



*Chaetanthera villosa*

SHADOW OF THE  
CONDOR  
Chile's high Andes in  
summer





*Rhodophiala rhodolirion*



*Alstroemeria umbellata*

*Argyria adscendens* (left)



*Loasa lateritia*

It took some determination to get there but, in the end, the various hoops and jumps required to even enter this fascinating Andean realm during these difficult travel times were negotiated (even if one of them was quite literally completed ten minutes before check in!). Sometimes you just have to be persistent. The reward for our dogged efforts was an array of outstanding alpine and summer-flowering plants set amidst empty and magnificent mountains. This was a research trip, much of the ground untrodden at least at this season. I had anticipated the first location at Lagunillas to have a few bits and pieces and then we would move on. How wrong I was. Once we had arrived at the first slope it was quickly apparent there was plenty on offer with fabulous spreading mats of *Argylia adscendens*, mainly ochre-orange but some tending to plum purple. Studded among them was *Perezia carthamoides*, *Mutisia sinuata* and increasing numbers of lovely rich pink *Rhodophiala rhodolirion* (it would seem the name may have changed to *Rhodolirion montanum*, but I've retained the familiar old name here) and *Schizanthus hookeri*. *Alstroemeria pallida* was also very common in a variety of colour forms and once we had finally reached the ridge at 2300 metres, we found reddish *Pachylaenia atriplicifolia* and *Cruckshanksia hymenodon* too. There were wonderful patches of alstoremeria, argylia, oxalis and other colourful plants and every so often a big







*Chloraea alpina*

*Mutisia subulata*

shadow swept across the ground as no fewer than eight huge Andean condors glided back and forth over the ridge at times only a few metres above us - checking for movement or a lack of it!

A superb start and this was followed by a jaunt up to El Morado where *Alstroemeria umbellata* grew in heavy scree. Our next location to the south was the magnificent Laguna del Maule, one of the most dazzlingly-colourful places we visited. Driving around the lake to the various fine vistas we ground to a halt at the sight of the first bank of garish scarlet and yellow *Mimulus cupreus*. These were mere sighters, for a bit further on were fabulous gullies packed with so much fiery colour it was hard to take in, the mimulus embellished with the swollen pouches of *Calceolaria filicaulis* and cooled by blue or white daisies. Every gully had something new and traversing the slope we found superb colonies of scarlet *Loasa lateritia*, tumbling masses of *Tropaeolum incisum*, sulphurous *Euphrasia andicola* and even a few late-flowering purple *Viola glacialis*.

The following day was a long but rewarding hike in Altos de Lircay, initially through woodlands filled to bursting with *Alstroemeria presliana* as well as fiery *Rhodophiala splendens* and the graceful flowers of wild *Fuchsia magellanica* along the many streams.



*Mimulus cupreus* & *Calceolaria filicaulis*





*Tulipa tschimganica*

*Gymnospermium albertii*

climbing above the tree line we were immediately confronted by the stunning red flowers of *Mutisia subulata*, followed by many *Rhodophiala montana*, *Alstroemeria exserens* and hefty golden spires of the orchid *Chloraea alpina* in a sublime volcanic landscape. On the ridge mats of *Azorella monantha* combined with amber *Adesmia corymbosa* and *Mutisia linearifolia*.

A bit farther south and new suite of plants and another display of unrestrained colour that will live long in the memory. I had hoped to see *Mutisia oligodon* in flower during the trip but the bounteous hummocks smothered in big pink daisies that in places carpeted the ash slopes of Volcan Antuco were a sight to behold. Often mingled with orangey *Quinchimalium chilense* they created an exquisite natural garden, with the placid waters of Laguna de Laja beyond. We pushed on further to where we had lunch beneath a delightful small waterfall and then picked up the pretty mats of *Ourisia microphylla* plastered in crevices in basalt columns as we returned.

As one travels the length of Chile the climate changes and it becomes increasingly green from north to south. Time was spent in the Araucania region, named for the remarkable *Araucaria araucana* (monkey puzzle) trees that still form



*Eremurus lactiflorus*

*Crocus alatavicus*



*Loasa nana*

1000-year old monkey puzzle



*Schizanthus grahmi*

*Tropaeolum speciosum* (left)



*Rhodophiala rhodolirion*

extensive stands here. A visit to Tolhuaca produced the scarlet necklaces of *Tropaeolum speciosum* amidst humid forests rich in ferns and bamboo. Having seen these it was hard to imagine the austere contrast of Las Nalcas that lay a few kilometres away. Here araucarias formed some fine forests, including among their ranks some venerable tree, but the turbulent nature of Chile's geology lay a stone's throw away. The stark seemingly lifeless expanses of ash beneath Volcan Lonquimay actually held one of the absolute gems of the trip. Having enjoyed the many *Loasa nana* that grew alongside *Oxalis adenophylla* we spotted a few woolly tufts on the slope. A closer look revealed the gorgeous *Chaetanthera villosa*, each silken bundle topped by a golden daisy flower. Rather enthusiastically we marched down slope to the best specimens, each with striking volcanic back drops. Alas, walking down an ash slope is indeed all too easy. Walking back up is a good test of lungs and thighs.

The necessary reposition took us north again to Paso Vergara, close to the border with Argentina. Coronavirus meant the border was closed and we were on foot, but that was no matter it gave us a better opportunity to enjoy the increasingly rich displays of *Schizanthus grahami*, *Alstroemeria exserens*, *Calceolaria arachnoidea* and great quantities of *Rhodophiala rhodolirion* that grew on the slopes, creating unrepeatable natural gardens. Alas, it became extremely windy later on and we

*Alstroemeria exserens*







*Cajophora coronata*

*Nassauvia pinigera*

wisely stopped short of the pass.

The final flourish to our colour feast was the diverse (if rather manipulated) slopes at La Parva. Whilst the skiing paraphernalia might make for a less visually appealing area, the many tracks make access easy. We enjoyed various walks into different areas finding many *Loasa sigmoidea*, *Viola philippii* (some still in flower), huge hummocks of *Laretia acaulis*, plentiful white forms of *Rhodophiala rhodolirion*, *Tropaeolum polyphyllum* and the incomparable displays of *Cajophora coronata*, with huge plants spreading across the ground and around boulders, brimming with peculiar wide-mouthed flowers. Our final day saw us up at 3500 metres, better acclimatised and able to tackle the high scree and slopes where we found *Loasa caespitosa*, abundant *Oxalis penicillata* and big mounds of *O. squamata*, exquisite rosettes of *Viola atropurpurea*, *Tropaeolum nubigena* and on the barest of ground *Nototriche compacta*. One of the most remarkable plants was kept until the very end when we found a few plants of *Nassauvia pinigera* in very heavy scree to round off our exploits.

Eating lunch after the final descent, condors were once again circling overhead and we pondered how terrifying it might be if they did the same as the gulls in Cornwall, swooping down to take our sandwiches and quite possibly us with them. For now, at least they only ate the dead and so long as we were still moving so were their shadows.

