

# GENTIAN BLUE



*Gentiana septemfida*



*Gentiana acaulis* in the Pyrenees

Mention gentians to many and they no doubt conjure up images of the Himalayas or maybe western China - the world centre for these charismatic flowers with around 250 species. And then there is the Alps and Pyrenees which host amongst others the gorgeous *Gentiana acaulis*, where I photographed these. These two mountain ranges also share species with north-east Turkey, an area that is perhaps not associated with having many gentians. This is not correct. It may lack the great diversity of eastern Asia, but it has quantity and from late summer and into autumn, gentians can be seen throughout the north-east Black Sea or Karadeniz region.

They begin earlier in the year with the incomparably intense blue of *Gentiana verna* subspecies *pontica*, a frequent plant of alpine turf throughout central and eastern Turkey. However, it can still be found in flower in a few spots even in late-July. It is one of the worst flowers to try and capture in print, that unbelievable blue is completely out of gammut. As such, it's vibrance can only be appreciated on screen (where more colours are possible) or in the field. Ovit Dag is an excellent area for gentians and at the same time as *G. verna* flowers it's possible to find the small, but still vivid, *G. nivalis*, diminutive *G. aquatica* (a rather tiny, pallid species) and the widespread



*Gentiana pyrenaica*



*Polygonum bistorta*



*Gentianella caucasica*



*Gentiana gelida*



*Gentiana cruciata*

violet-blue of *G. pyrenaica*.

By mid-July on the same slopes, are the subtler lilac of *Gentianella caucasica* and showy *Gentiana septemfida*. Backlight gives a wonderful translucence to the large bells of the latter and sometimes they are enhanced with the liquid gold of *Crocus sharajonii*, the only summer-autumn flowering crocus in Turkey. *Gentiana septemfida* is a widespread species and on the Cam Pass (between Savsat and Ardahan) it grows alongside the similarly-shaped *G. gelida*, the only white gentian in Turkey. Perhaps inevitably, they do sometimes hybridise producing attractive pale blue progeny. *G. gelida* prefers drier areas and it very common to the east and abundant on the way to Kars.

The Cam Pass in early August hosts several other wonderful blues with monk'shoods, delphiniums and scabious. In fact all the three species of the former can be seen in one location - the rather scarce yellow *Aconitum anthora*, dark blue *A. nasutum* and flamboyant and tall *A. orientale*, which here is often a lovely ivory-white. Soft mauve is the more common colour of this impressive herb. The dark blue spikes of *Delphinium flexuosum* can be seen among (its cousins) the aconitums, together with broad white corymbs of *Tanacetum balsamita* and the powder blue discs of *Scabiosa caucasica*, one



*Scabiosa caucasica*



*Aconitum orientale*

of the loveliest of all scabious.

There is also one final gentian to enjoy - *G. asclepiadea*, a familiar European species that also thrives here forming sizeable clumps with arching stems that starts to flower now. Yet another widespread European plant also occurs in this area. It is perhaps the most enigmatic of all orchids, rare in many places, locally common in others. Tucked away in a tract of mature spruce forest is reliable colony of ghost orchid - *Epipogium aphyllum* - a most peculiar plant. They always flower here in the first week in August with up to fifty stems present. It is a saprophyte, gaining all nutrient from decaying plant matter and having no chlorophyll. The flower structure is quite exquisite close-up, the flower inverted and the lip lined with papillae which secrete plentiful nectar to attract pollinators in the dimly lit forest.

Soon, bulbs such as *Colchicum speciosum* will be appearing and the floral emphasis will shift back swiftly to the Mediterranean and it's wealth of autumn bulbs. However, the north-east always offers the botanist the chance of an emerald contrast and a chance to cool off from the simmering Med.



*Epipogium aphyllum*



*Aconitum anthora*



*Gentiana asclepiadea*