

The Peloponnese

Autumn Bulbs of Sparta

A Greentours Tour Report

22nd – 29th October 2018

Leader: Kurt Vickery & Oron Peri

Mycaenae and road to Gythio

After a relaxing breakfast in the dining room of the lovely Arxontiko Hotel we had barely left when Oron spotted a fine specimen of *Clematis flammula* in very good flower especially for the time of year. Photographs were taken and we continued to our first scheduled stop about 15 miles of tight hairpins from Kefalari . We knew from experience that there should be *Colchicum cupanii* here. They were indeed but in fewer numbers than in previous years. They were joined by a scattering of *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus*. The weather was rather cool and cloudy meaning that most of the flowers were fairly tightly shut. Oron was asked to explain the structural differences between the two genera and obliged by crouching over and gently blowing into the blooms to reveal the relevant parts. Walter whose main botanical passion is *Cyclamen* wandered off while all this was happening and found some fine examples of *Cyclamen crassifolium* mainly finding refuge in the base of spiny shrubs. . A few miles down the road we couldn't resist a floriferous colony of *Erica manipulifolia*. There was a fantastic specimen of *Cyclamen graecum* with unusually large and plump flowers growing in the exposed roots of an Olive. A quick wander around revealed lots of *Prospero autumnalis* and the wonderful aroma of disturbed volatile oils betrayed the presence of *Micromeria juliana* and *Coridothymus capitata*. There were also thousand of leaves of *Anemone pavonina* which we speculated must be an amazing sight in the spring. Not much further along the road we found a rocky bank festooned with *Sternbergia lutea sicula* and *Cyclamen graeca*. There were lots of emerging leaves too of *Urginea maritima* (Apparently this species has been placed in *Drimia* and split into a number different taxa .Those from this part of the world are now referred to by some as *Drimia numidica* – groan!). It was then on to the magnificent archaeological site of Mycaenae. Unfortunately it was raining quite heavily when we arrived so the visit was rather short . We did however find our first *Arisarum vulgare* in flower along with the now familiar *Cyclamen* and *Sternbergia*. Needless to say the characteristic birds were nowhere to be seen. To compensate we spent a most enjoyable and protracted meal in one of the very friendly tavernas in the village below. The last leg of the journey was through beautiful if wet countryside. We were going to drive non stop but a rather urgent call of nature just north of Gythio revealed a fine colony of *Crocus boryi*. As we travelled the last few miles the weather gradually improved and lifted completely just as the pretty bay of the town came into view. We just knew we were going to enjoy our stay here!

Monemvasia

We awoke to a fine morning and enjoyed breakfast overlooking the bay. The view enhanced by the occasional blue flash of a Kingfisher flying from one side to the other .Our first stop of

the day was just outside Gythio at a spot overlooking Valtaki beach, where the wreck of the Dimitrios lies just offshore in shallow water. We had stopped to look at *Narcissus tazetta* which were in nice condition which isn't always the case at this time of year. Around and about were *Allium callimischon* and *Cyclamen graecum* with a few flowering *Heliotropium hirsutissimum* too. Some of the nearby trees were draped in *Clematis cirrhosa* and on more clifly habitat *Ephedra foemina* was abundant. The scratchy calls of Sardinian warblers gave them away just as we were leaving. Next stop was just outside the town of Sykia where we walked along a boulder strewn slope. Here were a lovely combination of *Crocus goulimyi*, *Crocus boryi*, *Colchicum cupanii* and *Allium callimischon*. The slightly damp terra rossa between the boulders made a very attractive contrasting background for flower portraits of which umpteen were taken. Eventually we reached a pretty white chapel that overlooked the surrounding hills. There were some spectacular clumps of multi-flowering *Crocus boryi* here and some very nice examples *Coridothymus capitata* and the unusual Bugle - *Ajuga iva*. Butterflies were numerous especially Clouded yellow and Wall brown and there was considerable excitement when a Plain tiger sailed past. As ever Walter was simultaneously searching for the best forms of *Cyclamen* and Reptiles and reported Snake-eyed skink. Somewhere in the distance we could hear a Western rock nuthatch. We spent a bit of time scanning likely looking rocks and eventually found one showing very well. The group were delighted to see them as missing them at Mycanae was a great disappointment. Driving on, we rounded the coast and caught a glimpse of the spectacular fortified peninsula of Monemvasia. We would be visiting the town later on so continued down the coast to Agias Foukas where a tiny chapel stood in a cemetery atop a small rock in the sea, accessed only by a narrow causeway. The charming little harbour just happens to be a perfect picnic spot. Kurt and Oron prepared lunch while the group explored the nearby littoral. People gradually drifted back with reports of plentiful *Narcissus serotinus* growing amongst the spiny shrubs that dominated the area and lots of splendid male Stonechats were seen. After we had eaten it was time to concentrate on the actual reason for coming here – that being it is the Locus-classicus for *Colchicum sfikasianum*. Before any time at all we saw a few growing on crumbly roadside banks. While these were being photographed by the many, Celia looked on a hidden bank opposite and found a magnificent multi-flowered clump and in the base of a fruiting *Rhamnus alaternus* a huge deep coloured *Cyclamen graecum* that had Walter almost in a sweat!. In the meantime Oron had been determined to find more *Colchicum* and had been searching in an abandoned Olive grove about quarter of a mile back from whence we came. It was well worth the effort as he found several perfect plants in a small area. The markings on this species are usually only just discernable but one specimen had the most spectacular dark tessalation usually only found in species like *Colchicum variegatum*. It was then on to see *Crocus goulimyi leucanthus*. The medicane of a few weeks previous may have caused devastation in so many ways but on the positive side it had created perfect conditions for flowering bulbs (OK corms in this case!). It is nearly always a sight to behold the *Crocus* here but it is no exaggeration to say that the myriad blooms of 2018 were quite overwhelming in beauty and scale. It took a bit of persuasion to drag people away but we needed to press on. First port of call was the huge bank festooned with *Cyclamen crassifolium* in the village itself. The tubers are so numerous here that they end up pushing each other out of the crumbling soil. Oron speculated that some of the largest specimens were probably fifty or sixty maybe even more years old. We had spent so much time looking at flowers that our scheduled stop at Monemvasia was only long enough to get a very welcome coffee before heading back to the hotel

Harouda

Today we were heading down the 'middle finger' of the Peloponnese towards Harouda. It took about twenty minutes of winding roads to get there and within seconds of arriving we found what we were looking for. In a very pretty and well-tended Olive grove were the magnificent chequered purple goblets of *Colchicum bivonae* in the peak of condition interspersed with *Crocus boryi*. Some of the old Olives had holes in them and several opportunist *Cyclamen crassifolium* were growing out of them. The margins of the plot were full of *Calamintha nepeta* that were being attended by all sorts of butterflies but mainly 'Whites'. After half an hour or so we went to the coastal village of Vathi. This is home to another *Colchicum* species, this time *Colchicum parlatoris*. It may not be such a spectacular species as *bivonae* but it is a multi-flowering species in some cases with as many as a dozen blooms from a single bulb-like corm. The temperature had risen considerably and the diversity and numbers of butterflies increased accordingly. Several species were nectaring of the *Colchicums* including Pygmy skipper, Common blue, Meadow brown and Large wall brown. Just as we were walking away from the *Colchicums* a Plain tiger sailed past serenely. A bit further along we stopped for a colony of *Narcissus serotinus*. It looked like there weren't many flowers this year but closer inspection revealed that there were hundreds of cryptic green seed capsules and in fact we were just a little late for them at this site. In some shadier habitat we found *Asplenium ceterach* and one of the 'Birthworts' – *Aristolochia sempervirens* whilst all the time the air was pervaded by the sweet scent of *Smilax aspera*. Pushing on we stopped at the 'Fireman's memorial'. This is the locus classicus for yet another *Colchicum* – *Colchicum psaridis* (the name has recently been messed with but I reserve the right to retain it) This species is superficially similar to *Colchicum cupanii*, but the main and most obvious difference is what goes on underground ... Instead of typical *Colchicum* corms it has what are technically known as 'sobols'. These are very strange looking things that look a bit like amorphous bronze shiny chicken breast bones. We were treated to many fine flowering plants that were joined by countless *Crocus goulimy* and *boryi* as well as *Allium callimischon*. Walter had other ideas and searched fruitlessly for Swallowtail caterpillars but did turn up a Spurge hawk caterpillar searching for a suitable pupation site. It was then on to Harouda but with just one more scheduled stop for *Crocus niveus* at its type location. As usual the site delivered a great many perfect and huge specimens some rivaling a small Tulip for size. There were good numbers of *Spiranthes spiralis* which although not a huge surprise we hadn't noted them at this site before on several previous visits. After half an hour or so we at last arrived at Harouda. It takes a bit of navigating through the labyrinthine village but the effort is so worth it. We parked up by its exquisite ancient church and while the group explored lunch was prepared. There are acres and acres of long abandoned groves here which have created the perfect habitat for *Sternbergia lutea*. The plants here closely match the concept of *Sternbergia lutea lutea* with very large flowers and apple green almost stripeless leaves. Oron hypothesises that this is in fact a selection from ancient times and has been originally planted by locals around churches and houses. True or not it seems a sound enough theory and here quite literally countless bulbs have found the conditions ideal to proliferate. It was hard to pull people away as ever on these trips but as time was marching on we headed for home but with just one more stop namely Kelefi castle. The castle affords a spectacular view over the surrounding area and just happens to be a great spot for *Narcissus serotinus*. Fortuitously the bulbs were not quite so advanced as at Vathi and lots of pictures were taken and as an added bonus yet more *Spiranthes* in very nice condition were found before we returned to Gythio

Lambokampos

It was an absolutely beautiful sunny morning in Gythio, enough to tempt almost everybody out of bed early for a promenade. Walter even found time to photograph Pipefish and Blenny's from the sea wall. After yet another relaxing breakfast we headed West this time. Before too long we gained altitude pretty quickly through beautiful jagged and crumbly limestone habitat. Abundant window views of *Crocus niveus* and *Euphorbia rigida* whet our appetite before our first stop of the day. The habitat was boulder strewn with *Cistus* and several spiny shrub species. Unusually both *Arbutus andrachne* and *unedo* were growing together too. Within minutes some 'new' *Crocus* were found namely the distinctive and easy to identify *Crocus biflorus melantherus* and more ambiguous *Crocus laevigatus*, most of which were completely white with only a few showing faint feathering on the outers. There were plenty of other dicots to keep us busy including *Thymelaea tartonraira* and pretty crimson-flowered but foul smelling *Putoria calabrica*. Cirl buntings filled the air with their songs and Linnets flitted about seemingly everywhere. We then moved on and into a valley where we traditionally look for *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus*. As soon as we got out of the mini-buses we easily found them, the good light had encouraged them to open their star-like flowers wide. Some were even forcing their way through the degraded tarmac on the side of the road! We then pressed on towards the main stop of the day, climbing steadily again for a while before the long winding road down to a village. The road was lined in places with fantastic fiery-red *Cotinus* in their glorious autumnal guise along with lots of showy *Erica manipuliflora* full of flowers. In the village itself we wandered around the labyrinth of lanes and smallholdings and before too long there were 'oohs' of pleasure at the myriad *Crocus goulimy* growing in any ground that hadn't been recently cultivated. We went into an ancient meadow walled with stunning weathered stone. Amongst some fantastic old and gnarled Acers were *Cyclamen crassifolium*, *Sternbergia lutea* and of course lots of *Crocus goulimy*. But in an old threshing circle were plentiful of *Crocus laevigatus*, this time showing more of the characteristic feathering that helps to identify them. We retraced our steps for the 12km or so to the plateau that overlooks the village. Amongst the boulder strewn habitat of stunted *Abies*, *Quercus* and Juniper scrub were *Crocus boryi*, *niveus* and *biflorus melantherus* and also *hadriaticus* that seemed to prefer the margins of lightly cultivated land that the locals had somehow managed to till in this rough terrain. After lunch in a handy roadside shelter we headed back towards Gythio. A few miles on someone spotted a big colony of *Crocus boryi* which had everybody piling out to get a better view. They were joined by scattered *Colchicum cupani*. The locals in a nearby house were clearly wondering what of earth was going on especially with lots of people on their hands and knees taking photographs! We got back into Gythio with a bit of time to spare so it was a popular choice to head for the lighthouse on the peninsula that overlooks the bay. To our great surprise there were numerous *Spiranthes spiralis* (hadn't noted them here before) but it was the infinite variation amongst the *Cyclamen graecum* we had come to see. There seemed to be an endless array of leaf colour, pattern and size that kept people amused for quite some time before it was time to head back for dinner.

Vathia and Cape Matapan

Yet another fine morning – we could get used to this! We entered a steep cliffy valley and stopped to admire a pretty good specimen of *Campanula versicolor* albeit rather high up and difficult to get to. While we were busy doing this Walter had gone on characteristic walkabout and with the eyes of a hawk had picked out an Oleander hawkmoth dangling from a shrub

about thirty feet above us. How he saw it remains a great wonder to us all as it was as cryptic as could be and took a lot of describing to everybody just where it was. Eventually it was gently 'coaxed' down for a closer look where its beauty could be admired in close-up. Pressing on we passed through lots of abandoned Olive groves and in one them we saw a Golden jackal scurrying away as we approached. We drove through the town onto a plateau again a landscape of abandoned terraces. Black kites circled above and lots of Linnet flocks were moving around. There were great thickets of spiteful *Calicotome villosa* much favoured by perching Stonechat. On the botanical front there were hundreds of *Narcissus serotinus* to enjoy interspersed with *Cyclamen graecum*, *Prospero autumnalis* and a few *Colchicum parlatoris*, the latter were pretty much past their best. We next popped into the town for a walk and a coffee. On a steep rocky slope right next to the sea, we found a broad-leaved form of *Colchicum cupanii*, much like f *glossophyllum*. Lunch was taken a few miles further on at the iconic Mani village of Vathia. While the food was being prepared people wandered around. Walter excitedly returned with reports of several Spurge hawkmoth caterpillars. When we investigated further it seemed like just about all the spurges in the area - *Euphorbia rigida* and *characias* had larvae of one instar or another on them. Next stop was at Cape Matapan, the most southerly point of the Peloponnese and site of the ominously named 'Death oracle' – now a pile of rocks to the heathens amongst us. It just happens to be the type locality of the newly described subspecies of *Prospero autumnalis*, ssp *latifolia*. It may be very rare internationally but there were plenty to be seen here as well as *Cyclamen graecum* and a few abraided *Colchicum parlatoris*. We had come down the west side of the peninsula and decided to return home along the eastern side. The road zig-zags pretty steeply on this side and it took a bit of time to drive up but the effort is so worth it. The scenery overlooking the sea is spectacular to say the least. After a while the road became flatter and easier to negotiate. Soon we were reunited with *Crocus niveus* in great numbers. Some jumbo sized clumps proved irresistible and we were 'forced' to stop. We had barely moved when Oron was flashing his headlights in the second minibus meaning something had happened. With his sharp eyes he had somehow managed to spot a Little owl peeping out of a crevice in the roadside cliff. It had been a wonderful day so we headed back with just one more stop for an exquisite tiny chapel that wouldn't look out of place in a Tolkien movie.

Mystras and Langada pass

Today it was time to start the last leg of the trip. We headed north towards Mystras. It was a pleasant drive in the sunshine and it didn't seem at all long before we began to approach the ancient site. About a mile or so before arriving we stopped to allow people to take the essential photographs of the fortified village and its spectacular, imposing citadel. As usual the group were ferried to the top and mini-buses taken back down to rendez-vous and save tired legs from having to make the very steep return. After a couple of hours 'doing culture' we met up. Walter had decided to wait at the bottom as the car park is a reptile 'hotspot' in both senses of the word and was patiently waiting with a tiny Whip snake wrapped around his fingers. We then travelled the quarter of an hour or so it takes to reach the Langada pass. The road snakes up through stunningly beautiful forest enhanced even more at this time of year by the Plane trees whose leaves a beginning to take on the golds and reds of autumn. Lunch was taken in the wonderful purpose-built shelter next to a tiny whitewashed church overlooking the stream that runs through the valley. The church just happens to be the perfect spot to find our main target of the day – *Galanthus reginae-olgae*. After lunch everybody spread out and enjoyed the Snowdrops scattered amongst the huge gnarled Plane trees. We were lucky with the weather as it often rains up here even when it is sunny

elsewhere. Lucky for us all except Walter who was hoping it would be wet as it tempts out the Fire salamanders from their lairs. There were a number of locals collecting Fungi and they were very keen to show us the fruits of their labours. Amongst a host of unfamiliar toadstools they had found some delicious looking Ceps and the Coral fungi – *Ramaria flava*. Just as we were leaving a group of Long-tailed tits were a pleasant surprise and would prove to be the last birds to make it on the trip list. Before setting off for the hotel we raced a few miles higher to see a disjunct colony of *Colchicum boissieri*. We were either too late or too early but there was only a solitary flower but a flower nonetheless! Time was getting on and so we headed straight back to the hotel for our last evening meal together and flight in the morning.