

Tajikistan

& Uzbekistan

A Greentours Tour Report

4th – 16th/18th April 2019

Led by Kurt Vickery

Karatag

Kurt arrived in the small hours and so it was merciful that we didn't need to set off too early. Jamshed offered to take the group to the local market while Kurt sorted himself out and the option was enthusiastically received. The market is an impressive building and offers a wide and fascinating range of local produce. We met up again and were soon whisked through the bustling streets of Dushanbe. It wasn't long before we approached the Karatag valley. There were countless Mynah birds nesting in crumbling cliffs. In similar habitat we found the sublime amongst Foxtails lilies – *Eremurus albertii*, its beautiful dusky-pink flowers unique in the genus. There were about a dozen fine specimens growing together and a scattered few on the surrounding hillsides. Interestingly Jamshed said that the local name "Dumi Ruboh" translates as Fox-tail (well, tail fox literally). We moved on, passing banks of 'blind' *Eremurus*, some had the same leaves as *Eremurus albertii* and others with much finer and numerous leaves almost certainly *Eremurus olgae*. We stopped at a bank covered in *Eminium* leaves. These proved to be *Eminium albertii* and a little searching revealed one or two of the deepest burgundy spathes. Other plants included a few *Ixiolirion tataricum* in flower (these were very short probably as a result of grazing), *Anemone petiolulosa* and the local endemic *Solananthus karataginus*. Further into the valley we started to encounter the main quarry of the day – *Iris bucharica*. Most seemed to be past their best where we could get to them and, rather frustratingly, we could see a hillside festooned with them on the other side of a raging torrent! Just to add insult to injury above them were also lots of *Eremurus lactiflorus*. We were beginning to think that our luck was out regarding the Iris but after turning into a side valley we found thousands of them in perfect condition. We spent a happy hour or so taking photographs. Growing amongst the Iris were many *Bongardia chrysogonum* and the tuberous *Geranium charlesii*. Next stop was close to the river. Kurt had noticed a Brown Dipper and the group were keen to see it too. This was a most worthwhile stop as not only did we get the Dipper, but a Blue Whistling Thrush flashed past us too. While we were doing this Cecilia had been looking at a cliff behind us and had noticed some very sturdy Tulips growing on precarious ledges. Much to Kurt's chagrin, they were impossible to get to - even with the kind help of the driver offering to let him stand on the roof of the bus! (The Tulip had a very well defined 'keel' to the leaf and was probably *Tulipa carinata*, but without being able to examine the inside of the flowers it will have to remain *aff. carinata*). This was a very worthwhile stop though as we found some very good plants including *Fritillaria bucharica* in excellent condition but, like the Tulips, they were definitely a binoculars job. We also found *Valeriana ficarifolia* and *Pseudosedum longidentatum* in shadier spots. Setting off back to the hotel the group kindly indulged Kurt with one last look at the *Eremurus albertii* and their kindness was rewarded with lots of *Anemone petiolulosa* that had responded to an afternoon drenched in sunlight by holding their stars wide open.

Romit

This time we left the city turning east towards the Zeravshan. Climbing gradually we eventually entered a steep-sided valley. We had noticed some whitish flowers on an unstable bank of granite stones and boulders. These proved to be *Iris vicaria*, about a dozen plants that kept the photographers busy for a while. A little further on we stopped for some *Allium giganteum* not quite in flower and a chat with some locals selling bundles of wild Rhubarb – in this case *Rheum maximowiczii*. Moving on to Romit village we stopped to explore a neglected municipal park that was full of spontaneously seeded *Iris vicaria* forming some very large clumps in places. This was a delightful spot and was surprisingly good for flowers. We found *Muscari neglectum*, Anemones (*Anemone gortschakovii* and *Anemone tschernaewii*) and a single remaining spike of *Fessia puschkinioides*. A bit more searching revealed Gagea species including *Gagea minutiflora* and whitish flowers *Gagea ova* plus *Bongardia* thriving in disturbed ground. Lunch was taken in the beautiful village of Viston. If it weren't for the satellite dishes it could be easy to believe that it was a scene from the Middle-Ages. This was an enchanting place full of the sound of happy playing children. It turned out that we were expected and not only that but we were 'guests of honour'. The village leader had organized a wonderful lunch laid out in the traditional way on a carpet surrounded by cushions. Once we had sorted out our various orthopaedic challenges we sat cross-legged and soaked up the atmosphere and enjoyed the amazing choice of finger-food including the 'natural snickers' a sort of fudgey concoction with peanuts. This was followed by the local version of the ubiquitous "Plov". We had explained to the villagers that we were searching for flowers especially the local 'Crown Imperial' – *Fritillaria eduardii*. This led to Kurt being paraded through the village like a latter-day pied piper by hordes of children, through a labyrinth, to a small fenced garden. There stood four extremely robust specimens of the Fritillary the best part of four feet tall. It was little wonder that they were doing so well as they were right next to a very 'rich' dung heap. There were also a few rather spent *Iris rosenbachiana*. Some of the children went haring up the hill behind the village to see if any of the wild *Iris* were still in flower but returned disappointed. Regarding the *Fritillaria* much gesticulating towards the Romit gorge was made as we reluctantly left the village. On the way up we encountered huge colonies of *Gymnospermium albertii* mostly in seed until we got near the snow level where the cool temperatures had kept them back in flower. They were joined here by *Corydalis ledebouriana*. We didn't manage to locate the *Fritillaria* for reasons that later became obvious but we did find our first *Tulipa praestans* mostly in rather inaccessible places. The snow had somewhat scuppered our plans to go higher but explorations on the way down were rewarded with more *Tulipa* and a chance find of *Scilla vvedenskyii*

Varzob

A slightly cloudier start today but fine nonetheless. After less than an hour we entered the lower Varzob gorge where we began to encounter scattered groups of *Iris bucharica*, occasionally in mixed populations with *Iris vicaria*. Our first stop of the day was for a bank covered in *Fritillaria bucharica* and *Anemone petiolulosa*. It had started to speck with rain causing the latter to close tight shut in the now low light levels. Next stop was for some large groups of *Tulipa praestans*. We took lots of photographs but again the flowers were shut tight because of the weather. A few miles further up we found a few fine specimens of *Fritillaria eduardii* on a crag that were frustratingly impossible to get to. We were consoled by a very large colony of *Crocus korolkowii* in the river valley below. In the few gaps left by the *Crocus* were the leaves of *Scilla*, presumably *Scilla vvedenskyii*, *Corydalis ledebouriana* and *Gymnospermium albertii*. We drove a bit further and stopped abruptly as an excited leader had

seen some perfect *Iris rosenbachiana* out of the corner of his eye. These were exquisite and pristine specimens some of which were clump forming and had several flowers. Most were of the 'typical' form but a few had a beautiful blue tinge. We weren't able to get much higher up the valley as it was blocked with snow but we had no real reason to be disappointed as the Iris were our main reason for coming up anyway. On the way down we noticed another fine group of *Fritillaria eduardii* high on a cliff, sadly another binoculars job but great to see. Another stop was made to feed David's insatiable *Corydalis* habit. Several hundred on a roadside bank made for some great photographs. We drove on to Varshob village for lunch. We had hoped the weather would be kind to us and clear - and clear it did! A return visit to the Tulip site became an absolute must. We arrived to find them wide open and beautifully back-lit. They had been a sight to behold in the rain but now were just wonderful. We still had enough time to visit a local botanic garden on the way home. Here we found Bokhara Tits and Vic found a Thrush Nightingale. We weren't scheduled for any more stops but a glimpse of a Golden Eagle had us all out of the bus. A very worthwhile stop as when the Eagle disappeared from view a number of Griffon Vultures started circling above us, sometimes coming into very close view.

Nurek

The day started pretty overcast, so we set off in hope rather than expectation of good weather. We headed south towards the Nurek reservoir stopping just short on the highway. Many of the major roads and railways in central Asia are lined with dense rows of hybrid Elms to help prevent snowdrifts. Despite being so close to passing traffic this was a surprisingly tranquil place providing perfect habitat for one of our main targets of the day – *Anemone tshernajewii*. There were thousands of them but sadly all closed tight because of the low temperature and light levels. They were joined by much less frequent stunning scarlet *Anemone bucharica* that weren't quite so shy to open. Just the other side of the elms was an old neglected vineyard. In the margins some *Adonis aestivalis* relishing the disturbed ground. Scanning for birds we got distant views of Olive-backed Pipit and closer to our first Grey-headed Goldfinches. There is now a new tunnel leading to the reservoir so we decided to go through and return via the old road. As we approached the reservoir we encountered a fabulous colony of an unusual *Eremurus*. It had the creamy flowers like those of *Eremurus lactiflorus* and a rosette of many very narrow sword-like leaves similar to *Eremurus olgae*, in fact previous leaders had speculated that it might be a 'form' of the latter (investigations post this trip have led to a positive ID, this is *Eremurus suworowii*, almost certainly not in cultivation, even in a former Soviet botanic garden). Around and about were *Arnebia guttatum* a fine *Stachys* species and *Phlomis laciniata*. The hills around us were full of *Cercis griffithii* thickets, in places creating a stunning purple haze. Next stop was for lunch in the town of Nurek. The weather had cheered up a bit and the waiters rushed around to create a table for us in the shade of some Mulberry trees. We then headed up to the viewpoint that overlooks the vast reservoir. There is a great view from here but even better a market selling local wild and cultivated produce including the Rheum that we had seen in the Romit gorge but this time on a much bigger scale. The giant Fennel – *Ferula kuhistanica* - was also very popular as well as an array of different Alliums. Great cauldrons of food bubbled away and we were offered many an opportunity to sample. Thank the lord that we had already eaten. One lady tried very very hard to sell vegetarian Kurt a broth made of various unthinkable bits of anatomy. When it was obvious that she might be losing a sale she came up with she seemed to think was her 'coup de grâce' by fishing out a great glutinous tongue to tempt him! This really was a most enjoyable experience but the weather was deteriorating by the minute and we thought it best to head for the hotel. Once we had got to lower altitude it had brightened up just a bit. We could see some spectacular *Ferula foetida* and a gargantuan *Crambe kotschyana* that everybody wanted to photograph.

We hadn't realised that there was a fence stopping us getting to the Fennels but this proved to be a very productive site. We found a new Tulip – *Tulipa lanata* as well as *Bellevalia turkestanica* and *Leontice ewersmanii*. Disappointed that we couldn't get to the Ferula we resolved to try and find others along the road, we did just that - an absolute monster some six feet high and not much less wide. Suddenly it started to rain hard and we made as quick a getaway as we could. We had planned to revisit the roadside Anemones on the way back but the now torrential rain completely trashed that plan and we headed straight back to the hotel to prepare for the transfer to Uzbekistan in the morning.

Transfer to Uzbekistan

A fine morning for our transfer to Uzbekistan. The scenery of the border lands was a spectacular mix of hills and low mountains eroded into fantastic shapes. An hour or so into the journey we stopped to enjoy thousands of *Roemeria refracta* interspersed with *Ixiolirion tataricum* and the curious yellow *Hypecoum procumbens* but this was just a taster as the many turned into myriad *Roemeria* staining the landscape a brilliant scarlet. We had found it irresistible to make several stops for 'better' shots. Kurt thought it would be wise to ask our driver how many more hours we had left to go? The answer was 'normally about four, but at this rate ten'! We sheepishly got back on the bus trying to resist botanical urges. About an hour later we chanced upon a group of robust (about a foot tall) *Gynandiris aff sisyrrinchium*. The guilt had worn off a bit and so we dared to ask for a stop. We then went through the bustling town of Baysun. It was market day and consequently the traffic was choc-a-block. This was quite a hold up but the comings and goings were so interesting that it didn't seem too much of a burden (except probably for the driver but he didn't seem too grumpy). Leaving the town we could see thousands of non-flowering *Eminium* in disturbed ground and amongst them we could see 'blobs' of brilliant carmine. This would have to be the last stop of the day and turned out to be one of the stops of the trip for these were the gorgeous *Tulipa micheliana* with its wonderful glaucous leaves striped purple and as tightly undulate as any flamboyant Tudor ruff. Sensing our elation the driver was being really patient and we spent an good half hour taking photographs. We really had pushed our luck though and we thought it only polite to call it a day stop-wise. From then on we made do with birding through the windows and were very pleased to add Montague's Harrier and Egyptian Vulture to our growing bird list during the long last leg to Shahrizabz.

Amankutan

We drove out of town climbing to about 1200m. First stop was to investigate a hillside covered in enormous *Ferula foetida*, rather surprising as this is obviously prized as a vegetable locally. Jamshed said that the Uzbek name for this plant translates to 'Devils dung'. Some excellent new plants to the trip included *Phlomooides napoligera* and *Gentiana olivieri*. This was also our second encounter with *Bellevalia turkestanica* but this time in much better condition. We then drove higher up the mountain to Amankutan. There were lots of locals selling huge bunches of *Tulipa fosteriana* – our main target of the day. Lovely ladies nearly all with mouths full of shining gold teeth did their best to sell us some. They were more than happy to have their pictures taken and in turn were very keen to take ours too. Some very jolly sign language conversations ensued. A bit higher our driver suddenly turned off onto a dirt track that he knew from previous trips would be good hunting for plants. Perhaps we shouldn't have been surprised that there was no sign whatsoever of *Tulipa fosteriana*, but plenty to keep us happy nonetheless. By a snowpatch we found masses of tiny candy-striped *Colchicum kesselringii*, a few *Crocus korolkowii*, *Anemone petiolulosa* and *Corydalis ledebouriana*. Cecilia had seen

some 'red things' that proved to be *Primula fedtschenkoana*, a bit of a result for her as we didn't see them again. A nearby ravine of crumbling pale coloured granite proved to be a real hotspot. Here we found a diminutive form of *Tulipa turkestanica*, a really nice form whose wide open starry flowers had highly contrasting black tips to the anthers. A new *Corydalis* to the trip, *Corydalis maracandica* with softest yellow flowers, was part of a beautiful community with *Shiberanthis longistipitata*, *Gageas* and *Fritillaria bucharica*. We had passed several groups of *Iris magnifica* on the way up that had fizzled out with altitude, so decided to pop back and get some photographs and get some lunch. After spending probably too long eating we then went up to the pass. As seems usual in these parts the pass has a fascinating market at the top. All kinds of strange fare were for sale, dried-almost-anything seemed the order of things here, mostly for medicinal use. One thing that looked distinctly like poo was indeed poo, apparently great ground up and rubbed in for something, quite what we didn't find out. Yet more beaming smiles from gold betoothed ladies wanting photographs added to the wonderful experience. It was then on to our very comfortable hotel in Samarkand

Samarkand

The day was spent taking in the world-famous blue mosques and other architectural treasures as well as time in the extraordinary market. Avian highlight was the great numbers of screaming Alpine Swifts

To Beldersai

Our hotel was situated in a quiet leafy suburb of Samarkand, a large and surprisingly modern city. It took quite a bit of time before the outskirts gradually merged into steppe and we were able to see a few things of interest. A Marsh Harrier and then several Long-toothed Susliks kept us amused for some time. Some huge rookeries filled the roadside Elms sometimes for more than a mile or so. Competition for space was intense with nests almost stacked one on top of the other. When we turned off the main highway we stopped for a promising looking rocky slope. A mixed population of two *Phlomoides* species dominated the habitat, *Phlomoides laciniata* and the white flowered *Phlomoides septentrionalis*. The latter atypical for a *Phlomoides* and closely resembling a *Salvia*. In rockier parts *Pseudosedum levieri* and tuberous *Geranium charlesii* were common as well as masses of *Crambe kotschyana*. The minibus had parked a bit further up the road. The ground was level here and had been recently disturbed creating an opportunity for *Roemeria refracta* to proliferate again this time mixed with Cornflowers. We had already taken scores of pictures a few days before but couldn't resist taking a few more. There were other 'Poppies' here too including *Papaver pavoninum* and *Glaucium corniculata*. The *Roemeria* proved irresistible to lots of locals too, cars often coming to a screeching halt while passengers disgorged in haste to have family pictures taken amongst the blooms. Moving on the road was parallel with pylons for some distance. A great many of them had White Stork nests in the masts, hundreds of them in total. The surrounding habitat was clearly to their liking. Turning towards Beldersai the hillsides were absolutely covered in *Eremurus lactiflorus* with spikes just about to flower. Rachel and Cecilia noticed a 'small yellow Iris' which could only be *Iris tubergeniana* but we didn't have time to stop as Jamshed needed to return to his home in Tashkent. As we entered the enormous gated grounds of our hotel we couldn't quite believe our eyes. The immense lawns were full of flowers – innumerable quantities of *Gymnospermium albertii*, *Fessia puschkinooides* at least four *Gagea* species and *Corydalis ledebouriana* in several shades from deepest pink to almost white. Having got our luggage to our rooms we decided not to waste the remaining daylight and had a very enjoyable time. Hundreds of House Martins circled overhead and

Mistle Thrushes were very vocal. Yellow-breasted Azure Tit was a real bonus especially for Jenny who hadn't seen them before. On the way back to the hotel we noticed a Kestrel on the roof and then another. They were taking turns to feed chicks in a nest hole created by a missing tile.

Chimgan

We had decided the night before to have a pre-breakfast birdwatch in the grounds of the hotel. It was a beautiful morning with bright blue skies and just a breath of wind. Just a hundred yards or so into our walk we got very close views of Yellow-breasted Azure Tits and some less confiding Black-throated Thrushes. Mistle Thrushes squabbled amongst themselves and the neighbourhood Magpies. The further we walked the more of the Yellow-breasted Azure Tits we saw, the wonderful light showing off their gorgeous colours to best effect. A Booted Eagle circling overhead finished off the walk perfectly. After breakfast we met up with Slav who was to be our guide for the next couple of days. We drove directly to what is used as the base camp for those doing the ascent of Chimgan (3309m) later in the year. As we started our walk our attention was drawn to the delightful chattering of Red-rumped Swallows. Within no time at all the terrain was dotted here and there with *Tulipa turkestanica* with occasional dense colonies. As we climbed higher the Tulips phased into masses of *Crocus alatavicus*, their flowers held wide open in the bright sunshine. Higher still and the Crocus were joined by *Colchicum luteum* in almost as high density. We were here to try for the local endemic *Tulipa tschimganica*. We scanned an area known to have them but without immediate luck. Much more careful searching revealed a few rosettes of undulate leaves making it obvious that the season was late. As a bonus to help with the disappointment we found a ravine with many really good specimens of *Korolkowia sewerzowii* in perfect condition. A couple of Chukar were flushed, their calls echoing across the valley as they fled. We also found a pair of Rock Bunting. Slav had prepared a picnic for us and while enjoying the food we had fantastic views of Lammergeier and the huge Himalayan Griffon Vulture above us. Realising that we had no chance of seeing the Tulips, Slav suggested to try a site on the other side of the road. We walked up a grassy valley. Many fine *Pedicularis olgae* were found but sadly no Tulips. We therefore decided that we would try again at lower altitudes around the Charvaq reservoir in the morning and hope that the season would be a little more advanced.

Charvaq reservoir

Not as bright as yesterday but the weather was warm and still. Our first stop was just a mile or two downhill from the hotel. We were here for an excellent colony of *Iris tubergeniana*. They were concentrated on unstable muddy slopes. They were all in perfect condition which made it difficult to select the best specimens to photograph. The hazy conditions providing perfect light to capture their stunning egg yolk coloured blooms. There were a great many *Fritillaria stenantha* relishing the conditions too. In areas where the soil was stabilised by vegetation we found plentiful *Valeriana chionophylla* in an unusual white and little-marked morph and equally common *Anemone gortschakovii*. The latter were clearly waiting for the sun to come out to open fully. This was amply compensated by the chance to view their lovely peach coloured outers. We could have spent much more time here but we needed to push on towards Charvaq. Just as we could see the reservoir Cecilia noticed a red Tulip. We got out to have a look and it was *Tulipa greigii* in fine form. We set about looking for more and found a group of four, rather dwarf for the species but lovely and compact all the same. In an area excluded from grazing a showy colony of *Thermopsis alterifolia* had taken full advantage as had *Geranium tuberosum*. We turned the minibus around to head through the

mountains and on to Tashkent. We had barely moved when we were stopped in our tracks by a large herd of sheep. Coincidentally we were at the spot where Cecilia had found the first Tulip, needless to say we witnessed it being reduced to a stump! We drove on to a slope that Slav knew to hold *Tulipa tschimganica*. As the hill was very steep, he very gallantly insisted on doing a recce to save people's aching limbs. He came back some minutes later saying that he could only find emerging leaves. Just before getting here Kurt had noticed a rocky gully with lots of *Eremurus lactiflorus* in full flower so we popped back to have a look. They created a spectacular display and were joined by several *Tulipa greigii*. In shadier conditions at the bottom of the gully were a few *Arnebia tschimganica* and frothy flowered *Thalictrum isopryoides*. Slav said that we had one last chance to see the Tulip about 10 miles up the road. This took us through some spectacular scenery with swathes of *Eremurus lactiflorus* many of which were growing on suicidal ledges. We turned up a side valley with what looked like some very 'bulby' habitat. We walked up a track before reaching some steep slopes of a strange black stained rock. At first glance it looked abrasive and grippy but proved to be anything but. It required care to cross so Kurt said he would forge ahead and try and find Tulips for people. That was the plan anyway, but within a hundred yards he found a fine specimen of *Iris capnoides*. This is a whitish Juno that is arguably not as showy as *Iris tubergeniana* but a much rarer plant and little known (This proved to be a previously unknown station). Kurt beckoned the group over for a look. This was far easier said than done but all got there in the end to admire the flower. In the meantime Slav had found a suitable spot for the picnic with a fine panoramic view over the river valley below. While everybody ate Kurt carried on the Tulip quest climbing considerably higher. Unfortunately, once again only leaves could be found and it became obvious that we simply weren't going to be lucky this season. It was well worth schlepping up there though, as to be amongst thousands of head height *Eremurus lactiflorus* was a breathtaking experience. A few more *Iris capnoides* were found as well as some *Rheum maximoviczii* that were remote enough to escape the Rhubarb collectors. Back at the picnic site we found a few more new plants including an extraordinary *Matthiola* species, very closely allied to *Matthiola alyssifolia*, whose flowers had a metallic perhaps copper-like sheen. Slav had worked out a much easier route back to the site entrance. Approaching the minibus we found our first *Phlomis speciosus* in flower – a very fine example fully justifying its specific epithet. We then started the long trek to Tashkent. The road followed the course of a wide river, quite often with wetlands, natural or created between the road and the river. This provided us with some of the best birdwatching of the trip adding Great White Egret, Pygmy Cormorant, Common Tern and several wader species to the list. David was leaving us in the morning and so we had a very good last meal in a fine restaurant with him before he set off home for England. The rest of the group would catch the train in the morning for a couple of days enjoying the sights and sounds of beautiful Bokhara.