

MOUNTAIN MEDLEY



Fritillaria delavayi, Sichuan, China



Meconopsis horridula, Sichuan, China



Chionocharis hookeri, Sichuan, China

Soon those calorie-laden boxes of joy will arrive and despite feeble attempts to resist eating 'just one', we will be racked with guilt at having demolished the whole box. I'm talking chocolates of course, tins of glittering wrappers that disguise the tooth-busting contents inside, but the lure is always too much. There's usually a menu of sorts, a run-down of favourites (and those to be avoided) as we move effortlessly from praline to walnut caramel or brandy liqueur (dodging the rock-hard toffee on the way). And so it is with plants, presented with a scree of delights one must move (without rolling to the base of the scree) between choice plants, concentrating on favourites but not neglecting the other beauties as we go. Altitude can play a part. The sheer effort of getting from one plant to another makes choosing which to go for a process based on available leg power. As ever our botanical year has had so many highlights, that choosing which to celebrate the season with is a confusing as that first moment of gazing at the chocolates or scrambling across a Chinese scree at nearly 5000 metres. It was easy enough this year in northern Sichuan when one had to choose everything. One scree seemed to have everything with *Saussurea medusa*, *Soroseris glomerata*, *Meconopsis horridula* in a variety of colour forms, the dangling bells of *Fritillaria delavayi*, *Corydalis scaberula*, saxifrages, androsaces and



Soroseris glomerata, Sichuan, China



Chaetanthera villosa, Chile



Rhodolirion montanum, La Parva, Chile

more. This was followed by a simply sublime time on a cloudless Chola Shan where mats of *Chionocharis hookeri* and spires of *Meconopsis racemosa* were set out with the most impressive mountain backdrop imaginable. What made it even more special is we had it entirely to ourselves.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, the year had begun with a dazzling and colourful Chilean selection, where *Alstroemeria pallida*, *Pachylaenia atriplicifolia* and *Rhodolirion montanum* had kickstarted a tour in the Andes, followed by stark volcanic worlds sprinkled with the velvet-leaved buttons of *Chaetanthera villosa*. We reached heights here too, walking up to 3500 metres at La Parva, past fabulous jumbles of *Cajophora coronata*, amber *Tropaeolum nubigena* and bizarre *Nassauvia pinnigera*. Central Asia was bulb-heaven with the incomparable *Tulipa regelii*, *Fritillaria karelinii*, countless *Iris bucharica* followed by a climb up limestone cliffs to reach hundreds of *Fritillaria eduardii*. The impressive pink spires of *Eremurus albertii* and screes filled with big leaved *Allium karataviense* were easier! The lure of Asia is always strong; it's confusion of mountain ranges offering so much variety. Eastern Turkiye is always high on the list of places to go, with its combination of oncocyclis irises and extraordinary steppe flora. Barely had Chris finished this tour then he returned to Tajikistan in June to finally find the unique *Ostrouskia magnifica*. The edges of Pamir have remarkable



Pachylaenia atriplicifolia, Lagunillas, Chile



Tulipa regelia, Kazakhstan



Ostrowskia magnifica, Tajikistan



primula jonardunii, Sela Pass, India



Fritillaria eduardii, near Batken, Kyrgyzstan

big herb meadows and slopes with *Eremurus stenophyllus* and *Lathyrus mulkak*. Not that there was much time to enjoy this either as a trip to Arunachal Pradesh in India beckoned. This seldom-visited corner has had significant improvement to its road network allowing access to the lush summer mountain flora, centred on the Sela Pass. Drifts of *Primula dickeana*, cerise *P. jonardunii*, big-belled *Swertia hookeri*, the incredible multi-hued *Meconopsis gakydiana* and enormous *M. paniculata* filled the green highlands, with more primulas, orchids and towering *Cardiocrinum giganteum*. The silver fir forests were magnificent and mysterious, wraithed in mists and draped in lichens.

Aforementioned China came straight after India and as if all of this was not enough, there's no rest for the botanist in spring and summer in Eurasia and after a brief hello to his boys it was the off to the wonderful flower meadows of the Kackar (north-east Turkiye), with one dazzling combination of meadow flowers after the next. Each slope and valley had its' own kaleidoscope of flowers and high passes gave little respite with their drifts of campanulas, flowery mounds of *Daphne glomerata* and screes with the rare endemic, *Viola odontocalycina*.



Campanula latifolia, Ikizdere, Turkiye



Meconopsis gakydiana, Sela Pass, India



Flower meadow at Ikizdere, Turkiye

A lull for summer holidays and then the complex flora of the Western Cape. Rain had fallen in the Atacama, so we added a last-minute trip to see the flowering desert, with its sheets of *Cistanthe longiscapa* and unbelievable quantities of *Zephyranthes bagnoldii* amidst the architectural columns and spiny barrels of so many cacti. None of these are mountain flowers though. As it turned out Chile was this season's most frequently visited destination (and the furthest away for us!). Our last tour of the year was filled with magnificent landscapes, forests of spidery-whorled monkey puzzle trees, Chilean firebushes and some standout alpine plants with the exquisite rosettes of *Viola atropurpurea* ringed with black-violet flowers, the refined beauty of *Oxalis adenophylla*, trailing stems of golden *Tropaeolum polyphyllum*, thirty taxa of *Calceolaria*, and in Patagonia an abundance of the lovely porcelain orchid *Chloraea magellanica* and that most desirable beauty, *Calceolaria uniflora* providing a perfect finale to 2025.

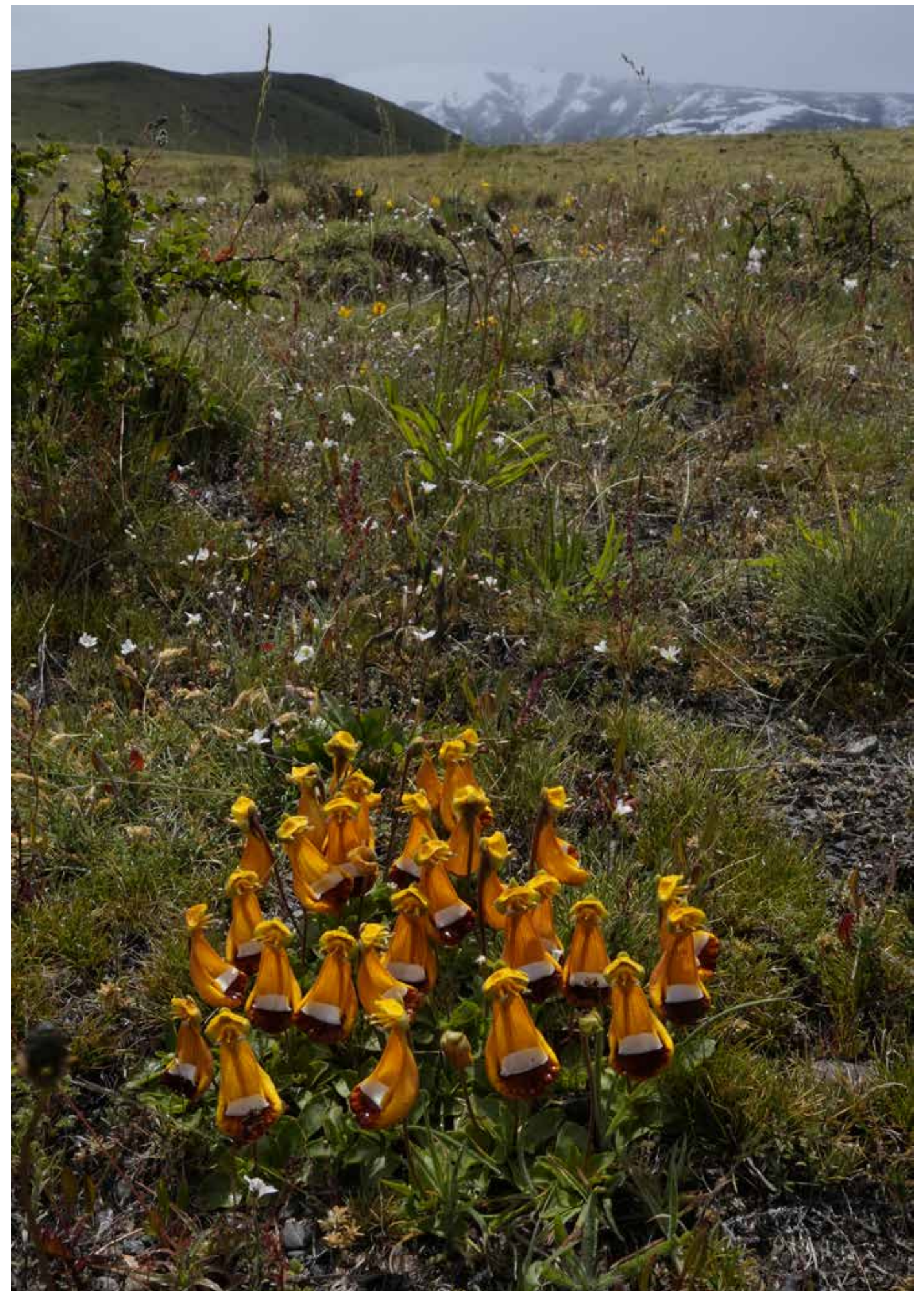
If we could have one Christmas wish it would be for an extra five days in every month to recover. And diet!

Viola atropurpurea, Chile





Oxalis adenophylla, Laguna del Maule, Chile



Calceolaria uniflora, Torres del Paine, Chile