

Flowers of Galilee & the Negev

A Greentours Tour Report

10th – 19th March 2019

Led by Oron Peri & Phil Benstead

Day 1 - Sunday, March 10th – Arrival

Members of the group arrived on different flights during the afternoon and evening and were taken to the hotel in Tel – Aviv.

Day 2 – Monday, March 11th - Coastal Israel & Mt. Carmel

We all met at breakfast in the hotel and after a short conversation and giving the program of the day we have left Tel-Aviv going north. Since this year was exceptionally cold and rainy Oron decided to try and find *Iris atropurpurea*. This species is the first *Oncocyclus* *Iris* to bloom, as early as January – February. We have reached the *Iris atropurpurea* natural reserve in Poleg, this reserve have been declared as such after a long battle led by the Greens and the Society for protection of Nature in Israel, it ended in the Israeli supreme court as the land was designated to become a luxury resident area due to its position near the coast.

It was not long till we have seen the last 20 flowers or so, beautiful brown/purple, large, shiny flowers. Tulips where gone already but there where plenty of the endemic *Allium tel-avivense*, tall *Scilla hyacinthoides* and quite a few Palestinian sunbirds attracted to the highly scented *Retama raetam* of which on one of the shrubs Oron found a juvenile Mediterranean Chameleon.

We headed north toward Mt. Carmel to visit Dor Natural Reserve, which is a coastal area situated west of Mt. Carmel and has a rich flora and fauna. Once again due to the unusual rainfall entire fields became large swamps and as we parked the bus we could already see a large numbers of resident and migrating birds such as Pelicans, Spoonbills, Lapwings, Marsh Harrier and many more. We walked southward on the rocky beach that was just carpeted with flowers, *Anthemis leucanthemifolia*, the stunning blue *Alkanna tinctoria*, the yellowish colored *Allium erdelii*, some orchids and the highlight, thousands of *Tulipa agenensis sharonensis* growing in the rocks only few meters from the water line. After spending a couple of hours at this site we continued our way north stopping for lunch before going on to Mt. Carmel. This mountain is covered by Mediterranean scrub rich in Orchids and bulbous plants. We have stopped for an afternoon walk in the reserve area to see the only location of *Orchis punctulata* on

this mountain, some *Tulipa agenesis*, *Ranunculus asiaticus*, *Anemone coronaria* etc. *Scilla cilicica* of which this area is the southernmost distribution, was already in fruit.

From there we had an hour drive through the Jezreel Valley toward our hotel in Kibbutz Nir-David, situated at the edge of the Jordan Valley under Mt. Gilboa

Day 3 – Tuesday, March 12th – Mt. Gilboa, Nazareth to Mt. Hermon

Ten minutes walk to the dining room of the hotel which is situated in the center of the kibbutz became 25 minutes as many birds such as White-throated Kingfishers, Rose-ringed Parakeets, noisy Spectacled Bulbuls and others were all over the place enjoying the subtropical weather and lush gardens. We sat near the wide river that crosses the Kibbutz. Enormous Silver Carp, St. Peter's Fish, and catfish came very close to us asking to be fed.

After having a delicious breakfast we headed up to Mt. Gilboa which actually is a small chain of mountains consists of limestone with Terra – Rossa soil, home to an incredible number of annuals.

Very soon, Oron noticed on the side of the road a very large clump with more than 30 flowers of *Iris haynei* with other smaller clumps near it. On a nearby Ephedra a pair of Palestinian Sunbirds was feeding young in a hanging woven nest. Farther up Oron noticed a Stone Curlew in a field, we have stopped the bus to find that one was on the ground just next us and that the large, red flowered *Adonis palaestina* was abundant there.

We left Mt. Gilboa toward Nazareth where we had lunch in a local restaurant than headed to a nearby natural reserve where *Iris bismarckiana*, one of the most beautiful iris species is growing. This year was very good for this species and we have found many in flower and many were still in bud. Many tulips and Anemone were in bloom as well as the orange color form of *Asphodeline lutea*.

It was early afternoon and we still had 90 minutes drive to Mt. Hermon where we would spend the next 3 nights. Not far from the hotel we made a short stop for a nice colony of *Fritillaria persica*, the green form that used to be called *Fritillaria libanotica*.

Day 4 – Wednesday, March 13th – Mt. Hermon, Golan Heights, Lake of Galilee

The night was very busy around the hotel as we could hear from very short distance many Golden Jackals calling, a Wolf, and a Scops Owl, and these were heard each evening on the following nights and Golden Jackals were seen as well as they come in search of food in the hotel grounds.

After breakfast we headed to the mountain, snow has melted late this year and still was abundant at higher elevation. We have spent all morning on the mountain up to about 1800m of elevation.

In between the rocks and in the shade of the Oak trees we have found many beautifully scented *Hyacinthus orientalis*, *Muscari inconstictum*, few *Cyclamen coum* still in bloom, and a few clumps of *Iris histrio*. *Fritillaria hermonis* was in good bud but not seen yet in bloom.

We then headed toward the Golan Heights crossing a deep valley and the habitat changed notably from white /grey limestone with red Terra-Rosa soils to Volcanic rocks with black soil on the Golan.

First a short stop in a little bog area where the only population of *Dactylorhiza romana* exists in Israel and that being less than 20 individuals. *Romulea ramiflora* was growing next to it and a couple more Orchids.

Lunch was in the Druze village of Mas'ade, where we had the best Falafel in the region as well as Labane cheese and Humus

We have spent the rest of the day on the Golan Heights where another extremely rare and endangered species, *Iris hermona* grows. Oron led the group to the only clump that was already in flower as this species was mostly still in bud.

Toward the south of the Golan we stopped at the Nov natural reserve where we saw the last flowering clumps of yellow flowering *Iris grant-dufii*, another rarity that grows in damp conditions. Another attraction at this site is a wonderful color form of *Anemone coronaria*, this vivid magenta color form is found only on this site.

We went down from the Golan Heights to the Lake of Galilee (Kineret) and waited there to see the most beautiful sun set.

Day 5 - Thursday, March 14th – Upper Galilee

We left the hotel early this morning, heading to the upper Galilee region descending Mt. Herrmon to the Hula Valley famous for the migrating birds that cross it twice a year; some would stay like the thirty thousand Cranes that winter

there. Temperatures start to rise, enough for us to see thousands of White storks starting to climb up in circles then continue on their way north.

First stop was in a small area where some ancient *Pistacia atlantica* trees have survived since Ottoman times, some are estimated around 500 years old. In the vicinity we found some orchids in bloom and few *Aristolochia bottae* in full bloom.

Our next stop was in the Upper Galilee near Kfar – Vradim where we have seen the very rare *Anacamptis israelitica* and some of the hybrids between it and *Anacamptis papilionacea* on site there were some *Cyclamen persicum* still in flower together with *Romulea bulbucodium* and the large, star shaped *Gagea commutata*. Lunch was in a nearby restaurant then we continued to Mount Meron, the highest mountain in that area reaching 1200m. Due to the high precipitations the mountain is covered with lush Mediterranean scrub and many species of orchids including the lovely *Orchis galiaeea* of which we saw a few color forms. It was time to head back north to Mt. Hermon.

Day 6 – Friday, March 15th – Jordan Valley & Dead Sea

A slightly early wake up in order to get ready for the long drive to the southern part of Israel. We went down for the last time from Mt. Hermon, crossing the Hula Valley and Lake of Galilee to enter the Jordan Valley on the way south to the Dead Sea. Lake of Galilee is situated 219m under sea-level where at the end of the day we would reach minus 430m on the coast of the Dead Sea.

Habitat and temperatures changed rapidly into desert conditions. Once more due to the unusual rainy season large parts of the valley were CARPETED! with flowers of every color the vast majority are annuals that appear for a short periods of time, probably the showiest were the red carpets made of hundreds of thousands of *Ranunculus asiaticus*, what was meant to be a ten minute stop lasted much more than an hour as people just wandered the entire area photographing endlessly the unusual sight.

Two more stop were in Mt. Sartaba were a nice selection of *Allium* such as *Allium qasiunense* white-flowered *Allium palaestinum* and tall, showy *Allium aschersonianum*, while just by the road few *Androcymbium palaestinum* and *Muscari inconstictum* were in perfect condition.

Near Jericho was the last stop for the rare, only blue flowering *Allium* in the region, *Allium ascalonicum* (syn. *Allium hierchontinum*)

By the late afternoon we reached our hotel on the coast of the Dead Sea, members of the group had still time to experience a bath in the sea before dinner.

Day 7 – Saturday, March 16th – Masada to Mitspe Ramon

Some members of the group started the day with early bath in the Dead Sea before breakfast.

Our first stop for the day was Masada, the famous mountain where King Herodes built his palace on its north side. After a short film that tells the story of the mountain we took the cable car up. Even before entering the site, Tristram's Grackles were there waiting to be fed, they will come to eat from your hand if you offer a piece of bread. Fan-tailed Ravens can be seen there regularly as well. We have spent the entire morning there before we have continued to the Negev Desert.

Climbing the road, Oron has noticed the very showy *Cistanche tubolosa*, large parasitic plant which parasitizes mainly *Atriplex*. There were many of it around there. We then stopped in Mamshit sands where Oron found a nice clump of as well as the rare, endemic *Allium negevense*. After a light lunch in the nearby town of Dimona just before getting to Mitspe Ramon, we stopped in a rocky area where the stunning, red *Tulipa aff. systola* flowered and few *Allium rothii* were just starting to show their color.

The town situated above the Ramon Crater, an amazing phenomenon of nature which we visited before going to our hotel not before we have seen a few female Ibex on the edge of the crater.

Day 8 – Sunday, March 17th – Upper Negev, Mt. Ramon and *Iris hieruchamensis* Natural Reserve

The higher part of the Negev desert with its beautiful mountains was the only region where winter hasn't left any sign, almost no rain this year therefore the entire area was very dry; still, many of the plants have adapted to grow in these conditions. On the roadsides many *Helianthemum vesicarium* flowering in different colours varying from pure white to the deepest magenta. In between the rocks there were a few *Bellevalia eigii* and *Bellevalia desertorum* in flower and later on a few *Tulipa biflora* were found in bloom. This species flowers by the thousands in a good year. After lunch we headed NE to the *Iris hieruchamensis* natural reserve where luckily there were many in flower despite the very dry conditions, also a few *Ixiolirion tataricum* and *Leopoldia longipes* were in flower as well mainly in the shade of *Retama raetam* shrubs. A brown Hare has been seen running away.

Day 9 – Monday, March 18th-, Western Negev to the Judean Mountains

We had left the upper Negev heading NW to the western Negev, where the habitat changes again, now flatter with vast sandy areas, home again to a whole range of new plants for us. Despite the dry season we were able to find two

populations of a real stunner; pink/purple *Iris mariae* and quite a few *Eminium spiculatum*, a little monster, a member of the *Araceae* family in bloom.

Our next and last stop before leaving the Negev were hills north of the city of Beer–Sheva where again we were lucky to find the black *Iris atrofusca* in flower, some *Eremostachys laciniata*, and *Gagea rigida*.

It was time to head north, toward the Judean Mountains and Jerusalem, entering the Mediterranean area again. The green mountains appeared soon and we had time for another stop in Hamasrek Natural Reserve, once famous for its ancient *Pinus halepensis* tree that unfortunately were burnt completely some years ago. Still the forest recovers fast and is rich in orchids and other Mediterranean scrub species such as *Cistus salvifolius*, and *Salvia fruticosa* and many more. A fantastic bank of *Cyclamen persicum* and a large population of *Ophrys galilea* were seen. We walked there almost 'til sunset before heading to our comfortable hotel situated just 20 minutes from there.

Day 10 – Tuesday, March 19th – Jerusalem view, Jerusalem Botanical Garden

A few members of the group had an early flight but for the others we had time until the early afternoon. Oron had made changes in the plan and so we went to visit the Jerusalem botanic garden where parts of it like the South African and Australian sections were in full bloom. We were taken behind the scenes to the propagation area and saw the area where some of the endangered plants of Israel are grown, a real treat.

After lunch in the Garden's restaurant we have headed to Armon Hanaziv promenade to see the view of Jerusalem's old city. Then it was time to head to the airport.