

# Georgia

## Greater & Lesser Caucasus

### *A Greentours Trip Report*

11<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> May 2014

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#### **David Gareja**

Because of our late arrival last night we didn't have many hours sleep, but a good buffet breakfast and caffeine fix soon made the eyes less bleary. With considerable anticipation we were soon heading to our first day's venue - David Gareja.

The first part of the journey took us through the leafy part of Tblisi where we had the chance to admire some of the beautiful early Christian churches seemingly perched on anything higher than the rest of the city. After a pleasant drive through rolling countryside we approached the site and noticed the sudden change in the landscape. Here the steppe-like habitat gradually becomes a spectacular wind-eroded and rocky land. It is amongst a natural amphitheatre in these rocks that the sublime monastery of David Gareja nestles. When we arrived our Georgian team of Gocha, Valikho and Tolcha started to prepare food while the rest of us had a pre-lunch explore around the nearby rocks. Without moving we could see great clumps of *Dictamnus caucasicus* and walking towards them we encountered flowering shrubs of *Jasminum fruticans* and *Cotoneaster nummularia*. Around the edges of the shrubs we found *Onobrychis radiata*, *Stachys atherocalyx* and the first examples of the beautiful narrow endemic *Salvia garedjii*.

We reconvened for our picnic in the shade of a large *Celtis caucasica* with a panoramic view of the extraordinary landscape in front of us. In the nearby thickets, Nightingales unleashed their almost deafeningly loud song and on top of a flowering endemic *Amygdallis georgica* we were treated to excellent views of a singing male Black-headed bunting.

After lunch we started the rather steep walk up and around the top of the monastery. It requires quite some effort to make the walk but is always worth it for the wonderful flowers. We found amongst many others *Psephellus carthalnica* playing host to stunning scarlet *Diphyllipea coccinea*, *Jurinea blanda*, *Campanula hohenackeri*, *Ranunculus illyricus*, and an unusual Bladder senna - *Colutea orientalis*. If the plants weren't enough, our reward for the walk to the top was an amazing expansive view of Azerbaijan in the distance. On the way back down we had great views of Spotted Flycatchers and Lesser Grey Shrikes. Driving back, we enjoyed the backlit plumes of *Stipa caucasica*; the last excitement of the day was a Glass Lizard in the middle of the road.

## The road to Gudauri

Today it was time to head for the mountains. After a nice relaxed breakfast we set off through Tbilisi. This time we took a slightly different route through some of the leafy, wealthier suburbs. Just as it seemed we were about to leave the city, Gocha took a left turn up a steep hill, lined with attractive well-to-do houses. At the top we parked up at an altogether different place, the rather gaudy park surrounding Kus Tba which translates as 'Turtle Lake', probably referring to the terrapins that have been ousted from their homes. We skirted the lake to the far bank and went through a thin band of woodland to reach the fabulous herb rich hillside that overlooks the park and city. Pushing further through shrubs (mainly of *Spirea hypericifolia*) we began to find some wonderful plants. Among them were abundant Burnt-tip and Green-winged orchids along with clumps of *Dictamnus caucasicus* and occasional startling purple-flowered *Verbascum phoeniceum*. Here and there we found several seed capsules of *Fritillaria caucasica* and *Muscari szovitsianum*.

It is quite bizarre to be in a beautiful place such as this with loud thumping Eurobeat in the background posing a dilemma not often met with in the field, that being 'Do I make some shapes to Enrique Doubleglazias or be a serious botanist?' Judging by the skyward jiggling bottoms of some of the photographers amongst the group, it was not an easy decision! Amongst the butterflies were a very freshly emerged Hungarian Glider that had just enough strength to frustrate Sandy's attempts to photograph it for a few minutes before settling long enough for him. Other species included Chapman's Blue and Glanville Fritillary.

Leaving the city we passed through the less salubrious environs of Rustavi. This is an area of run down ex-Soviet factories and multistorey flats. What can't possibly be nice for people to live in is apparently Swift Heaven as the skies swarm with them and you can see them swooping in and out of the cracks in the concrete.

Our next stop was just outside the city for the Jvari church. It is a beautiful building that is set amongst meadows and woodland. Approaching the church we could see a Black-eared Wheatear sat on exactly the same place on the same boulder as last year. We took time to admire the church. Along the edges of some of the walls we found *Zygophyllum fabago*. In the surrounding meadows were scattered plants of *Eremostachys ibericum* and *Orobanche caryophyllacea* - the Clove-scented Broomrape, known from only one station in the UK; it was the first time some of us had ever seen it. We had our picnic on the edge of nearby Hornbeam forest. Here we encountered *Primula macrocalyx*, a first hint of things to come. A shower of rain rather spoiled the party so we decided to move on to the monastery at Zedazeni. This proved impossible as the shower turned into a thunder storm of Biblical proportions. There was nothing for it but to drive straight to Gela's guest house in Gudauri. As usual when we arrived we were greeted by a beaming Gela and soon were enjoying the open log fire in the hotel's snug.

## Cross Pass and Truso Valley

We awoke to a glorious morning. The skies were alive with House Martins and Swallows. Gudauri has an unlikely mix of modern ski chalets and absurdly expensive 4x4s crammed in between ancient farm buildings and smallholdings. The overhangs of the chalets suited the martins perfectly and the dilapidated outbuildings were very much to the liking of the swallows, which could be seen darting in and out of even the smallest apertures. There was no sign of the

usually common Redstarts leaving Kurt to wonder if the season was a little late. The sweet notes of Common Rosefinch filled the air as we started to assemble for the minibus. We set off up towards the Cross pass and soon were seeing clumps of *Daphne glomerata* along with increasingly common *Primula algida* and *Veronica gentianoides* as we gained altitude. One of the main targets on the pass was *Galanthus platyphyllus* but as we approached the main site Kurt's heart sank as the usually conspicuous white haze that announces their presence just wasn't there - given the lack of Redstarts he assumed that we were too early. On arrival and closer inspection the opposite proved to be the case. There were plenty of Snowdrops in flower but the vast majority were quite well into fruit. To add to the confusion the other treasure of the site - *Fritillaria latifolia* - were late and just beginning to unfurl their magnificent plum purple bells.

We then made our way over the top of the pass and stopped on the other side at the well-known travertine seep that covers a large area on the hillside. It just so happens to be a great spot for plants. The group were easily seduced by the opportunity to photograph the vivid blue *Gentiana angulosa* and spectacular clumps of *Primula auriculata* that favour the wettest areas. Sandy, who likes to photograph anything that moves, happily snapped the flowers along with various frogs and snails. When we reached the bottom of the pass we turned into the immense Truso valley. Stopping to admire a photogenic semi-abandoned village, we disturbed a small flock of Crimson-winged Finches. Walking for a while most people had their noses to the ground enjoying the Primulas and other flowers in the sward. Kurt however was looking skyward as he could hear Choughs. When he got his binoculars on them he realised that they were mobbing a Golden Eagle. Thanks to them we had marvelous relatively close views as it sailed past. Some time was taken photographing a tiny chapel about the size of a Nissan Micra with a tin roof and a wonky cross. We were being watched the whole time by some Azerbaijani shepherds. Although they must have wondered what on earth we were doing they were very friendly which was more than could be said for their rather grumpy dogs. Curiously the dogs were furious with any vehicle they might see but completely uninterested in people!

A little further on we stopped for lunch at our usual picnic site. Tolcha and Valikho were first off the mark as usual and came back to Kurt saying they had found a large black bird. To his enormous surprise it turned out to be an injured Caucasian Blackcock 'just sitting there'. At first glance it seemed in pristine condition, but Valikho gently lifted its wing and we could see it was terribly wounded, but what by? The poor bird's misfortune giving us a rare and privileged view of this shy and elusive species.

We had our picnic, the Nutella revealing the darker side of some otherwise perfectly polite and respectable people!

Despite the weather changing to a steadily increasing drizzle people braved the rather slippery grassy slopes to see our first *Fritillaria collina*. The surrounding rocks were heavily covered in *Saxifraga juniperiolia* in places and where enough soil had managed to accumulate there were plentiful *Lloydia serotina*.

Our next stop was in the Koba valley. We were here to look at a large meadow. The dominant species here being *Primula algida*. Diana was justifiably chuffed with herself for finding a white one. We found some lovely clumps of *Primula macrocalyx* and *Aipyanthus pulchra*. On a bank crammed with *Gentian angulosa* there was a group of what appeared to be a *Primula macrocalyx* x *ruprechtii* hybrid.

Leaving Koba we had the briefest glimpse of a Lammergeier. Turning back up to the Cross pass we saw Lammergeier again - possibly the same bird. Back on the other side we stopped at another *Galanthus* colony but this time at a higher altitude. This proved to be a good idea as just a few hundred meters made all the difference and the Snowdrops were much less advanced and in better condition. We made another brief stop at the gaudily decorated viewpoint that overlooks one of the deeper sheer drops in the mountains. Here we enjoyed views of Alpine and Red-billed Choughs along with one or two Whinchats. A couple more stops were made for Sheila to photograph particularly good specimens of *Primula* and *Gentiana* were made before returning to Gela's and one his very enjoyable evening meals.

## Khada Valley

Another glorious morning with a mackerel sky. From the dining room window we could see singing Dunnock and perhaps three pairs of Common Rosefinch squabbling over territory. Kurt and Sandy set off on a pre-breakfast birdwatch. In some nearby buildings we at last found nesting Redstart. We could hear Cuckoo and Great Spotted Woodpecker drumming in the distance. We inadvertently scattered several House Martins collecting mud in a puddle before spotting a pair of Lesser Grey Shrike. We also added Red-backed Shrike, Goldfinch and Greenfinch to our list.

Today we were heading to lower altitudes so retraced our journey of a few days ago. This time we were enjoyed much better views in the sunshine. After half an hour or so we crossed over the fast flowing Aragvi river and through the charming village of Bedoni with its rather run down houses. We have christened this place the 'pig village' in the past on account of the free range pigs and other beasts that wander around it, seemingly (and mysteriously) knowing where they are supposed to be. Run-down buildings spells Redstart heaven in these parts, and several pairs could be seen feeding young. Having passed through the village we entered the Khada valley with its dramatic slopes covered in Hornbeam and Hazel forest. Some of the rock faces had incredible folded strata sheared away by glaciers. David, a retired geography lecturer told us these features are known as 'columnar jointing'. As we progressed up the valley, blazing yellow *Rhododendron luteum* became increasingly frequent and of course we had to stop and take a closer look. The air was heavy with their scent which was irresistible to the many Rose Chafers writhing around in their pollen. Here we found *Dentaria bulbifera* too, a curious dicot that gets itself in Kurt's good books by producing bulbils in its axils. The deceptively loud calls of tiny Green Warblers could be heard everywhere.

With the rising temperatures we began to see butterflies: Queen of Spain Fritillaries were common, but nowhere near as numerous as the superabundant Dingy Skippers that were 'puddling' in the car tracks along the way. There were quite literally hundreds of them. Some were so engrossed in this activity that they had been run over by vehicles. A bit further on we visited a beautiful glade that Kurt had discovered on a previous trip whilst answering the call of nature.

Here was an extraordinary assemblage of plants! Perhaps the most spectacular were the swathes of *Paris incompleta* but complemented by *Polgonatum verticillatum* and *glaberrimum*, *Arum orientale*, *Galium odorata* and *Oxalis acetosella* - it left an unforgettable image in the mind. This area was on

the edge of a meadow where we found *Anemone caucasica* and our first *Dactylorhiza euxina* colony. There were good numbers of Pearl-bordered fritillaries and wood whites of uncertain species. On the way back to the minibus Sheila found the tiny *Gentiana aquatica* on a moist bank. Everybody wanted to see this diminutive gem and Celia very generously held her diffuser while a queue of grateful photographers took its picture. Our picnic was taken on the way back on the banks of the Aragvi river. We had planned to visit a pretty waterfall on the other side but the old bridge had been washed away by recent heavy rains and its temporary replacement looked decidedly dodgy and we thought better of the idea. We stopped to admire a wet cliff face with various *Draba* and *Saxifraga* species giving a few ID headaches. Diana was last on the minibus; as we had prepared to leave she had found a fantastic display of fungi erupting from a cowpat. We made one last stop for Kay to photograph a recently installed hydro-electric power plant. While we were waiting for her we found the Tamarisk relative, *Myricaria germanica* in the river gravels, and *Androsace villosa* on some boulders. We also put up some Common Sandpipers.

Our last stop of the day was at the Gudauri lake. This involved a bit of trek up a steep windy track. It was clearly unsuitable for the minibus but Valikho very kindly offered to take those that wanted to up in his rather nice personal 4x4. At the top we crossed a meadow with thickets of *Rhododendron luteum*. Growing in amongst them were pretty blue *Scilla armena* and, around the edges, hundreds of *Ornithogalum aff schmalhauseni*. Judy found the tiniest specimen of *Anemone caucasica* imaginable. Kay was rather scathing about the merits of the *Scilla* until getting a 'close-up' and was then very willing to capitulate. We found yellow and purple forms of *Dactylorhiza flavescens* before walking across a meadow studded with *Potentilla crantzii* and relaxing by the lake for a while before heading home.

## To Kazbegi and the Dariel Gorge

Before the rest of the group arrived for breakfast, Kurt, Sandy and Celia did a bit of birdwatching through the window from the comfort of the dining room. The morning light was fantastic and brought out the colours of Common Rosefinch beautifully. We also had Tree Pipit and Red-fronted Serins which were a particular thrill for the American pair as, in Sandy's words, they were a 'lifer'.

On our way to Kazbegi we simply couldn't resist one more look at the *Fritillaria latifolia* which were now at their absolute best. We were made very aware of just how important timing can be on these trips as the *Galanthus* flowers had now completely finished. While the others were busy snapping, Kurt and Tolcha had a wander on the other side of the road and found a large colony of *Fritillaria collina* and also some superb *Primula auriculata* in very deep shades of purple.

Having traversed the Cross Pass once more we made a stop for supplies. The group took the opportunity to photograph the imposing 5033m peak of Kazbegi. From Kazbegi we drove down the spectacular Dariel Gorge before stopping near the village of Tsdo. Here Kurt tempted Sandy, Judy and Diana up a slope with the promise of wonderful things such as the very local *Fritillaria orientalis* with its arching stems hanging from upright damp shady rock faces. Amongst the other firsts for the trip there were *Pulsatilla violacea*, *Pedicularis acmodonta* and a few *Orchis pinetorum*. Lunch was taken overlooking the valley, where David explained we were looking at a classic truncated shingle fan. The experience was made even better by flypasts of Crag Martins and Alpine Swifts and the calls of competing Corncrakes. Around us were dense thickets of



concolorous Sea Buckthorn and thorny *Pyrus* species providing perfect habitat for the numerous pairs of Red-backed Shrikes. After lunch we carried on further down to the valley to the Russian border to collect permits for our last stop. While Shamil was organizing things we managed to botanise the nearby cliffs. We found pretty *Muscari pallens* on rock ledges along with a few *Silene pygmaea* and *Campanula bellidifolia*.

The last stop of the day was up the Gveleti valley, we were ferried up a few at a time to the pass by Valikho. Here were the first few flowers of *Rhododendron caucasicum* and huge drifts of the fresh rosettes of *Veratrum lobelianum*. As is usual in this location Ring Ouzels and Red-fronted Serins were numerous and we saw a few Rock Buntings, too. As we gathered together, Valikho had organized tea and biscuits for us. We had just enough time to enjoy our refreshments before an ugly black cloud appeared from nowhere and helped make the decision that it was time for home.

## Juta Valley

It had rained very heavily during the night but had completely cleared by dawn. Sandy, Celia and Kurt took full advantage of the situation and went for a walk before breakfast around the fringes of the conifer plantation above the hotel. Around and about there were many *Pulsatilla violacea* and, on a steep bank of course grasses, plenty of *Primula amoena*. It was very pleasing for Sandy as we found white examples of both for him to photograph. We also found an unusually large group of Moonwort that were noticed by Kurt when retrieving a dropped lens cap.

After breakfast we all headed up the Juta valley just a few miles from the hotel. We enjoyed the scenery of high valley tops cloaked in the dark blankets of still dormant *Rhododendron caucasicum* contrasting with the bright fresh young leaves of *Populus tremulus* and various other trees waking from their slumber.

We noticed some Northern and Black-eared Wheatears on the move and inordinate numbers of Cuckoo which always seem particularly abundant at this time of year in the Juta valley - Tolcha even managed a superb photograph of one in flight without the benefit of special camera gear. Our first stop was at a stream where we had seen *Puschkinia scilloides* for the last two years. There were butterflies here too including a confusing mix of difficult-to-identify 'Grizzled' Skippers and Northern Wall Brown.

Our next stop was at the top of the valley at the village of Juta. It is an idyllic place of very basic traditional mountain houses packed cheek by jowl around little smallholdings with free range everything walking around the heaps of dung dried in blocks for burning in winter. Depending on your point of view the place has been trashed rather by the building of a tacky hotel to service the many hikers that come this way. As we crossed the river that goes through the village we had a Dipper fly over our heads. Kurt had only just finished saying how unusual it was to see a Dipper from underneath when it did the same thing coming back the other way!

The track above the village is rather steep so the group went up at varying speeds. When we got to the plateau we were treated to views of the amazing jagged peak of Jaukhi (3842m). As is usual, Tolcha had literally run up to the plateau to check if *Gentiana pyrenaica* was in flower, and indeed it was! Sandy and Celia yet again generously obliged the diffuser vampires to give nice

soft light to bring out the best of the wonderful blue of this species. A few hundred yards away we checked for *Fritillaria collina* that was in much greater numbers than last year. By this time the various ailing hips and knees had been stoically ignored and we had all made it. It was certainly worth the effort to see the flowers and magnificent views of the valley. While Sandy and Kurt were taking photographs of the *Fritillaria*, a Cuckoo landed on a wire just a few feet away. It had just settled when a Water Pipit, and then another, came to see it off. It was one of those never-to-be-repeated magical natural history moments.

We went back down the valley for our lunch stop in one of the many side valleys that run into the Jura. While lunch was being prepared we spread out to botanise the rocky slopes around us. Of particular interest were couple of endemics – on more stable soil *Erysimum iberica*, and on shady rock faces *Draba osetica*. Rodney found a single *Campanula saxifraga* and then demonstrated why *Thalictrum foetidum* is so called by crushing a leaf and wafting it under our noses. Next stop was in the village of Sno where people were keen to photograph the picturesque ruins of a small castle and look around the pretty little church nearby.

On our return to Kazbegi some of the group wanted to visit the church of Tsminda Sameba perched high up above the town. Valikho took them up in his trusty 4 x 4 while the rest were keen to see the plants we had found in the morning. We spent a bit of time admiring the *Pulsatilla* and *Primulas* and Diana found the very beautiful, tiny yellow *Viola caucasica*.

We all met back at the hotel and prepared ourselves for the ‘travelling’ day in the morning.

## To Bakuriani

We set off in good time towards Bakuriani. Our last journey of the trip across the Cross Pass was interrupted near the top by a flock of sheep some three thousand strong, which provided a photo opportunity for some who wanted to get out of the minibus to get amongst them. After fifteen minutes or so the last stragglers passed us and we continued on our way. We reached the outskirts of Tblisi before turning east onto the recently built motorway. The countryside was quite different here with broad plains of orchards and arable farmland. The change of habitat brought a different set of birds with seemingly a Corn Bunting or Black-headed Bunting perched up on every other telegraph pole along the way. We also had our first Crested Larks since David Gareja, playing ‘chicken’ with the traffic. After an hour or so we turned off at Igoeti. *Paeonia* enthusiast Judy had waited patiently (well almost) for this moment as it is the locus classicus for *Paeonia tenuifolia* in Georgia. We pulled over at the site. It was now pretty warm so Valikho started to prepare lunch in the shade as Kurt led an excited Judy through the labyrinth of spiny shrubs that the *Paeonia* frequents. Sadly the *Paeonia* weren’t in flower, though it was a thrill for Judy all the same to see them in the wild. After lunch we had an explore and found lots of new plants including *Adonis aestivalis*, *Eremostachys iberica*, *Papaver armena* and *Orobanche ramosa* to name but a few. Butterflies included several Silver-studded and Adonis Blues along with a few Large Wall Brown and Small Heath.

As we approached Borjomi we could see mountains in the distance and the roadsides became ‘cliffier’ once more. As we drove along we could see lots of *Campanula hohenackeri* and *Centranthus longifolia* clinging to the rock faces as well as the huge dustbin-lid-sized umbels of *Heracleum antasiaticum* in deeper soils.

Our last stop of the day was about half way up the road between Borjomi and Bakuriani. This has become a traditional Greentours stop with a rich diversity of woodland and meadow habitats to explore. Before long we found one of our 'target' species - *Paeonia caucasica* - the flowers had barely finished as many of the plants were only just beginning to set seed. Orchids were plentiful with large groups of *Orchis simia* in the woodland edge and *Orchis caucasica*, *Plathantha chlorantha* plus *Cephalanthera longifolia* and *kotschyana* further in. In the meadow which was a sea of Ox-eye daisies was yet another orchid, this time a nicely coloured form of the sometimes rather drab *Orchis coriophora*. Sandy was right when he said how sometimes even the most common things can be stunning. He was referring to the Daisies which really were something to behold. Of the butterflies, by far the most common were Glanville Fritillaries. This was a new species to Sandy and a mating pair conveniently stayed perfectly still to add to his picture library. Time was pushing on and reluctant as we were to leave, we pressed on for the last few miles to our hotel in Bakuriani.

## **Kharaguli National park**

We were going to go to the Javakheti plateau today but it had been a very wet night and the mountains around us were shrouded in thick cloud. We decided to head for lower altitudes to see if the weather would be better. We stopped just a few miles down the road lured by a meadow full of *Dactylorhiza*. Both *Dactylorhiza euxina* and *Dactylorhiza caucasica* were here and, unsurprisingly, some intermediates. Diana found some beautiful groups of *Viola kuepferi*, the local version of Heartsease mostly associated here with the disturbed soil on anthills. In the shade of *Picea* were spikes of emerging *Lilium szovitsianum* and flowering *Valeriana alliarifolia*.

Our next stop was just a little further down the road for *Cephalanthera kotschyana* and *Campanula stevenii*. On a *Salix* stump a beautiful moss green lichen (*Lobaria* sp) attracted much interest. A gigantic specimen of *Dactylorhiza euxina* with two rather dwarf *Dactylorhiza caucasica* seemingly growing out of the same hole had us scratching our heads. As we headed for our next stop the roadsides became 'cliffy' once more and we passed several *Saxifraga rotundifolia*.

We then arrived at another of our 'Greentours' stops on a crumbly hillside for *Coluteocarpus vesicaria* which, as the name doubly implies, has inflated 'bladders' for seed pods. We were in luck as this year not only were they plentiful, there were one or two flowers hanging on too. We found lots of new flowers for the trip. On the less stable soil lots of bright orange *Papaver fugax* of which there was no sign the previous year and *Psephellus meschetica*. On rocky parts mats of *Astragalus microcephalus* and *Scutellaria sosnowskyi* stole the show. Above us Booted Eagle and Common Buzzards struggled to find enough thermals to climb on. It took a bit of effort to drag people from the scene but eventually we did manage it and head for Borjomi where we needed to collect permits to visit the local nature reserves. While this was going on, Kurt and Valikho slipped away on a covert 'cake run' as it was Rodney's birthday the next day. Armed with permits we headed on to the Likani valley in the Borjomi-Kharaguli National Park. The Likani is a typical valley of the Kharaguli, being one of steep forested slopes with a small fast running river cutting through it. We parked up at the entrance and started to explore. In the woodland edge were swathes of *Helleborus caucasicus* in fruit and some fine specimens of *Lathyrus roseus*. Kurt and Judy went a special quest to find more *Paeonia caucasica*. They were rather sparse at first but then they chanced upon some small seedlings that had clearly set from cascading down the



steep slope above. Following the botanical paper chain, sure enough there were some mature specimens higher up. After our picnic we made our way up the river. The river edges were dominated by *Alnus barbatulus* and the very large leaved Caucasian Buckthorn, *Rhamnus imeretina*. The weather got wetter and wetter but didn't stop us enjoying new plants like *Valeriana tilifolia*, *Euphorbia oblongifolia* and *Gentiana asclepiadea*. The now familiar *Cephalanthera longifolia* and *Platanthera chlorantha* were joined by Birds nest *Neottia nidus-avis* and *Dactylorhiza urvilleana*. The weather, however, was completely unsuitable for spotting the butterflies for which the valley is famous and all we managed to see were Speckled Wood and Meadow Brown. On our way back we found a single mature *Sorbus torminalis* and on the banks two very showy yellow-flowered *Vicia* species - *crocea* and *balansae*; although the flowers are similar the foliage couldn't be more different, showing two extremes of the family. We had barely set off when Rodney pointed out a specimen of *Stapelia pinnata* – it was interesting to see what it really looked like as we had all rather tentatively eaten it as a pickled local delicacy in Gudauri. It just so happened that another 'new' plant was growing on the bank opposite. It was the pretty 'daisy' *Pyrethrum roseum*.

## Above and around Bakuriani

If anything the weather on the mountain tops looked even worse than yesterday so again we abandoned any hope of trying the Javakheti plateau. It would have been unthinkable to deny Judy the chance of seeing *Paeonia steveniana*, one of our targets for the day - so the decision was made to put on full wet gear and at least head the couple of miles above the village to our usual site for it. It was only about twenty minutes before we arrived at the scene. We could just make out the great primrose-yellow mop heads of the Peonies through the steamed up windows. Undeterred by wading through soaking wet vegetation, we all hurried to get a closer view. One benefit of seeing the *Paeonia* in the wet is the spectacle of the silvery beads of water that collect on the leaves. When the plants were photographed from just about every conceivable angle we set off just a bit higher up the valley. We stopped to look at a small colony of *Orchis pallens*. In the surrounding meadows there were thousands of the now very familiar *Dactylorhiza*. Huge *Heracleum* are a real feature of the Georgian countryside and up here the dominant species was a new one to us – *Heracleum wilhelmsianum*. We also added creamy yellow *Pedicularis armena*, *Cerastium purpurescens* and *Polygonum carneum* to the plantlist. Feeling brave, we decided to go just a bit further up the mountain to a promontory where, in better weather, we sometimes put up a scope to search for Caucasian Blackcock on the opposite side of the valley. We couldn't see more than a hundred feet today, so there was no chance of Blackcock, however around and about we found plenty of flowers. In the meadow areas were countless *Primulas* and *Pulsatilla georgica*. On rocky slopes we found *Muscari sosnowskyii*, *Erigeron alpinus*, *Campanula aucheri* and narrow endemic *Medicago dzhawakhetica*. Having had just about enough of the weather we headed back down the mountain.

Luckily the hotel allowed us to have our picnic in the dining room. A few hot drinks later the rain had relented just enough to stimulate renewed enthusiasm for going outside. Shamil led us above the village to a 'make do and mend' picnic spot. He had brought us to see *Galanthus caucasicus* in fruit and *Colchicum speciosum* in a similar state. We then went to a pond and found *Alisma plantago-aquatica* in flower, in the background, male Marsh Frogs were making a right old din trying to impress the girls. Again the weather took a turn for the worse and the group became ever smaller as people headed back for the warmth of the hotel.

In the evening we reconvened for dinner but this was a special occasion, namely Rodney's birthday. Kurt went and retrieved the cake we had bought in Borjomi from the kitchen fridge and walked forward as everybody sang 'Happy Birthday'. Georgian confections are usually a seriously camped up affair and this was no exception. If it wasn't for the candles and gooey consistency of the icing you could be forgiven for thinking it was one of Liberace's piano stool cushions. It was a great end to a day where we had made the most of the positives that came our way.

## Javakheti Plateau

There wasn't a great improvement in the weather today but it was now or never for the Javakheti plateau. We followed yesterday's footsteps, driving through pristine Beech forest with some superb specimen trees before stopping at the promontory. This time we could see right across the valley and the 'snow' of thousands and thousands of *Anemone fasciculata* stretching as far as you could see in all directions. As we drove we passed meadows of countless *Primulas* of various species that were finally dominated by *Primula algida* as we approached the top of the pass. Just before the top the vegetation was dominated by *Rhododendron caucasica*. The snow had only recently retreated and the rhododendrons were still 'black' and only just stirring from dormancy. As we reached the plateau everywhere was shrouded in dense mist. We stopped at the security post to present our passports for what seemed an age in the chill. We could hear, but couldn't see, parachuting pipits in the gloom. Finally we were allowed to continue and hopes were raised as by chance the mist began to clear a little. We stopped just a short way along the road. The main target for today was *Scilla rosenii* and we found them in abundance. The pretty blue of the *Scilla* was complemented perfectly by the yellow of *Gagea sulfurea* and *Caltha palustris*. We found a single clump of *Primula pallasii* a bit like a *P. ruprechtii* that's been working out and much more clump forming. We also found what we had been calling *Veronica gentianoides* from the window of the moving minibus turned out to be another similar species - *Veronica schistosa*.

Next stop was to look at *Muscari sosnowskyi* in the turf. Shamil clambered over some rocks nearby to photograph a Saxifrage and dropped his expensive camera. It rolled and clattered from one rock to another but amazingly was pretty much unscathed. We travelled just a bit further along and stopped for yet another huge panorama filled with *Anemone fasciculata*. This time there were quite a lot of pink specimens that kept the photographers busy for quite a while. We then pushed on towards Tabatskouri a large isolated lake in the shadow of the two and a half thousand meter extinct volcano 'Tavkvetili'. As we approached the lake we passed through strips of cultivated land. In the recently tilled rich soil we saw a stunning Black-headed Wagtail. At the lake itself there were hunting Marsh Harrier, Black-necked Grebe and, most exciting of all, the 'special' bird of the lake - Velvet Scoter. We had a most enjoyable picnic in this spectacular location. On the way back we stopped for a colony of *Doronicum oblongifolium* that we had somehow managed to overlook earlier. While on hands and knees getting low angled shots it became apparent that the turf was full of tiny *Bellevalia paradoxa* with the flowers being the darkest possible blue without actually being black.

When we got back to Bakuriani the weather had improved dramatically. We had just enough time for one more stop and were very fortunate that the lady at the Bakuriani botanic garden had agreed to open it for us as a special favour. This is a delightful place and completely

unpretentious. The main collection is of Caucasian plants with a special emphasis on *Paeonia*. All of the species known in Georgia are represented here. They all looked completely at home in this semi-natural setting and well they might. *Paeonia stevenii* and *Paeonia caucasica* grow wild just a few miles higher and lower respectively.

## Zekaris Pass

Overnight we had transferred to Arkaltsike, a border town close to both Armenia and Turkey. The town itself is dominated by an impressive castle. Kurt explained to the group that the name translates as 'New Castle' which seemed to be of interest, however with his quip that perhaps the locals should refer to themselves as 'Geordians', he inadvertently added Tumbleweed to the local flora.

Today we hired a couple of extra 4x4s as we were heading for the Zekaris pass. Our first stop was just a few miles out of town on a crumbly slope that is home to an array of very interesting *Fabaceae*. Pride of place belonged to the beautiful endemic *Onobrychis meschetica*, but not far behind was the stunning blue *Hedysarum sericeum* and *Astragalus bungeanum*. Above the noise of frequent cars going past at terrifying speed we could hear Hoopoe, Golden Oriole and Cetti's Warbler, and above us circled dark phase Booted Eagle.

Not long after presenting permits to enter the Zekaris it became very obvious why we needed 4x4s. The track became tricky and the expertise of the drivers was frequently needed. The area is remote and barely visited by outsiders giving a feeling of real wilderness. Our first stop on the way up was at a rocky meadow covered in flowers. In the sunshine butterflies were everywhere, most common of which were Mazarine Blue and Glanville Fritillary. We also had our first Scarce Swallowtails of the trip and a Green Hairstreak (*Calophrys* sp) posed 'flat' on yellow *Alyssum* to absorb maximum sunshine. There were also masses of *Orchis pinetorum* dotted around and another pretty 'new' *Astragalus* species - this time it was *Astragalus polygala* draping itself over rocks. Gradually gaining altitude, we drove for another few miles before finding a large colony of *Dactylorhiza flavescens* in purple and yellow forms with a few intermediate colour forms as well. There were groups of a showy form of perhaps the showiest of all Caucasian *Pedicularis* - *willhelmsiana*. Amongst the *Abies* hundreds of *Cephalanthera longifolia* and just as many emerging spikes of *Lilium szovitsianum*. Making a visit in June is high at the top of Kurt's list of things to do before he dies! Before we set off again we added Woodland Ringlet to the butterfly list but the weather was changing and butterflies were getting harder to find.

We moved further still before stopping at a roadside bank to admire *Corydalis angustifolia* amongst a gorgeous combination of *Anemone caucasica*, *Muscari sosnowskyi* and *Ornithogalum*, probably *Ornithogalum balansae*. Sandy and Celia said it was a good job they weren't in charge of stops as we wouldn't have got as far as we had by now. Looking at the sky Kurt suggested that we needed to get our skates on and get up high as quick as possible, but inevitably contradicted himself when we came across a vast colony of *Primula auriculata* that simply had to be photographed!

Eventually we arrived at our usual picnic spot, a group of shepherds' shacks on a small plateau with the most extraordinary panoramic view of the Turkish mountains in the distance. From here we scrambled to get to the nearby *Rhododendron caucasica* which were fortuitously in perfect

flower on this occasion. The threat of rain passed briefly and we were amongst the plants in wonderful diffused sunshine which proved perfect for photographing the difficult to expose creamy colours of the Rhododendrons. On the way back we had time to admire many *Fritillaria latifolia* and *Scilla siberica caucasica*. On the way to the top of the pass there were even more *Fritillaria* and *Scilla* but this time they were growing amongst masses of *Trollius patulus*. At the very top of the pass we had fantastic views of not only the Turkish mountains but also the very highest peaks of the Greater Caucasus over the border in Russia. We were a few hundred meters higher than our picnic stop and the extensive swathes of the Rhododendron were only just coming into leaf. We found soft yellow *Pulsatilla albana* here along with *Gentiana angulosa* including some very pale specimens. On rocky outcrops we found *Onosma caucasica*, *Draba meshetica* and an *Androsace* that caused a bit of discussion. There was mention of *Androsace albana* but eventually we settled on the more likely *Androsace intermedia*. The weather suddenly worsened yet again and we made a hasty get away. When we were just a short way from leaving the reserve the weather perked up a bit. Kurt saw one of his favourite plants of the area, the enigmatic Stemless Bitumen Pea - *Psoralea acaulis*. It wasn't actually flowering prompting Judy to make the rather unkind remark, 'is that it?' Needless to say Kurt felt it important to defend the plant's honour and eventually found one in bloom, before we made our way back to the hotel.

## To Tblisi and Nichbisi

Today we needed to make our way back to Tblisi. We set off in good time but Kurt, now a veteran of three consecutive Georgia trips knew that he wouldn't get past the outskirts of Arkaltsike in a hurry and so it proved to be. The 'problem' was the extraordinary display of arable weeds. We stopped by some fields that were a mass of *Consolida orientalis*, *Papaver commutatum*, *Trigonella caerulea* and yellow *Crepis* sp. The spectacle kept people occupied for half an hour or more. There were Chimneysweeper moths and *Plejebus* species - almost certainly Silver-studded Blue, but with atypical smudged red lunules that caused a bit of puzzlement. Our next stop was half an hour or so further on. We were in the Mtkvari valley and the cliffy roadsides had plenty of flowers to admire including *Centaurea bella*, *Vicia variabilis*, *Asperula arvensis*, *Dianthus aff ruprechtii* and the very local *Jurinea carthalinica*. We added Green-underside Blue to the butterfly list, too. On the other side of the road we watched what we thought were elver fishermen using a similar large net to the ones we see back at home. They were leaning over the banks at enormous risk to themselves as the river was very swollen and angry. If they fell in they would almost certainly never get out again. Through binoculars we could see they were catching just a few tiny silver fish about the size of sprats, how they could detect them in the sediment thick water remained a mystery.

We drove on for a while longer and saw Yellow-legged Gull, Hoopoe, Black Kite and Sparrowhawk from the minibus. Our next stop was to photograph the picturesque Khertvisi castle perched on top of a great crag. Around the minibus we found lots of *Pegandum hamala*. The sky was filled with chattering Bee-eaters and there were Green Woodpeckers yaffling away in the background. A few miles further on and the roadside cliffs became much higher and naturally terraced. One discrete stretch of about half a mile or so is home to a colony of *Eremurus spectabilis*. Despite its name it is among the less showy in the genus but nevertheless they looked amazing in their backlit ranks along the ledges of the cliffs. A few miles further on we chanced upon a colony

of the very attractive cream flowers of *Salvia compar*. Among them were *Linum austriacum* and *Astragalus mollis*. Above us was what would prove to be the only Short-toed Eagle of the trip. As we left the Mtkvari valley we drove for some time through a very bleak landscape of impoverished villages and bare hillsides until we reached the Georgian 'lake district'. As we usually do up here we had our picnic in one of the very convenient bus shelters. After lunch we made haste towards Tblisi as we needed to check into the hotel before setting off yet again to Nichbisi for our very last site before going home.

Our last stop, Nichbisi, is a fantastic bit of limestone habitat about ten miles or so outside of Tblisi. Amongst the stunted thickets of *Carpinus* and *Cotinus* we found some orchids, among them *Anacamptis pyramidalis* and the fruiting stems of *Orchis caucasica* plus a single *Orchis punctulata*. On sparser soils created by the crumbling limestone we found *Artemesia splendens*, *Scutellaria orientalis*, *Onobrychis angustifolium* and drifts of *Hedysarum sericea*. We also found the strange umbellifer - *Laza triloba*, a wonderful plant whose unflowered rosettes resemble a *Thalictrum* or a robust *Aquilegia*, but whose two foot high umbels eventually give the game away.

We would have enjoyed staying here much longer but much too soon we had to make our way back to the hotel to ready ourselves for our flights home the next morning.