional farms and literally through the hills via numerous tunnels. Avoiding the city, the road eventually began to climb into the hills and we stopped beside a small population of rich pink *Primula bessiana* with a few darker pink *P. poissonii* in a clearing in the scrub. The scrub itself contained some superb climbing bushes of *Rosa longicuspis*, their flowery stems looping over the taller shrubs and into the pines. There were also the much smaller *Rosa farreri*, *Clerodendron peii*, *Jasminum officinale*, *J. humile* and the elegant hanging racemes of *Indigofera pendula*. Around and among the scrub were many *Arisaema consanguineum* as well as a solitary brown and white striped spathe of *Arisaema franchettiana*.

After lunch, we drove higher stopping first for some lovely lilac-pink *Thalictrum delavayi*. These grew alongside *Deutzia calycosa*, *Viburnum nervosum*, *Philadelphus purpurascens* and the odd spike of *Lysimachia delavayi*. At the pass, the woods were brimming with both purple and yellow forms of *Roscoea cautleyoides* as well as *Stellera chamaejasme* but we didn't stop for these and instead descended to the Wenghai lake which was coloured pink by thousands of *Primula beesiana*. Walking towards this display the short turf was full of *Anemone yulongshanica*

Primula beesiana



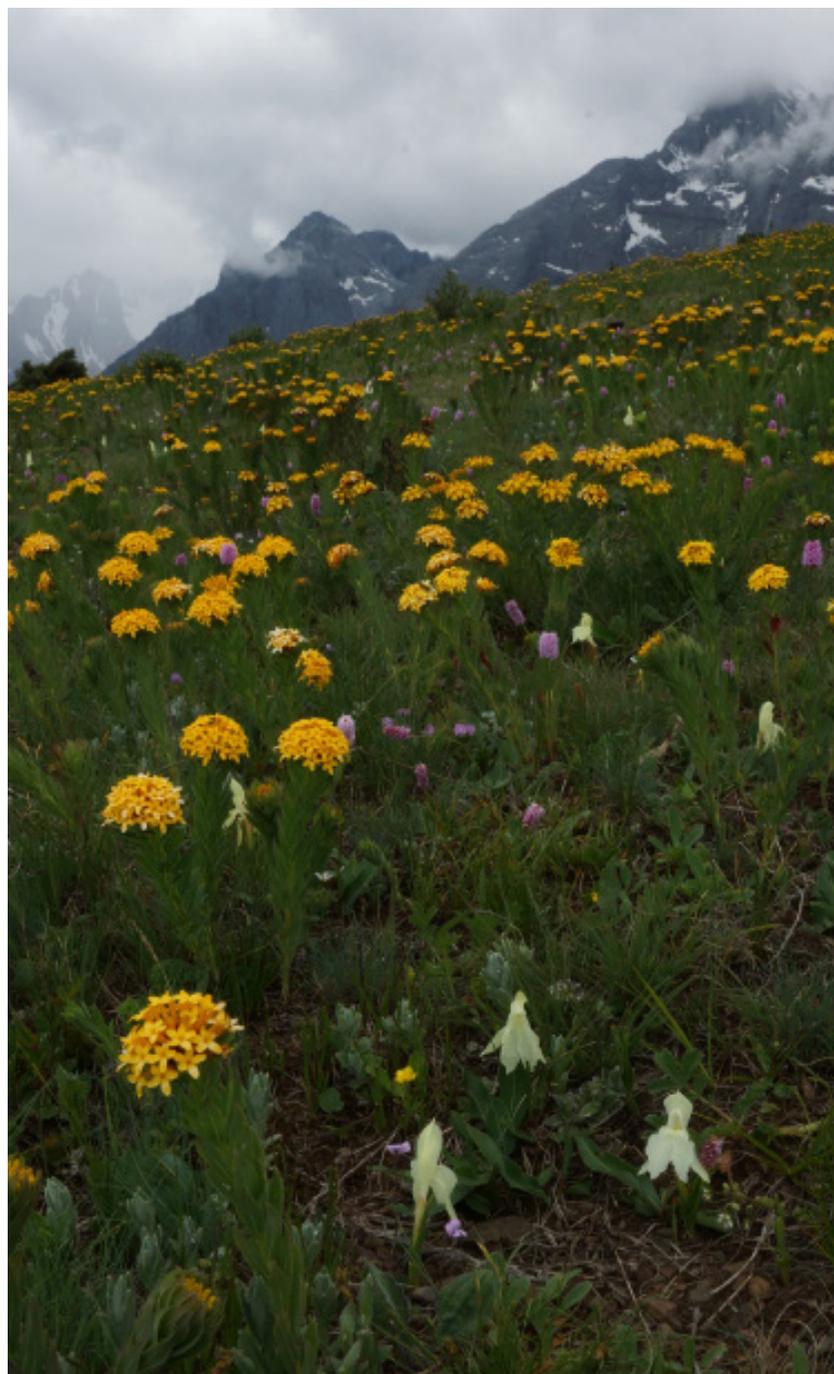
and a tiny *Gentiana sp.* It was an idyllic scene with countless primulas spreading out towards the hills and distant peaks of Yulong Xue Shan – Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. It was in these hills that we went next scrambling over fences and across fields. Seeing *Hemerocallis forrestii* on the way we finally reached a steep rocky slope where we found several decent *Incarvillea lutea*. The pretty light blue *Iris colletii* was also here with *Veronica pyrolifolia*. Driving back, we stopped for more displays of *Roscoea cautleyoides* before arriving at our hotel.

Day 4

11 June – Yulong Xue Shan

A flower-packed day was spent within Yulong Xue Shan national park. Not far after entering the park we took a side turn to an area of low limestone cliffs and woods. Here we found purple *Primula pulchella* and a trio of roscoeas, with the diminutive *Roscoea tibetica*, the familiar *R. cautleyoides* and the flamboyant, large-flowered *R. humeana*, which came in both yellow and purple forms, many of them sprouting from the limestone rocks. On the rocks were dainty *Primula yunnanensis* and *Pleione bulbocodioides*, as well as some large flowery plants of golden-yellow *Primula forrestii*. Higher up on the rocks Wenbo found a colony of *Cypripedium plectrochilon*. Despite the harsh habitat or rather because of it there were many other plants including *Arisaema echinata* and *A. ciliatum*, *Anemone rupicola* and *Polygonatum cirrhifolium*. Walking back down there were more good colonies of roscoea, primula and various shrubs and then a wooded area beside the road held *Clematis chrysocoma*, *Anemone demissa* var. *major* and *Androsace spinulifera*. Moving on we didn't get far as a superb display of lurid pink *Incarvillea mairie* brought us to a halt. They grew under scattered *Pinus densata* with many soft pink *Roscoea humeana*. Slender *Herminium ophioglossoides* were here and there and *Euphorbia stracheyi*.

We drove on through the park all the way to the smaller cableway passing tempting primulas and salvias on the way. After a quick lunch, we boarded the rather antiquated two-person cars for the twenty-minute ride over diverse woods to a large open area ringed by forest known as Yak Meadow. A rustic boardwalk made its way around the hill passing through fine drifts of *Stellera chamaejasme*, *Androsace spinulifera*, *Iris colletii* and pretty pink *Polygonum palacea*. At the high point of the walk we came across a wedding photo shoot with the moody ramparts of Yulong Shan in the background. Searching the scrub-dotted pasture we managed to find a



Stellera chamaejasme

couple of sky blue *Meconopsis forrestii* and around a temple were many large *Paeonia delavayi* with a few with dark red flowers.

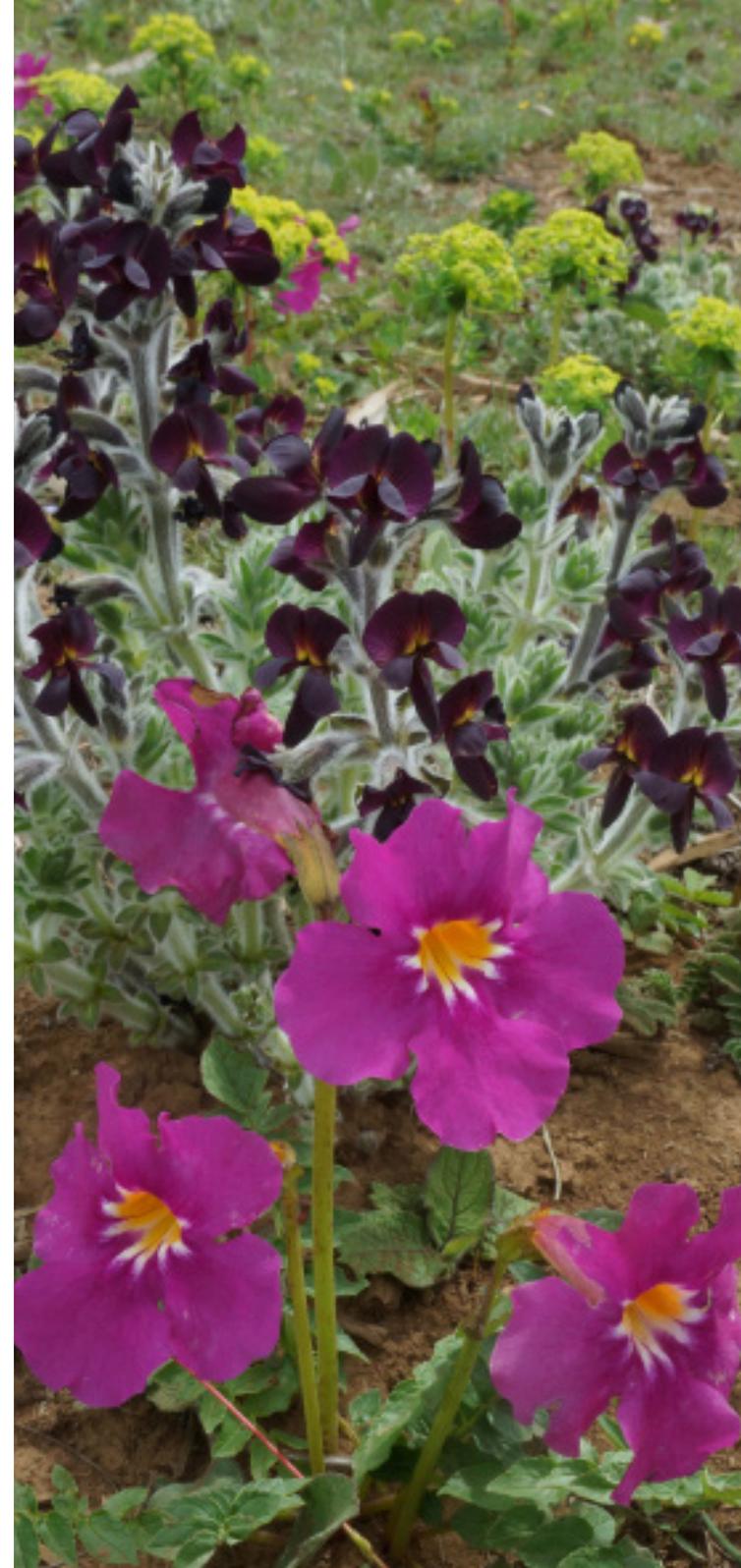
Back at the bottom we started to drive back, but of course there were stops. The first was for a superb population of *Salvia aerea*, which grew in a multitude of colour forms from cream to lilac to red-pink. There were joined by the apricot flowers of *Primula bulleyana* and then in the woods stands of *Calanthe tricarinata*. There were additional stops for creamy *Salvia digitaloides* and then the round everything off a wonderful bronzy bell of *Lilium bakerianum*.

Day 5 12 June – To Zhongdian (Shangri-la)

Leaving Shuhe we drove through the sunny countryside to an old temple complex which, was also home to a five hundred-year-old camellia. After looking around here we headed north reaching the muddy waters of the Yangtse after an hour before stopping for lunch. The bare rock of Yulong Shan could be seen beneath the clouds, but the summits were hidden. Passing the entrance to the Tiger Leaping Gorge the road climbed with the rocks beside the river peppered with dozens of (sadly unreachable) *Arisaema candidissima*. A succession of slow truck meant progress was also slow through this section, but our drivers negotiated this and we arrived on the broad Zhongdian Plateau, flanked by forested mountains. An area of flat pasture was swathed in flowers with hundreds of *Incarvillea zhongdianensis*, amidst a sea of *Euphorbia stracheyi*. Knitting this garish ensemble was the incomparable black-purple of *Thermopsis barbata*, a stunning legume. Little blue *Gentiana asterocalyx* were dotted among all of this and we spent an hour wandering about photographing it all, also admiring the sturdy construction of the surrounding Tibetan houses – it was a wonder there were any trees left standing!

There was a second flowery stop in an area of replanted forest with delightful drifts of *Erigeron breviscapus*, *Polygonum palacea* and *Anemone obtusiloba*. Taller *Anemone demissa* var. *major* grew among the shrubs and sprinkled throughout were the lovely little purple and white *Iris barbatula*. Some careful searching produced the pretty little orchid *Ponerorchis brevicarata* as well as a couple of *Geranium delavayi* with their reflexed petals and white *Morina alba*. A cup of tea later and we were on our way to Zhongdian arriving at the large square from where we walked a short distance to our very pleasant hotel.

A spread of Tibetan food and stronger beers finished the day off.



Day 6

13 June – Napa Hai

The inflated pouches of cyripediums were the stand out feature of today. The region around Napa Hai offers the opportunity to see five species of these charismatic orchids in one day. Just outside Zhongdian a botanic garden combines both ornamental plantings with extensive native habitat and we began here seeing many bushes of *Daphne aurantiaca* smothered in yellow flowers and the stunning scarlet drumsticks of *Androsace bulleyana* all overlooking the placid reflective lake below. Then there was the first blue poppy, *Meconopsis prattii* and moving onto an area of poplar woodland we found a few decent *Cypripedium tibeticum* with their outsize purple pouches (many more were to follow later). There were also several *Cephalanthera longifolia*, *Platanthera chlorantha*, *Maianthemum henryi* and the delicate golden spikes of *Oreorchis erythrochrysea*. Walking out of the garden we found some good flowering *Syringa yunnanensis*, many flowering *Rosa omeiensis*, the spidery silver flowers of *Leontopodium haplophyloides* and a solitary pink *Primula pulchelloides*. The lake was still beautifully reflective as we drove onto the pass stopping just past it and then setting off on a walk. A few of the extraordinary *Sinopodophyllum hexandrum* with pink cups atop fast-expanding marbled leaves were in flower along with the abundant *Iris bulleyana* and *Anemone rivularis*. A rough track was spattered blue with *Gentiana curvistyla* and led eventually to a slope with many lovely flowers. *Iris ruthenica* was common and as we progressed there was a succession of different colour forms of *Cypripedium tibeticum* from purple to pink. Another pink, *Acanthocalyx nepalensis*, was common throughout. As we moved across the slope the vegetation became denser with more flowering *Rhododendron vernicosum* and some stunning yellow *R. wardii* with (almost certain) hybrids between them. A few flowers were hanging on the narrow-leaved *R. roxiaenum* bushes.

Lunch was down by the calm lake where a number of *Meconopsis prattii* could be seen on the rocky slopes behind. Afterwards we continued onto an orchid wonderland. The stony track was lined with *Corydalis appendiculata* and led to an area of birch woods with superb clumps of *Cypripedium yunnanense* and abundant *C. flavum*, mingled among them were deep pink *C. guttatum*. Light gaps had drifts of *Incarvillea zhongdianensis*, *Anemone rivularis*, some stunning deep pink colour forms of *A. demissa* and *Androsace spinulifera*, but the enduring memory was perhaps the stunning stands of *Cypripedium flavum*.

Day 7

14 June – Tianchi Hai

The hills west of Zhongdian contain a great diversity of plants and we began with a tract of birch wood where there were plenty of beautiful *Nomocharis aperta* in flower. A few patches of *Pedicularis siphonantha* were beside the road. Moving on there were the wonderful emerging bronzy leaves of *Rodgersia pinnata*, trailing stems of very large flowered *Clematis montana* var. *grandiflora* and stands of blue *Iris bulleyana*. An area of



Meconopsis prattii

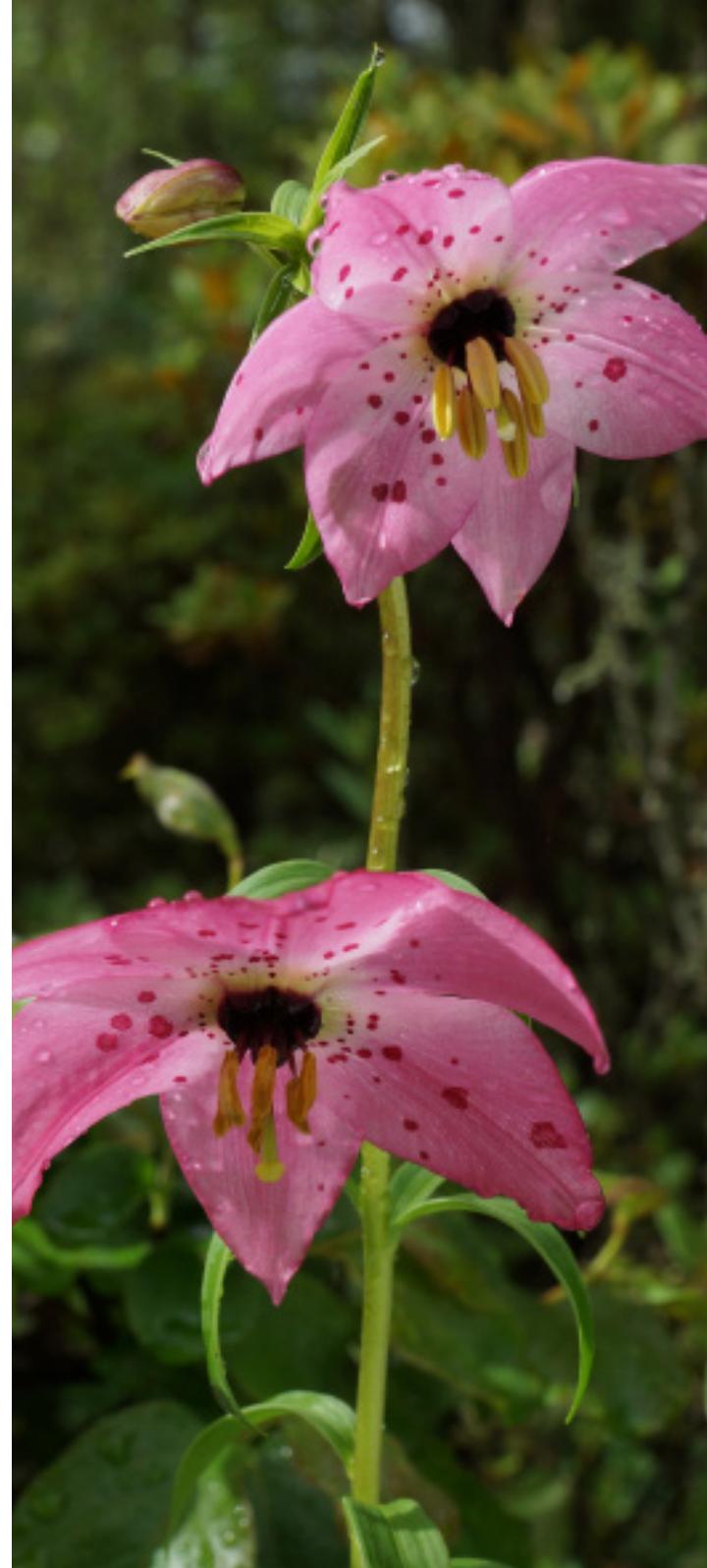
pasture had a magical display of thousands of matt pink *Primula secundiflora* mingled with a lesser amount of yellow *P. sikkimensis*. The road rumbled up through the forest to where we stopped for some fine plants of *Primula chionantha*. These grew near an area of Tolkienesque firs, with long wisps of lichen draped over the branches. In the turf were *Primula amethystina*, sunny margins had purple *Rhododendron russatum* and Peter found a the peculiar blackish flowered *Mandragora caulescens*. Rocky banks further up had a couple of superb big-flowered *Meconopsis pseudointegrifolia*.

Reaching the lake there was an abundance of *Rhododendron telmetsium* in vast carpets of lilac, and many bushes of white *R. phaeochrysum* were in flower too. Tucked among the dwarf rhodos were the sombre chocolate bells of *Lilium souliei* and plenty of golden *Lloydia delavayi*, whilst a view point has the white bells of *Cassiope pectinata*. The weather was taking a turn for the worse with squally showers sweeping across, but luckily a tent roof had been put up to shelter us as we ate lunch. The rain passed and set off across the heath finding more lilies, flowery patches of *Allium humile* and a dark form of *Fritillaria cirrhosa*. Climbing up a little above the lake we now had clear views of the waters and surrounding hills. Along the track were superb patches of *Primula sikkimensis* and some magnificent flower-laden *Rhododendron wardii*. A solitary *Rhododendron trichostomum* was perched on a rotting log. Driving back down we stopped for another superb *Meconopsis pseudointegrifolia*, views of the wooden yak-herder shacks and then stopped at a little valley with abundant bushy clumps of *Adonis davidii* including some delightful blue-suffused forms. On the rocks around were plentiful *Primula deflexa* and a few *Arisaema elephas*. The last stop was for some red-flowered *Schisandra rubiflora* tumbling over some rocks, before rumbling down to smoother roads and onto Zhongdian for some excellent pizzas.

Day 8 15 June – Baima Shan I

New roads and tunnels meant getting to Baima Shan was much quicker than in the past. We set off after breakfast and descended through the spectacular, but dry Yangtse river valley to Benzilan, dropped off our luggage and then climbed up into increasingly lush forested mountains. The first flower stop was for some of the pale form of *Primula chionantha* with a few purple *P. apoclita* in the gutter(!) and a patch of pretty white *Pinguicula alpina*. Driving up to the pass we took a dirt track even higher onto the alpine turf to save our legs a bit. From here we walked up higher past delights such as *Pedicularis przewalskii* and as we did more and more alpine flowers appeared. Around a snow patch were *Thermopsis smithiana*, *Primula nanobella* and *Potentilla stenophylla* and just above it the first of the attractive pink *Chesneya nubigena* var. *purpurea*, *Solmslaubachia retropilosa* and *Anemone rupicola* var. *gelida*. Even though we had acclimatised to some degree the going was fairly slow as we were now at around 4500m. Among the rocks were some stunning clumps of *Primula dryadifolia*, tight cushions of *Draba involucrata* and then the prize we had set out for, domes of *Chionocharis hookeri* beset with dozens of blue flowers. There were superb mountain backdrops all around too with clear views of the

Nomocharis aperta



ragged limestone ranges opposite and the various coloured mountains either side, rich plant hunting areas for sure.

From here we descended slowly to where the cars were parked for a late lunch. We met Adong on the way down and he showed us pictures of a much larger population of *Chionocharis hookeri* he had found. It was too tempting so we arranged an early departure the following morning for the hardy few to rescale the hill and see these. We looked for *Lilium nanum* on the way down, but no luck and then stopped a superb roadside drift of *Primula gemmifera* subsp. *amoena*. On the limestone rocks nearby, were *Androsace wardii*, the diminutive little *Polygonatum hookeri*, some good *Fritillaria cirrhosa* and *Loxostemon delavayi*. *Paraquilegia microphylla* could be seen higher up, but more of those tomorrow. Lower down on the mountain we stopped for large flowering shrubs of *Paeonia delavayi* var. *lutea* and then last of all for the spectacular valley views of the first bend in the Yangtse.

Day 9 16 June – Baima Shan II

The determined few set off at 5.30 driving back up to the pass of Baima Shan and then setting off across the slopes with fabulous early morning mountain views all around as gentle mists and clouds drifted across. We made excellent time, reaching the top in forty minutes and finding the many cushions of *Chionocharis hookeri*. The light was not quite right for these yet so we spent time photographing all of the other delights and mountain views. There were some fine flowery mats of *Chesneya nubigena* var. *purpurea*, dwarf rhodos and *Arenaria oreophila*. Walking back down there was the odd little mat of pinkish *Androsace delavayi*. There was time for some to indulge in some yak butter tea at a food stall at the pass before meeting up with the rest of the group.

We drove up into a limestone valley where the rocks had plenty of superb mauve-flowered *Paraquilegia microphylla* quivering in the breeze. Surely one of the quintessential alpiners. Having switched from granite to limestone today there were many new plants here with *Primula polyneura*, *Erysimum croceum*, *Incarvillea compacta*, the superb crinkled leaves and purple flowers of *Phlomis rotata* and *Astragalus yunnanensis* among them. After spending some time walking along the narrow valley we drove on to a much higher location, where a road took us to



Primula dryadifolia

4400m and large areas of accessible scree.

On the coarser scree were plenty of emerging *Saussurea medusa*, their woolly rosettes akin to vegetable jellyfish. These would gradually extend and form woolly column later in the summer, if they weren't gathered up for traditional medicine before then. With them were the gorgeous ice-blue (or purplish-flowered) *Corydalis melanochlora*, as well as *Taphrospermum verticillatum* and pink *Solmslaubachia retropilosum*. More stable ground nearby held mats of *Spongiocarpella yunnanensis* beset with large golden pea flowers. The weather was fine and there were superb mountain backdrops to our photos as we wandered further down the track seeing electric blue *Corydalis pachycentra*, a fabulous big clump of *Primula chionantha* and the pink form of *Rhododendron phaeochrysum*. Huge drifts of dwarf purple rhodos coloured the slopes, interspersed with the odd yellow *Rhododendron rupicola* var. *chryseum*. Yellow flowers abounded as we descended with *Anemone trullifolia*, bronze-backed *Trollius farreri*, *Primula sikkimensis* and *Caltha scaposa*, followed by the delicate *Corydalis atuntsuensis*.

It was time to leave the botanically rich Baima Shan and head for Zhongdian, stopping for a fine *Rhododendron decorum* display and then views along the Yangtse river valley. Another feast of excellent pizzas completed the day.

Day 10 17 June –Da Xue Shan

The approach to Da Xue Sha is a long one, and unfortunately, we had some early delays and then police checks. Nonetheless we still managed to stop for *Omphalogramma vinciflora* and *Nomocharis aperta* as we gradually climbed through the tidy villages into forest swathed mountains. The landscape becoming increasingly dramatic with impressive ragged tooth limestone ridges. Stands of *Aquilegia rockii* and *Phaius delavayi* were seen as we progressed eventually reaching the pass, but not stopping. Instead we made for a nearby side valley where we were to enjoy a botanical feast. Four species of primula were found within the first fifty metres with *Primula sikkimensis* its regular sidekick *P. secundiflora*, pink *P. involucreta* and smaller pink *P. florida*. The first patch of scree had a few lovely *Corydalis benecincta* and the blue veined-white flowers of *Hemilophia sessilifolia*. Flanking this were shrubberies of *Rhododendron agniphum* mingled with the very similar *R. phaeochrysum* and the much smaller *R. primuliflorum*. Clearly visible through binoculars on more distant scree was a large creamy triangle and this was our target. Ignoring the many *Meconopsis integrifolia* we plodded on uphill passed disgruntled yaks to where there was a superb example of *Rheum nobile*, surely one of the ultimate alpine plants. It was in perfect condition and had a magnificent mountain backdrop. Everyone eventually made it to see this iconic alpine, and all were suitably impressed. The surrounding scree had abundant *Corydalis benecincta* and *Hemilophia sessilifolia*.



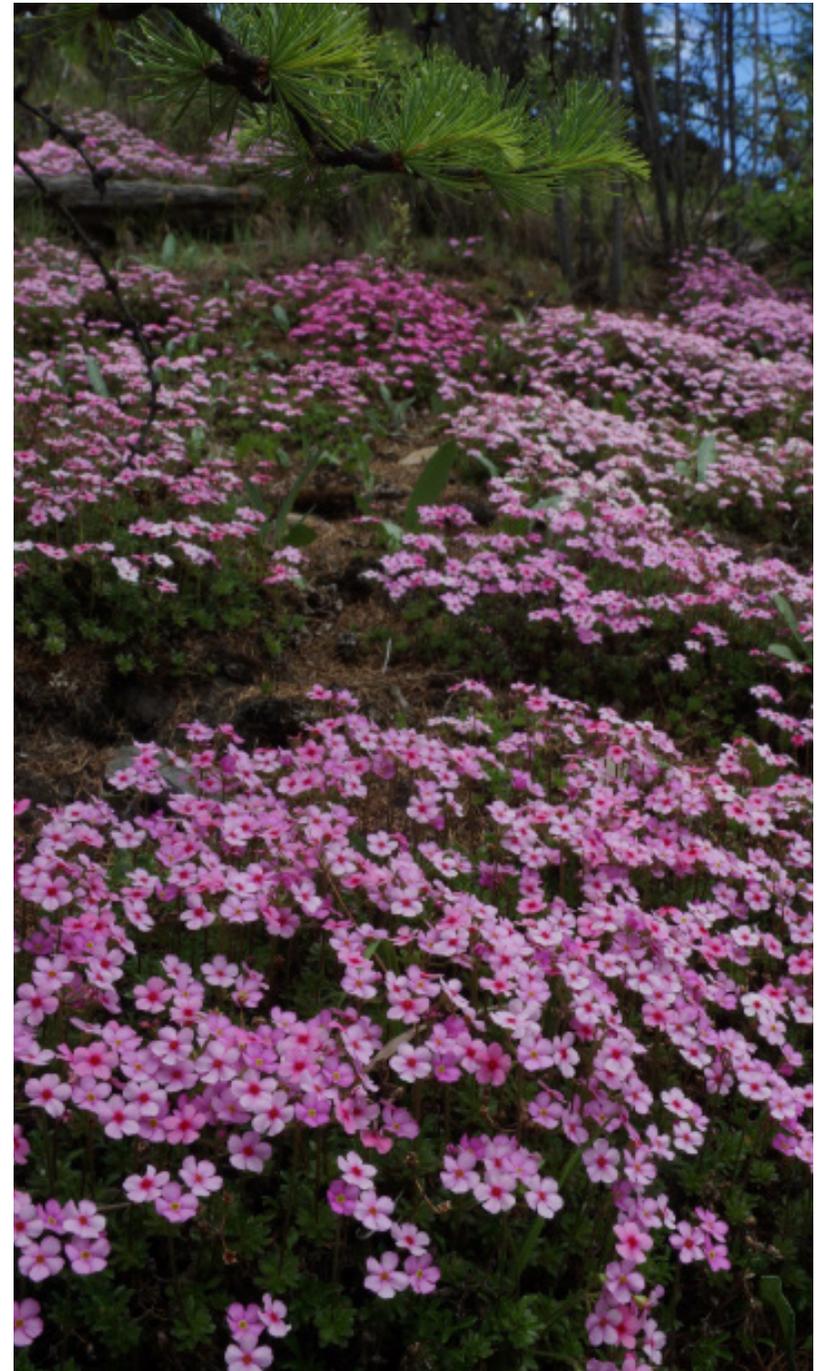
Lunch was late but that was no matter after finding so many fine flowers. There was more to come, certainly in terms of abundance. Descending we stopped in an area of flowering *Rhododendron oreotrephes* for a stunning display of *Androsace rigida* that quite literally carpeted the ground beneath. There was a stop for a fine valley view with the neat architecture of white Tibetan houses nestled between immaculate fields. In fact, we had longer views of some of the houses when road works delayed us for a while. Chinese roadworks is a menace and when they arrive a whole stretch of many kilometres of road is disrupted. There was little choice but to grin and bear arriving into Xiancheng to find the council had just smashed up the road to the hotel that day! Luckily, we managed to negotiate this rough stretch fifteen minutes before a convoy of trucks came the other way.

A fine dinner set things straight.

Day 11 18 June – Wuming & Haizi Shans

We passed through some more areas with the same attractive architecture, stopping to photograph a temple and various rural scenes before starting to climb. Leaving the road construction behind we reached an area of flowery turf with *Androsace bisulca* var. *aurata*, *Astragalus acaulis*, tiny *Primula walshii* and clumps of *Aster batangensis*. The pass was at a giddy 4600 metres and the weather took a turn for the worst with squally showers. However, in between the rain there was the chance to enjoy *Androsace wardii*, *Silene davidii*, *Arenaria kansuensis* alongside *A. polytricha* and lilac-pink *Hedysarum pseudoastragalus*. On the opposite slope, there were some decent *Iris dolichosiphon*, the peculiar blue-green-grey flowers of *Solmslaubachia pulcherrima* and the rich purple of *Meconopsis lancifolia*. The rain finally drove us off the hill and into the cars.

Fortunately, by the time we had descended for a late lunch the weather cleared and eased. We picnicked below a large monastery with three big stupas in front. Moving on there were superb drifts of *Anemone demissa* var. *villosissima* in various shades of blue together with *Iris goniocarpa*, *Thermopsis barbata* and *Incarvillea mairei*. Beyond we reached the impressive granitic plateau of Haizi Shan with vast boulder fields, studded with lakes. By one large outcrop we looked for *Primula orbicularis* and found just a few flowers. There was also a solitary *Lilium lophophorum* and plenty of *Aster himalaicus*. Then the rain returned with a



Androsace rigida

vengeance and we hurried back to the cars. Sadly, we were unable to experience this unique landscape other than in the vehicles and made our way slowly onto Litang.

Day 12 19 June – Jianziwan Shan

The rain had stopped by morning when we visited the large monastery at Litang. Sadly, the original main temple had burned down three years ago, but a new one had been constructed and was in the midst of being painstakingly repainted by a team of forty painters from Lhasa. It was interesting to see this intricate process at work and most of the other buildings were still original including some smaller shrines.

Moving out into the countryside the slopes were full of flowers with abundant *Lilium lophophorum*, *Iris goniocarpa* and *Anemone demissa*. Among these were both reddish-bracted *Ajuga lupulina* and its squatter cousin *A. ovalifolia*. Another slope had superbly rich-coloured *Incarvillea mairie*, with *Androsace mariei* and a small *Galearis diantha*. Then a marshy field in a small town had some fine *Rheum alexandrae* and a veritable sea of *Aster souliei*. Lunch was below a slope with *Meconopsis integrifolia* and domes of turf studded with *Primula fascicularia*.

Taking a side road rather than the tunnel we climbed much higher to over 4600 metres again, stopping for an area of *Rhododendron agniphum* in flower. The pass was (as usual) strewn with colourful prayer flags and the immediate slopes had an attractive *Pleurospermum sp.* There were fine views in both directions and various photocalls were made (mainly the drivers and their cars). A little way down the road was a *Meconopsis rudis* in flower, and that was very much the last plant of note as the late season meant there was nothing on the nearby screes.

The hotel in Yajiang had some interesting chasmophytes visible from the rooms, they were so close to the cliff!

Day 13 20 June – Grasslands and Zhedou Shan

Heavy rain had caused flooding near Danba a few days before and this had meant we had to change our route. Sadly, this rain had returned this morning as we drove across the grasslands, only managing the odd view stop or loo stop. Floods around Danba has meant a last-minute change to the itinerary and now we climbed up to the southern pass of Zhedou Shan rather than the northern. Stopping at the pass the rain had eased a bit so we set off across a very flowery turf with superb stands of *Meconopsis integrifolia* and a veritable carpet of *Androsace minor*, punctuated by the lovely cream and purple *Pedicularis variegata* and occasional *Meconopsis lancifolia*. Now and then the mists parted a

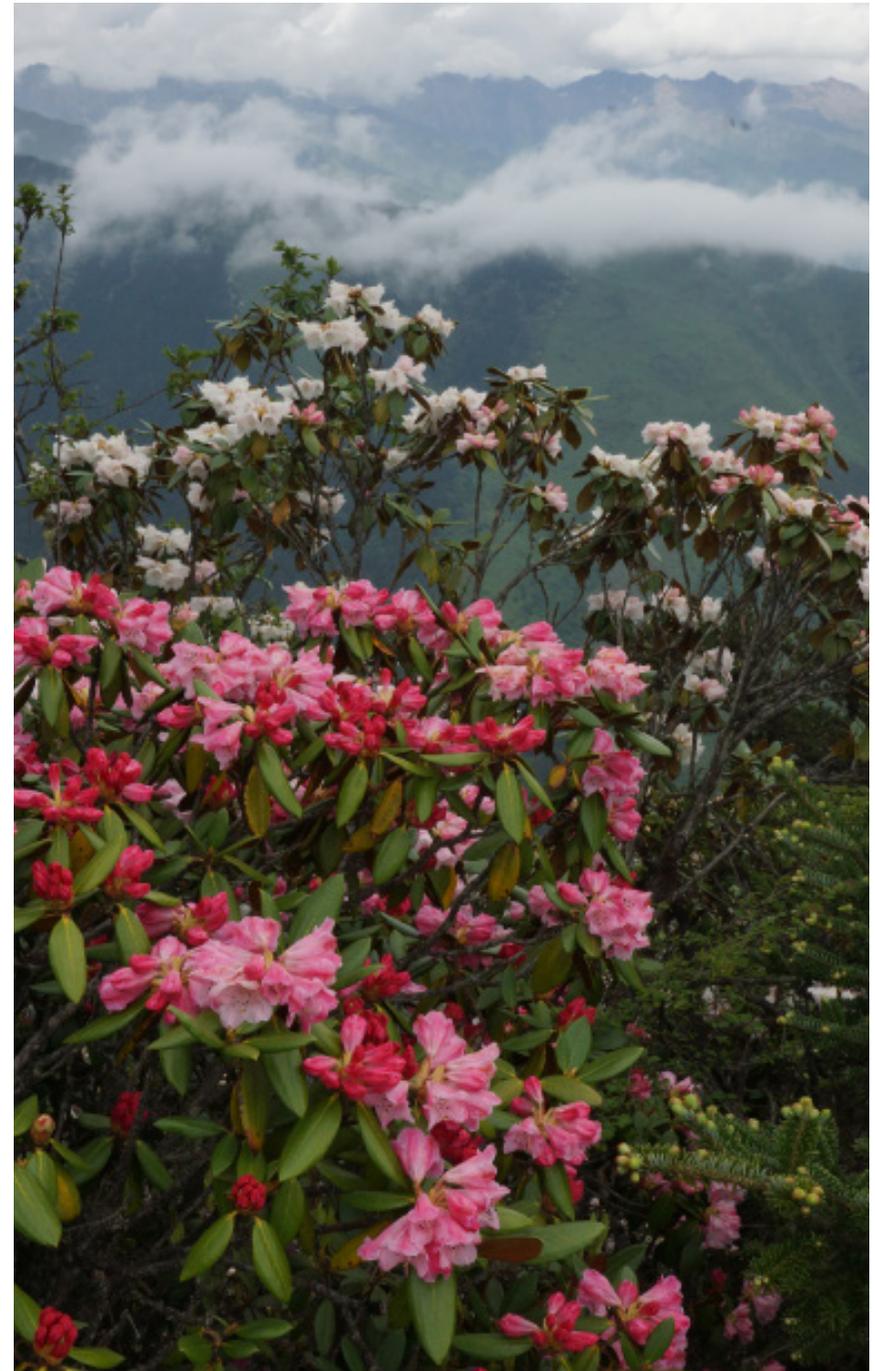


revealed the rocky slopes and peaks around the pass and it was all very atmospheric.

Lower down we stopped in a rocky area of low shrubs and turf where we quickly located the unique 'black primula', *Primula melanantha*. In fact, there were quite a few and all in perfect flower. Bushes of *Daphne retusa* and the chocolatey bells of *Fritillaria sichuanica* were also seen among the mists. Because of our rescheduling we now had a longer drive than originally planned so ears were pinned back and we drove on beyond Kangding to a good (late) lunchtime restaurant. And then continued on towards Baoxing, stopping for stands of *Cunninghamia lanceolata* and then on a quieter road a tall *Lilium sulphureum*.

Day 14 21 June – Jiajin Shan

It was all very lush and green in the warm temperate surrounds of Baoxing and the landscape quite a change from what we had seen with an overall pleasant rural scene, neat fields and half the road spread with drying sillage for pigs, all hemmed in by forested hills. There was a decidedly different style of architecture with pinkish-orange houses dotting the landscape and women in colourful rich-blue clothing. Plant wise we found the handsome purplish *Salvia prattii*, *Pedicularis axillaris* and some very fresh *Incarvillea arguta* by the roadside. Rounding a reservoir, the road quickly began to climb and we stopped at a viewpoint from where we could see the spectacular valley and the rhododendron encrusted hills beyond. In fact, it was one particular ridge of rhododendrons that provided one of the highlights of the trip. However, before we reached this we sampled a hillside swathed in golden *Caltha palustris*, *Primula involucrata*, *P. sikkimensis* and *Euphorbia pekinensis*, among which grew the brownish-pink orchid *Galearis wardii* and a few *Cypripedium tibeticum*. Driving higher we stopped for lunch above steep slope with some large *Meconopsis integrifolia* below, whilst above we could see some rhodos in bloom. Climbing up to these it was quickly apparent that there were many flower-laden rhodos stretching along the ridge with four species on offer. The most common was *Rhododendron roxieanum* in a variety of colour forms from white to mid-pink, and nearly as abundant was the variable purplish to pink of smaller *R. rubiginosum*. Much smaller *R. nitidulum* was scattered throughout. However, the largest species and perhaps the one with loveliest flowers was *R. prattii*, all flowers having some sort of spotting or red blotches within. The mountain backdrops were superbly moody and it was a classic Chinese mountain scene. Mingled among all of this was *Corydalis curviflora*,



Rhododendron roxieanum

Primula gemmifera and *Ponerorchis chusua*, but the rhodos provided the main event.

A wonderful population of *Meconopsis integrifolia* and *M. punicea* was magical in the mist, with the handsome purplish-white *Anemone* aff. *cathayensis* and a white form of *Paraquilegia microphylla* on the rocks. Reaching the pass, the mists had firmly closed in as we set off to try and find *Meconopsis melanantha* (the black poppy). There were very many purple spotted leaf rosettes, but only plants in bud in this late season. Pinkish *Corydalis dajingensis* was found among them, but rumbles of thunder had us making for the cars. The remaining drive down was through yet another architectural style, with graffiti-like painting drawn roughly onto the beige walls.

Day 15 22 June – Balang Shan I

One of the floweriest places in China beckoned today, but the weather tried to put us off with heavy rain to begin with. We opted to head straight through the new tunnel and descend into the diverse and lush woodlands of Wolong Nature Reserve. And what better plant to epitomise lushness than the amazing *Cardiocrinum giganteum* subsp. *yunnanense*. There was a spectacular colony of these tucked away in the woods with maybe fifty of sixty stems all told, and these were just the ones we could see. Time was spent photographing, admiring and smelling these impressive lilies. Also along the roadside was *Deutzia purpurascens*, *Pedicularis davidii* and *P. szetschuanicus*. The rain had eased a lot by the time we began to climb again, passing stands of *Pedicularis kansuensis* and onto a suitable spot for lunch. The slope above had some decent *Paeonia anomala* subsp. *veitchii* and both *Veratrum album* and *V. nigrum* (in bud this late year).

In the afternoon, there were various stops for the increasingly flowery slopes with some superb displays of *Omphalogramma viola-grandis*, *Fritillaria sichuanica*, amazing mixed populations of *Cypripedium tibeticum* in every colour form pink to near black. A rocky seep had a few blue-purple *Primula melanops* as well as *Meconopsis punicea*, *Anemone* aff. *cathayensis* and *Pedicularis triangularidens*. Even better drifts of *Primula melanops* were seen higher up with a smattering of *P. gemmifera* to round off the day. There wasn't time for the pass, that would have to wait until tomorrow morning.

Day 16 23 June – Balang Shan II

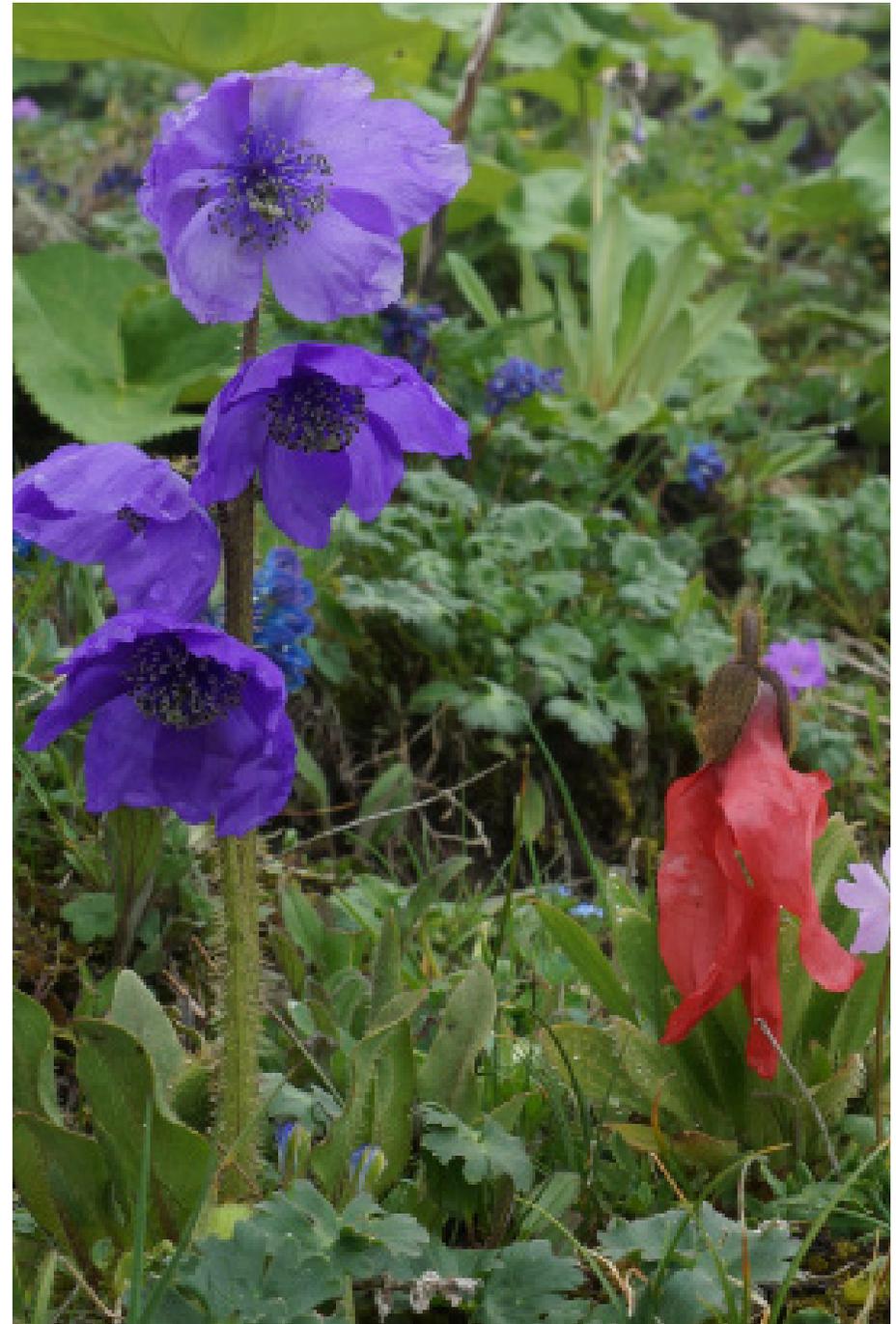
Our final foray into the botanical wonderland of China began with some fine stands of *Primula chionantha* in various shades of pink, mingled with *P. melanops* and the odd little *Corydalis tribilobipetala*. At the pass, we spent time just below it where there were many deep blue *Corydalis barbicephala*. But the flowers were, for a time, eclipsed by the stunning velvety blue Grandala that fed on the turf



nearby, a quintessential high-Himalayan bird. A solitary but good *Meconopsis rudis* was found and there were clusters of tiny *Primula walshii*, larger *P. gemmifera*, *Rhodiola atunsiensis* and pretty pale blue *Gentiana pubigerum*. An area of coarse scree had both *Saussurea medusa* and *S. quercifolia* growing together. Descending further we came upon another superb tract of turf with a delightful mixture of *Meconopsis integrifolia*, *M. punicea* and various colour forms of *M. lancifolia* from lilac to deep purple. *Corydalis barbicephala* was abundant and there were quite a few *Fritillaria sichuanica* mixed in throughout. We now had to move on as we were already running late (no change there). Descending all the way to the valley floor we drove onto to a small side valley where there was just time to find the very delicate *Corydalis flexuosa* growing on wet rocks with *Saxifraga rufescens*. A dainty *Semiaquilegia ecalcarata* was also found among the spectacular strata of the valley. A quick lunch and we were off to Chengdu, although roadworks in the tunnels, too much trust in a GPS and then the grindingly slow traffic of the city meant the short distance took three hours to cover. But the pleasant surrounds of the hotel and a final tasty meal meant this was all quickly forgotten.

Day 17 21 June – Kaindy Lake

Some were staying on for more exploration of Chengdu and its pandas, but most of us we scattered back across the globe after a flower-rich experience among the Shans of China.



Meconopsis lancifolia & *Meconopsis punicea*



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Chionocharis hookeri