

Kythnos

Wildlife at Leisure

21st – 27th March 2022

Led by Kurt Vickery & David Koutsogiannopoulos

We arrived at a very wet and windy Athens and transferred to the ferry at Lavrio. The wind made the crossing a bit exciting but as evening fell we could see the lights of the mainland disappear as those on Kythnos came into view and it wasn't long before we were on the island and eating a lovely meal in the port before settling in at our hotel.

Around Velidi

The weather had been unseasonably cold of late, so much so that the locals seemed completely unprepared for it (in fact the whole Aegean region of both Greece and Turkey had a fiercely cold and wet spell this spring – very unusual – ed). Undeterred we set off enthusiastically in search of flowers. Just a few miles from our hotel above the Velidi valley we stopped for good numbers of the purple-magenta form of *Anemone pavonina*. Soon we were finding plenty of beautiful Orchids – *Ophrys tenthredinifera* and *Ophrys bombyliflora* being particularly numerous. Just before getting back on the minibus we noticed a bank with lots of *Trifolium uniflorum*. This gorgeous thing is most unusual for a Clover – at first glance its prostrate mats of radiating pink flowers give it the look of an *Astragalus*, only the distinctive leaves giving the game away. Our next stop was at a location where David had found *Ophrys iricolor* a few days before. Further searching revealed some new species for the trip as well, including *Ophrys ferrum-equinum*, *Ophrys sicula* (or *Ophrys lutea* s.l.) and some spikes of *Anacamptis sancta* just beginning to show. Perhaps more exciting was our first specimen of *Fritillaria tuntasia* possibly not recorded at this site before. We then popped down to Merichas for lunch before heading to possibly the largest known colony of *Fritillaria tuntasia* at Diasela. Several tens of their fabulous near-black shining bells were found but unfortunately the wind was so strong as to make hanging around unpleasant so we resolved to return in a few days and so moved on. We didn't need to travel far to the much more sheltered plateau above Kastelas. Our target was *Anacamptis papilionacea*. We found them quite easily but they weren't abundant this season and most were skulking in the protection of spiny *Sarcopterium*. They were, however, in perfect condition and the few that were out in the open afforded a great photographic opportunity. Other highlights were innumerable *Ophrys lutea* and *Ophrys bombyliflora*, the latter being mostly absolutely tiny in stature. We also found some magnificent *Mandragora officinarum* in perfect condition. Our last stop of the day was at Flambouria beach. David wanted to show us a huge colony of *Pancratium maritimum*. Obviously they had long since stopped flowering but with thousands and thousands of bulbs it was easy to envisage the spectacle that would follow in due course. The bulbs were interspersed with a wonderful display of *Mattiola tricuspidata* and *Cakile maritima* – their lilac shades contrasting beautifully with the yellow mats of *Medicago marina*. The biting wind had done its best but failed to spoil a fantastic first day of botanising.

Kakavoulo and Loutra area

After breakfast we set off to one of the higher parts of the island around the little church of Ag Athanasios to get an idea of the lie of the land. From high up we could see that most of the land was divided into fields and terraces. Inaccessible gullies were wooded with relict populations of *Pistacia* and *Juniperus phoenicea* that once would have covered the island. We then travelled along the road between Ag Sostis and Loutra stopping for a very fine colony of *Fritillaria tuntasia*. Orchids were again abundant and we found some stunning specimens of *Ophrys iricolor*, some of which were in excess of 30cm tall. There were also other specimens, closely related but that didn't seem quite to fit any known species. They were probably just variants or maybe hybrids but hard to imagine with what. Everywhere we walked was the delicious aroma of Thyme. Our searches revealed lots more of the now familiar *Ophrys ferrum-equinum* and *Ophrys tenthredinifera*. There were also many spikes of *Anacamptis collina* but these were well and truly finished, probably having first flowered in February. We then had coffee at the old harbour of Loutra before moving on to the sheltered bay at Ag Eirini for lunch. After we had eaten we botanised the varied habitats finding our first *Romulea bulbocodium* in a number of colour forms on crumbly banks. The nearby cliffs were host to dazzling displays of colourful flowers, mainly common things like *Silene colorata*, *Malcomia nexensis*, *Vicia villosa* and *Hypericum procumbens*. As we left we added Common Sandpiper and Grey Wagtail to the bird list. We then made our way back to the hotel stopping on a sharp bend near the sea as we had seen some spectacular *Leopoldia cycladica* – A rather special 'Tassel Hyacinth' in lovely purple and yellow shades. We also found a really nice spiny Knapweed – *Centaurea spruneri* - and an early flowering *Bituminaria bituminosa*. Our last stop of the day was at the islands rubbish tip where we saw lots of Ravens and Yellow-legged Gulls and a single Long-legged Buzzard.

Vyrokastro

After a very stormy night we awoke to a bright and still day and so revisited some sites to see the flowers out of the wind. On the way to the 'papilionacea site' at Kastelas, Diana noticed a splendid male Pallid Harrier sailing serenely in the opposite direction as we drove along. Taking more photos with the warm sun on our backs was a much more pleasurable experience. It was then on to the ancient archaeological ruins of Vyrokastro which translates to 'Mossy castle'. Between the old walls were lots of *Fritillaria tuntasia* in perfect condition which were a joy to see but a clump of three really tall plants (45cm+) with multiple buds was a tantalising two or three days away from flowering. Next to the Fritillary's were some specimens of *Ruta chalepensis*, an understated beauty with unusual greeny-yellow flowers that look more and more attractive the closer you look at them. Returning to the hotel we found a field full of The Widow Iris – *Hermodactylus tuberosus* in a number of colour forms – the vast majority had been damaged by last night's downpour but there were still enough in good condition to enjoy their curious blooms. In the evening we went for a very pleasant dinner at Hora. On the way back Diana asked if it would be alright to stop and admire the stars. We were all so glad she did as the constellations were absolutely spectacular in skies completely free of light pollution.

Loutra

At last a lovely sunny warm and still day, perfect for a boat trip out of Loutra to explore the remote cliffs and islets. We were met by our skipper, the ever-cheerful Christos and his wife, and soon sailing out of the harbour. Our main quarry for the day were the endangered Monk Seal. David gave us a seemingly pessimistic 20% chance of seeing them which sadly turned out

to be prophetic. You need to chance upon the right place and the right time and on this occasion we didn't. It was still a marvellous trip and we were amply compensated with sparkling azure seas and stunning scenery. We got really close views of cliff nesting Mediterranean Shags – the chicks panting with frenzied gullets trying to keep cool in the very sun-exposed sites. Perhaps most exciting for everybody were really good views of a Bonelli's Eagle hovering above the cliffs and an even closer encounter with a Short-toed Eagle that flew right over us seeming to have come over the open sea. On the way back to port Christos took us into some little coves hoping that we might have one last chance to see the seals – we didn't but Kingfishers flying backwards and forwards were a real joy. Arriving back at Loutra we had to gather our things and get to the ferry to make our way back to the mainland. There was still plenty of sunny daylight when we got on the ferry and those who stayed on deck were treated to some very pleasant mobile seawatching where amongst many sea birds we saw lots of Cory's Shearwater and the much less frequently seen Yelkouan Shearwater.

Marathon area and Schinias wetlands

Leaving our hotel in Lavrio we stopped at what at first sight was a rather unattractive wasteland. Piles of rubble and broken glass were otherwise bejewelled with some very special plants: The lovely Stock – *Mattiola sinuata* -stole the show amongst the dicots, along with *Pallenis spinosa*, *Trifolium grandiflorum* and swathes of showy *Chrysanthemum coronarium*. We were also treated to some superb clumps of a new Orchid for the trip – *Ophrys attica*. Our next stop was at the largest remaining tracts of Stone Pine forest in Greece, on the outskirts of Marathon. The Pines mixed with *Juniperus phoenicea* and *Pistacea* create a labyrinthine habitat with perfect conditions for Orchids – There were plentiful *Himantoglossum robertianum* in a number of colour forms and countless *Ophrys ferrum-equinum*, *Ophrys tenthredinifera* and another new one – *Ophrys aesculapii*. On a nearby beach there were sparse but nonetheless pretty colonies of *Mattiola tricuspidata*. We then went to Dikastika, a rather well-to-do suburb of Marathon, to search for *Fritillaria obliqua* an endemic of Attica and closely related to *Fritillaria tuntasia* (possibly synonymous depending on which botanist you talk to) that we had seen on Kythnos. We found several dozen plants but alas they were in really quite advanced fruit. Again lots of *Ophrys* were here but *Ophrys ferrum-equinum* was by far the most common. The road verges were home to a number of very attractive peas including *Lotus tetragonolobus*, *Lathyrus cicera*, *Vicia melanops* and *Tripodion tetraphyllum*. Our last stop of the day was at the Schinias wetlands nature reserve. As we started walking along one of the many paths that traverse the marshes we flushed three Green Sandpipers and enjoyed views of a very confiding Black-headed Wagtail (Feldegg race). Among the usual wildfowl on the lakes were a number of Ferruginous Ducks. David was keen to find Tree Frogs for us. We searched for quite some time but it was only when we had pretty much given up that one jumped onto the track in front of us. It was great to see it and a really good way to end the day.

Hymettus and Vravra

Our first visit of the day was on the small mountain of Hymettus (Ymmitos), a remarkably bio-diverse place right on the very edge of Athens. Having negotiated a long series of tight hair-pin bends we arrived on a plateau near the summit which afforded amazing views of the great sprawl of the city below. We spent some time exploring the short turf and found many treasures. One of the most beautiful was the narrow-endemic *Viola hymmetia* – a delightful tiny 'Field Pansy' - growing in the company of *Veronica glauca* and the tiny purple stars of *Romulea linaresii ssp graeca*. There were also lots of robust rosettes of *Himantoglossum robertianum* that

were only just beginning to send up their spikes, as we were considerably higher than at any other time during the trip. After an enjoyable half an hour or so we descended almost to the bottom of the mountain among dense Pine habitat. Here were lots of *Fritillaria graeca* and in places great swathes of *Anemone pavonina*, mostly lilac but some with white zones. This time the main Orchid species was *Ophrys sicula* with a single *Ophrys mycenensis* (recently separated and possibly just a form of *Ophrys scolopax*). Our last stop of the day, and indeed of the trip, was at the Temple of Artemis and the estuary and wetlands at Vravra. The rocky hillside above the estuary was a flowery spectacle of common wildflowers, mainly the lacey white *Tordylium apulum*, *Anchusella variegata* and pink *Silene colorata* here and there interspersed with shocking red forms of *Anemone pavonina*. Yet more Orchids, this time mainly *Ophrys tenthreninifera* and *Ophrys ferrum-equinum*, with some beautiful hybrids between the two. As you might expect, these were almost exactly intermediate in appearance with deepest magenta tepals. (On returning home I have found that this hybrid has been named *Ophrys x feldwegiana*). As if the flowers weren't enough there was some great birding too – Species included Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Ruff, Curlew, a Godwit too far away to identify and Ringed Plover to name but a few.