

Delphi

& The Southern Pindhos

A Greentours Trip Report

11th to 18th October 2015

Led by Kurt Vickery

Delphi

The morning started grey and overcast but the sun burnt away the clouds just in time for our arrival at the ancient ruins. It soon became lovely and warm and many Crag martins took full advantage by picking off insects rising in the increasing morning thermals. Butterflies were numerous as they were on last year's visit but luckily for us they were much more diverse. Common species that we might have expected included Various Whites, Clouded yellow, Brown argus, Common blue, Large wall brown and Queen of Spain Fritillary, but we were especially pleased to see the much more localized Freyer's grayling. We could hear the echoing calls of Western rock nuthatch and got our first close view of an individual creeping about the nooks and crannies of the magnificent treasury building. A little further up the stairway a Rock thrush performed nicely on one of the temple columns. We could hear the plaintive calls of a Buzzard and leaning back we could see it was being mobbed by a Peregrine falcon. Kurt had left the group to explore further while he picked up supplies for our picnic. Having had their fill of culture they all met up at one of the rather convenient grotto-like rest areas below the site. On the surrounding slopes were large clumps of *Sternbergia lutea sicula*. After enjoying a rather nice lunch Kurt asked if everybody would like to spend the afternoon in Arrahova that was clearly a popular choice for last year's group. The look of abject horror on peoples' faces spoke a thousand words and it became clear this was a 'nat hist' group, 'nic-nacs' weren't required, and we needed to get some more nature under our belts. We drove down the zig-zaggy roads below Delphi for a few miles and ventured up a track that looked like it had been quarried at some time in the past. This proved to be a very good site for butterflies that were abundant, nectaring on the characteristic *Dittrichia viscosa*. Amongst many other species, we added Sandy grizzled skipper and Europe's tiniest species - the Grass jewel to our list. We found one of the special plants of the area - *Daphne jasminoides* and a Kotschy's gecko before leaving the spot. Driving on the group were still eager to explore and so we took a side road towards the nearby Profiti Ilia Monastery. Lining the road in places were spikes of *Urginea maritima* in perfect condition. At a higher elevation we found plentiful *Cyclamen hederifolium* in *Quercus* and *Pistachia* scrub. As we delved a bit further into the habitat we found scattered *Colchicum cupanii* and *Prospero autumnalis* and managed to flush a covey of Rock partridges. Satiated, we headed back to a very warm welcome and a wonderful meal at the Hotel.

Itea – Galaxidi

Today we headed for the area between Itea and the pretty coastal town of Galaxidi. We drove along the coast for a short time before heading up through some beautiful boulder-strewn garrigue dominated by the large domes of *Euphorbia dendroides* interspersed with *Phlomis fruticosa* and *Quercus*. Our first stop was on a rocky slope overlooking one of the many gorges that run down to the sea. We had been here last year and found a vast colony of *Colchicum cupanii* and *Biarum tenuifolium*. The flowers were plentiful and it made making up the mind which were the ideal photographic subject a little bit tricky. Moving amongst the scrub and boulders we noticed lots of small birds on the move including Linnet, Blackcap, Stonechat and a single Firecrest, we could also hear but not see Sardinian warbler somewhere in the distance. Jill found a huge female Predatory bush cricket (*Saga aff hellenica*), some 11cm long including its antennae. After an hour or so we went back down the road but not very far as perhaps a dozen or so luxuriant roadside *Dittrichia viscosa* were teeming with butterflies. Butterflies new to the trip included both Mediterranean and Pigmy skipper. Long-tailed and Lang's short-tailed blue, Berger's clouded yellow, Krüper's small white and as we were 'totting up' the species count Martin mentioned that he had seen Balkan grayling at our last stop.

We then drove along the coast road before turning up towards the Koutsourou monastery. The scenery was spectacular especially when looking back over the gulf. When we were almost there we stopped for our picnic in the welcome shade of some large evergreen Oaks. As the food was being prepared the group had a look around and were rewarded with some fine clumping *Colchicum cupanii* and plentiful *Crocus hadriaticus parnassicus*. After lunch we walked the few hundred yards up to the monastery. We spent a few moments watching a Large tortoiseshell that had settled on an ancient Pear tree. The monastery itself is rather beautiful but has the added bonus for naturalists of having some natural rock gardens on nearby crags which in the autumn are adorned with vigorous clumps of *Campanula versicolor* in the peak of perfection. We then took the 'interesting' route to the Mournos reservoir. If it wasn't for the fact that we had one of her majesty's finest Tornado navigators reading the map we may have lost confidence on the way. But confidence was well justified and after half an hour of bumpy tracks and often very narrow lanes we arrived at the reservoir and headed towards the dam. After arriving at the dam we headed south towards Nafpaktos to look for the site that Kurt had found *Crocus robertianus* in the previous year. Kurt isn't an RAF navigator and took a wrong turn. Not deterred we spent some time in a rather nice meadow at suitable spot to turn around. There were plentiful *Spiranthes spiralis* to occupy the photographers. It was a lovely spot but time was getting on and Kurt needed to engage his brain to find 'his' *Crocus robertianus*. Eventually we did find the site and spent an enjoyable time admiring their subtle beauty. To celebrate our success Kurt brought out homemade cakes wrapped in foil that our lovely landlady had insisted we take with us, the perfect way to end our day.

Parnassus

We awoke to another fine bright sunny morning and after picking up a few supplies we headed up to the ski-slopes of Parnassus. It didn't take much gain in altitude before the hills and roadsides were dotted with *Crocus hadriaticus parnassicus*. Our first stop was in the foothills near the village of Kellaria. We walked around some rocky meadows surrounded by *Abies cephalonica*. The trees

were playing host to Mistletoe -*Viscum album*, in this case *ssp abietis* which is exclusively found on conifers. Amongst the turf were lots of *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus* in all shades of blue from very dark to almost white, but always with the distinctive dark streaks or stripes around the neck. We found a few of the tiny *Sternbergia colchiciflora* whose tiny bright yellow flowers erupt stemless straight from the soil and here and there *Ajuga chamaepitys*. Butterflies were plentiful too with some 'Small whites' to challenge our 'ID' skills which included 'Krupers' along with a single female *helice* Clouded yellow. We then turned up through the extensive *Abies* forest towards the Ski-centre. very near the top we stopped for an extensive colony of *Colchicum boissieri* associated with Spiny Astragalus and Acantholimon in a meadow scattered with large rocks. We then went over the pass to the other side of the mountain. The way down took quite some time as a seemingly endless series of hairpin bends kept our average speed right down. At the bottom we motored along for a while before climbing once again up the mountains to approach the Mournos reservoir from the north. We stopped at a meadow that we had discovered last year to enjoy a colony of *Colchicum bivonae*. As is typical of this species they were very variable in the depth of lilac-purple coloration and strength of tessellation but entirely constant in having huge goblet shaped flowers. Insects and butterflies were highly attracted to their scent and we observed the extraordinary sight of a Clouded yellow engrossed with nectaring, completely enclosed by the huge petals it seemed very content to stay there for some time. Not so fortunate was a Lang's short-tailed blue that had failed to notice a concolorous Crab spider that had been waiting hidden in another bloom. After half an hour or so we drove through yet more spectacular scenery before reaching the 'other end' of the reservoir. We stopped on one of the causeways that traverse the lake for a spot of birdwatching. We saw a few Grey heron and Cormorants in the shallows. The lake fringes were surrounded by dense thickets of *Vitex agnus-castus* where we were able to observe lots of Finches moving about, particularly Linnets. There was nothing out of the ordinary but we were happy to add Greenfinch to our ever growing bird-list. We then drove back along the coast road in glorious evening sunshine stopping briefly for the birding boys to arm wrestle over the identity of some distant rafts of Gulls.

To Karpenisi via the Sperchios delta

We were very sad to leave our wonderful hosts but after warm farewells were on our way towards Karpenisi. Our route north took us through yet more spectacular scenery and windy roads. Eventually we reached the coast and headed towards our first stop of the day – The Sperchios delta. At the first opportunity we stopped at some 'birdy' looking habitat near a large Phragmites lined dyke. On some power lines we saw several Corn buntings accompanied by a solitary Tree sparrow. In the reeds were Fan-tailed warbler and a number of Dragonflies including Red-veined darter, Broad scarlet, plus Norfolk and Migrant hawkers. We then drove on trying to get to the 'coast' that seemed to get further and further from our reach. In the end we settled in a relatively dry area between strangely juxtaposed Rice paddy and Cotton fields. We had our picnic there and spent a pleasant half hour birdwatching, adding Marsh harrier and Great white egret to the bird list. After Lamia the landscape changed as we climbed higher and became progressively green as we followed the Sperchios river to Karpenisi. Nature called so we stopped at a rather nice riverside taverna for a while. While relaxing with beers and teas, Richard shunned luxury and stayed with the minibus scanning for birds. We all heard a high pitched 'yaffle' but only he was rewarded with great views of a Black woodpecker. When we had finished it was only half an hour before we arrived at our very comfortable hotel set in beautiful Fir forest.

Timfristos

It was very wet overnight. Today we were going to make a circular route around the northern side of Timfristos and back over the mountain pass. We first went back down to the Sperchios river. First stop was overlooking a broad shingly flood plain. David spotted a roosting Sparrowhawk and Richard kindly set up his scope to give us all privileged views. David and Jill walked down to the river and picked up a couple each of Cetti's warbler and Grey wagtails. We then turned west up through superb Chestnut forest. We stopped for coffee in Marrilo – a small village centered on a vast and ancient Plane tree. The tree was host to a pair of Nuthatch that we enjoyed watching for a few minutes before getting in the warm. We then climbed higher through the colourful forest of Chestnut and Walnut whose leaves were 'on the turn'. We stopped for a while to admire a colony of *Cyclamen hederifolium* in a multitude of leaf forms. Martin found a Wall lizard that was so chilled it could barely move. We then moved on up the mountain pass and stopped at the ski-centre overlooking Karpenisi. It was really cloudy and chilly but a few hardy souls were determined to explore the nearby peaks. Their efforts revealed Skylark and Linnets. Thoroughly perished there was nothing for it but to return to the hotel to recuperate over some warm beverages before walking the short distance to the hotel restaurant for a delicious evening meal.

The road to Athens

Sadly it was our last day and we regrettably had to get going towards Athens. On the plus side the weather had improved dramatically. On our way down we stopped to buy Mountain tea and fresh Chestnuts from a friendly lady in a roadside shack.

After we had 'broken the back' of the motorway section we stopped for a most relaxing coffee in a café overlooking a very calm azure sea. Suitably refreshed we carried on before heading towards a small lake on the outskirts of the city. Making our way to the shore we encountered plenty of butterflies. Most of them were now familiar species but Small heath and Spotted fritillary were new to our list. The temperature was rising rapidly and a heat haze was developing making bird identification a problem. We could see lots of birds but needed a different angle, so after lunch we resolved to try the other side of the lake. This proved to be a good idea as we got great views of abundant Yellow-legged and Black headed gulls, Grey herons, Little egrets and Great crested grebes. In nearby shrubs we had Corn buntings and a pair of Red-backed shrikes. Perhaps the best spectacle of the stop was a close fly past of a male Marsh harrier. We had time for just one more brief stop which we took in the Pine forest overlooking the urban sprawl. Even this close to humanity there was much evidence of Wild boar activity. We didn't find anything new in the fauna department but a colony of a very pleasing pink form of *Prospero autumnale* finished the day off nicely before arriving at the very comfortable Coco-mat hotel to prepare for our journey home.