

Delphi

& the Southern Pindhos

A Greentours Tour Report

15th – 22nd October 2018

Leader: Kurt Vickery

The flights arrived late in the evening so it was straight to the very comfortable Nafsika hotel in Athens for a good night's sleep.

To Karpenisi

After breakfast it was time to head for Karpenisi. It was a lot easier to get out of Athens than getting in and we were soon on the first leg of our journey. The stretch of motorway to Lamia didn't seem to take too long to pass and soon we were driving through 'proper' countryside. We stopped at Makrakomi for lunch in a friendly taverna. On the way back to the minibus we found a Geranium bronze nectaring on various cut flowers on display outside a florists shop. After leaving the town we turned up a promising looking valley and made our first 'nature' stop of the day. We were drawn to a bank covered with scores of *Prospero autumnale* and the much more conspicuous *Calamintha nepeta* – flowering their hats off and attracting a great many butterflies. Showiest of all was a pristine Swallowtail, It was most confiding and allowed some lovely pictures to be taken. Other species seen included abundant Clouded yellows, Eastern bath white, Large and Small white, with a few each of Common blue, Brown argus and Large wall brown. We then drove a bit further looking for suitable *Spiranthes spiralis* habitat. A very likely looking meadow was chosen and we were soon spread out suitably arched over to try and find our cryptic quarry. At first it looked like we might be disappointed but careful searching revealed one and then another before we really began to get our 'eye in' and several were found and all in really nice condition. There were a number of dicots hanging on to the last few flowers of the season including *Polygonum equisteforme*, *Dianthus tenuiflorus* and a tiny *Verbascum blattiarum*. We then pressed on to the hotel stopping about a mile short for a bank covered with *Sternbergia lutea sicula* and a smattering of *Cyclamen hederifolium* giving us a taste of what was hopefully going to come later in the trip. We finished our botanising by adding a few more flowering plants to the list including *Centaurea solstitialis*, *Consolida regalis* and *Dorycnium hirsutum*.

Timfristos

We set off in perfect weather towards the ski centre and the pass of Timfristos. Just above Karpenisi the road got ever steeper and quickly into botanising territory. Our first stop of the day was for what turned out to be a rather spent *Colchicum bivonae* – evidence of the early season we were experiencing. Around and about more late-flowering plants were found including the knapweed – *Lomelosia crenata*, *Petrorhagia prolifera*, *Verbascum speciosum*, paradoxically revitalised by nearly being grazed to the ground and Ploughman's spikenard (*Inula conyza*), the latter not very showy but a flowering plant nonetheless. A Peregrine falcon

circled overhead as we returned to the minibus. We had nearly reached the pass when we simply had to stop for some *Morina persica* that were in surprisingly good shape for the time of year. Arriving at the Ski centre on the pass we spread out to explore the slopes. Not a lot other than *Armeria canescens* was seen in the flower line but there were a great many Chaffinch and Linnet on the move and a Black redstart was seen flitting from one building to another. After half an hour or so we set off down the other side of the mountain. As always first port of call here was the beautiful *Epilobium dodonaei*.

While these were being photographed we also managed to find *Centaurea grisebachii* and *Lotus pedunculatus*. There were flypasts of several butterflies that all with the exception of a single Queen of Spain fritillary were Brimstones. A little further along Cecilia spotted a single spike of *Campanula versicolor*. We had barely moved a hundred yards when Kurt feared he had run over a snake. He ran back to investigate and was delighted that not only was it in perfect health, it was a Horned viper (*Vipera ammodytes*). Despite being well and truly warmed by the sun it was torpid enough for us all to have a good look before it slithered off into the undergrowth. As we had plenty of time on our hands we decided to take a different and longer route back than we have in the past. This proved a fortuitous move as we found a wonderful bank of *Colchicum boissieri*. Just before leaving Tony had 'popped into the woods' Which resulted in an impromptu fungus foray as he had found amongst many others some fantastic Coral fungus which if they weren't *Ramaria flava*, resembled it strongly. We had a rather late lunch in yet another lovely simple family taverna. It was late because we simply couldn't stop looking at things as we went along. One last stop was made a few miles below the valley where we found sparsely scattered Cyclamen. Fleabane and Vervain were common by the roadsides and *Ruscus aculeatus* was our last discovery of the day before returning to the hotel for what seemed like a well earned rest.

To Arrahova

Today was transfer day to Arrahova that would be our base for the next five days. After a short motorway stint we turned south towards Amfissa. Although this is still quite a major road it is pleasant enough to travel along thanks to the dramatic scenery with lots of *Sternbergia* colonies in the cliffy road cuttings. About half way we made one of our regular stops to see if *Campanula rupicola* might still be in flower – it wasn't but a most photogenic *Campanula versicolor* was ample compensation. Legs were stretched in the nearby track leading through *Abies cephalonica* forest. The abundant Cyclamen were admired and we saw lots of Coal tits in the tree canopy. We then pressed on towards Amfissa passing yet more slopes festooned in *Sternbergia*, all the best ones seemed to be on the most dangerous corners which made stopping for them very unwise. Passing through Amfissa we had broken the back of the journey and carried on just a little further to have lunch in the pretty coastal village of Galaxidi. On the way to the restaurant we spent a bit of time admiring the abundant fish in the crystal clear water. We had a delicious meal in the relaxing surroundings before making the last short hop to Arrahova and a very warm welcome from Panos at the Nefeles hotel.

Delphi

The weather was perfect when we arrived at Delphi . The ruins are of course incredible but simple things like crumbling walls covered in flowering ivy alive with buzzing hoverflies, wasps and Red admirals were enjoyed with equal measure. Kurt drew the groups attention to the Crag martins and Sparrowhawks circling overhead – there were clearly a number of 'neck

issues' amongst the group some of them with unpronounceable medical names but that wasn't going to stop us enjoying the birds! We were hoping for Western rock nuthatch which duly indulged us on the pillars of the great temple of Apollo. They were extremely vocal unleashing their full repertoire of song and calls – some familiar and some not. After a while it became clear that the frantic comings and goings of the birds were being caused by three fledged juveniles making unreasonable demands on their devoted parents. Up around the stadium site good numbers of *Colchicum cupanii* were seen and Cecilia found a fine specimen of *Campanula rupicola*. Unfortunately Mary was the only one to see a Blue rock thrush but Kurt felt confident that we would see one or two at our next scheduled stop. Picnic lunch was taken at what has become 'our' grotto just outside the archeological site. In the afternoon we visited an area below Delphi village. The site seems to be an abandoned attempt to build a bypass but has clearly had some mining activity in the not so distant past as well. Happily no lasting damage to the local flora and fauna has been inflicted, in fact it has become a superb spot for butterflies. By the time we arrived it had clouded over but enough warmth had been trapped to keep us more than comfortable. The areas of disturbed ground had lots of the butterfly magnet otherwise known as *Dittrichia viscosa*. Butterfly numbers as well as diversity were very high especially for the time of year and we added several new species for the trip including Nettle tree butterfly, Pygmy skipper, Lang's short-tailed blue and Europe's tiniest species, the exquisite Grass jewel. Soon the Blue rock thrush prophecy was fulfilled and we all got very good views of at least three of them. Whether by luck or design the great rocky pillars for which the area is famed have been spared here. These incredible geological features are favoured by the stunning *Daphne jasminea* and we were lucky enough to find a very floriferous specimen that had no doubt benefitted from the recent rains. Walking on a little further we encountered more flowering plants including a large patch of flowering *Bituminaria bituminosa* (all previous plants were completely finished) as well as *Coridothymus capitata* and in rockier situations *Centranthus longiflorus*. Returning to the minibus we added a few more species including *Plumbago europea* with attendant Hummingbird hawkmoth and the pretty soft yellow *Centaurea pelia*. On the way back to the hotel we had one last treat in the shape of a vast mixed colony of *Crocus hadriaticus* and *Colchicum cupanii* just outside of Delphi. There were scattered *Biarum tenuifolium* with spathes on the verge of opening too

Parnassus to Sikia

It was a beautiful sunny morning and a relaxed breakfast was enjoyed overlooking the great gorge leading down to Delphi that is just discernable from the dining room. After setting off we were very soon on the lower slopes of Parnassus. Our first stop was in the foothills near the village of Kellaria. We walked around some rocky meadows surrounded by *Abies cephalonica*. The trees were playing host to Mistletoe - *Viscum album*, in this case ssp *abietis* which is exclusively found on these firs. We were here to search for *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus* which we found pretty quickly. They weren't as plentiful as usual but there were enough for us to find them in their full range of colours ranging in all shades of blue from very dark to almost white. The night had been rather cold which meant that the flowers were all covered in tiny dew drops that caught the light in a most attractive way, keeping the photographers busy for quite some time. We usually find *Sternbergia colchiciflora* here too but after careful searching we had to concede that they had probably been and gone already this year. We then moved on to an area of pristine *Abies* forest and walked along a track. There wasn't a lot in the way of flowers but were very pleased to find plentiful pristine *Colchicum boissieri* lining the trackside. One individual specimen was so tiny it was almost

dwarfed by a visiting Pygmy skipper. Next stop was at the pass just below the ski-centre. Again we encountered good numbers of *Colchicum boissieri* growing in beautiful crumbling limestone pavement habitat. A lot of the other flowering plants had recently been browsed by animals so not a lot of blooms to be seen with the exception of *Dianthus deltoides*. It was in lovely condition and worth getting spiteful *Astragalus* spines in the knees to get a closer look. We had lunch on the other side of the mountain in the grounds of the delightful little church of Ag Maria. While Kurt prepared the food the group spent time botanising in the gently kempt Walnut grove opposite.

The ground around the trees had been scraped by humans and excavated by Wild boar which resulted in a lot of *Cyclamen hederifolium* tubers sitting on top the soil. They seemed none the worse for this disturbance and were flowering their hats off. In less shady situations *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus* of a uniformly dark blue were found as well as the leaves of countless *Biarum*. Last scheduled stop for the day was to search for *Colchicum bivonae*, just north of the Mournos reservoir at around 1200 meters. We searched a site well known to Kurt but could only find one withered flower—sadly the rains that had helped us in so many ways had defeated us this time. The way back to the hotel was through dramatic scenery and a number of photo opportunities were taken along the way. The last half hour was spent driving past mirror calm azure sea setting the scene for a relaxing evening at the hotel.

Koutsorou monastery and Mournos reservoir

Today we headed west along the coast road. Our first botanical foray of the day was in the foothills between Itea and Galaxidi. We climbed up through wonderful phrygana until we stopped at what seemed like an unremarkable gully on a hairpin. We had been here on previous trips and knew that we had a good chance of finding *Biarum tenuifolium*. The season was clearly late for them as we only found one specimen. On a more positive note we found the first *Arisarum vulgare* 'flower' of the trip so far along with *Calandula arvensis* in profusion. There were a lot of passerines on the move of which a very high percentage (and all that we checked) were Robins. We then moved on higher up the mountain through beautiful boulder-strewn *Euphorbia dendroides* and *Phlomis fruticosa* habitat. Before settling on a plateau. As soon as we stepped out of the minibus we were having to watch our feet to avoid treading on the abundant *Colchicum cupanii* which included some fine multi-flowering clumps. There were quite a few *Prospero autumnalis* and a single *Crocus hadriaticus*. A pair of Western rock nuthatches were very active and seemed 'out of place' flitting between the low rocks. After an enjoyable hour we travelled further up the coast road. Some of the group had expressed a desire if possible to see *Urginea maritima* in flower as thus far the thousands we had seen had been in well advanced fruit. Fortuitously, Cecilia saw some out of the corner of her eye as we sped along the highway. We made a U-turn as soon as possible to investigate. The few that Cecilia had seen were in fact part of a very large colony numbering a few hundred bulbs nearly all of which were in flower. Thanks mainly to overgrazing they had managed to dominate in much the same way that *Eremurus* do in other parts of the world and from a distance they bared an uncanny resemblance to them albeit having no leaves. There was very little else that had managed to survive the ravages of grazing except for the lovely little Bugle – *Ajuga iva*. The *Urginea*'s were most photogenic and so we lingered for quite a while before moving on towards to The Koutsourou monastery. The way up involved seemingly innumerable hairpin bends through a landscape of *Quercus* scrub. Eventually we got quite high and on the plateaux leading towards the main stop of the day we were delighted to see thousands of *Crocus hadriaticus*. Our lunch was taken under the arms of a fantastic old Plane tree just below the monastery itself. Again there were countless *Crocus hadriaticus* along with

scattered *Colchicum cupanii* to enjoy in the surrounding meadows. When we had eaten a quick walk up to the rocks below the site we found some very large plants of *Campanula versicolor*, most of which had gone to seed but a few were still in good condition and deserving of a few photographs. The last leg of the day involved driving through the spectacular scenery of around Mournos reservoir before heading south towards Nafpaktos. We drove through several miles of beautiful Plane trees just beginning to take on their autumnal hues punctuated by the fiery colours of *Cotinus* that were seemingly advanced and ready for the coming cold of winter. The reason for this lengthy if beautiful detour was to search for the local endemic – *Crocus robertianus*. Kurt stopped at a site that he knew well for the species. At first he feared that we might be out of luck as the first search only revealed a couple of shriveled specimens. With a bit more perseverance more in hope than expectation we counted ourselves very lucky as a few of these beauties were found hidden in the base of some dense shrubs that had perhaps kept conditions cooler just that little bit longer. This seemed the perfect swan song for the trip and we cruised home much satisfied with our day.

To Athens and home

How lucky were we!? It had rained heavily in the night, something we had managed to avoid all week. Sad farewells to the lovely family at the Nefeles were made before an easy drive to the airport and home