

Galanthus of the Black Sea

A tour for the Alpine Garden Society

7th – 15th March 2024

Led by Kurt Vickery with Tolkha Shetekauri in Georgia

Day 1 - Semela monastery and Karadere valley

We opened curtains to a view of a very calm Black Sea bathed in soft sunshine. After breakfast we were soon driving through busy Trabzon before going inland where the sprawl gives way to very steep sided valleys, often covered with Hazelnut groves and millions upon millions of familiar soft-yellow *Primula vulgaris vulgaris* - these would be a constant feature for the rest of our day. After about an hour we neared the monastery but couldn't resist a quick exploratory stop. Here we found *Cyclamen coum* and handsome specimens of *Helleborus*, followed by inconspicuous leaves and fruits of today's main target *Galanthus rizehensis*. We hoped that gaining altitude towards the monastery would result in finding some more actually in flower.

When we arrived we walked towards the entrance through a splendid mature *Picea orientalis* forest with more *Cyclamen coum* dotted here and there and also the attractive Brassica *Pachyphragma grandiflora*. After a hundred yards or so we were delighted to see the *Galanthus* in perfect condition hanging gracefully from a damp moss covered bluff but needing a little effort to reach them. When we'd taken sufficient photographs we made our way to the world heritage site. The group enjoyed an hour or so looking around before gradually making their way back to the minibus, choosing to walk through the car park and a little way into the forest where dozens of smart Chaffinch in their best breeding finery were joined by small groups of beautiful Siskins. We then took a quick look at the mountain road, but overnight snow made it quite hard for the driver who stoically did whatever he could for us. When we could progress no further we got out to admire the wonderful snowy scenery and spent time amongst the abundant *Rhododendron luteum* that would paint the scene in fiery orange-yellow in a couple of months' time. On the way back down we scanned for more Snowdrops and before too long Lynn spotted some that were at a much more accessible height than those we had seen earlier. We chose to walk down the road a little way and eventually found some really nice clumps growing there with magenta *Corydalis caucasica* and yet more *Cyclamen coum*.

We really hit the jackpot a little further down where we found a steep meadow absolutely carpeted in *Primula vulgaris* and *Galanthus rizehensis*, with *Cyclamen coum* and the much rarer and localised *Cyclamen parviflorum ssp subalpinum*. There were wonderful *Corydalis caucasica* and the very first of the season's *Scilla winogradowii*. In about a week the combination of yellow Primrose and blue Scillas would undoubtedly make a stunning combination en masse but for now we could enjoy discrete little groups. We then proceeded eastwards to our second main site of the day, the Karadere valley inland from Arakli. Our main target here was the rare (increasingly so due to over collecting) *Galanthus koenenianus*. Sadly we didn't manage to find it, probably as it was not in flower and therefore highly inconspicuous. We had looked along upstream of Kayaici with light levels rapidly dropping. One last roll of the dice downstream didn't connect us with *G. koenenianus* but we did find large groups of *Galanthus woronowii*, again growing amongst myriad Primroses - a fabulous start to our tour.

Day 2 - Anzer Yayla and Cimil valley

Our hotel was situated in the Cimil valley, but having arrived after dark last night we had no idea of the wonderful forest habitat that surrounded the grounds. After breakfast we decided to explore the meadows and forest on foot from the hotel for an hour. Quite literally outside the front gate we found a bank with hundreds of *Primula vulgaris* in its dark purple-magenta form *ssp sibthorpii* (this colour form predominates around İközdere). Closer inspection revealed some wonderful mats of *Cyclamen coum* and our target 'drop' for the day *Galanthus alpinus var alpinus* and plentiful *Viola alba*. Samson found a single specimen of *Ruscus colchicus* that was just starting to unfurl. We walked further up the valley to very steep, open grassy meadows that in places were again covered in myriad *Primula*. Walking back we noticed several noisy Jays and heard lots of Coal Tits singing from the canopy. Keith saw a Dipper as we crossed the river next to the hotel. After picking up picnic supplies in İközdere we then drove up through the Anzer valley, a magnificent place with ancient *Picea* forest, huge cliff faces and lush vegetation following the course of the river. Higher up there had been overnight snow which made the whole scene absolutely magically beautiful. It did however present potential problems for our driver who took it in his stride and got us to the top without issue. We had hoped to see *Crocus aerius* which we know to occur in great numbers here, but they were well and truly under the deep white blanket. We searched in vain for areas with just a dusting of snow but to no avail. It was lovely and sunny but quite chilly so we were amazed to see a Small Tortoiseshell (*var ichnusa*) just about finding enough warmth to fly and nectar on Coltsfoot. Fatih kindly suggested we try the road up to the Ovit pass instead so it was all the way down again and up probably even higher up towards Ovit dagh - this is pretty much kept open all year round as it's a major road - but the snow was even deeper each side of the road than on Anzer and shrouded in mist. There was no real point in pursuing these high places and so we decided to return to the Cimil valley upstream of the hotel where we had lunch next to the river. The surrounding riverside and forest edges had hundreds of fertile fronds of last season's Shuttlecock Ferns - *Matteuccia struthiopteris*. While lunch was being prepared Samson and Lynne came back from their wanderings and reported seeing a 'Boragey-thing' which turns out to be *Trachystemon orientalis*. After we had eaten we all walked half a mile or so to look in a side valley where we found more of the *Galanthus* and what were now 'all the usual suspects'. Driving a bit further up we stopped at a beautiful waterfall that would surely be a tourist attraction back home but considered two-a-penny in this part of the world. Pressing on further the weather turned to a sleety drizzle and so we decided to return to the hotel for cup of tea before some of us walked downstream to look at more *Galanthus* meadows that we had seen out of the corner of our eyes earlier - so glad we did as their shows were by far the best *Galanthus* clumps we had seen, in places with even better *Cyclamen* than this morning if that was possible! - just breathtaking and a fantastic way to end our day.

Day 3 - Mençuna waterfall

We drove an hour or so to the Mençuna waterfall that lies a few kilometres up a side valley above the famous double bridges at Çifte Köprüsü. Arriving at the site we started quite a stiff half mile trek up steep undulating path towards the waterfall, finding an array of lovely ferns as we went including the splendid *Pteris vittata* in abundance and a smattering of *Asplenium onopteris*, *Polystichum braunii* and *Dryopteris aemula*. The forest here is predominantly of Oriental Beech (*Fagus orientalis*) and Sweet Chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) with many enormous specimens lining the path. An understory of familiar *Prunus laurocerasus* and *Rhododendron ponticum* are joined by the much rarer *Rhododendron ungerii*. Arriving at the waterfall our target *Galanthus woronowii* became immediately obvious but was on a large vertical rock in the middle of the powerful force and completely out of reach - it looked great - especially through binoculars - snuggled in a beautiful blanket of *Hedera colchica*. However walking a few paces more we found some really nice groups directly to the left of the impressive falls. They were accessible, albeit with difficulty, as the boulders between which they were growing were very slippery in the now drizzling rain. As an aside, the *Galanthus* here are thought by some to differ in some way - there is even speculation that they may be a hybrid between *G. woronowii* and *G. rizehensis*. I couldn't see anything strikingly different about them and

think at best we may be looking at a little bit of natural variation. Despite the rain we managed to get great pictures of the *Galanthus* with its spectacular natural backdrop. Returning downstream, we stopped for our picnic at the two bridges at Çifte Köprüsü that arc in a perfect semi-circle at the confluence of river and stream. Built in the 18th century, they have recently been restored to their former glory and really are rather special. While the food was being prepared people wandered off to take pictures of the bridges and do a bit of botany at the same time. There were lots of *Dentaria quinquefolia* in good flower as well as soft-yellow flowered *Symphytum caucasicum* and really showy examples of *Scrophularia chrysantha*. As usual Samson went much further than everybody else deep into the nearby woods and came back brandishing a photo of *Brunnera macrophyllum*, a species that had thus far eluded us. Unfortunately we didn't have time to retrace his steps. After a most enjoyable lunch overlooking the bridges that we had all to ourselves, we headed over the mountains at their low point, the Cankurtaran Pass, rising just 690m above sea level. The pass itself was shrouded in dense mist and rather cold so we didn't linger but carried on to a fascinating site that Andy Byfield found on a previous trip, when he had to come up with an emergency plan B after rock falls had closed a road that he was trying to get up. It was a charming little dilapidated cemetery at a village called Demirciler. A wonderful place, it is home to an intriguing *Galanthus* population. Sadly they were all in early fruit when we got there but the very dark and narrow leaves were like nothing else we had seen. They are very similar to *Galanthus kemulariae* (a very very rare and restricted species from a long way away near Zedazeni, a few miles outside of Tbilisi in Georgia and not really like anything else Turkish). Given that they only seem to occur in the graveyard, it seems pretty reasonable to assume that they had been planted there but we will probably never know. Apart from the Snowdrop the flowers around and about were just beautiful with some of the best *Anemone caucasica* we had seen and abundant *Primula vulgaris* ssp *sibthorpii* in its much paler and variable morph - in fact the variation in pinky-lilac seemed endless. Other plants included some fine forms of *Helleborus caucasicus*, *Cyclamen coum* and just a very few *Scilla monanthos* with many more to follow in the coming days. With just a little time left our guide Fatih suggested we might like to see an interesting wooden bridge in the next town. Being a bunch of botanists the bridge was 'done' pretty quickly and a small weedy patch was of much more interest. In fact we found quite a few firsts for the trip including *Muscari* that we assumed must be *neglectum*, *Mercurialis annuus*, *Vicia grandiflora* and *Myosotis sylvestris* before heading off back to the hotel.

Day 4 - Chalaati

We said goodbyes to our lovely guide Fatih as we were dropped us off at the border with Georgia. At busy times it can be a real ordeal getting through but we pretty much sailed through customs to find a beaming Tolkha waiting for us at the other side. After picking up some supplies for the picnic and the first half decent coffee in what seemed an aeon we were on our way towards Batumi. Surprisingly our first stop was within ten minutes of hitting the road proper. In a deep, damp, ferny gully we got our first Georgian Snowdrops, that is technically speaking, as although there were hundreds of *Galanthus woronowii* they were all either blind or in well advanced fruit but they were only a few meters above sea level here. We travelled a few miles more before turning up the Coruh valley, firstly following the meandering river at its widest before the valley sides became steeper and steeper - there was a real feel of spring about it with the emerging leaves on the trees in that indescribably beautiful shade of green that just lifts the spirits after winter. Many a Brimstone and OrangeTip reinforced that feeling. A further fifteen miles or so more and the roads became mountain tracks. We were here for *Galanthus krasnovii* more in hope than expectation because we had been well and truly warned by previous parties to expect deep snow at this time of year. Well, the *Galanthus* Gods must have been looking down on us, as not only was the snow almost completely gone except for the highest peaks, but on arriving at the site there were some absolutely perfect clumps right by the roadside. We were so happy for so many reasons but particularly for Beryce as she was nursing

a knee that was about to be replaced and the 1 in 3 slope above them would have been quite an ask! We could see a few more clumps a bit higher and even more higher up than that. People gathered around the best ones to take photographs while Samson, Tolkha and Kurt ventured up to see what they could find. The turf was full of early flowers but especially the rich magenta *Corydalis caucasica*, with a few leucistic forms here and there, and the dainty dark-centred *Potentilla macrantha*. We reconvened for the picnic by the roadside where Samson showed a photograph on his phone of a huge mass of *Galanthus* a bit further along the slope but really quite high up. This led to an irresistible urge for Kurt and Lynn to see them and so they followed the annoyingly fit Samson back up to investigate. This was a pretty lung-bursting labour but eventually we arrived to see a colony of Snowdrops about a couple of acres in extent. We had just assumed that they would be *G. krasnovii* but in fact they were *G. woronowii* in perfect flower at this altitude - it seemed remarkable that two species could grow almost side by side with no crossover. Lynn and Kurt decided to go back down rather than stay too long - Samson and Tolkha however took their young legs much higher above the scattered *G. krasnovii* and found a similar scene of *G. krasnovii* to the *G. woronowii* but it just wasn't feasible to drag everybody else up in the time we had left. Those that stayed down decided to walk the mile or so to the waterfall where they encountered yet more *Corydalis caucasica*, a few *Lathraea squamaria* and the first *Scilla sibirica ssp caucasica* of the trip with one particularly fine clump on a knoll overlooking the fast-flowing river below. Utterly delighted by our luck on the first day in wonderful Georgia we pushed on to our next hotel.

Day 5 - Racha district and Ambrolauri

A long transfer was made just that bit more of an endurance when Tolkha picked up a troublesome puncture on the asphalt entering Kutaisi - so ironic when you consider amount of off-roading we had done in very rough terrain the day before! Anyway not long after we managed a bit of botany in a *Carpinus* woodland just the other side of town. We had seen a few *Erythronium* from the car and were champing at the bit to see them. The understory was remarkably dry underfoot which seemed to have stunted the Dog-tooth Violets a little - not that we were complaining as they were still absolutely beautiful. The only thing that seemed to be thriving in the dry was *Ruscus aculeatus* of which there were hundreds of plants. Pushing on we stopped again at a spot in the pristine *Carpinus/Quercus* forest between the Tkibuli and Shaori lakes. Timing for our hoped for species was absolutely bang on - within seconds of leaving the car we found *Galanthus shaoricus*, *Scilla sibirica caucasica* and *Erythronium caucasica* the latter this time lush and in absolutely fine form. A bit further on we found the very localised endemic *Helleborus abchasicus*, a lovely thing in various shades of burgundy and smoky-pink. Although one of the *Galanthus* was in really good shape, people had spread out in search of others on a ridge just above the minibus. There were a few including one gorgeous rather dumpy specimen with short, broad, very glaucous leaves in very attractive proportion that was photographed by all. Heading further North we arrived at Shaori lake that was a real sight to behold as it was still frozen and covered in snow, as were the surrounding conifers. Lots of pictures were taken before pushing on the last few miles to Ambrolauri.

Day 6 - Shobi

Today we visited the remote beautiful and wild Shobi valley. A few miles into our journey we stopped for a colony of *Euphorbia pontica* that were relishing the conditions created by one of last year's mini-landslides. The plants were in their prime with wonderful fresh acid-yellow flowers that would look 'over' in a matter of a few days. Sharp-eyed Lynn found tiny Whitlow Grass - *Erophila verna* in roadside grit. A few miles further on we stopped at a spot Tolkha knew for *Galanthus shaoricus* - there had been a recent small avalanche which had melted much later than the surrounding area meaning the Snowdrops had been held back just that bit longer and there were hundreds of them in

perfect flowering condition as well as lots of *Cyclamen coum* in clumps that closely rivalled the spectacular ones that we had seen in the Cimil valley in Turkey. By complete chance on the opposite side of the road Tolkha looked over the armco barrier and noticed our second target of the day the sublime *Galanthus platyphyllus* - a small colony about the size of a single bed, again in absolutely pristine condition. Needless to say we spent quite a time taking photographs. While we were pre-occupied with this, Imeda our driver had spotted a Lammergeier circling around overhead and managed to get a really good shot on his phone. Dragging ourselves away we drove much higher up the valley where the *Piceas* became increasingly joined by *Abies nordmanniana* and in places *Pinus sosnowskyi*. We drove as far as the snow would let us which coincidentally was where our hoped for *G. platyphyllus* had been seen on the previous tour. But the whole area was under deep snow. This species is usually found at much higher altitude in most of its range and in fact we expect to see it as late as mid-May on the Cross Pass when Greentours next returns. This just confirmed how lucky we were to see it earlier at an even lower elevation. We felt blessed to have seen it at all today and instead of disappointment we relished the opportunity to have a relaxed picnic in such beautiful surroundings. As we left the bright sunlight became very nicely diffuse - absolutely ideal for photographing white flowers and so providing an ideal excuse for revisiting the *G. platyphyllus* on the way back - needless to say spending nearly as long again!

Day 7 - Gelati - Kutaisi botanic gardens.

Strong winds overnight seemed to come out of nowhere. As it happens this proved to be the least of our worries, as shortly into our journey to the Gelati monastery the warning light on Tolkha's dashboard showed that his tyre was again deflating and yesterday's overpriced repair had been pointless. The only way not to waste too much of people's time was to get everybody into Imeda's 4x4 while Kurt and Tolkha went into town to sort things out properly. Everybody seemed to enjoy the Monastery set atop a prominent hill above Kutaisi but were glad not to spend too much time outside in the chilling wind. We made our rendezvous at the botanic gardens that were in an altogether more sheltered situation but the wind had pretty much dropped by then anyway. The gardens here are absolutely charming if a little bit rundown (due to lack of funding one would imagine) but this would turn out to be a morning full of pleasant surprises. First surprise was to see a number of Humming-bird Hawkmoths batting about - it seemed a bit early for them? Butterflies were surprisingly numerous as well, including Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Brimstone, Orange-tip and several battling Speckled Woods. We even found a Holly Blue nectaring on *Veronica persica*. Keith also showed a picture of a butterfly on his camera that turned out to be a Wood White, again much earlier than one might expect. As on a previous tour, the non-native plant that seemed to attract people the most was a group of coppiced (at least I think they were) *Cercis chinensis* with stunning sessile flowers of a very dark purple, much deeper than the much more familiar *Cercis siliquastrum*. But it was really the native flowers that were of more interest to the group especially another surprise in the shape of *Ophrys transhyrcana* (generically an 'Early Spider' Orchid) and a lovely bank dominated by *Sympythem caucasicum*, *Dentaria quinquefolia* and hundreds of *Ornithogalum imertinum*. Tolkha also popped his head around the door of the propagation house to see if it was OK for us to go in - as it happened the chap inside couldn't have been more delighted and welcoming and probably couldn't quite believe that anybody would be interested. Just before leaving we were introduced to the director who had been a friend of Tolkha's father. He was able to give us some very good intelligence about where we might find *Leucojum aestivum* that we had thus far missed on the trip. We drove about ten miles west of town and found an extensive *Quercus/Carpinus* woodland that was very boggy most of the year. Driving past we noticed little white dots several yards into the woods that indeed turned out to be the Summer Snowflakes in abundance. The boggy conditions weren't to the liking of many other species but in slightly drier areas we found the wonderful softest-blue *Viola siehanus* a rather uncommon species generally but not here. We had also been told that

a mile or so away, much deeper in the woods, we should find *Galanthus woronowii*. This area was on a slope and much drier. The woods here are clearly ancient and near pristine. We searched high and low for the *Galanthus* without luck, but to be honest the habitat didn't seem right at all - perhaps we were in the wrong place. Nonetheless the abundant *Helleborus caucasicus*, *Lathyrus vernus* and *Viola siehanus* were very special and so would have been the thousands of *Erythronium* in fruit if we had visited a few weeks earlier. Although we hadn't managed to track down the *Galanthus* we were more than satisfied with our afternoon. Just as we set off we flushed a Hoopoe that posed nicely in front of us before being scared off when Imeda inadvertently pipped his horn not quite knowing what was going on.

Day 8 - Batumi botanic garden

With afternoon flights, some sooner than others, we made our final botanical stop of the trip at the magnificent Batumi botanic garden that occupies a long stretch of coastline just north of the city. Until just before arrival we weren't aware that the assistant director Davit Kharazishvili was going to meet us and show us around. He was justly very proud of the collection and showed us some magnificent specimen trees including absolutely gargantuan *Magnolia grandiflora* and various other choice *Eucalyptus* etc. Being the group we were, the things that excited us most were the native plants, especially of the Colchic biotope that we had been touring for the last week or so. The garden has an enormous natural colony of *Galanthus woronowii* but alas all well in fruit at this altitude. We loved a fairly recently established planting of *Quercus pontica* with its most unusual leaves looking to the uninitiated much more like a Sweet Chestnut than Oak. Also enjoyed were similar plantings of *Rhododendron ungerii* that we had seen and the smaller *Rhododendron smirnovii*. In an area of perennial and other natives some really robust specimens of *Ruscus colchicus* had us clicking away with our cameras. We also noticed a new Violet for the trip namely *Viola orthoceras* amongst the lush ferns on a nearby bank. Way too soon Beryce and Samson needed to leave for their earlier flight and not long afterwards Davit was suddenly summoned to return to his office. Despite this he had been a fantastic guide and inspiration for the time we had him. The group then went into town where Tolkha had organised a really lovely lunch before dropping us off at the airport.