

BULLS IN THE MIST



Campanula lactifollora



Alchemilla mollis

Botany is generally a hazard-free activity if you discount precipitous slopes, steep screes, avalanches, rockslides, biting insects, stinging nettles, thorns, spines and falling trees. But there are times when you have to deal with some potentially unpleasant animals too. This last ten days we've been on holiday with friends in the cool, green north-east, a welcome respite from the heat of the Mediterranean (where thankfully, we have avoided the forest fires that have blighted the region this year). Not so much a botanical trip but a kids activity trip. I of course always have one eye of the potential flower action, and at this season gentians were very much on my mind. Animal taming was not. The first hike took us towards a 2700-metre-high lake, except we couldn't see much further than our noses the mist was so thick. At one pause a barking sheep dog had us looking around and we could see this and two other dogs lying down. The noisy hound eventually left (I should point out Turkish Kangal sheep dogs are huge), the other two remained. I whistled and beckoned and one trotted over tail wagging, a friend was made, and it was safe to go on. The turf on the



Swertia iberica



Gentiana septemfida



Geranium cinereum

approach to the lakeside was brimming with hundreds of gorgeous *Gentiana septemfida* in perfect condition, more than making up for the lack of blue sky.

Although the weather looked iffy for the whole week, we took a chance on trying reach a second lake the next day. There were breaks in the sky and the spectacular jagged ridges of the Kackar could at last be seen. The walk up was interesting with the wet turf sprinkled with snow white grass of Parnassus, the dark-purple spires of *Swertia iberica* and up above rivers of *Campanula lactiflora*, colouring moist rocky gulleys and slopes with lilac-blue. The mists came a went and we reached beautiful pristine streams lined with *Alchemilla mollis* as well as the odd large clump of *Campanula lactiflora*, bursting from rocks, a far cry from the plant we use in sunny herbaceous borders. Grassier slopes had hundreds of golden *Crocus scharojanii* too, sometimes mingling with the sapphire trumpets of *Gentiana septemfida*. The higher turf had plenty of pretty *Geranium cinereum* and all looked good for a pleasant lakeside picnic. Until that is, the bellow of a bull stopped the party in its tracks. Some of the gang were more than a little nervous of cattle. I for one have been walking through herds of



Crocus scharojanii



xxxx landscape



Silene multifida



Geranium psilostemon



Sedum spurium

livestock since childhood to go birding on the grazing marshes of low-lying Essex. Four hefty bulls emerged from the mist and lumbered into view. Everyone else was safely on a big rock, and in went the matador - or rather I wandered over to them and after a while the lead animal had a good sniff and lick of my hand and that was that. The problem was these were not the troublemakers we had heard, and the thick mist made seeing them almost impossible, so the group decision was to retreat. This turned out to be a smart move. The walk down was fine, and we reached a hotel/restaurant that had been built only recently. Sitting drinking tea and coffee, a thundering storm swept in with deafening hail smashing on the tin roof. We also found out there were lots more bulls on the pastures than we had seen - the area is used as a bull bed - to get the animals fit and angry for the bull fighting season next month!

Calmer destinations were needed. A potter around some fine konaks (big traditional houses), trampolining (in the rain) for the kids, cappuccinos for the adults. But adventure is never far away in this region, even if it is just the unmade roads, the kind that are not for the faint-hearted and would have many on the edge of their seats are well used routes to reach the upper



Sibbaldia parviflora



Gentiana asclepiadea



Gentiana asclepiadea

pastures. Once you've travelled across north-west India, nothing scares you. On the way up to the family yayla there were fine patches of *Sedum spurium*, stands of rosebay willowherb (*Epilobium angustifolium*) and around the yayla village were the pretty fringed bells of *Silene multifida*. A gentle hike to pick raspberries and blueberries seemed perfect. As we climbed the *Gentiana asclepiadea* were superb with big clumps arcing from the turf often with *G. septemfida*, magenta *Geranium psilostemon* and *Campanula lactiflora*. Moisture coalesced beautifully on the foliage of *Alchemilla mollis* and silvery *Sibbaldia parviflora*. It was these I was photographing when I looked up and came face to face with seven bulls that had walked up behind me without making a sound. No time to panic, I zipped up the camera bag, put it on a walked up to the lead animal. He had a long sniff of my hand, and we were friends. Problem was I couldn't convince everyone else they were benign (in fact they were headed down to get much needed salt) and I witnessed the fastest ever descent by a walking party I'd ever seen. If only I had some bulls handy for my tour groups, I'd guarantee prompt arrivals back at the bus every time!



Epilobium angustifolium