

# Tajikistan

*& Uzbekistan*

## A Reconnaissance Report

6<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> April 2011

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Başak and I were well advanced with our book project 'The Flowers of the Silk Road & Shangri-La', but there was a gaping hole in the photo content – the glamorous juno irises of Central Asia and many of the other spring beauties that grow with them, so I convinced myself I had to visit to two main centres of their distribution Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – two of the mysterious 'stans' – to put this right. And what a wonderful flower trip it proved to be...

I set off from Ankara – having just completed a reccy of NW Turkey (and what a bulb feast that was) and flew to Istanbul and then onto Dushanbe the capital of Tajikistan...

### Day 1 Turkey to Tajikistan and Romit

After arriving at the ungodly hour of 3.30am I emerged into the cool Dushanbe night, met my guides and drove across town to their home/office for coffee and then a couple of hours kip. We drove out at 9.30 into the hills east of the capital towards the Romit Reserve and not long after leaving town I picked out the first lovely juno iris of the trip *Iris vicaria* a subtle combination of white with lilac markings (on some) and egg-yolk yellow. They were growing on a rather steep slope at the top of which were also a few striking deep purple *Bellevalia atrovioacea*. I found some easier irises to photograph and then we carried on until we came across a good number of *Fritillaria bucharica* growing with lots of *Anemone tschernjaewi*, *Scilla puschkinioides* and also a stunning cluster of extra-large flowered *Corydalis popovii*, with long slender pink spurs and deepest purple outer perianths. A cracking view of a Wallcreeper followed, feeding at length on a soil bank, occasionally flying a way and revealing its dazzling pink wing colour.

We arrived rather late for lunch in a small village and showed our host pictures of the flowers we were after, in particular *Fritillaria eduardii*, and they all recognised the flower and offered to take us to it. There were different populations around and the best one, it turned out, was on the other side of the river accessed by a rather fun zip line. Under the trees were masses of *Corydalis popovii* (although much smaller flowered than those I'd seen earlier) and quite a few tall handsome *Fritillaria eduardii* as promised although it has to be said they do look rather similar to *Fritillaria imperialis*! There was a fine violet scattered about too before we zipped back across the river and then drove further up the road to another possible location. The frits here were far from ready, but we did see a number of *Crocus korolkovii* and plenty of lovely *Iris*

*rosenbachiana* growing on steep turf and our guides promised to show us plenty around the village the next day.

## Day 2 Romit to Takob

And they certainly did with many superb forms, mainly white with purple standards but some much pinker too. There were some very dense groups with twenty or more flowers crowded together, and all in all, hundreds of flowers. I wanted to get some mountain photos so I climbed up to the ridge above the village, although the going was steep and the altitude was making me puff a bit, but I reached the telephone mast from where there were commanding three-sixty degree views of the mountains and deep dry valleys with rivers in full spate. *Corydalis ledebouriana* was at the top too and a Himalayan Griffon passed overhead. The descent was easy enough and there were more irises to be had before saying our goodbyes to the village headman and driving back down towards Romit.

We asked about *Fritillaria eduardii* at the entrance to the Romit Nature Reserve, but they reliably informed us their population was not in flower yet. However, not far beyond we asked a local by the side of the road and he said straight away yes there were some near his village just a few hundred metres away so he jumped in and then took us above the village. From here we walked to where we could see some fine flowering clumps on a rock ledge above. Attempts to reach them proved unsuccessful, but there were still a quite a few good plants scattered about the shrubberies and a good group higher up as well as some magnificent clumps of the gorgeous *Corydalis popovii*. I scanned the hillside and found what looked like a superb big group high above on some rocks. There was no real path in places so we had to battle through the scrub as Black-throated Thrushes flew about. But reach them we did and they were worth every effort to reach a fine stand in great nick. Lunch was by the stream and then we returned to Dushanbe well satisfied.

## Day 3 Varsob Gorge part one and Nurek

Rather rain affected day today but nonetheless I managed to locate some big populations of *Crocus korokovii*, non-flowering cushions of a *Dionysia*, saw another superb Wallcreeper and then spent time among thousands of *Iris bucharica* that covered the slopes on the valley, trailing from the foot of the slope to the top, lining the gullies with gold, a magnificent show. Mixed among the irises across the grassier slopes were also hundreds of *Anemone petiolulosa* and there were patches of *Iris vicaria* here and there too.

After lunch in Dushanbe we headed out towards the large dam lake at Nurek (it supplies the capital's power) seeing little at first but after climbing into foothills there were *Anemone tschernjaewii*, then more good numbers of *Iris bucharica* and a few *Anemone bucharica* mixed in. Climbing up to the viewpoint we passed by hillsides coloured purple-pink with wild *Cercis siliquastrum* trees, in places mixed in with an impressive bulky yellow-green fennel, quite a combination of colours.

## Day 4 Nurek to Karatag

Plenty of blue was in the sky this morning as we first retraced our steps towards Shavshar following a small track to where there was a fine display of *Cercis siliquastrum* and the huge fennel in flower together in much better light than yesterday afternoon. *Iris bucharica* was also quite numerous, but this was nothing on what was to come later on. In the meantime we once again climbed up into the foothills stopping for good groups of brilliant scarlet, cut leaved *Anemone bucharica* and then some *Iris bucharica*, but we really shouldn't have bothered with the latter as we'd find out. There was a tremendous wall of snowy peaks stretching across the skyline as we topped the pass and began to descend towards Dushanbe, stopping for a superb display of *Anemone tschernjaewii* growing under some elms, with lovely drifts of pinkish centred white flowers scattered throughout.

After a tasty lunch in the city we drove on to Karatag (Black Mountain) and began to climb seeing a fine *Astragalus sp* on the way before we hit an iris wonderland or should I say overload. As we progressed we could see the entire valley for miles was peppered with hundreds of thousands of *Iris bucharica* with impressive dense stands and drifts, quite unbelievable numbers – no word of a lie there were millions! The slopes covered in *Anemone petiolulosa* almost went unnoticed along with tufts of *Fritillaria bucharica*. It was all about irises and although there wasn't much else to see the cumulative display was something else.

## Day 5      Varsob Gorge part two and Iskender Kul

An early start was needed for our day trip to Iskender Kul, a large alpine lake north of Dushanbe, which involved us crossing the high Ansob Pass. Progress was halted for a colony of *Tulipa praestans* that quickly opened once the sun hit the valley floor. However, as we climbed the weather worsened and the large crocus colony we saw were all wrapped up tight. No matter the sun may come out later we thought so for now we pushed on over the pass and through some sleety rain and descended into a dry sunny valley as a Lammergeier cruised across the hillsides really quite close. The scenery was magnificent with multicoloured hills and amazing rock strata, the slopes plunging steeply, and the ragged peaks capped by snow. Driving through a small village the apricot blossom was at its peak and looked wonderful against the mountain backdrop and the rows of poplars so typical of Central Asia. An impressive colourful valley with amazing eroded rock formations led the way to Iskender Kul and high lake ringed by snowy peaks. It was a great spot for a picnic but it was devoid of flowers although I did see a Rosefinch and a Thrush before we left.

The weather had improved no end and as we rose up towards the pass again the skies were clearing fast and there were great views of the outrageous terrain. Even better lay beyond the long tunnel where we exited into a snowy wonderland with multiple peaks and ridges all swathed in the white stuff. It was tremendous high mountain scenery and there was many a stop as we descended but fortunately we didn't delay too long as the highlight of the day lay a short way ahead. Rounding a bend there was a distinct band of gold ahead and it was a simply stunning dense carpet of thousands of golden-yellow *Crocus korolkovii* that stretched across an area of flat turf with the snowy peaks as a backdrop, a magical scene to round off the flowers in Tajikistan.

Tomorrow I was crossing the border.

## Day 6 To Shakhrisabz

The magnificent Zerashan Mountains were clear and cloud free, a long white spine that ran alongside the road as I drove the hour to the border with Uzbekistan. Border formalities were slow with a total of six checks between the countries and thankfully there were few people, but even so it still took an hour and a half! Once across I met my new driver Norbek and we sped off towards Shakhrisabz, first driving through flat agricultural lands and then cutting inland and up into amazing convoluted multicoloured, multi-strata hills tilted at improbable angles, with sloping flat-topped snowy crests in the distance. However, it was completely flower free, although Egyptian Vultures were common enough and there was a pale morph Booted Eagle too.

After lunch in a small town higher in the hills we drove on but hadn't gone far from the town when the red glow of tulips brought us to a halt. The rough ground to our left had a decent population of *Tulipa micheliana*, with red-striped leaves and flowers with a large triangular gold-edged black blotch at the base of each tepal and black anthers. An unknown junco was in seed. Just past another checkpoint I checked out a promising looking gulley with areas of scree and found the small brilliant red *Tulipa montana* with small yellow anthers. They were scattered about the scree and rocks with many more on the higher slopes. This proved to be the last of the flowers for the day as the bare hills were showing no colour at all, and we drove the remaining two hours to Shakhrisabz arriving in time for me to take a look at the blue-domed mosque there.

It had been a lengthy transfer enforced by the recent closing of the border near Penjikent in Tajikistan, which will hopefully re-open and leave an alternative option although both take while.

## Day 7 Amankutan Valley

What a superb floral day! We left Shakhrisabz at eight and were climbing up to the Amankutan Pass by nine and seeing the first impressive pale lilac *Iris magnifica* almost straight away, growing among large granite boulders and on loose slopes with a bulky fennel and flowering *Amygdalus* bushes. Here and there were a few bright red *Tulipa fosterana*, but not many and judging by the many bunches of tulips waved at us for sale by the roadside this explains why! Quite how long these flowers will withstand this abuse is anyone's guess, not long I suspect. There were also big plants of hairy yellow flowered *Astragalus seversovii* as I climbed back up to the road.

There was still one more 'big' iris I needed and I didn't have to wait long to find it as just a short distance further up near the pass was a colony of the stunning *Iris warleyensis*, real beauties, growing on loose granite sand and among the boulders in precarious positions. Needless to say I spent some time here.

Afterwards we climbed a bit higher and then took a side track towards the few remaining snow patches. *Primula fedtschenkoii* was first up closely followed by *Corydalis maracandica* one of

two absolutely lovely species of this genus the other allegedly is *Corydalis ledebouriana* (?) but I struggle to accept this, nonetheless its colouration was remarkable with cherry-red lower half the lip edged with gold and a broad virtually erect pink spur. Tiny *Gagea gageoides* was abundant and on another bank the snow had recently left was a colony of purple-striped white *Colchicum kesselringii* and *Anemone petiolulosa*. *Tulipa turkestanica* was common alongside the road but across on the ground around the snow were hundreds more *Corydalis* sp, *Crocus korolkovii* and a few *Eranthis longistipitatus*, although the watching Hoopoe was unimpressed by my photography. All in all it was a wonderful area and a pity to leave it but I had to continue onto Samarkand, arriving in good time to relax and await my dose of culture tomorrow.

## Day 8 Samarkand

Under a hazy sky I toured the wonderful sights of Samarkand with my guide seeing the stunning blue domed mosques, blue tiled mausoleums, more blue domed mosques, amazingly decorated interiors (much of it made with paper mache!) and after lunch at a Turkish café we went to see the remains of Ulugbek's observatory. An interesting cultural break from the botany but it will be back to normal tomorrow with a return to Amankutan to reshoot some of the irises which weren't quite up to scratch.

It rained heavily that evening and I hoped it wouldn't bash the irises too much!

## Day 9 Amankutan and onto Tashkent

I needn't have worried the irises up at the pass were still splendid, although the weather was not with lots of mist and some rain. I spent a good while dodging both to reshoot my iris pictures. Then it was back to Samarkand for a big plate of tasty plov and then a wait at the station for my train to Tashkent. This turned out to be a less than thrilling ride across largely flat countryside with occasional interesting looking shaley hills, making me wish I'd taken the car as they were probably the home of *Iris narbuti*.

## Day 10 Beldersay

We left Tashkent behind and after an hour we were climbing into the hills and stopping soon enough for a fine population of tall bronzy or green belled *Fritillaria severzovii*. Scattered around them were *Solanthus circinnatus*, *Scilla puschkinoides* and *Corydalis ledebouriana* (looking like it should). Continuing up there were a handful of a yellow *Iris tubergeniana* and then as we neared the hotel there was masses of *Gymnospermium albertii*. The latter was to prove one of the most abundant plants of the day.

I dumped my gear and with my guide Vasily we set off up a rather muddy slope and after fifteen minutes of this we found many pretty *Fritillaria stenanthera* in perfect flower and more *Iris tubergenianai* as well as a handsome unknown labiate with dense heads of creamy-pink flowers. We moved through a belt of juniper with lots of *Corydalis ledebouriana* and then reached a flat area with masses of *Gymnospermium* and a tiny *Gagea*. I could see some snow patches to our right around which grew a few *Crocus alatavicus*, but we were to see many more

later on. For now we dropped down to our picnic site as a Siberian Rubythroat flicked around the scrub.

After lunch we moved up a scree slope where there were first a good number of *Tulipa biflora* and then a bit higher some *Tulipa kaufmanniana*, a handsome species with bicoloured red and yellow flowers. Soon enough we were on a ridge with lots of *Tulipa biflora* and walking through a carpet of tiny *Gagea minutiflora* that stretched across the hills mixed among which were at least two other larger species. *Corydalis ledebouriana* was everywhere too with lovely clumps scattered across the turf as well as good clumps of *Scilla puschkinoides* and by the big snow patches were hundreds of *Crocus alatavicus*. Rock Buntings were common up here and we flushed a Chukar as we descended the north-facing slope where we came upon a fantastic population of *Colchicum luteum* with hundreds scattered across the slope all the way down from the top to the bottom, with some fine twins and triplets. What a cracking flower day this turned out to be and the weather had also been good, with no rain and only the odd misty moment and by now (late afternoon) the mountains were revealing themselves fully.

## Day 11      Chimgan Valley and to Tashkent

Today's weather was superb with clear skies for most of the day and a succession of great mountain flowers. We hiked up to a low ridge that was smothered in *Tulipa turkestanica* and from here I could see dazzling mixed populations of *Tulipa tschimganica* on the scree, with red, orange and yellow forms. We descended into a valley with *Tulipa turkestanica* a constant companion and as we did so, the other tulips changed from mixed to red *Tulipa kaufmanniana* and then to areas of pure familiar bicoloured forms. Alongside these were magnificent stands of *Fritillaria severzovii*, many violets and scree full of *Anemone petiolulosa*. Climbing out of the valley onto a north facing slopes there were many *Colchicum luteum* at times mixed with *Crocus alatavicus* and the familiar *Corydalis ledebouriana*, *Gymnospermium albertii* and then the bristly-stamened spires of *Solenanthus circinnatus*. Rufous-naped Tits were buzzing around the junipers as we ate lunch with a fine view down the valley and the deep gorge below.

The rock type changed to limestone as we climbed up a stony path where there were lovely groups of the delicate *Corydalis darvasica* and an unknown yellow cushion-forming brassica. From the ridge there were fine views of the Tien Shan and Chimgan peak and as we descended many more *Tulipa kaufmanniana* and then a smattering of the delicate *Iris kopalkowsianum* hidden among the shrubs. However, it didn't end there as a rather fortuitous wrong turn took us down a steep slope and then across a stony area where there was a lovely colony of *Iris orchoides* to round off the flora nicely. Well almost, there was a good stand of the impressive *Astragalus severzovii* as we drove back towards Tashkent.