



Salvia caespitosa

THE BIG ONE



Eryngium bourgatii subsp. *heldriechii*

Though I've been chasing various endemics all across the south-west Taurus this season, one of the richest places of all looms directly behind our house - Tahtali Dag, also known as Mount Olimpos. A modest but nonetheless wild 2325-metre lump of limestone that rises abruptly to this height directly from the Mediterranean Sea. It is isolated from the other higher peaks in the region and its proximity to the sea means a different micro-climate too. Forests of pine yield to magnificent cedars and then, quite suddenly rocky alpine tundra above 1850-metres. Given its position close to so much cheap and cheerful tourism, it was inevitable a teleferic would be constructed to whisk the sun-seekers to the top and back. But, this is no bad thing when you've lots of photographic equipment to carry and I took full use of it this week to get me straight into the high alpine zone. Now I was after a particular and striking plant that I know grew here, but guessed there would be plenty more on show too. I was not wrong.

The teleferic station is right at the summit with commanding views of a big stretch of coast and hinterland. Immediately after I started down I found shaded rocks with (I know I've featured it before, but it is just lovely), growing



Omphalodes luciliae



Tahtali landscape



Centaurea drabiifolia



Paronychia chionaea



Rosa pulverulenta



Asyneuma lycium

alongside a scarce endemic *Asyneuma lycium*, mats of *Asperula nitida* and crevices packed with white *Arenaria tmolea*. On the rocky slopes grew plenty of spiny *Eryngium bourgatii* subsp. *heldreichii* and the trailing *Campanula stricta* was frequent too. However, none of these compared to the stunning big pink flowers of *Salvia caespitosa*, a gorgeous spreading alpine with outsize flowers emerging from among fine foliage. *Rosa pulverulenta* sprouted from among the boulders and screes. The I found the first of my target plant - *Echinops emiliae* - though these were in bud only. I know more grew lower down so I carried on to another population, finding increasing numbers of bright yellow *Centaurea drabiifolia* as I went and on the barest gravelly parts its stemless cousin *C. pestalozzae* with straw-coloured flowers. Tidy little silvered domes of *Paraonychia chionaea* had an understated charm and mats of *Pteroccephalus pinardii* were just starting to bloom.

I had intentionally gone up to the mountain in the early afternoon, hoping that by the time I reached the *Echinops emiliae* they would have kind, soft light on them. It also kept me moving so I wouldn't end up walking the rest of the route in the dark. There were many stems from last year



Pteroccephalus pinardii



Echinops emiliae

with huge seed heads disintegrating in the wind. Whilst it did not seem to be a bumper year I did eventually find a couple of superb specimens on a rocky slope. This is an impressive plant, bristling with spines, the leaves white-felted beneath, but it is the remarkable flower heads that stand out - great tennis ball sized green spheres, the flowers so deeply buried among the long jade phyllaries that they are hard to see at all. A magnificent brute, they looked particularly good against wispy grasses with the green forested hills stretching beyond. A couple of hundred metres below and I entered that cedar forest, transitioning from rocky alpine slope to tall forest in a short distance.

Within the beautiful forest there was nothing to tempt my camera further, and the increasing gloom kept me moving, meeting the very welcome car with Basak and the boys an hour or so later.

