

STEPPE EAST

17 May

Tchihatchewia isatidea



Muscari massayanum



Hesperis breviscapa

A very different Turkey lies away from the sun-soaked Mediterranean. Indeed, this is a country of tremendous contrasts with everything from dunes to forest-cloaked mountains, alpine highlands and vast spreading steppe. The latter endures a tough climate, with dry summers and cold winters. At first glance steppe often seems devoid of interest, and yet it contains some of the most striking plants in the country and some of our favourites.

We'll start this steppe journey in the heart of Anatolia and the extraordinary landscapes of Cappadocia. This is undoubtedly the most familiar part of Turkey's steppe region, a spectacular landscape of eroded and contorted volcanic ash. It offers up stunning jewels to get us going with the localised endemic *Iris sprengeri*, one of the lovely *Oncocycclus* irises. These grew near tufts of deep blue *Moltkia coerulea*, a widespread plant that pops up throughout Inner Anatolia. In fact, we can find them just an hour's drive from our house and we can see the same on the other side of the country around Lake Van. Another widespread and impressive plant is *Arnebia densiflora*, this one spectacularly poised over a canyon. This species has relict populations in the mountains of central Greece.



Arnebia densiflora



Cappadocia



Moltkia coerulea



Bungea trifida



Iris sprengeri

Heading east there is a remarkably rich area around Erzincan and Erzurum. It's here we find the ultimate steppe plant. Nothing quite prepares you for *Tchihatchewia isatidea*, a truly incredible plant. Look closer and it's a complex arrangement of flower whorls, like sprockets in a wonderful floral machine. They burst from bare banks and rocky slopes. This amazing colony was in a rather sensitive area near Tunceli, and we had to photograph them quickly with security cameras watching our every move. It has a lovely relative *Hesperis breviscapa* (rumour has it *Tchihatchewia* has now become a *Hesperis* - but that name just doesn't have the same ring to it). In the same area the stout spikes of *Muscari massayanum* appear too.

The steppe landscape varies a lot as the climate cuts across different geology. Some areas are decidedly colder (such as around Kars) and here the forests reappear, albeit plantation of Scot's Pine. However, tucked among one area of pines is a bulbous gem that takes some beating - *Fritillaria michailovskyi*. In a good year there are hundreds of these golden-rimmed beauties, eagerly attended by striking orange wasps - quite possibly drawn to that vivid yellow band. One year we took a back road down from Kars in search of irises and found a stunning stony, slope crowded with huge *Allium akaka*, all mingled with blue *Sherardia*



Fritillaria michailovskyi



Iris iberica subsp. *elegantissima*

orientalis and brimstone fennels. Not far beyond here we found our irises. Peppering the weathered lava fields and igneous slopes were stands of the incredible *Iris iberica* subsp. *elegantissima*, it's quivering white standards visible from afar. Surely, deserving of a place in the upper pantheon of steppe flowers. They invariably grow with the semi-parasitic *Bungea trifida* a widespread plant including around towering Agri Dag (Mount Ararat). And, in places these both grow together with just the right *Achillea*-host that supports the fiery-flowered parasite *Phelypaea tournefortii*. It has an unmatched intensity to its red flowers and a habit of just appearing from bare ground, alongside other steppe beauties such as the irises. Beauty and the beast - these were beautifully framed with the filigree silver leaves of its victim.

Reaching the far east, the turquoise waters of Lake Van stretch out before us, and the steppe flora just keeps delivering. But here I stop; Basak's report next week, is from here and other parts of the 'East' where hopefully she will show you some more incredible and rare geophytes...so watch this space.

Allium akaka



Phelypaea tournefortii