

## Pontic Alps

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Days 1 - 5

#### Ovit Pass, Mor Yayla & Anzar Yayla

A great mountain barrier stretches eastwards along the Black Sea shore, hogging moisture that rises from the sea's millpond surface and preventing it from penetrating sun-baked Anatolia to the south. Verdant meadows and forests attest to the superb growing conditions. Jason and the Argonauts would have seen this green and vibrant land as they neared Colchis thousands of years ago and though the lower slopes are now partly cultivated with hazel groves and tea plantations much of the higher ground would have looked much the same then as now. Except now roads take us quickly to the great heights just forty miles inland. The tiny hamlet of Camlik, some six thousand feet above the Black Sea, is where our hotel sits amid superb Euxine Forest. From here we'll explore flower and butterfly-filled meadows and a truly wonderful alpine zone, all within easy reach.

Broad-bodied Chasers and *Orthetrum brunneum* overfly boggy ground where the local butterwort *Pinguicula balcanica* and steel-blue *Swertia iberica* bloom among *Dactylorhiza urvilleana* and Grass of Parnassus. *Anemone narcissiflora* and brilliant orange *Geum coccineum* mix with wands of pink Bistort amongst dark green patches of the *Rhododendron caucasicum*. Mountain Chiffchaffs are common and so too are Scarlet Rosefinches, the bright red males whistling gently from streamside willows. The road takes us to an 8,500 foot pass and thus allows easy access to a fantastic world of snowy craggy peaks, serene tarns and flowery alpine turf. We'll encounter families of Shore Larks and Red-fronted Serins feeding in the flower-rich turf. Alpine Accentors and Ring Ouzels are common and overhead we should see Golden Eagle and Alpine Chough. Snow-fed streams are edged with vibrant blue *Gentiana verna* and shining pink-red *Pedicularis nordmanniana*, one of a number of beautiful species of this genus. *Primula auriculata* and the diminutive *Primula algida* grow in profusion and by snow patches we'll find endemic *Primula longipes* and gorgeous purple-flowered *Primula elatior meyeri* - yes, a purple Oxlip! Nearby we'll find lovely azure *Corydalis alpestris* and purple *Corydalis conorhiza*. Several campanulus decorate the rocks and turf, the best plants of *Campanula aucheri* and *Campanula tridentata* produce rounded clumps of solid blue!

Clouded Apollos and the endemic *Erebia graucasica* inhabit the highest slopes and lower down we'll encounter many wonderful butterflies. The rich golden-orange hues of Scarce and Fiery Coppers adorn meadows where Red Helleborine, *Digitalis ferruginea* and the pretty pink *Lathyrus rotundifolius* blooms. Swallowtails, Purple-shot Coppers, *Lycaena asabinus* and a host of blues sip salts by roadside runnels overflowed by stunning Banded Darters. Just above a little teahouse we'll see elegant *Lilium ponticum*'s orange-yellow Turk's-cap flowers amid a fabulous show of bright pink *Stachys macranthera*, two metre tall *Cephalaria gigantea* and orchids including *Dactylorhiza saccifera*. Damp areas

are littered with Frog Orchids and the pleasingly compact pink spikes of *Dactylophiza euxina*.

Above Mor Yayla and Anzar Yayla, both summer villages, are the most sublime meadows where the lovely fritillary *Boloria caucasica* overflies a mesmerising show of colour. Bistorts, orchids, bellflowers, *Asteraceae* of huge variety and Geraniums are abundant, the latter including *Geranium collinum*, *Geranium ibericum* and the amazingly named *Geranium cinereum* subspecies *subcaulescens* variety *lazicum*! There are abundant louseworts too with large yellow *Pedicularis condensata* and *Pedicularis comosa* as well as the more diminutive *Pedicularis caucasica* and *Pedicularis pontica*. We'll see white *Saxifraga sibirica*, yellow *Draba polytricha*, *Oxytropis albana*, *Gentiana cruciata*, and the beautiful yellow black-dotted Prophet Flower *Arnebia pulchra*; the list seems almost endless. Moving higher we'll find Rock Thrushes, Shorelarks and Alpine Accentors. Rocks host a garden of campanula species, drabas, asters, and succulents, the latter including the bright red *Sedum pilosum*.. Up here fly Peak White and Gavarnie Blue. On north-facing slopes we'll find Yellow Globe Orchid *Traunsteinera sphaerica*, often growing with orange *Papaver lateritium*, blue *Asyneuma amplexicaule* and silvery *Centaurea appendicigera*.

Those wishing to see the regional endemic Caucasian Black Grouse should join us on an early morning trip into this habitat when we also have a fifty-fifty chance of seeing Brown Bear!

Below the treeline we'll find fine temperate rainforest (Euxine forest) typical of the eastern end of the Black Sea. These forests and associated meadows are rich in both endemic species and in beautiful blooms, many of which will be familiar to gardeners. There is a fabulous range of campanulas, labiates, vetches and geraniums, the latter including the intensely beautiful black-centred flowers of *Geranium psilostemon*. Scotch Arguses and fritillaries fly above the strange *Rhyncocorys elephas* whilst in woods we'll encounter *Epigaea gaultherioides* as Green Warblers sing above us. Crimson-winged Finches and Chough mark our progress as we move above the trees and enjoy turf littered with bright golden *Crocus scharojonii*, blue *Gentiana pyrenaica* and pink *Scutellaria pontica*. The amazing purple-black flowers of *Pedicularis atropurpurea* almost disappear amidst locks of silvery-white hairs.

## Day 6

### The Çoruh Valley to Barhal

The Coruh River marks the boundary between arid Anatolia and the more temperate Pontic Alps. We journey along its course passing through an endlessly changing landscape from pine woods to paddyfields and from colourfully eroded badlands to tremendous deep gorges. The gorges are home to all four of Turkey's vultures so we'll be able to add Egyptian Vulture, Black Vulture and Griffon Vulture to the Lammergeier we've probably already seen on the Ovit Pass! Pretty pink *Cynanchum acutum* scrambles over tamarisk and myricaria along the river's banks where we'll find the lovely *Epallage fatime*, a damselfly that looks like a dragonfly! Paddyfields host Banded Demoiselles, *Aeshna affinis* and abundant darters and orthetrum. Anywhere wet along here attracts butterflies - sometimes

in huge numbers. Clouds of blues can include twenty or more species in one spot with a variety of 'anomalous' blue types often common along with Zephyr and Loew's Blues. The pretty orange *Chazara bishoffi* often attends along with a variety of graylings and marbled whites. Camberwell Beauties, the lovely *Thaleropsis ionia* and many fritillaries including *Melitaea interrupta*, make up an intoxicating mix of butterflies. Amongst several Burnet moths are *Zygaena lonicerae* and the 'golden' *Zygaena loti*. Rollers and Bee-eaters hunt from roadside wires and Marsh Warblers, Black-eared Wheatears and Semi-collared Flycatchers are typical birds of this area. We'll find the unusual deep pink *Pelargonium endlicherianum* along roadsides, the only member of its genus in Turkey.

### **Days 7 - 9**

#### **Barhal, Yaylarlar, and the Kaçkar National Park**

Barhal is a delightful place. The village sits deep in the valleys that descend from the highest peaks of the Kaçkar range. Each house has a large garden full of walnuts, cherries, peaches and other fruit trees, indeed, a little later in the year, when *Colchicum speciosum*'s pink goblets abound and the trees are heavy with fruit, the villages find it hard keeping the Brown Bears off their bounty! Now though Barhal basks in summer sunshine and its shady gardens and streams offer instead a wonderful flora and incredible variety of butterflies. Damp tracks between Barhal and Yaylarlar attract abundant mud-puddling butterflies. Shimmering bright orange Fiery Coppers are prominent, and we'll find Large Tortoiseshell, Hungarian Sailor, Little Tiger Blue, Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Cleopatra, Amanda's Blue, *Polyommatus aedon*, False Grayling and a local speciality, *Chazara bischoffi*, a large Grayling with pinky-orange markings. There are many rare flowers found around Barhal including the beautiful *Campanula seraglio* and delicate *Onobrychis lazistanica*. The striking *Centaurea carduiformis* and the delicate campion *Silene spergulifolia* are both common on the south-facing slopes by the village. The range of grasshoppers and crickets in this area is extraordinary, just some we may encounter are the Saddle-back Bush Cricket, Large Speckled Bush Cricket, Wart Biter, Large Sword-tailed Bush Cricket and the impressive Large Conehead.

Around Yaylarlar the late afternoon sun will see all sorts of butterflies mud-puddling at one of the richest sites in Turkey. Amongst hordes of blues will be Chelmos and Damon Blues, Silver-studded Blues, Amanda's Blues and a couple of real beauties; the large Meleager's Blue with scalloped hindwings, and the very bright Pontic Blue. There are a large number of 'anomalous blue species' found here, telling them apart is a taxing business!

### **Days 10 - 12**

#### **Sahara National Park and the Yalnizcam Mountains**

Traditionally, 'east meets west' at the Bosphorus, though to us the continental divide seems more properly positioned on the Cam Pass. Hamlets of steep-roofed houses, testament to the snowy winters, give a Swiss feel to wonderful subalpine rolling meadows interspersed with fir woods. East of the pass we're confronted by a radically different landscape. Vast montane grasslands stretch before us to a

horizon dominated by rounded mountaintops ten thousand feet above sea level. A scene redolent of Central Asia. In a flat-bottomed valley at the foot of the Cam Pass Ardahan's farmers will already be sharpening their scythes in preparation for the hay harvest. These grasslands not only provide hay for herds that have to endure the six-month winter but also a peerless show of fabulous flowers. Royal blue wands of *Delphinium flexuosum* and the diminutive *Delphinium schmalhauseni* mix with huge verbascums and three wonderful monkshoods, yellow *Aconitum anthora*, blue *Aconitum nasutum* and creamy-pink *Aconitum orientale*. Great red goblets of *Papaver orientale* decorate roadsides amid colourful swathes of large blue *Scabiosa caucasica* and the lovely pink and silver *Centaurea pulcherrima*. Large yellow *Centaurea macrocephala* and blue and purple *Centaurea nigrifimbria* are two particularly fine knapweeds. The metre tall silver 'sea holly' *Eryngium giganteum* makes a fine photographic subject and also provides great background for Scarce Coppers and Twin-spot Fritillaries! A feature of the montane steppe here are colonies of Large, Alcon and Dusky Large Blues, the latter being rather common. Elegant blue *Eryngium billardieiri* is a lovely sight and so too the massed displays of pink *Lathyrus tuberosus* and red *Lathyrus rotundifolius*. If all these seem rather too coarse for your taste then smaller gems include mats of white flowered *Campanula crispa* emerging from rocky crevices and blue-green *Gentiana septemfida* and white *Gentiana gelida*. Back on the West side are gorgeous meadows where the large brown-marked yellow flowers of *Lilium kesselringianum* bloom with *Dactylorhiza iberica*. Under shadey woods we'll find a rich saprophytic flora with abundant Yellow Birdsnest flowering with Creeping Lady's Tresses and maybe the first of the late summer's Ghost Orchids though we'll probably be a week or so early for the latter. The latter are capricious flowerers however this is the best time to see them here, and as long as there has been some moisture before our visit we've a good chance of seeing many plants. In wetlands near Ardahan are Common Cranes, Citrine Wagtails, Moustached Warblers and Red-necked Grebes. Marsh Harriers quarter sedge beds where Hobbies feed on abundant odonata. Black Darters are common and so too Damselflies such as Scarce Emerald, White-legged and Azure. Four-spotted Chasers patrol the margins along with the prettily marked Large White-faced Darter. Nearby, relict Scots Pine woodlands hold a dense breeding population of birds of prey and we'll see Lesser Spotted Eagles, Booted Eagles, Long-legged Buzzards, Imperial Eagles and back up on the hilltops Lammergeier, Black Vulture and, hopefully, Saker.

## **Day 13**

### **Ani**

An hour east of Kars is the ruined and uninhabited medieval city of Ani. Known in its heyday, when its power and importance rivalled that of contemporary Constantinople and Baghdad, as the 'City of 1001 Churches', Ani stood at the juncture of several important trade routes and had a population approaching 200,000. The grandiose design of some of the buildings and the extent of the ruins are indicative of just how important the place was, and wandering the site now is a rather surreal experience given the vast expanse of unpopulated montane steppe that that spreads in all directions. There is no-one around, no-one has lived here for three centuries. Indeed it is Ani's spectacular setting that will impress as

much as anything. Two of its three sides are bordered by deep canyons, the eastern side cut by the Akhurian River, a branch of the great Arax River, and the border with Armenia. Both Finsch's and Pied Wheatears are found along its rims and Isabelline Wheatears in the open country to the west. Ani was built from local volcanic basalt which is easily carved. The stonework in the cathedral features basalt of a variety of colours from rose-red to yellow and black. Ani's best-preserved structure is the Church of St Gregory of Tigran Honents, which has stone carvings of real and imaginary animals on the exterior and inside are beautiful frescoes. We'll explore some lakes in the area, rich in waterbirds such as Dalmatian Pelicans, Black-necked Grebes, White-headed Duck, marsh terns and Ruddy Shelduck. Marsh and Montagu's Harriers are exceptionally common.

## **Day 14**

### **Depart from Kars & return to UK**

We've a lunchtime departure from Kars Airport.

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