

RETURN TO THE SILK ROAD



Ostrowksia magnifica, Southern Tajikistan



Amberboa moschata et al, Tuzluca, Turkiye

Fourteen years have passed since we published our first book, *Flora of the Silk Road*. We still delight in rereading some of the generous reviews it received, and it was both relief and satisfaction in equal measure. Time flies. Our lovely Merlin was only a baby and little Aren was not even in sight. During these years we have continued to travel the length and breadth of the remarkable floristic regions it spanned, revisiting many areas, finding many new areas and learning a great deal more about the flora and its relationships. Now we can consider publishing a revised edition, and not just a rehash but a thorough overhaul that offers greater insight and a more thorough journey, with most photos new and featuring many new species too, some seldom if ever published before, though it will not lose sight of the ethos of the first, a shameless showcasing of one of the world's greatest floras. Of course, Turkiye continues to enthrall and still stands as one of the great botanical destinations. Our two eastern Turkiye trips this year only reinforced that with memorable displays of irises, the wonderfully named and extraordinary *Tchihatchewia isatidea** and elegant ruffs of *Amberboa moschata* in jumbled kaleidoscope of colour with *Papaver arenarium* and *Senecio vernalis* amongst many highlights. The latter formed extensive brushstrokes of colour across basalt terraces with to-the-horizon displays of fiery poppies imitating the hot lava of the past. The Turkish far east has always had a magic of its own, but we have also learned much from the Mediterranean Toros and the emerald greenery of the Karadeniz (Black Sea) region to offer and even richer Turkish aspect to any revision. Discussions with our publisher are ongoing.



Rhododendron agniphum, Da Xue Shan, Yunnan

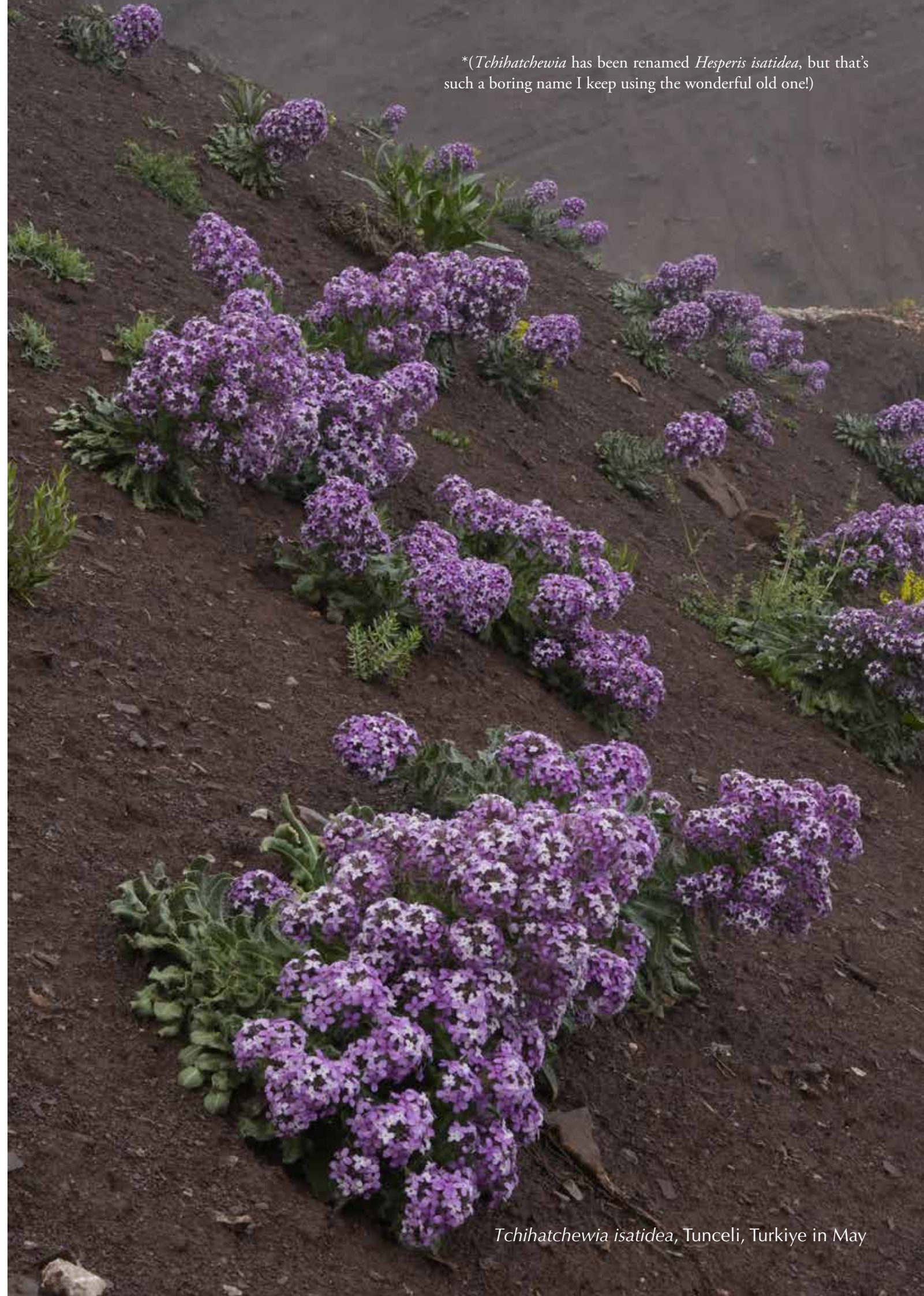


Papaver arenarium, Tuzluca, Turkiye in May



Iris barnumiae, Lake Van, Turkiye in May

China as ever, flexed its green muscles and draws us back to its vaulted peaks and endless landscapes. Yunnan last year had the finest rhododendron displays any of us had ever seen, including my Chinese drivers who witness these mountains every year. And Central Asia has continued to offer surprises and wonderful moments. The latter is perhaps the area we have learned the most about in the intervening years. The previous book offered a generous slice of what is to be found and was fairly comprehensive. However, the new version will delve deeper and include global rarities and endemics seldom if ever published before. Back then there were a few nagging omissions, perhaps only discernible to us, but nagging, nonetheless. In March I went to Kazakhstan on the trail of the singular and lovely *Tulipa regelii*, a crinkle leaved botanical jewel. They were more beautiful than any photo I had seen and were deliciously sweet-scented too. That trip also led me to lovely populations of *Iris kuschakewiczii*, *Fritillaria karelinii* and a suite of tulips. It was a four-stan tour and by the end few stones were left unturned. We scaled a limestone rock face to an astonishing 'forest' of *Fritillaria eduardii*, found stunning colonies of *Allium karataviense* (matched by an amazing display of similar *Allium akaka* in Turkiye in May) in steep screes and seen all manner of other fiery tulips. There was one more itch to scratch though and one that had been itching for years. I have just returned from a successful trip to Tajikistan to finally bring relief to that botanical irritation. I had good information to



*(*Tchihatchewia* has been renamed *Hesperis isatidea*, but that's such a boring name I keep using the wonderful old one!)

Tchihatchewia isatidea, Tunceli, Turkiye in May



Allium karataviense, Kyrgyzstan



Iris kuschakewiczii, Kazakhstan



Tulipa regelii, Kazakhstan



Fritillaria eduardii, Kyrgyzstan



Fritillaria karelinii, Kazakhstan

hand and after an early morning arrival and a few hours of sleep I was raring to go. North of Dushanbe we entered a cool forest enclave, following a stream and criss-crossing it we finally arrived at a magical spot where dozens of majestic *Ostrowksia magnifica* grew, each tall stem topped by an outsize wide, white bell. This remarkable plant is something of a relict largely (but not entirely) confined to more humid, shady nooks and always on steep slopes. Aside from this sizeable colony, several more were found in other locations, usually in association with shade giving walnuts, but often in inaccessible places. Another good colony was located growing with *Delphinium longipedunculatum* but the most interesting was another population way to the south and growing in sunnier exposed slopes. These were also more strongly suffused with lilac. Elsewhere on this trip I also caught up with the sulphurous spires *Eremurus stenophyllus*, a striking foxtail lily and one I had longed to see in wild. They mainly grew on stony slopes, sometimes with the tumbling masses of *Lathyrus mulkak*, a plant that came as a complete surprise. This is a stunning very large flowered sweet pea that forms great masses on rocky slopes and scrub. A more garden worthy plant I can't imagine. They were often with hefty clumps of *Polygonum coriarium* and the very handsome *Phlomis lehmannaiana* two of the robust herbs that comprise the fascinating big-herb or forb communities here and I had a wonderful walk along a nightingale song filled valley on the edge of the Pamir, flanked by vast swathes of these together with big fennels, rambling vetches and fragrant roses. Getting there including the novelty driving alongside the Panj River,





Lathyrus mulkak, Darvaz Mountains, Tajikistan.



Eremurus stenophyllus, Darvaz Mountains, Tajikistan.

which forms the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan with the latter quite literally a stone's throw away. It is one of the most remarkable national divides I've ever seen, a narrow but tumultuous ribbon of water dividing the fortunes of two populations. No doubt *Ostrowkia magnifica* is also over there somewhere, glorious and oblivious to the ideological whims of humankind. *Iris afghanica* will never feature in our book, but for now I am pleased with completing this missing piece of the Silk Road puzzle. We'll continue to search for other beautiful species that so characterise each region. Research into the road by UNESCO have revealed new insights into unknown or poorly known routes that passed from the arid wastes of southern Xinjiang and into India, crossing from Xinjiang to Himachal Pradesh and onwards. In fact, routes into India were significant, another being at the opposite end of the Himalayan chain, passing from Lhasa via Sikkim to Bengal. This hasn't gone unnoticed by us, and we have already started planning trips to Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh where we hope to find different blue poppies, primulas and other moisture-loving flora.

This year is shaping up to be a phenomenal Asian experience for both of us, one from which we'll need some time to catch our breath, having flitted from Central Asia to Turkey, back to Central Asia, onto the Himalaya and then a romp around China (and Japan for Basak). Just in time to explore the Kackar of north-east of Turkey before summer with those fast-growing boys from the end of July.

It's a road we already know we will never reach the end of.



Phlomooides lehmanniana, Tajikistan.