

Jordan

A Greentours Tour Report

November 24th – December 3rd 2011

Led by Oron Peri

Day 1 November 24th

Group arrived to Amman airport just before 1900 and transferred to the Mariam Hotel in Madaba where we had a late dinner.

Day 2 November 25th Madaba to A-Salt

The program for the early morning was a cultural visit to two historical sites. After a good breakfast we left the hotel heading to see the famous byzantine mosaic situated inside the church at the center of Madaba followed by a visit to the biblical Mt. Nebo situated in the west just out of the city. Weather was a bit hazy still we could see the amazing view of the Dead Sea, Jordan Valley and Judea Desert on the other side of the Great Rift. A Sinai Rosefinch was standing on the monument as we were leaving the site. Outside in the field next to the parking area we could already see a few flowers of *Biarum pyrami*.

We took the road that goes down to the Jordan Valley from 700m above sea level down to 240m under sea level. The habitat changes dramatically to become desert where it is mainly dominated by *Acacia tortilis* trees, *Retama raetam* and the peculiar *Calotropis procera* to enter the fertile Jordan Valley. We took the road of Wadi Shuayeb that climbs all the way up to A-Salt. Half way we had a stop to see an excellent site of *Sternbergia clusiana* which is growing side by side with *Cyclamen persicum* var *autumnale*. This site is probably the southern-most population of this Cyclamen. Many birds can be seen in this wadi as an aqueduct and the wadi itself enjoy spring water originating from the mountains above. Just to mention White-breasted kingfisher, Palestine Sunbird, Collared Dove and Laughing Dove. After a second stop for a picnic we have continued our way up to A-Salt where in the early afternoon we had another stop for *Crocus hermoneus* subspecies *palaestinus*. This beautiful pinky-bluish Crocus is becoming a rare species but in this site it can still be seen in large numbers. *Biarum pyrami* in good condition were seen here as well. After about an hour we have continued, directed to our hotel which is situated on the hills between the towns of Jarash and Ajlun where we stay for the next three nights.

Day 3 November 26th Jarash - Ajlun to Irbid and the Syrian border

The hotel is surrounded by old *Pinus halepensis* trees which attract many birds and at this time of the year Jays tend to stay in groups and can be also heard from distance while Greenfinches can be seen on top of the trees inside the hotel's garden.

As we left the hotel, just on the wire fence, a Little Owl sat and seemed to not be bothered by our presence, it was still in its place to welcome us when we came back in the evening. First stop of the day was on the way to Ajlun, above the village of Anjara at the highest point of the area. The view of Ajlun Castle and the hills surrounding the town is wonderful with autumn colors of this Mediterranean habitat as *Pistacia palaestina* and *Rhus coriaria* [Sumac tree] are tinged in red and orange and can be seen from far away. After taking photos we entered the fields and oak wood, where thousands of *Crocus hyemalis* were in bloom, some with very nice purple markings on the sepals. In the north facing slope it was growing together with yet another *Crocus* sp. *nova* which is somewhat intermediate between *Crocus hermoneus* and *Crocus cancellatus*. We were quite lucky to see the two species in large quantities and in very good conditions.

Next stop was as we entered the city of Irbid where on another northern slope with large flat limestone rocks many *Colchicum stevenii* were in flower. After a picnic at this site we headed north east in direction of Mafraq and the Syrian border entering the eastern desert. Again habitat changes dramatically turning from green Mediterranean to dry yellow coloured open hills. It was evident that this area hasn't received any rain yet and so we made only one stop in an area where thousands of *Biarum pyrami* were in bloom. While taking photos of these I turned over some stones and found a couple of Yellow Scorpion *Liurus quinquestriatus* and a Sand Gecko, the smallest reptile in the region, reaching only 6cm at maturity, living mainly under stones. Only a few flowers of *Dianthus strictus* and a rare, late flowering *Consolida scleroclada* were seen on this site. We had a last stop before complete dark on a hill above our hotel where many old *Arbutus andrachne* trees are growing bearing many red fruits.

Day 4 November 27th Ajlun and Jarash

We started the day with a visit to Ajlun Castle. The castle with origins going back to Salah ad Din period is very well preserved and situated on a strategic hill above the town of Ajlun, the view from the top of the castle is fantastic. We visited the small, interesting museum on the site as well. Looking out from one of the windows we could see a carpet of *Colchicum stevenii* just on the back side of the castle which we visited before leaving the site. Next stop was at the Ajlun Nature Reserve, a typical Mediterranean habitat dominated by *Quercus coccifera*, *Quercus ithaburensis* and *Pistacia palaestina* trees, where we found many *Crocus hyemalis* and *Colchicum stevenii* and *Erodium acaule*. The reserve is fenced all around and therefore no grazing at the site. We have spent a couple of hours inside the reserve and left for lunch at a restaurant in Jarash where we had a lovely range of local tasty dishes. After lunch we went to the ancient Roman site of Jarash, probably the most well preserved Roman city with all its amazing structures, in particularly the gate and the theatre. At the site itself there were quite a few birds such as a Hobby, Common Kestrel, Hooded Crow and others. We spent the entire afternoon on the site.

Day 5 November 28th Jarash to Petra via Dead Sea

An early wakeup this morning as we had a long day ahead of us. We headed south, leaving the green part of the country to reach the semi desert area after an hour. We encountered traffic as we reached the outskirts of the capital Amman in order to take the main road that leads to the Dead Sea. This road starts at about 1000m above sea level and goes down to 424m under sea level. We had a first stop for photos mid-way down as the desert mountains appear, in this site we could find many *Sternbergia clusiana* in flower. Another stop was as we reached the Jordan

Valley, to have a close look on some of the plants, originated in Africa but managed to 'climb' north to reach this area of the Great Rift.

After a while we arrived at the Dead Sea and entered Amman's Public Beach where we took a bath to follow by lunch at the restaurant. There was still a long drive south to Petra and we made two more stops on the way, the first along the Dead Sea where small springs of sweet water reach road level with some interesting plants; *Juncus rigidus*, *Tamarix* and even Date Palms. These places are very good for birds and we have seen Little Green Bee-eater, Fan-tailed Raven, Northern Wheatear, Rock Martin and others. It was late evening as we reached the Edom Hotel in Petra.

Day 6 November 29th Petra

The whole day was dedicated to Nabatean city of Petra. We walked slowly through this amazing site and could also enjoy plants and birds. A few shrubs of *Daphne mucronata* subspecies *linearifolia* and *Thymelaea hirsuta* were in full bloom, as well as the interesting *Gomphocarpus sinaicus* with its puffed fruits. The high walls are home to real Rock Doves while in the open areas many Desert Larks, House Buntings, Bulbuls, Black Redstart, Finsch's and Mourning Wheatears were seen. Small-spotted Lizards came out to take a sun bath. A fantastic day!

Day 7 December 30th Little Petra & Dana Reserve

In the morning we were still around Petra. First stop was on the road above Petra to take photos of the unique sandstone mountains around the famous site. After a short drive we reached the site of Little Petra, a much smaller site with other wonderful monuments. This is mostly a shady area as the site is situated in a narrow strip between two high walls. We could see last year's *Fritillaria persica* seedpods high in the crevices, while on the ground *Solanum sinaiticum* and on the walls a few plants of *Podonosma orientalis* were in bloom together with the rare *Gallium canum*. We left the site and our minibus started to climb steep road that leads up in direction of Shoubak. At the high elevation, there is still evidence of the Mediterranean climate that used to be in the region before it turned to be desert with many ancient trees of *Pistacia atlantica*, *Crataegus aronia* and *Quercus coccifera* still growing but unfortunately they do not regenerate as rain is a rare phenomenon here. As we reached the top of the mountains we made a stop at a site where *Crocus pallasii* subspecies *haussknechtii* is growing, luckily there where many of it in flower and in good condition. The flowers cannot be noticed from the road as they camouflage well with the habitat. After the Crocus site, another stop at a nearby quarry to see the different layers of the colorful sands. The sand used to be collected by the locals who filled small glass bottles to sell as souvenirs to the tourists.

We reached Dana Reserve at lunch time and set out a picnic while two Griffon Vultures flew just meters above our heads diving in the deep canyon underneath us. Huge flocks of Tristram's Grackles made the same route flying down to the Jordan Valley as it is much warmer there at night. We walked for a couple of hours in the Reserve which is dominated by ancient *Juniperus phoenicea* trees. The site was extremely dry this season after a few years of severe drought and so we enjoyed mainly the view, birds and the absolute silence of the desert and a couple of White Widow spider nests with the females protecting the big egg sacs. On the way back to Petra we made a stop to look at two huge trees of *Pistacia atlantica*, a sign next to them indicating their age which is 900 years.

Day 8 December 1st Wadi Rum

We left the area of Petra and headed south to Wadi Rum which is located 35km north of the Red Sea. At midday we took a 4X4 car to the centre the sandy dunes with dramatic tall mountains that seem to come straight out of the sand. We have spent the rest of the day in the wadi. Many birds such as Brown-necked Raven, Common Buzzard, Wheatears, and Black Redstart were seen. Despite the dry climate *Hammada scoparia* bloomed in different vivid colors, and the wild water melon *Citrullus colocynthis* was all over with mature fruits. We reached the lovely hotel at dark, temperatures dropped down rapidly to almost freezing point. This place is excellent for watching the stars as there are no artificial lights to disturb.

Day 9 December 2nd Wadi Mujib and Madaba Area

After a cold night we were happy to have the sun again. There was a long drive ahead of us as we had to cross the desert in order to get back to Madaba. After 4 hours drive we reached Wadi Mujib, a huge dry river that starts at the desert plateau in direction of the Dead Sea to create a huge and deep canyon. We had lunch at a restaurant situated above the wadi with a fantastic view of the dam down under. As the area was very dry I decided to try to get to a site SE of Madaba which I knew received some rain a few weeks earlier. It wasn't long before we found the rare and stunning *Crocus moabiticus* in flower as well as *Colchicum tauri*. Couldn't have been a better way to end this trip.

Day 10 December 3rd Departure

An early wake-up to reach the airport by 6am where our flight left on time.

Systematic List Number 1 Flora

AMARYLLIDACEAE

Sternbergai clusiana

Wadi shuyeb, West of Amman, Wadi Muji

AMARANTACEAE

Anabasis setifera

Dead Sea

Atriplex halimus

common, salty silvery leaves, widespread in deserts.

ANACRADIACEAE

Pistacia atlantica
Pistacia palaestina
Rhus coriaria

Shoubak, Petra, Jarash
Autumnal colors, Jarash, Ajlun
Autumnal colors, Jarash, Ajlun, Irbid, Amman

APOCYNACEAE

Nerium oleander

Widespread near water and wadis

ARACEAE

Biarum pyrami

Widespread, Mt. Nebo, Eastern desert, A-Salt, Madaba

ASCLEPIACEAE

Calotropis procera
Gomphocarpus sinaicus

'Sodom Apple', Dead Sea, Jordan Valley
Petra, Dana

ASPARAGACEAE

Asparagus aphyllus
Drimia maritima
Prospero hanburyi

A-Salt, Jarash, Ajlun
big glaucous leaves, widespread.
leaves and dry seedpods, Mt. Nebo, Eastern Desert

BORAGINACEAE

Ancusa strigosa
Podonosma orientalis
Symphytum brachycalyx

Sky-Blue flowers, Petra
growing on Walls, Petra, Little Petra
leaves only, Ajlun Reserve

BRASSIACACEAE

Arabis alpina

rare, in leaves, Dana

CAESALPINACEAE

Ceratonia siliqua

Carub Tree, Common in the Mediterranean regions.

CAPARACEAE

Capparis aegyptia

growing on walls, cascading glaucous leaves, common

CARYOPHYLLACEAE

Dianthus strictus

Common, tiny pink flowers

CHENOPODIACEAE

Anabasis articulata
Halogeton alepcurioides
Hammada scoparia
Noaea mucranata

Dead Sea
Dead Sea
Wadi Rum, different vivid colors.
thorny shrub, pink flowers

COLCHICACEAE

Colchicum stevenii
Colchicum tauri

Irbid, Ajlun
Near Madaba

COMPOSITAE

Artemisia santolina

Dana, Shoubak

<i>Echinops polyceras</i>	Wadi Mujib
<i>Inula viscosa</i>	Yellow flowering shrub, common in Med. areas
<i>Taraxacum cyprium</i>	Jarash, Ajlun
<i>Xanthium spinosum</i>	Eastern Desert

CRASSULACEAE

<i>Umbilicus intermedius</i>	widespread
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CUCURBITACEAE

<i>Citrullus colocynthis</i>	wild watermelon, Petra, Wadi Rum
<i>Ecballim elatrium</i>	Jarash, Wadi Shuayeb, Madaba

CUPRESSACEAE

<i>Juniperus phoenicea</i>	Petra, Dana
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ERICACEAE

<i>Arbutus andrachne</i>	Strawberry tree, Jarash, Ajlun
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EUPHORBIACEAE

<i>Euphorbia supine</i>	small prostrating plant in rock crevices, Madaba
<i>Ricinus communis</i>	Jordan valley

FAGACEAE

<i>Quercus coccifera</i>	widespread
<i>Quercus ithaburensis</i>	deciduous large tree, Ajlun, Irbid

GERANIACEAE

<i>Erodium acaule</i>	small, flat rosette with pink flowers, Ajlun, Irbid
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GRAMINACEAE

<i>Arundo donax</i>	Wadi Shueb, Jordan Valley
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IRIDACEAE

<i>Crocus hermoneus</i> sbsp <i>palaestinus</i>	A-salt
<i>Crocus hyemalis</i>	Jarash, Ajlun, Irbid
<i>Crocus moabiticus</i>	Madaba
<i>Crocus pallasii</i> subsp <i>haussknechtii</i>	Shoubak
<i>Crocus Specie Nova</i> [op]	Ajlun

JUNACEAE

<i>Juncus rigidus</i>	Dead Sea
LAMIACEAE	
<i>Majorana syriaca</i>	Irbid, A-Salt
<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	Petra, Shoubak, Danna
<i>Stachys aegyptiaca</i>	silvery leaves, pink flowers, Wadi Rum
LEGUMINOSAE	
<i>Acacia tortilis subsp raddiana</i>	Jordan valley, Dead Sea, Wadi Rum
<i>Colutea istria</i>	Petra
<i>Ononis natrix</i>	widespread, small yellow flowers
<i>Retama raetam</i>	Widespread
<i>Spartium junceus</i>	A-Salt
LORANTACEAE	
<i>Loranthus acaciae</i>	parasitic on Acacia trees, red flowers, Jordan Valley
<i>Viscum cruciatum</i>	Danna, Jarash, parasitic on Olive and Almond trees
MORACEAE	
<i>Ficus carica</i>	Shoubak
<i>Ficus pseudosycomorus</i>	Little Petra, Wadi Rum
PINACEAE	
<i>Pinus halepensis</i>	common, Jerash, Ajlun, Irbid, A-Salt
PLUMBAGINACEAE	
<i>Plumbago europea</i>	Small shrub, dark violet flowers, Jarash
POLYGONACEAE	
<i>Polygonum aquisetiforme</i>	Ajloun
PRIMULACEAE	
<i>Cyclamen persicum var autumnale</i>	autumnal form, blooms before leaves appear, Wadi Shueb
<i>Cyclamen persicum</i>	widespread leaves only, A-Salt, Ajlun, Jarash, Irbid
RHAMNACEAE	
<i>Rhamnus disperma</i>	growing on walls, Petra, Little Petra
<i>Ziziphus spina-cristi</i>	large tree, yellow edible fruits, Jordan Valley, Wadi Shueb
RANUNCULACEAE	
<i>Consolida scleroclada</i>	late flowering plant, dark purple, Eastern Desert
ROSACEAE	
<i>Cratagus aronis</i>	common, Shoubak, Jarash, Irbid
<i>Sarcopoterium spinosum</i>	small round spiny cushion, widespread

RUBIACEAE*Galium canum*

small cascading plant, walls, Little Petra

SCROPHULARIACEAE*Verbascum fruticosum*

undulate golden leaves, widespread

Verbascum sinaicum

widespread, gigantic rosettes, tall plant

SMILACACEAE*Smilax aspera*

Climber, red berries, Ajlun Reserve

SOLANACEAE*Hyoscyamus aureus*

Jarash, Ajlun

Solanum sinaicum

white flowers, Little Petra

Solanum elaeagnifolium

Yellow berries, widespread, mostly cultivated areas, not native.

TAMARICACEAE*Tamarix jordana*

Jordan Valley

THYMELACEAE*Daphne mucronata subsp linearifolia*

Yellow creamy flowers, Petra, Little Petra

Thymelea hirsuta

Shoubak, Dana

ZYGOPHYLLACEAE*Zygophyllum dumosum*

white flowers, Petra

Systematic List Number 2

Birds

Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Seen in Dana Reserve
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Common
Hobby	<i>Falco columbaris</i>	Irbid and Dana
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livida</i>	Petra
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Jerash, Wadi Shuyeb
Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	Widespread
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	Active at day time as well, Jarash, Eastern Desert
White-breasted Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrensis</i>	Near water, Jordan Valley, Wadi shuyeb
Little Green Bee-eater	<i>Merpos orientalis</i>	Dead sea, a pair on Tamarix trees
Syrian Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos syriacus</i>	Near the Hotel in Jarash
Desert Lark	<i>Ammomanes deserti</i>	Common in Petra
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Common
Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>	Irbid
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Common, seen everyday
Yellow-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus xanthopygus</i>	Common everywhere
Rufous Bush Robin	<i>Cercotrichas galactotes</i>	Jordan Valley
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Common
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	Semidesert areas
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	Dead Sea, Wadi Shuyeb
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Dead Sea
Finsch's Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe finschii</i>	Petra, Shoubak
Mourning Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe lugens</i>	Dead Sea, Petra
Hooded Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe monacha</i>	Shoubak
White-crowned Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucopyga</i>	Common in the desert
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	Female in Petra
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Common in the Med. Region
Scrub Warbler	<i>Scotocerca inquieta</i>	Shoubak, Petra
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Common in the Medit. Region
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	Jordan Valley, Irbid
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Jerash, Ajlun
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	A large flock near Irbid
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus [corone] cornix</i>	Many in Ajlun and Jarash
Brown-necked Raven	<i>Corvus ruficollis</i>	Many in and north of Wadi Rum
Fan-tailed Raven	<i>Corvus rhipidurus</i>	Dead Sea, Petra
Tristram's Grackle	<i>Onychognathus tristramii</i>	Common in the Desert
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Widespread
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Ajlun, Jarash
Sinai Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus synoicus</i>	Mt. Nebo, Petra
House Bunting	<i>Embriza striolata</i>	Dead Sea , Wadi Rum

Systematic List Number 3 Reptiles & Insects

Sand Gecko	<i>Tropicolotes nattereri</i>	The smallest reptile in the region, Eastern Desert
Snake-eyed Lizard	<i>Ophisops elegans</i>	Dana Reserve
Small-Spotted Lizard	<i>Mesalina Guttulata</i>	Wadi Rum
White widow spider	<i>Latrodectus pallidus</i>	Dana Reserve
Palestine Yellow Scorpion	<i>Leiurus quinquestriatus</i>	Eastern Desert