

SPRING IN THE PINDOS TRIP REPORT 2024

ViRA NATURA
TOURS

Paeonia peregrina

Day I Arrival in Greece 20 April

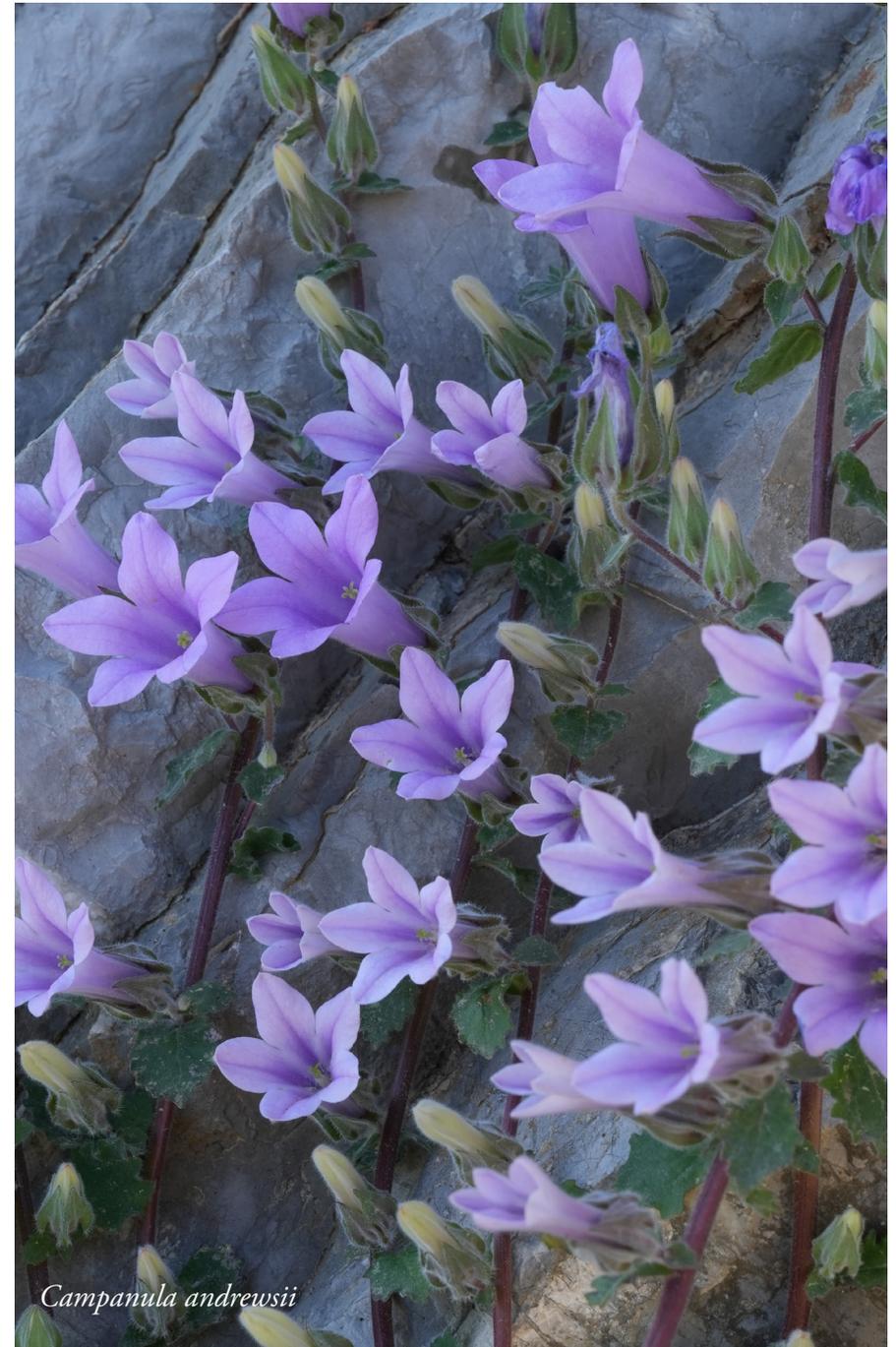
Minor flight delays didn't affect the day much and we arrived at our seaside hotel by late afternoon, with the pleasant calm bay surrounded by rocky headlands and the blue sea punctuated with distant islets.

Calamari, cold beer and Greek salad proved the perfect combination.

Day II Argolid Peninsula

A day exploring the nearby hills began well with some superb *Campanula andrewsii*, the spreading stems addressed to the limestone rocks, each stem nurturing many buds and lovely tubular lilac-blue flowers. Nearby were stands of shrubby *Salvia pomifera* (a common plant in the area) with large flowers, bushes of *Hypericum empetrifolium*, together with *Teucrium divaricatum* and abundant *Bituminaria bituminosa*. Moving on we stopped first for a olive grove full of *Ornithogalum narbonense*, airy *Crupina crupinastrum*, *Tragopogon longirostris* and a multitude of yellow *Crepis capillaris*. We looked for orchids in some rocky macchie, but there was little in flower in this advanced season. So instead we climbed higher onto a hill topped by spinning turbines, reaching an area of gentle slopes that led to limestone pavement where we found *Erysimum cephalicum*, *Leontodon graecum* and *Centaurea raphaniana*. Lunch was beneath the whoshing blades of the turbines and then on the low cliffs as we descended we found plentiful *Onosma frutescens*, more good rosettes of *Centaurea raphaniana* and *Clinopodium alpinus*.

Orchis quadripunctata was seen below on an adjacent hill before we moved on stopping next for a field of *Gladiolus italicus*. Among them grew more *Ornithogalum narbonense* and the attractive *Bupleurum subovatum*. A revitalising coffee followed before our final foray to look for orchids among the macchie. The *Ophrys speculum* had finished some time ago, but in the same area were *Dorycnium hirsutum*, *Linum* sp. and *Pallenis spinosa*. The views across the deep blue sea were clear and sharp with many low islands and deep bays in the convoluted coastline.



Campanula andrewsii

Day III

To Evia & Mount Dirfys

Today we switched sides, travelling from west of Athens to east of Athens. Gnarly traffic around the city delayed us a little while and crossing the narrow strait onto Evia involved a trundle through a less than attractive urban strip, but we were soon into very pleasant countryside with flowery *Cistus monspelianus* and *C. creticus* on the roadside. The route climbed a little and entered a greener area with lots of fresh-leaved plane trees and the sombre grey peak of Mount Dirfys rising above the dark forms of Cephalonian firs. Lunch was beside a river, serenaded by nightingales and then we checked in at our comfy hotel where on the patio were five astonishing mulberries with each of their branches horizontally-trained for several metres to span the space. Then we set off for the higher slopes, but didn't get more than fifty metres from the hotel. Superb plants of *Campanula constantiini* were spread across the walls next to the road, each in perfect flower.

Stops followed for the abundant creamy *Vicia pinetorum*, bells of *Campanula spathulata*, *Silene italica*, *Euphorbia oblongata* and *Geranium asphodeloides*. Turning onto a side track we followed the dirt road up, stopping for more good *Campanula spathulata* as well as mats of *Anthemis tenuiloba*, deep violet *Linaria pelisseriana* and *Thymus longicaulis*. Reaching the ridge top we saw the first *Asphodeline lutea* and as we drove along many, many more appeared in wonderful stands on the rocky slopes as the mists swirled about the peak of Mount Dirfys. Walking the rough track there were not only these but masses of *Polygala nicaensis* and compact *Trifolium uniflorum* carpeting the ground in places. The developing fruits of *Helleborus odoratus* formed dense patches amongst the fast emerging bracken and there were pretty tufts of apricot *Alkanna graeca* too. Further along the track a shaley slope had carpets of *Anthemis tenuiloba* as the gathering mists wrapped around the peak.

Time was spent exploring the main road that led down from the pass, finding pretty drifts of *Lathyrus laxiflorus* on wooded banks attended by big gingery bees. *Genista lydia* formed thick low patches, flowery shrubs of *Coronilla emerus* grew from the rocks and we found a stony slopes peppered with many *Linum flavum* and the slender spikes of *Verbascum eriophorum*. There were also some impressive old, gnarly sweet chestnuts as we drove too. The



Asphodeline lutea

landscape all around was of forest clad mountains slopes, yielding to raw bare rocks above with the blue of the Mediterranean in the distance.

The only rub was all of the village restaurants were closed on a Monday, so we had to make do with a local café for burgers and fries (and cold beer) instead. The lights of the spidery arms of the mulberries had been switched on when we returned to create a unique glow on the patio.

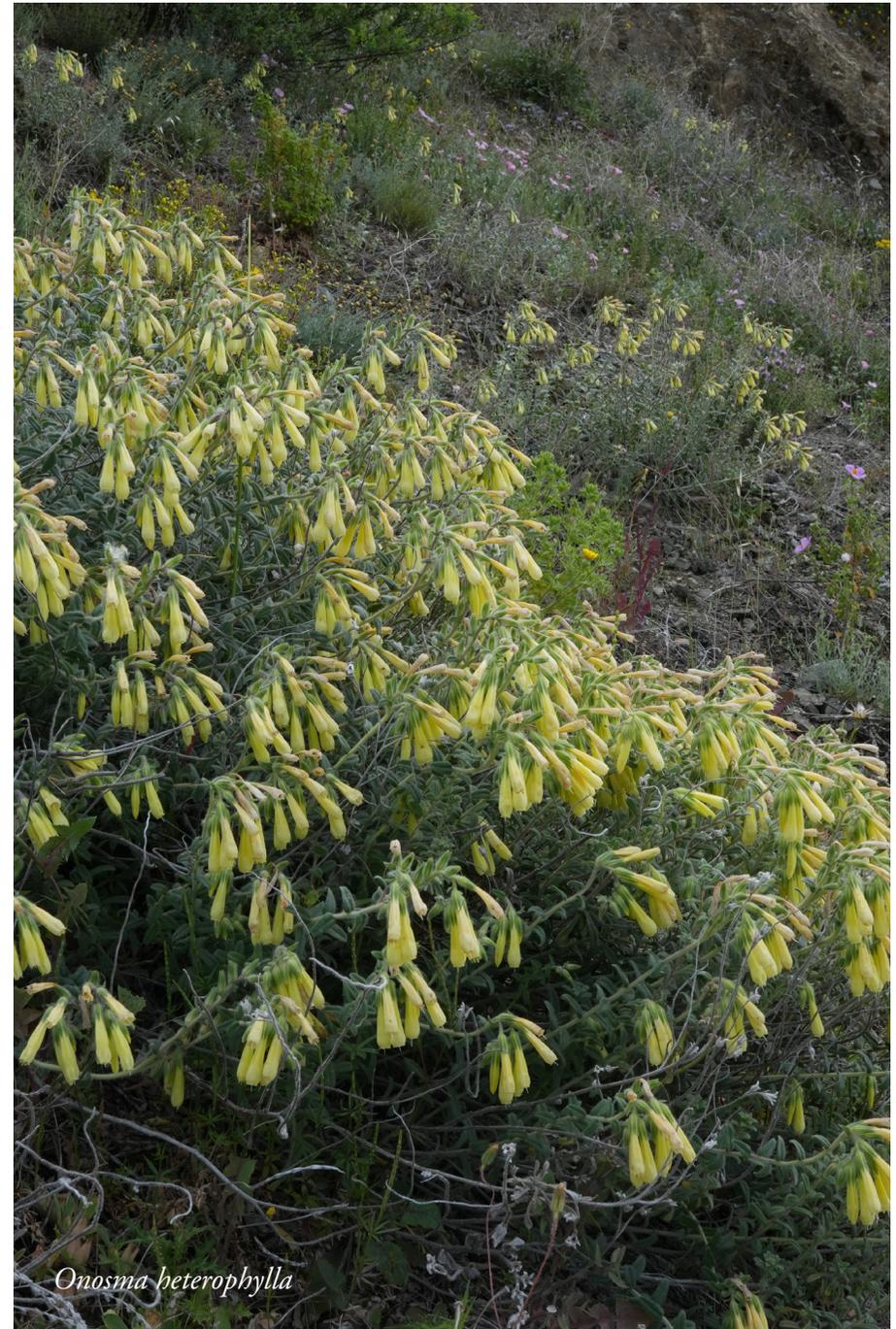
Day IV Evia

The morning was spent among the fine landscapes of central Evia, following the dramatic coast road that clung beneath sheer cliffs before turning inland to verdant wooded valleys. More confusing (but lovely) *Campanula* were seen and based purely on distribution we should have seen two species, but all seemed the same! Along with these were banks plastered with *Genista lydia* and *Cistus salviifolius*, a fine plant of *Brassica cretica* growing from a rock with *Centranthus ruber*, stands of golden *Phlomis fruticosa* lining the road and then some flower-laden *Cercis siliquastrum* as a nightingale struck up its powerful song.

Lunch was back overlooking the sea and then we drove on to the north of the island. We had heard of the extensive fires that had hit the island a couple of years ago and indeed there was a sudden shift to burnt out trees, but it's an ill wind that blows no good and the fires had invigorated the understorey plants and macchie, such that there were huge quantities of flowering plants with lots of *Cistus creticus* and *C. salviifolius*, *Alkanna graeca* and *Aristolochia rotunda* (complete with eastern festoon caterpillars) together with *Leptoplax emarginata* and nearing our accommodation (on an olive farm) a bank with abundant lemon-drops of *Onosma heterophylla*.

Day V Evia

Our target today was to find *Campanula euboica*, a scarce endemic of the far north, and a part of the island unaffected by the fires of two years ago. However, our first stop was in a flowery area that had blossomed because of the burn, with lots more *Onosma heterophylla*, *Convolvulus altaeoides*, spires of *Verbascum undulatum* and flowery mounds of *Dorycnium hirsutum*. We exited



the burned zone and the road dropped down towards the coast following close beside the water to where we found some fine plants of *Glaucium flavum* with the sweep of the bay beyond. Lunch supplies were procured and then we tried to find a road higher onto the mountain, but no luck (and sat-nav was decidedly unreliable) and we actually got a bit disoriented so that we ended up back at a small church we had already gone past once! No matter it was a good spot for lunch. Our second attempt got us up in the hills on a rough track that led to a (very) ruined castle. Here we found some rather fleshy *Campanula* rosettes that may or may not have been *Campanula euboica*. We followed the road higher and took a talk among the pines finding the parasitic *Cytinus hypocistis* and *Gagea graeca*. On the way back, another area of limestone cliffs was examined with binoculars and here we could see flowering *Campanula*. Unfortunately, it was impossible to fight through the very thick macchie to get to the cliffs! A day that didn't quite work out and this continued with our attempts to buy pizzas to take away. Restaurants were not interested, closed or not even there anymore. Instead we some supplies from the supermarket and as it turned out had a very pleasant cold dinner eating on the balcony overlooking the fine views of the bay and hills.

Day 1 Athens to Parnassos 25 April

George, Lizzie and I headed back to Athens, switched vehicles and met up with Alan, Fran and Ruth. From here it was a smooth, straight run onto Arachova, where we stocked up on picnic supplies for the next few days and then climbed the hill up to the plateau above and onto our hotel nestled amidst the tracts of Grecian fir; *Abies cephalonica* that clothe the slopes of Parnassos.

There was time for a quick bit of exploration, crossing the rocky grasslands where we found *Euphorbia myrsinites*, *Muscari neglectum* and *M. comosum*, superb flowery mounds of *Astragalus*



Glaucium flavum

angustifolius and a colony of *Ophrys lutea*. There was also the added bonus of a purple *Iris pumila*. It was an early season and we were lucky to find this. Close by were drifts of *Lathyrus digitatus* and *Polygala nicaensis* in various colour forms.

Dinner was back down in Arachova, at a unique restaurant where we were treated to some delicious food, all carefully explained and choreographed by the head chef.

Day 2 Mount Parnassos

A beautiful morning without a cloud in the sky and crystal clear views across the forested slopes of Mount Parnassos. We drove up towards the ski centre and it quickly became obvious the season was very early and there was no snow – and we needed some snow. Fortunately, we were able to drive up on the track to the upper ski lift from where we could see accessible snow remained. Not long into our walk up towards the precious white stuff and we saw our first *Corydalis solida* and then the first *Crocus sieberi*. As we gained height these both got better and better and we eventually came across snow hollows and banks with snow that were generously fringed with hundreds of gorgeous crocuses, as well as the rich blue of *Scilla bifolia*. The latter were even better inside a goat corral with some fine clumps of both these and *Corydalis solida*. After some time with a particularly good patch of crocuses we walked back down savouring the fine views and cool clean air.

Driving slowly down we made several short stops for *Anemone blanda*, mounds of *Aubrieta deltoidea*, *Doronicum orientale* growing from the rock crevices, a dense tuft of *Lathyrus digitatus* together with *Ajuga orientalis* and *Erysimum cephalonicum*. Descending a bit further into the forests we took lunch next to small chapel with a nuthatch busy finishing its nest in a tree hole directly above us. On the adjacent slope were plenty of large-flowered *Viola graeca*. From here we took a side road down further finding a population of *Orchis pallens* and a slope with more *Aubrieta deltoidea*, cerise *Geranium subcaulescens*, *Alyssum montanum* and a large-flowered buttercup; *Ranunculus sprunerianus*. Wending our way down into the Mediterranean zone bushes of pink *Cistus creticus* appeared with Spanish broom; *Spartium junceum* and a steep bank had two interesting species with the dissect leaved *Verbascum boissieri* and an



Crocus sieberi

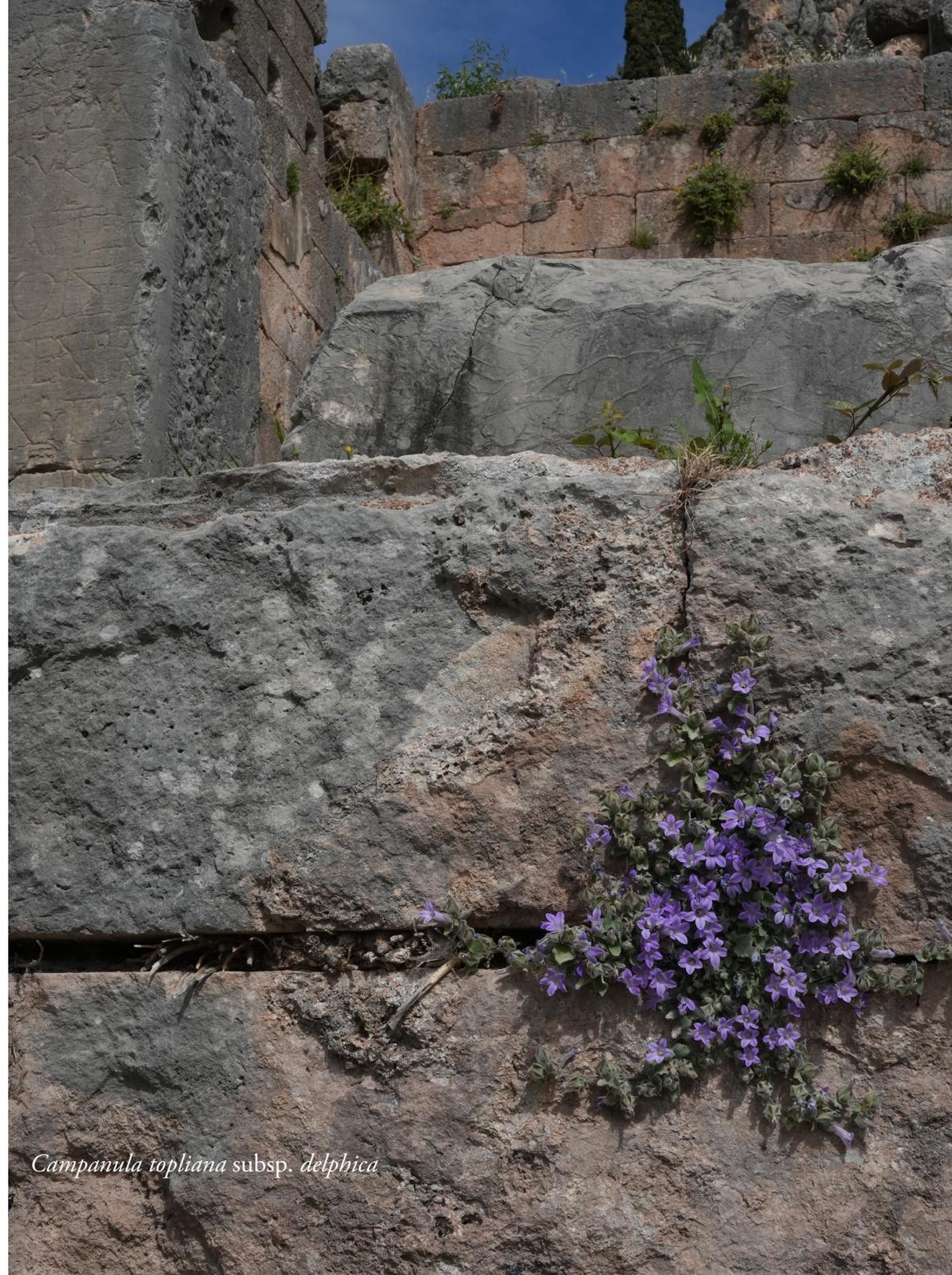
attractive pink thistle; *Jurinea mollis* subsp. *glicacantha*.

The early season meant it was worth trying for something very special and we drove back up. From our car park we walked through the forest seeing more *Orchis pallens* and lots of fruiting *Helleborus odorus* before reaching a more open area. And there they were the tantalising buds of *Paeonia parnassica*, with one seemingly ready to pop! We would have to revisit in a couple of days to hopefully see this rare plant in flower. Despite the lack of open peonies it had been a pleasant walk in the woods and we made our way back to the vehicle and then drove the short way to the hotel for a clean-up before dinner.

Day 3 Delphi

A mix of plants, culture and birdlife today. We drove directly down to Delphi, found a decent parking place and went into the site. The various skilfully built walls, buildings and classic columns were all impressive enough, enhanced further by a singing western rock nuthatch and various plants in crevices with *Campanula topliana* subsp. *delphica*. *Stachys swainsonii*, *Centranthus ruber* and all across the site the tall stems of *Ferula communis*. Unfortunately, the upper part of the site was closed so we reached as far as the theatre, topped by large cypress trees with 'beards' of *Ephedra* and then made our way down slowly. Find of the day was probably the superb western rock nuthatch nest tucked away in an overhang and we had stellar views of a parent bird returning to the nest with food. At least three woodchat shrikes were seen too. We went on to the Temple of Apollo with clumps of *Convolvulus cantabricus* on the banks and then more shrikes, black-eared wheatears (chasing one another) and a fly over of a short-toed eagle. Wandering back to the vehicle there was a handsome male blue rock thrush and a girl bunting preening in a tree.

Lunch was along a track where a limestone pillar had a good



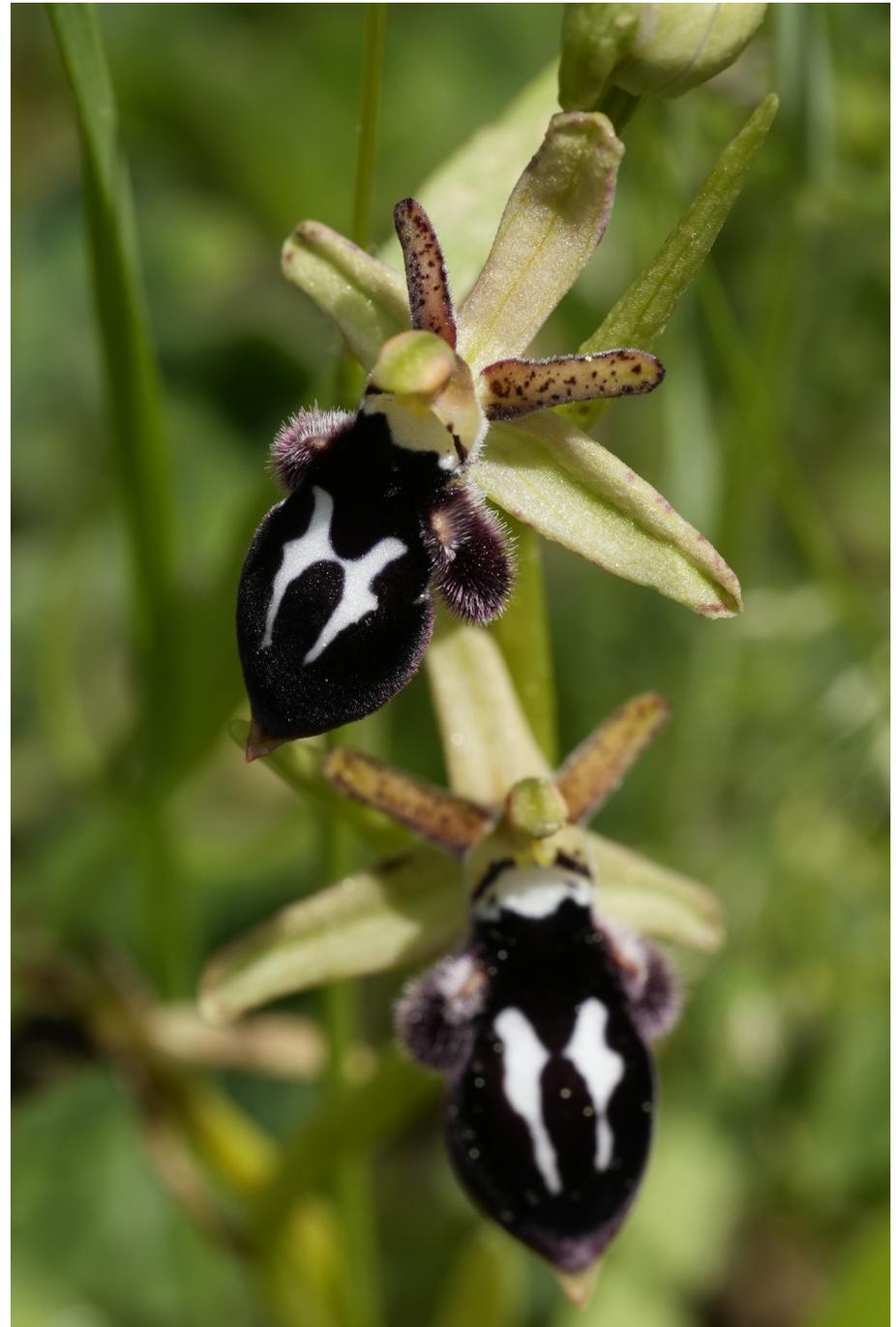
Campanula topliana subsp. *delphica*

number of *Daphne jasminea* including some with flowers on, though the finest specimen was of course well out of reach smothered in pinkish flowers. There was a big view down to the coast across the extensive olive groves. Our three stops on way back were in varied habitats, the first in an area of rocky grassland *Hypericum olympicum*, *Vinca herbacea*, a pretty *Ajuga reptans* in a rock crevice as well as lots of *Ornithogalum montanum*, *Trifolium grandiflorum* and thyme. The second area was rich in orchids with hundreds of *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp *epirotica* mingled with *O. ferrum-equinum* and a few (similar) *O. argolica*. There was a great variety of lip markings and in places the orchids were so thick it was hard to tread. Ruth also picked up *Ophrys scolopax* on her way down. The final stop was for an exposed breezy cliff top that was home to fabulous cushion plants, with large *Astragalus angustifolius* submerged in creamy flowers, much appreciated by large red-tipped bumblebees. Alongside these were low bushes of *Genista parnassica* with copious yellow flowers as well as a few *Adonis aestivalis* and plenty of *Muscari comosum* as we wandered back.

Arriving back at 5pm there was time to go back and try for the peony. This time we were able to drive through and with a bit of careful teasing managed to get the remarkable black-red flower to open enough and reveal the golden stamens inside. A great finale.

Day 4 To Meteora

The perfectly clear weather continued as we drove north descending through the dark Grecian firs and into the flowery Mediterranean vegetation with abundant *Phlomis fruticosa* and *Spartium junceum*. As we followed the switchbacks down the display of *Campanula trachelium* grew better and better and we had to stop by one cliff that was plastered in many floriferous spreading plants. Among these a species of bee was busy building mud nests on the rock wall and among them we also spotted a couple of iridescent green-and-red cuckoo wasps. There were great views out across the landscape into which we then descended, passing through villages with Judas trees and then down to the fast new motorway that sped us north along a road flanked by flowering Spanish broom. A coffee stop broke up the journey and then we were soon closing in on the distinctive profile of Meteora, an area of peculiar conglomerate sandstone rock pillars and contorted cliffs that rose abruptly from the plain. A side road led to an area of



Ophrys reinholdii

flowery meadows where we had lunch beneath the shade of *Quercus frainetto* oaks. Tongue orchids (*Serapias vomeracea*) were common in the grasslands along with a fair smattering of *Anacamptis papilionacea*, *Stachys spruneri* and a few large-flowered *Campanula ramosissima*.

After lunch we went through a second meadow finding mounds of thyme, thick layers of clovers and then *Anacamptis morio* subsp. *picta* and a good number of lovely *Ophrys reinholdii* with their distinctive white lip markings. A subalpine warbler was singing in the open as we returned to the vehicle. A visit to small monastery perched atop one of the rock pillars was next and then there was a tour of the various viewpoints of Meteora and its wonderful rock formations. Mint-scented *Clinopodium suaveolens* grew from the rocks which were enhanced further by the emerald green trees that filled the intervening valleys as crag martins and alpine swifts sped over. Higher in the hills above we found a few late *Anemone pavonina*, *Orobanche mutellii* and *Anchusa cretica* with a patch of *Campanula lingulata* providing a final botanical note before we reached the hotel, well-positioned with a commanding view of the landscape.



Walking to dinner, there was the bonus of a number of *Allium amethystinum* in good flower as the nightingales started up for the evening.

Day 5 Meteora to Metsovo

The best time to see Meteora is early in the morning when gentle light and no crowds give it a serene and magical ambience. We left at 6.30, stopping first by one of the larger monasteries where stands of *Verbascum undulatum* provided a fine foreground to the smooth contours of the rocks. Crag martins whipped past overhead. Moving along the various viewpoints the sun began to hit the tops and move slowly across the rippled-texture of the cliffs as a big flock of alpine swifts spun in the air and resonant bird song echoed about the rock walls and valleys. Final close up views of some of the rock towers completed a very satisfactory morning, which set us up for a good breakfast at our superbly positioned hotel.

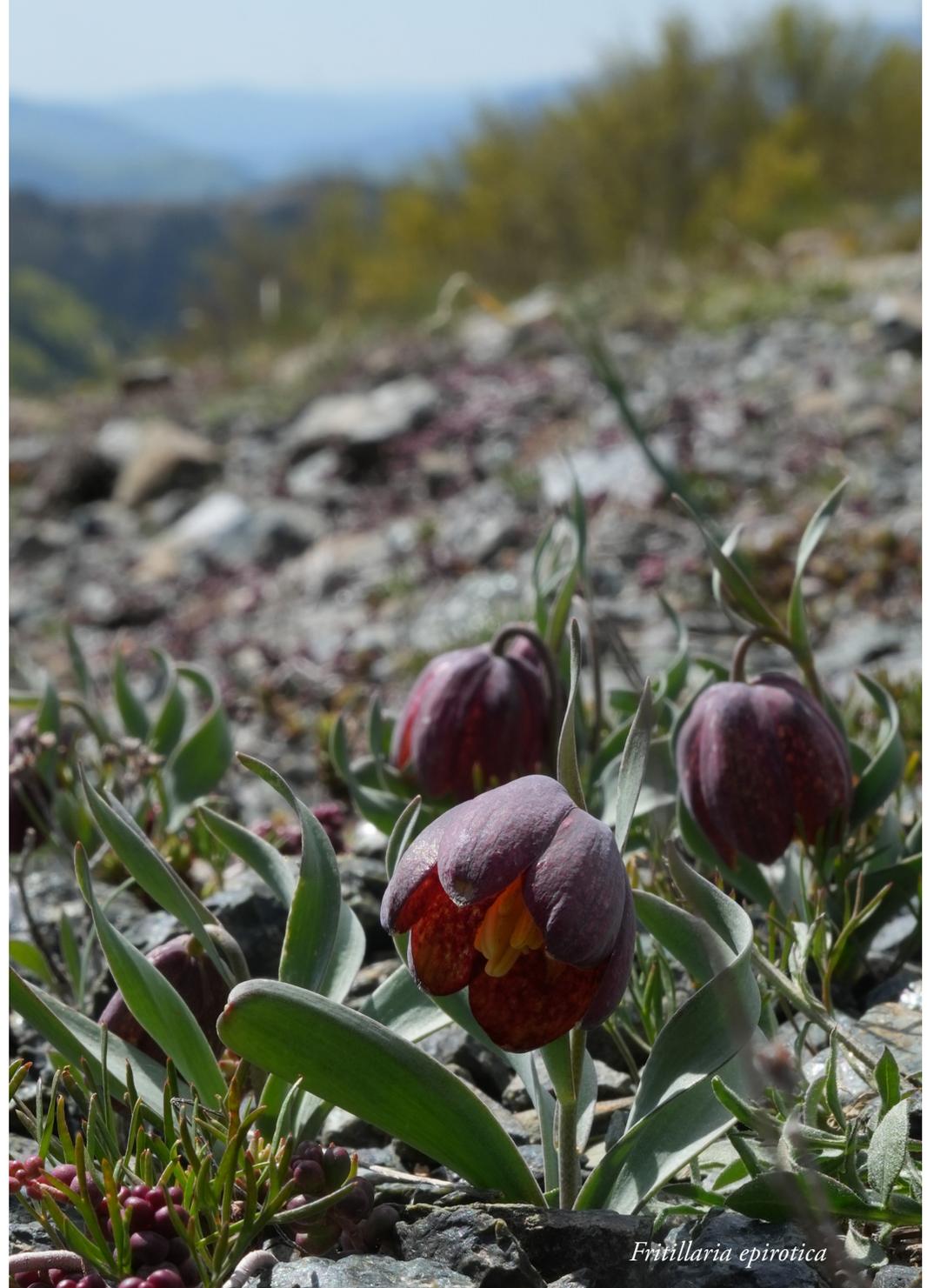
Leaving the area we drove north wending our way up into oak clad hills, stopping for a stand of elegant *Verbascum boissieri* with a drift of *Helianthemum nummularium* as a nightingale sang from cover. Turning off for Metsovo we climbed past the town and into the hills, reaching an area of damp grassland ringed

by emerald beech forest. In the grassland were scattered hundreds of scented *Narcissus poeticus* and we squelched about searching for the best clumps. Further on there was a fine view across to Metsovo with snow streaked mountains beyond and after that we drove up and over the pass descending to a warmer picnic spot among some hefty pines. Bushy clumps of *Bornmuellera tymphaea* grew in the clearing along with a few *Dactylorhiza sambucina*. Returning to the pass we explored the extensive box scrub and eventually found some good patches of the pretty *Daphne blagayana* in flowers nestled in the shelter of the box.

An altogether different habitat held our next gem, the rare *Fritillaria epirotica*, with many scattered among stony serpentine slopes that were laced with the red beads of *Sedum album* and coloured further by dainty tufts of blue forget-me-nots. Time was spent finding the best cute little cuboid flowers and examining the lovely interior patterns. Looking across the valley the emerald beech contrasted with the dark silhouettes of the conifers and we began to drive along a track between them when a bank with *Viola aetolica* and *Cardamine carnosa* brought us to a halt. In the opposite direction the track was lined with vivid pink *Malcomia orsiniana* and on the turf slopes above were dense patches of *Symphytum tuberosum*, *Primula veris* and thick carpets of *Viola aetolica*. We searched for *Tulipa sylvatica* (some had been in bud with the frits) but no luck and finished the day looking at the last few decent *Fritillaria graeca* in bloom near the town, before reaching our pleasant hotel (and winery).

Day 6 Aaos Lake

Breakfast was a lavish affair with a confusing array of choices from spinach pie and yogurt to fried eggs and various cakes, all washed down with excellent coffee. Driving up to the large reservoir aka Aaos Lake, the grasslands and water meadows had various delights beginning with many more *Narcissus poeticus* and drifts of *Anacamptis morio*, together with blue *Muscari botryoides* and the



Fritillaria epirotica

rich golden flowers of *Caltha palustris*. Nearer the lake were patches of *Viola epirota* and *Cruciata laevipes*. We followed the sinuous shore of the lake stopping for a colony of yellow (and deep pink) *Dactylorhiza sambucina* and seeing a black stork before descending to a different orchid site where we found *Orchis provincialis* and *O. mascula* in the woods, together with the fast developing spikes of *Platanthera chlorantha*. On the banks we flower-laden stems of *Chamaecytisus supinus* and the handsome clover; *Trifolium pignanii*. Back up at the lake we continued around to an area of pines. Searching the woods we found a good population of *Fritillaria graeca* subsp. *thessala* growing with the odd *F. montana* as well as hybrids between the two parents, all sprouting from an architectural foliar carpet of *Helleborus odoratus* and *Veratrum album*. *Orchis mascula* subsp. *ovalis* was also plentiful along the margins and by now *Dactylorhiza sambucina* had become commonplace.

Lunch was near a colony of flowering *Pinguicula crystallina*, overlooking the lake as the wind soured through the pines. The twists and turns of the road brought us to an area of grassland that usually had *Fritillaria montana*, but this year no luck. However, this meant we might see and altogether different and lovely plant instead. Taking a side road we travelled through the softly glowing beech woods and parked, setting off again on foot. It was a pleasant walk along a wide track with good views out across the forest-clad hills. A stony slope had a good colony of *Tulipa sylvestris* and bushy plants of white *Bornmuellera tymphaea* were common, whilst some areas of grassland had many more orchids and drifts of violets. Entering the forest again the track climbed and we encountered the first of several small streams. First we found the leaves and then the first flowers of the lovely *Soldanella pindicola*, with some prime specimens alongside running water. Time was spent with these, but as is the case with these things, a hundred metres further on and we found many more and better, and another hundred metres still and they were in delightful patches on the wet banks, with dozens of delicate mauve bells.

Well satisfied (although you never truly take enough photos of



Soldanella pindicola

Soldanella) we wandered back catching up with Ruth who had seen marsh and coal tit. It wasn't so much further back to the vehicle and then we drove onto the hotel in good time to clean up for dinner in the town after a viewing of the large plane trees and flowering horse chestnuts in the square.

Day 7 To Papigko

Clouds hung over Metsovo, but these dispersed once we had moved a little west and quite suddenly, as we exited one of the tunnels, we had blue skies and sunshine. The day was spent wending our way slowly north with many stops and many different plants. Our first stop was in an area of stark shaley rocks where patches of *Helianthemum nummularium* grew with numerous flowery *Coronilla ermerus* shrubs. As is the way we such seemingly bereft sites, many more plants followed with some searching with *Onosma heterophylla*, *Orlaya grandiflora* and the pretty *Onobrychis alba*, whilst in the grassy gulleys we found *Serapias vomeracea* and *Ophrys scolopax*. Following a dirt track down there were superb stands of *Lysimachia atropurpurea* (quite the largest I've ever seen) and these grew near meadows with many *Anacamptis morio* subsp. *picta* (in fact this orchid turned out to be abundant throughout the day and turned up many times in large numbers), a dainty milkwort; *Polygala monspeliaca*, *Stachys cretica* and low-growing yellow-flowered ground-pine; *Ajuga chamaepitys*. Black-headed buntings called and we had a good view of an eastern subalpine warbler just before we left.

Not far away was the first elegant Ottoman period bridge spanning a clear river. At one end grew *Sorbus torminalis* in flower and the corymbs were busy with many shiny chafer beetles. Even the partially overgrown path across the bridge held a colony of orchids and underneath grew masses of intense blue-flowered *Lithospermum purpureocaerulea*. A spur-thighed tortoise was a cute bonus just before we left. The twists and turns led through gorgeous rich green woodlands, broken every so often by drier



slopes and on one we saw suddenly a colony of feisty lady orchids; *Orchis purpurea*. Climbing up to these we also found monkey orchid; *O. simia* and then scarce *O. spitzelii*. Manna ash grew everywhere with foamy masses of flowers peppering the hillsides all around, sometimes with the cerise of Judas trees too.

Lunch was nearby in a convenient shady church where more lady orchids grew. Moving on a solitary *Neotinea tridentata* caught our eye and then exploring further into the adjacent woods we found *Ophrys sphegodes* and then masses of lovely *Melittis melissophyllum*, some with attractive pink lips. There were large numbers especially around a small disused church and just below this we also found a couple of *Neottia nidus-avis* in fresh flower. Another population of *Orchis simia* (monkey orchids) followed and with these grew (rather tired) *O. pauciflora*, a very fresh *O. spitzelii* and a tall spike of *O. provincialis*. Our second elegant hump-backed Ottoman bridge was next and around this grew *Geranium macrorrhizum* and *Valeriana italica* as well as a stout thistle; *Carduus nutans*. The blue waters flowing beneath added to the graceful architecture.

Then, cresting the final pass there were a few *Tulipa sylvestris* on a stony bank, the valley below dressed with the white of countless manna ash. From here the road wound down and then crossing the blue waters of the Voudimatis River we wound our way up and up to the overlook of the Vikos Gorge entrance. Soft afternoon light played over the magnificent cliffs and lush vegetation, with the soaring ramparts of Mount Typhi above it all. From here it was a short distance up to our superbly positioned hotel and the best coffee in Greece.

Day 8 Bourazani

A varied and flower-filled day began with a stop by the blue waters of the Voudimatis River below Papigko where *Saxifraga rotundifolium* grew on mossy rocks with *Silene italica*. After some essential shopping we continued into the fresh green oak woods, stopping for a colony of *Neotinea tridentata* and then a fine stand of *Salvia officinalis* in full flower with *Phlomis fruticosa* and *Stachys cretica*. Turning off onto a



Melittis melissophyllum

small side track it didn't take long to see the first *Paeonia peregrina* with its sumptuous red flower. The rest of the morning was spent walking the flowery track, searching for the best peonies, also finding other delights such as greater butterfly orchid; *Platanthera chlorantha*, fine plants of *Melittis melissophyllum*, *Lathyrus venettus*, *Cephalanthera longifolia*, some more lady orchids and *Orchis quadripunctata*. Then we reached the motherlode and a slope and scattered trees that had many gorgeous peonies as the mists drifted across the woodlands beyond. A few spikes of *Asphodeline lutea* were the final note before we walked back for lunch.

Our route continued north towards the Albanian border and we saw an *Orchis italica* (whilst some looked in the nearby monastery) and then after stopping for a richly-coloured *Orobanche gracilis* we arrived at the border overlook. A different narrow road headed to a flowery area where we found the singular *Ophrys helenae* with its rich velvety lip, together with lovely drifts of *Crepis rubra* mixed with lacey *Tordylium apulum*, the red poppy; *Papaver apulum* and the beige spikes of *Orobanche alba/reticulata*. A buzzard called a circled overhead and eastern subalpine warblers were quite common in the spiny scrub. There was time for one last gem which we found near another traditional bridge over another stretch of crystal clear blue river lined with plane trees. Growing among the mossy rocks was the delightful *Ramonda serbica*, with flat orange-centred lilac flowers emerging from attractive rosettes of crinkled leaves. The icing on the cake. From here it was back to Papigko where once again beautiful afternoon light playing across the sharp lines of the mighty cliffs.

Day 9 Vikos Gorge

The drama of Zagoria's landscapes reached its' zenith today with a visit to the Vikos Gorge. We drove directly to the main viewpoint, having the spectacular landscape virtually to ourselves as the light changed frequently, with sun bursts illuminating sections of sheer cliff and the bright green forests that clad the valley bottom, with a brooding grey sky beyond. There were good plants too, with lots of pristine *Fritillaria graeca* subsp. *thessala*, mauve *Aubrieta deltooides* wedged into crevices, spreading mats of *Geranium macrorrhizum* in flower and the snow-white



Paeonia peregrina

of *Saxifraga granatum* poking through. Large cushions of *Saxifraga scardica* clung to the rocks above. After enjoying the various stunning viewpoints we walked back and then drove to the stone forest, and area of interesting pancake limestone rocks. In the crevices grew *Malcomia orsiniana*, stonecrops and many ferns, but the mossy shady places were the best with superb colonies of *Ramonda serbica* plastered over the rocks. They weren't in flower but looked great nonetheless.

Dropping down to Monodendri, we took a walk to the small monastery there, which clings to the edge of gorge. A path led past stands of *Iris x germanica*, *Verbascum phoeniceum* *Carduus nutans* and *Convolvulus elegantissima* to another fabulous lookout. A narrower path went further and this got closer to the



Aesculus hippocastanum (horse chestnut) growing from the cliffs and offered even more wonderful views. Just don't look down! A final look from the monastery balcony and we walked back and then drove a short way to a sheltered picnic spot with a great view of Monodendri and the entrance to the gorge.

Half an hour down the road and we reached another area of pancake rocks and gorges, this time with a triple arch bridge spanning the river at Kipio. Our cultural visits continued with a visit to Mikro Papigko, the sister village to Megalo Papigko. At the church (and bell tower) were two fine spreading plane trees and we had a walk among the carless streets, overhung with vines that led to views back across the landscape and up to the cliffs. *Ajuga orientalis* sprung from the walls as did a multitude of ferns, sedum, *Umbilicus horizontalis* and crane's-bills. Fran and Ruth opted to walk back to the hotel, the rest of us drove. George (our host) arrived back at 5pm and we enjoyed another outstanding coffee, followed an hour later by beer and homemade raki!

Geranium macrorrhizum at Vikos Gorge (above)

Day 10 To Voras

Reluctantly, we had to leave the pleasures of Papigko, our delightful hotel and convivial host, but there was more of Greece to explore. The sky was moody, but there was little rain as we made our way down to the Aoos River and then followed this for while before turning east, the road undulating and winding through hills of shaley rocks. One slope had *Scutellaria orientalis* alongside a rich red-pink form of *Anthyllis vulneriana*, *Clinopodium* sp. and *Euphorbia seguieriana*. Continuing for a while we then reached a area of different geology with alternating soft and hard layers of sandstone, topped with grasslands and woods. These had plentiful orchids and we stopped for an area with lots of monkey and toothed orchid as well as *Ophrys scolopax*, *Muscari comosum* and the bonus of several European bee-eaters flying about.

It was windy further on so we took lunch in a restaurant and then continued up and over a pass, stopping for a field of flowering poppies that also had *Agrostemma githago* (corn-cockle), *Cyanus cyanus* (cornflower) and purple *Anchusa officinalis*. The rock changed again to limestone and we checked an area for *Iris reichenbachiana*, but there was no sign. However, there were a few *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *mammosa*. There was a longer and productive stop in an area of woods, grassland and rock outcrops. The white of *Cyanus pindicola* was common here together with a couple of pretty burnt-tip orchids; *Neotinea ustulata* and up of the rocks was abundant *Salvia officinalis*, *Haplophyllum patavinum* and growing among the rocks, a few *Dictamnus albus* in perfect flower. Alas, the many clumps of iris had finished flowering some time ago. Liz then found a horseshoe whip snake and we got a good look at this, especially when it climbed up my lower leg.

From here we drove through cherry orchards and up to the hotel on the lower slopes of Mount Voras.

Day 11 Voras

Clear skies boded well for our final day in the field and our first stop on the way up to Mount Voras was in sunshine. Rocky banks and grassland had some wonderful clumps of *Viola doefferi* in perfect flower and they continued in



Ophrys scolopax

abundance at our next location where white *Ranunculus cacuminus* grew in plenty around seeps. Even wetter areas had the rosy-red *Pedicularis verticillaris*, golden *Caltha palustris* and along the rivulets was that choice little gem; *Soldanella pindicola*. By now, unexpected clouds had begun to build and when we reached the higher parts it was on the chilly side. The lower temperatures, dull weather and what appeared to have been either heavy rain or hail the previous day had rather battered the large patches of *Crocus veluchensis* that grew near the last snows. By compensation there was lots of bright yellow *Viola violitsii* and a very tame and healthy red fox, which posed for photos. A second crocus, deep violet *Crocus pelistericus* was also found in the wetter areas, though these two had been shaken up by the conditions. Tree pipits parachuted down as we successfully searched for good clean crocuses to photograph.

Lunch was taken lower down overlooking the large Lake Vegoritida and *Silene atropurpurea* grew here and there along the road. A final plant stop was made for the pretty pom-poms of *Globularia cordifolia* that smothered areas of short turf and then it was on to Edessa. Greek Easter meant most petrol stations were closed, but we did eventually find one open (an essential for refuelling ambulances on a holiday!). Our journey concluded with a straightforward drive across the countryside to Thessaloniki, stopping once for a flock of lesser kestrels hawking insects next to the road. Our hotel was well-positioned overlooking the sea and city and a pleasant final dinner was enhanced by the thick perfume of the jasmine; *Trachelospermum jasminoides* that draped over the roof.

Day 12 Flights 6 May

George and Liz took their flight back to Canada, Alan, Fran and Ruth were staying on in Greece for more tours and visits to Athens and I set off at 5.45 for the drive south to Athens and my journey back to Turkey, seeing the looming bulk of Mount Olympus at sunrise, a place I really must visit sometime...



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Cercis siliquastrum