

CONNECTIONS - SPAIN TO NEW GUINEA?



Rhododendron agniphum, Da Xue Shan, Yunnan



Rhododendron luteum, Zigana, Turkiye

The botanical world has fascinating links. Distributions can be logical with a clear spread across a region, such as *Rhododendron* in Asia with the eastern Himalaya and western China the epicentre of the genus, with hundreds of species found among the complex terrain of deep river valleys and very high peaks. At other times these ranges are more stretched and plants can be found in far flung places, separated now by great distances, where once they grew in a unified continuum from A to B. An example is *Rhododendron ponticum*, that much maligned invasive menace and one which in wetter, cooler times stretched from its heartland in north-east Turkiye west to Andalusia and south to Lebanon. Poised above Tarifa in Spain, hidden among lichen-draped cork oaks is a relict population that exists to this day, growing on sandstone slopes close to a colony of the remarkable sticky leaved *Drosophyllum lusitanicum*. There are few if any between here and the Black Sea coast where the vast majority now reside. This vigorous shrub (which has given the genus a bad name) is common but not necessarily dominant in its native home, where it is up against a lot of other equally robust plants. That said rhododendrons can and will occupy large areas of hills and mountains, and in north-east Turkiye *Rhododendron luteum* can colour



Drosophyllum lusitanicum, Tarifa, Spain



Daphne retusa, Yunnan

the slopes golden over large areas and *R. caucasicum* at higher elevations creates summer 'snow'. Ditto in the Himalayas and China, where they can also form extensive shrubberies, sometimes of one species, which in bounteous years create a veneer of white or pink across large areas of mountainside. This is a variable feast, and lean years can see large populations almost devoid of flowers. Other species are more reliable and one of our favourites the soft yellow *Rhododendron wardii* seems to always perform producing plenty of flower and shown is an old plant sprawled across limestone boulder. It grew near bushes of fragrant *Daphne retusa* and, yes, many species of *Rhododendron* grow on limestone. *Rhododendron* are also often in mixed communities, with some locations producing a dozen or more species and it is interesting how sometimes several species live alongside one another, the blend changing with altitude or subtle changes in slope and aspect. 2026 has been a big rhododendron year for Chris with a tour of Yunnan to see over forty species in flower there including some beautiful glades of *R. beesianum*, *R. rex* and rarities like *R. gracilipes* on the lush Gaoligongshan. There were also some good species in Arunachal Pradesh including the spectacular *R. dalhousiae* var. *rhabdotum*, with huge creamy trumpets that are striped with red on the outside. We also ran a trekking trip to Sikkim in early May, and this caught the forests of *Rhododendron hodgsonii* that flower then together with the blood red of *R. thomsonii* and lots of *Primula denticulata* so if you were truly addicted you could have seen even more.

However, somewhere south of the vaunted high peaks of Asia things change and for sheer diversity of species in one location there is somewhere quite different to visit. Whilst the classic idea of the rhododendron is a floriferous bush laden with big trusses of flowers, the Vireya section offers something else. They number over three hundred species, distributed across the south-east Asia highlands east to New Guinea (and just into northern Australia). New Guinea is the diversity centre for Vireyas. As in temperate Asia, there are some exceptionally showy species, none more so than *Rhododendron zoelleri* with large fiery flowers. Fragrant white *R. konori* is also very large flowered, showy and common on in the Arfak mountains of the Vogelkop, growing in heaths with a plentiful *Nepenthes maxima* and the truly bizarre swollen stems of *Myrmephytum arfakianum*, a plant that has a symbiotic relationship with ants, who live inside the swollen stems. They bear delightful china blue flowers too and are in the same family as coffee: Rubiaceae. However, one must travel to Lake Habema within the magnificent Lorentz National Park, a vast are of accessible New Guinea highlands and where the diversity of Vireya species is exceptional, with more than thirty species of these



Rhododendron neriiflorum, Yunnan



Rhododendron wardii, Yunnan



Rhododendron dalhousiae var. *rhabdotum*, Arunachal Pradesh



Myrmecodia lamii, Lake Habema



Rhododendron zoelleri, Arfak



Myrmephytum arfakianum, Arfak



Rhododendron konori, Arfak



Nepenthes maxima, Arfak

very distinctive plants. These highlands are intriguing and unlike anywhere else, a textural masterpiece with vast forests of *Nothofagus* blanketing the foothills that rise to the pointed limestone peak of Mount Trikora at over 4700 metres. The national park extends from here to the sea and is the only park with such a huge contiguous altitude range. In this region access is always a challenge, unlike Asia where large mountain areas are easily reached, here safe access is limited.

The rhododendrons found here are often hot coloured (bird pollination is common here – though sunbirds also fulfil this role in the Sino-Himalayas) with many red, orange, yellow or bicoloured species such as the brazen *Rhododendron versteegii* and *R. brassii* though others are white and fragrant (*R. roseiflorum*), or pink as in *R. rhodocroum* and their shape may be a dangling bell e.g. *R. subrenulatum* or a downturned trumpet such as the tongue-twisting *R. haematophthalmum*. One crucial difference with vireyas is unlike temperate Asian rhododendrons they never form extensive dense, dominating stands but rather are scattered among the matrix of woodland and heath vegetation, a flash of red here and splash of pink there, every one worth investigating as it may be a different species. They are

typically smaller and laxer in habit, no need to fight through impenetrable shrubberies as I tried earlier year to reach the best *R. neriiflorum* in Yunnan. To make the most of vireyas you must seek them out and enjoy the company they keep, which around Lake Habema include another outlandish ‘ant-plant’ *Myrmecodia lamii*, even larger than its cousin in the Arfak mountains. The diversity of *Rhododendron* form is amazing, growing among a landscape filled with moss-clad trees bearing epiphytic orchids and architectural tree ferns. It is on the latter that the world’s smallest *Rhododendron* species grows – *R. caespitosum*, clinging to the fibrous trunks and bearing tiny pink bell flowers. From the sublime to the ridiculous perhaps, and New Guinea is another world in many respects, but when one considers this incredible genus stretches (in the Old World) from a remote outpost in Spain to the world’s second largest island nestled in the southern tropics it’s no surprise things change a little along the way.

My botanical globetrotting during June and July has given me the privilege of seeing around ten per cent of the world’s rhododendrons in flower. Only another nine hundred to go!



Dendrobium decockii, Lake Habema



Lorentz view



Rhododendron versteegii, Lake Habema