

Delphi

& The Southern Pindhos Mountains

A Greentours Tour Report

13th – 20th October 2023

Led by Kurt Vickery



Colchicum boissieri

Day 1 - Delphi

We awoke to a glorious, still and sunny morning. A pair of very active Spotted Flycatchers entertained us before a most enjoyable and relaxed breakfast. Soon after we made our way down the windy road through the beautiful expansive gorge that leads down to the ancient site. While queuing for tickets we admired the floriferous clumps of the much underrated *Heliotropium hirsutissimum* that were in particularly fine condition for the time of year. The group spent a most enjoyable hour or so in the world famous ruin(ation)s often seeing and hearing the Western Rock Nuthatches doing their thing seemingly oblivious of the crowds. Near the stadium at the top the first few *Colchicum cupanii* of the season were beginning to open in the company of *Odontites lutea* and Selwyn spotted a Freyer's Grayling. While folks did the museum Kurt popped back to Arrahova for supplies and prepared lunch in one of the lovely shady grottos below the site. There were a surprising number of plants still flowering here including *Plumbago europea*, *Reichardia pichroides*, *Psoralia bituminosa* and *Hippocrepis emerus* as well as the expected *Sternbergia lutea sicula*. After lunch we travelled a few miles below Delphi to what seems to be a long abandoned attempt to make a road. This just happens to have created some wonderful habitat especially for butterflies. There are a number of large *Dittricia viscosa* here which are an irresistible magnet for many species in autumn and we found lots of

Wall Brown, Large Wall Brown, Sage and Pigmy Skipper, Painted Lady, Eastern Bath White, Common, Chapmans and Lang's Short-tailed Blue as well as Europe's tiniest species The Grass Jewel. The flowers also attracted large numbers of the attractive Wasp - *Scolia hirta*. As well as being good for butterflies the track also affords easy access to one of the characteristic rock 'pillars' that are a distinctive feature of the Delphi landscape. These are the locus-classicus of the enigmatic and beautiful *Daphne jasminea*. Relatively small but decades-old plants cling tenaciously to the weather pitted rock face. A few highly scented late season flowers persisted in less exposed situations and were much appreciated by all. There was a little bit of warm daylight left so we made good use of it by heading down to the idyllic fishing village of Galaxidi to look at the abundant fish in the clear waters of the harbour and enjoy a delicious coffee.



Sunset from Nefeles

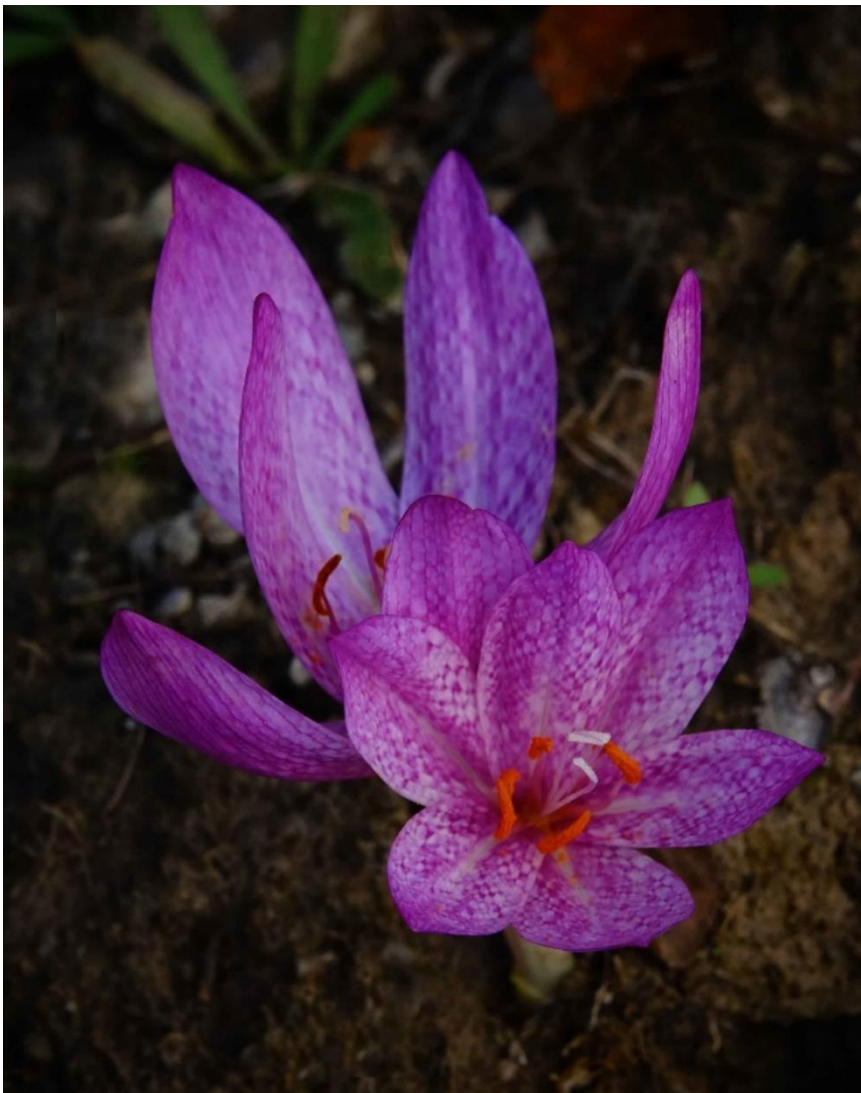
Day 2 - Parnassus

Another beautiful morning. Our first stop of the day was in the foothills of Parnassus around the village of Killaria. On a rocky roadside bank Selwyn spotted a couple of plants of *Campanula versicolor* with quite a few flowers and below them several *Euphorbia rigida* covered in bright red fruits. From here we explored an area of *Abies cephalonica* forest interspersed with rocky grassland clearings. There were plentiful *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus* here in all shades of blue to almost white but we had to move to more open sunny spots to find our first *Crocus hadriaticus parnassicus*. Our main target here was the diminutive *Sternbergia colchiciflora* which proved highly elusive with just one flower



Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus

found in a seemingly unsuitable spot for it at the mossy moist base surrounding a *Lonicera nummularifolia* which was heavily adorned with its fascinating near transparent berries. Some of the *Abies* were almost covered in the host-specific Mistletoe – *Viscum album ssp abietes*. We then drove up to the pass just below the Parnassus ski centre. This is an area of beautiful weathered limestone pavement with scattered specimen *Abies cephalonica* close to the tree line. The object of our desire here was *Colchicum boissieri* and happily it was a good season for them with hundreds opened perfectly in the fine sunshine. They looked particularly good when their delicate blooms were growing through large mats of the beautiful if spiteful glaucous-leaved mats of *Astragalus angustifolius*. There were butterflies too including Adonis Blues at what must be close to the limit of their altitudinal range. Going down the other side of the mountain we stopped for ‘something purple’ that Selwyn had seen that turned out to be *Epilobium dodonei*. It was a good excuse to stay for a while and look for butterflies on the *Dittrichia* but it just happened to be good for unexpected flowers too which included *Scabiosa columbaria ssp ochroleuca*, *Knautia integrifolia*, *Centaurea grisebachii* and showy large flowered *Salvia ringens*.



Lunch was taken in the grounds of the delightful little church of Ag Marina situated in the middle of a walnut grove. While food was being prepared the group wandered about finding many fine *Cyclamen hederifolium*. The last stop of the day was at a site known to us for *Colchicum bivonae* just North of the village of Sykia at around 1200m. This stretch of the journey had involved quite a lot of hairpins and so it was a pleasant relief to stretch our legs and even better to quickly find a few of the gorgeous large tessellated goblets of the *Colchicum*. There were also a good number of *Spiranthes spiralis* lots and lots of them in fact once we had got our ‘eyes in’. *Petrorhagia illyrica* and *Dianthus viscidus* were added to the flowering plant list before setting off back along the mirror calm azure Gulf of Corinth bathed in golden late afternoon light for a relaxing evening meal at the hotel.

Colchicum bivonae

Day 3 - Around the Mournos reservoir

Crocus hadriaticus parnassicus



The very fine and settled weather continued. This morning we headed towards the Mournos reservoir via the coast between Itea and Galaxidi. Just past Itea we turned up into the foothills through the wonderful characteristic habitat of magnificent *Euphorbia dendroides*, *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Pistacia* and *Quercus* growing between limestone and conglomerate boulders. We stopped at a plateau a mile or so inland to search for *Colchicum cupanii* which were here in good numbers but clearly far more to come. The other thing that

we hoped to find was *Biarum tenuifolium*. Before too long we found a single plant with two spathes. Given how quickly it turned up it was very surprising that in due course it would prove to be the only specimen showing itself on the whole trip. Sardinian Warblers were common flitting in and out of the dense scrub. We retraced our steps a little and stopped at a bank of roadside *Dittrichia* that is usually very good for butterflies. The diversity wasn't as good as some years but numbers were good, especially Eastern Bath White and Meadow Brown and we added Humming-bird Hawkmoth to the list. Our next stop was just along the coast and a bit higher in the area around the Koutsourou monastery where and *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus* were in very good form - the area we searched had clearly experienced conditions to the liking of both species. Most of the flowers were exceptionally large and well defined, conveniently growing side-by-side making it easy for Kurt to explain the differences between the two. We then drove a little bit further towards the reservoir to an area we know for *Colchicum bivonae*. There were about a hundred or so flowering plants but sadly most were past their best. The very best multi-flowered clump was tantalisingly out of reach of our lenses inside a stock pen and, with dogs barking in the background, we thought it best not to push our luck. The last leg of the day started through spectacular scenery along the south shore of the reservoir. We drove through several miles of beautiful Plane trees just beginning to take on their autumnal hues, punctuated here and there by the fiery colours of *Cotinus*. Lunch was taken in a shady gully. While setting up the picnic we realised that we had narrowly avoided smothering some *Spiranthes* with the table cloth. Selwyn found an Eastern Rock Grayling on a short wander. We then crossed the dam and headed South towards Nafpaktos. The Forests and roadsides are much cooler and damper in this area and create suitable habitat for our last target of the day - the Pindos endemic *Crocus robertianus*. On a steep mossy slope quite near the village of Paliokastro



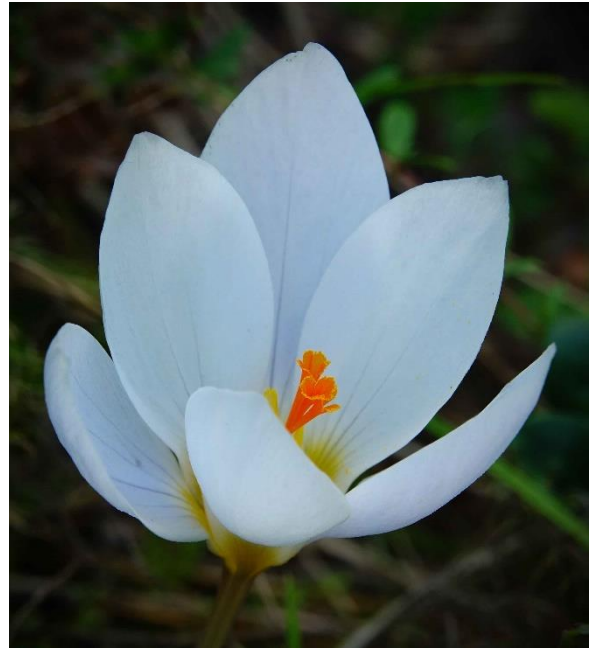
Crocus hadriaticus parnassicus

we found just a few but these were in perfect condition and with very large blooms, some rivalling *Crocus niveus* for size. We then drove half an hour or so to just before the coastal highway where there just happens to be a very high quality cafe serving excellent coffee and cake. Refreshed and restored we set off back home feeling very satisfied with our day.

Day 4 - To Karpnisi

It's always sad to say goodbye to Panos and Lena who look after us so well at the Nefeles hotel but it was transfer day and so after another leisurely breakfast we set off for our centre for the next few days near Karpnisi. An hour or so into the journey we stopped to stretch our legs along a forest track amongst tall *Abies*. Lots of *Cyclamen hederifolium* were seen on the forest floor and as usual at this site Coal Tits were particularly abundant. Driving on through yet more beautiful montane forest we eventually arrived at the Sperchios delta and followed the eponymous river as far as Makrakomi where we had lunch in a favourite taverna. Ever-so-slightly full we made our first nature stop proper of the day a few miles out of town at a gently sloping meadow surrounded by the *Quercus freinetto* and *Cercis siliquastrum* woodland so characteristic of the area. Although there was a spectacular show of Hawkbits and Southern daisy, at first glance there didn't seem to be a lot else - *Prospero autumnale* are abundant here but were mostly without flowers and it looked very dry. But further diligent searching revealed hundreds of *Spiranthes spiralis*, some being visited by Brown Argus. Other occasional flowering plants included *Dianthus viscidus*, *Calamintha nepeta* and a couple of *Verbascum* species, firstly *V. bossieri* and later a splendid multi-spiked *V. sinuatum* that looked in the sort of condition that you might expect back in April. Another completely out of sync plant was a *Pyrus amygdilliformis* covered in fresh flowers while all others around it were laden with ripe golden fruit. It had been pretty cloudy for the last few hours but as the sun broke through more and more butterflies began to appear including our first Small Heaths in good numbers, a lot more Brown Argus, Wall Brown, Eastern Bath White, Clouded Yellow and a Sooty Copper spotted by Selwyn. It was then on to our hotel at Koryshades giving us just enough time to explore the nearby forest fringes before dinner.

Crocus robertianus



Day 5 - Timfristos



Colchicum boissieri

After very heavy and sustained rain overnight it wasn't much better when we drew the curtains in the morning so it was a pleasant if unexpected surprise see some bits of blue in the sky as we set off through Karpenisi and on to Timfristos the great mountain that looms over the town. The lower levels were fairly bright to start with, giving us some great views over the town. But as we approached the peak heavy mist set in and then cleared briefly as we arrived at our first stop on the pass and around the ski-centre. Flocks of Linnets flew around us and as ever a Black Redstart kept an eye on us to-ing and fro-ing from the various building tops. There wasn't a great deal to see this year but we did find a couple of *Verbascum* species in flower that Selwyn checked and ID'd as *Verbascum chaixii* and *Verbascum mallophorum*. There were also a few *Eryngium amethystinum* in a good colourful state. Going down the other side of the mountain we noticed some good clumps of *Epilobium dodonei* before approaching forest once again, this time with a progressively greater density of Sweet Chestnut. *Helleborus cyclophyllus* was common in this habitat. It began to get very misty as we started to climb higher towards a little chapel that we usually visit for *Colchicum boissieri*. It was a little disappointing to find that there weren't many flowers this year and those that we did find were either going over or closed tight-shut in the cool wet conditions. We were amply compensated though as although the conditions were no good for *Colchicum* they were exactly what was need to bring out a magnificent Fire Salamander which was a great thrill for those who had never seen or even heard of them before. We got great views but as usual it was keen to escape our attentions and rapidly crawled out of sight. We would normally linger here a bit longer but the weather wasn't really play-

ing ball and we set off down lower to look for new things. We stopped at Ag Georgios on the Sperchios river for a welcome coffee and then moved to a site with access to the river. We made our way through some old abandoned smallholdings, spotting a few butterflies on the way including Lang's Short-tailed Blues that all seemed absolutely tiny here as well as one or two Mallow Skippers and Small Heath. The main reason for coming here was to try and find Dippers that Alf was really keen to see. It was so gratifying to see a pair almost as soon as we arrived at the river bank, as well as some Grey Wagtails. With more time on our hands than usual Kurt decided to drive back through the forest to see what else we could find. A glimpse of plentiful *Cyclamen hederifolium* in a ravine as we drove past was enough to tempt us to stop. When we got there and climbed a wall and through the undergrowth - plentiful wasn't an apt description for the *Cyclamen*, myriad being much more appropriate, their rich-pink flowers glowing like stars in the very low light levels. To add to the joy another Salamander appeared in the stream below us, this one seemed much less threatened by us in the security of the water and posed nicely for photographs. What we had feared as a potential wash-out of a day ended up being a really enjoyable and varied experience.

Day 6 - Road to Athens

Swallowtail



Today we left the beautiful Pindos behind us and drove a few hours on the motorway towards Athens before stopping at the extensive salt lagoons at Aralia. We usually see a lot of birds here but this time it was a little bit quiet with just a few Egrets and Herons seen on the shallow pans. However we did see a dozen or so Kentish Plovers on the spit that separates the sea from the lagoons. These charming little birds were a little bit nervous but did allow some pretty confiding views. Dragonflies abounded often settling on Sea Spurge - *Euphorbia paralias* - and the large-leaved Sea Lavender - *Limonium compactum* - a seemingly contrary specific epithet. We moved on and an hour or so later pulled off the motor-

way into a quiet valley to have lunch. The roadside was lined with thickets of very tall-for-the-species *Pistacia lentiscus* and wild olives - these in turn were absolutely draped in *Clematis cirrhosa* - hundreds of plants flowering profusely, an absolutely stunning display the like of which none of us had ever seen before. It was then time to make the last leg to the airport to drop Selwyn off and get the rest of us to our next hotel before picking up the Peloponnese group in the morning for our next adventure.