

# HIGH AND DRY



*Calceolaria pinifolia*



Laguna Santa Rosa

A perfect mirrored sunrise saturates the rich earthy hues and golden grasses that surround Laguna Santa Rosa. At 3850 metres, dawn was decidedly chilly, but warmed quickly enough. Basak and I had spent the night in the small refugio next to the lake and awoke to the muted honks of hundreds of flamingoes that were now reflected in the serene waters. This picturesque salt lake lies in the high Atacama Desert amidst a wonderful area of colourful landscapes, inland from the dusty town of Copiapo. What is surprising is that despite the apparent dryness, there is a surprising wealth of flowers. This is augmented by El Nino rains every few years and in 2017 we hit it just right. I managed to convince my intrepid botanists that a pre-dawn start was needed to get the most out of the day and for the first hour we could see nothing, then the faint outline of rising valley walls. Finally, the first rays hit the first of the colourful hills and it became impossible not to stop and photograph the rich landscape.

Further along and rocky slopes were peppered with golden *Argylia checoensis* and pretty domes of *Cruckshanksia hymenodon* in far greater quantity than I'd seen before. These are extraordinary plants each whorl of little golden trumpets surrounded by large showy cream (or pink) bracts. However, they were not the star turn. This came a little later in an innocuous scree slopes where Doreen aced the stunning rosettes



*Cryptantha gnaphaloides*



*Cruckshanksia hymenodon*



*Cristaria andicola*



*Chaetanthera lanata*



of *Chaetanthera lanata*, a quite beautiful alpine with densely overlapping woolly leaves beset with fine-rayed white flowers. Wonderful. Alongside these were a white forget-me-not; *Cryptantha gnaphaloides* and strongly-fragrant *Glandularia origens*.

The landscape grew grander and more colourful. Another steep loose slope looked unlikely to support much, but incredibly this sharply drained versant was exactly what *Malesherbia lanceolata* preferred, with big clumps sending up spikes of creamy stars. Set against the blue sky and pastel hills they looked wonderful. Stonier flats had the violet cups of *Cristaria andicola* as we wound our way ever higher. From the breezy pass at around 4000 metres, we could see the edges of Laguna Santa Rosa below, nestled among rich-earth colours of the surrounding snow-streaked hills. The rocky slopes were populated with countless tufts of golden *Stipa* grasses and then we spied larger more vivid gold, striking clumps of *Calceolaria pinifolia* in full flower with an azure sky beyond.

The Laguna was alive with coots, flamingoes and grebes and we explored various viewpoints and had a picnic overlooking the blue waters and blinding white salt flats beyond. Multicoloured slopes could be seen in the distance, bands of red, green and yellow, the product of the intense vulcanism that has created and shaped the whole country.

The rub with coming here is the breathless



*Argylia checoensis*



*Glandularia origens*



*Malesherbia lanceolata*



*Adesmia echinus*

altitude and having driven up from near sea level, we needed to return to that elevation. Fortunately, a scenic circuit is possible and we carried on past the salt lake and then down into dramatic canyons with more *Calceolaria pinifolia*, then up to an even higher 4300 metre pass and over towards the huge gold mines that have opened up this area. On that first visit with Basak our car hit trouble early on. Luckily a gold mining camp was nearby and the guys there offered to take a look. The fuel filter was blocked, so our newly-made amigo promptly sucked the petrol through the filter a few times to clear it. If any of you have ever attempted this you will understand just how disgusting it is. We gave him a litre of wine to wash away the taste!

Near the big gold mine were remarkable pyramids of *Adesmia echinoides* and then gulleys full of broad creamy plates of *Malesherbia obtusa*. *Cruckshanksia hymenodon* was also very common scattered across the gravelly flats. I have been fortunate to visit this stunning place several times, but this was the most flowery I had seen it. The sun was dropping as we completed the drive, arriving in perfect time for that Chilean cultural essential - downing a pisco sour. if you don't know what this is you'll just have to come to Chile and find out.



*Malesherbia obtusa*