

Delphi

& The Southern Pindhos Mountains

A Greentours Trip Report

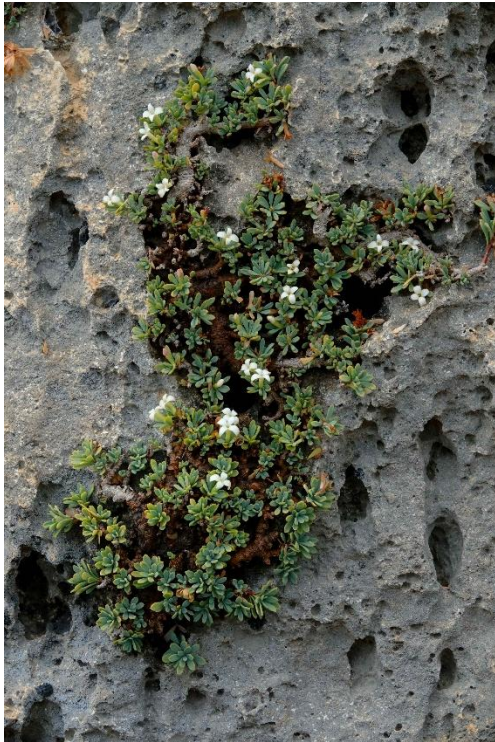
13th to 20th October 2024

Led by Kurt Vickery



Day 1: As we always seem to do on the first day of this tour we awoke to a glorious,

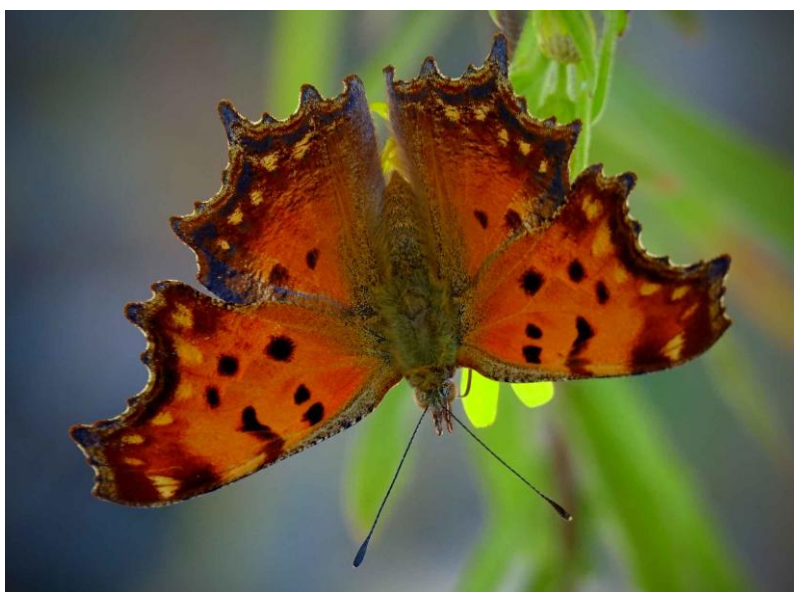
still and sunny morning. We had a splendid breakfast taking in the wonderful panoramic view from the large window in the dining room. Soon after we made our way down the windy road through the beautiful expansive gorge that leads down to the ancient site. The group spent a most enjoyable hour or so in the awe-inspiring classic site, often seeing and hearing the Western Rock Nuthatches doing their thing seemingly oblivious of the crowds and Blue Rock-thrushes often perching on top of the many pillars. *Sternbergia lutea sicula* were rather late this year but we did manage to see some nice clumps here and there as well as the first few *Colchicum cupanii* of the season near the stadium at the top of the site. A few Freyer's Grayling, Clouded Yellows and Queen of Spain Fritillary's were seen too. While Ian and the group enjoyed the excellent museum, Kurt popped back to Arahova for supplies and prepared lunch in one



of the lovely shady grottos below the site. 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 Wall Brown, Large Wall Brown, 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. On the way back to the minibus we added Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*), Krueper's Small White and Small Copper to the butterfly list and found an attractive Catchfly – *Silene congesta* - growing atop some large boulders alongside The local Red Valerian – *Centranthus longiflorus*. There was a little bit of warm daylight left so we made good use of it by heading down the coast to the idyllic little fishing village of Galaxidi to look at the fishes in the harbour and have a nice cooling drink to finish off the day.

Day 2: Parnassus



Another beautiful morning. Our first stop of the day was in the foothills of Parnassus around the village of Killaria. From here we explored an area of *Abies cephalonica* forest interspersed with rocky grassland clearings. At one of our known spots we looked for *Sternbergia colchiciflora* that we sometimes see here. We were out of luck and

assumed that, given the season, we were too late, but the flowers are so ephemeral that is really difficult to know. There were however a few *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus* in all shades of blue to white but we had to move to more open sunny spots to find some with wide open blooms. Some of the *Abies* were almost covered in the host-specific Mistletoe – *Viscum album ssp abietes*. Coal Tits were abundant and vocal and it was very pleasing to see a flock of six Hawfinch fly over as we looked up into the trees. Leaving the site, we noticed a couple of plants of *Campanula versicolor* on a steep rocky roadside bank with quite a few flowers, and below them several *Euphorbia rigida* covered in bright red fruits. One of the *Euphorbia* had a tiny probably second instar larva of Spurge Hawkmoth. They aren't often predated so it was very surprising that it was the only one. 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 sized *Abies cephalonica* close to the tree line. The object of our desire here was *Colchicum boissieri*. Sure enough they were here, though not in their usual numbers, but still plentiful enough to enjoy and take photographs. They looked particularly good when their delicate blooms were growing through large mats of the beautiful if spiteful glaucous-leaved mats of *Astragalus angustifolius*. Going down the other side of the mountain we started to see *Epilobium dodonei*. Of course we had to stop for them but it was a fortuitous opportunity to enjoy the abundant butterflies on the swathes of nearby *Dittrichia viscosa*. Wall Brown, Large Wall Brown and Cleopatra were particularly common but we also had Nettle-tree butterfly and pristine freshly emerged Southern Comma's too that we had never seen at this time of year on several previous tours. A little bit further down the road we stopped to admire the autumnal colours of the



surrounding landscape and chanced upon a few new flowers including *Scabiosa columbaria ssp ochroleuca*, *Knautia integrifolia*, *Centaurea grisebachii* and *Dianthus viscidus*. Lunch was taken in the grounds of the delightful little church of Ag Marina , a really idyllic and peaceful place situated in the middle of a walnut grove. We then drove on for half an hour or so and stopped among the extensive *Quercus frainetto* woodlands that follow the road up to village of Iti. *The Cyclamen hederifolium* are quite a spectacle here and it took some effort to persuade people to leave. Drag them

away we did before our last stop of the day, at a site just north of the village of Sykia at

around 1200m, known to us for *Colchicum bivonae*. This stretch of the journey had involved quite a lot of hairpins and so it was a pleasant relief to stretch our legs. The site was still absolutely bone dry and so no sign of the *Colchicum* still waiting for the rain and subsequent drop in temperature to wake them up. The same applied to the expected *Spiranthes spiralis* that we know to be here in their thousands. Though Gerry did find a few in the deep cool shade of some trees. *Petrorhagia illyrica* were added to the flowering plant list before setting off back along the mirror calm azure Gulf of Corinth for a relaxing evening meal at the hotel.

Day 3: Around the Mournos reservoir

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*. In most years the colchicums would be flowering in their thousands by now but the lack of rain meant that they were only just waking up. There were however enough of them in cooler spots in the shade of large boulders for us to enjoy. Sardinian Warblers and Robins on passage were common flitting in and out of the dense

scrub. We retraced our steps a little and stopped at a bank of roadside *Dittrichia viscosa* that is usually very good for butterflies. We managed to see a number of species including Eastern Bath White, Krueper's Small White, Wall Brown, Mediterranean and Pygmy Skipper as well as a couple of Crimson-speckled Footman. Our next stop was just along the coast and a bit higher in the area around the Koutsourou monastery. We searched for *Crocus hadriaticus* in an area where we know they grown in numbers, but at first without luck. The habitat was of scattered *Quercus/Pistachia* scrub with a number of large *Pyrus amygdaliformis* covered in golden ripe fruit. Some of the fruit had fallen and was beginning to ferment which was highly attractive to the many Balkan Graylings feasting on them. It was very interesting to see them like this as they are usually found as singletons occasionally fighting over territory. There were perhaps twenty or more in close proximity to each other. We had just started



to leave when Richard noticed some 'white things' below the road. To our great delight they were *Crocus hadriaticus* that had found just enough moisture from somewhere to trigger flowering. We then moved on a mile or so and noticed a steep rocky slope with hundreds of *Crocus cancellatus mazziaricus* in very good form. As people were enjoying the spot so much we decided to have an impromptu lunch there before moving on a little further to outskirts of the

pretty hilltop village of Amygdalia. This is one of our favourite stops for *Colchicum bivonae* but we struggled to find any at first and those that we did were very small and pretty much going over. Luckily there were quite a few on an adjacent slope in much better shape and Gerry found some *Spiranthes spiralis* which had never been seen at the site before. As usual Eastern Rock Grayling were seen in good numbers. 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 we found just a few but these were in perfect condition and with very large blooms, most in the typical Lilac form but with one or two pure white ones. We then drove half an hour or so to just before the coastal highway where there just happens to be a very high-quality café serving excellent coffee and cake. It was then back to the hotel driving along the coastal landscape bathed gold in the glorious autumn sunshine.

Day 4: To Karpenisi

Our transfer first took us through the spectacular rugged Southern Pindos. 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. Feeling somewhat replete we drove a few miles out of town to a gently sloping meadow surrounded by the *Quercus frainetto* and *Cercis siliquastrum* woodland so characteristic of the area. By now it was unsurprising to find that the site was absolutely bone-dry. At first glance there didn't seem to be a lot in the way of flowers but in areas where there was at least some moisture *Leontodon* and *Bellis sylvestris* made a nice show. The expected super-abundant *Prospero autumnale* were almost all in advanced fruit and in fact some had ripe seeds scattering as we brushed past. We did however find one or two lingering flowers. We searched further as we knew that *Spiranthes spiralis* is common at the site and of course when we got our 'eyes in' we found one and then another before realising we had been walking past them the whole time! Every so often we would see some of the flowers being visited by Brown Argus. We also saw a few Clouded Yellows, Small Heath and Vestal moths roosting on grass stems. Other occasional flowering plants included *Dianthus viscidus* and *Calamintha nepeta*. We then went on towards our hotel at Koryshades but with a little time left in

the day we stopped at a site near Voutiro for a favourite *Sternbergia lutea* site. Once again the early dry and hot season slightly spoilt our plans as the Sternbergias were pretty much over but nevertheless there were a few other flowers to enjoy including *Delphinium peregrina*, *Petrorhagia prolifera*, *Mentha longifolia* and lots of the pretty little Brassica – *Ptilotrichum cyclocarpa* growing amongst a few *Salvia verbenaca*.

Day 5: Timfristos

We set off through Karpenisi and on to Timfristos the great mountain that looms over the town. Our first stop was amongst the fabulous show of *Calamagrostis varia* – a spectacular blonde-bronze grass that is such a feature of this mountain when backlit by the morning sun. Stopping on the pass and around the ski-centre, flocks of Linnets flew around us and, as ever when we visit, Black Redstart flitted from one roof top to another. There weren't many flowers to see except a couple of very late blooming Mullein species – *Verbascum chaixii* and *V. mallophorum*. The views of the Southern Pindos were spectacular with peaks pushing their way through dramatic clouds. As we pulled away Richard spotted a Golden Eagle overhead being mobbed by Ravens. Going down the other side of the mountain the roads were lined with the skeletons of *Cirsium candelabra* and *Morina persica* that would have been a fantastic display back in June. Further down we noticed some good clumps of and *Epilobium dodonei* still in fine flowering form. Having a look around the area we found *Centaurea griesbachii* and were very surprised to discover some *Campanula versicolor* growing in roadside rubble. This was a really unusual place for it, its usual pendulous cliff-hanging habit turned into more of an untidy sprawl. As we got lower and approaching forest once again we



stopped by a hillside to admire the fiery autumn colours of *Cotinus* and scattered Sweet Chestnut. Taking a short walk down a side valley *Helleborus cyclophyllus* and *Cyclamen hederifolium* were common and Ian found a nice clump of *Dianthus viscidus* in a compacted part of the track. We started to climb higher towards a little chapel on the plateau where we traditionally have lunch. It is a good spot for *Colchicum boissieri* and although not a classic year for them they were much enjoyed while the food was being prepared. On a patch of rough grassland nearby we found an interesting pale form of *Knautia macedonica*. Our last stop of the day was at a 'hidden' steep sided dell with a small stream flowing through, obscured from the road by thick overhanging Oaks. We had discovered this site a couple of seasons before when desperately trying to find flowers for people on a day of heavy persistent rain. *Cyclamen hederifolium* are common even abundant at times on this side of the mountain but this is a really exceptional site for it. Thousands and thousands of their beautiful flowers shone almost like stars in the deep shade and we took many photographs to try and do justice to the scene. A really special way to end the day.

Day 6: Road to Athens

Today we left the beautiful Pindos behind us and drove a few hours on the motorway before stopping at the extensive salt lagoons at Aralia. Almost as soon as we arrived we noticed about twenty Kentish Plovers on the spit that separates the sea from the lagoons. We managed to get pretty close views of these charming little birds winding the windows down and using the car as a mobile hide. We got out to scan for birds across a bank of Sea Spurge - *Euphorbia paralias* - and the large-leaved Sea Lavender - *Limonium compactum*. Redshank and Grey Herons were picked up pretty close but for reasons known only to themselves most species were on the far side of the lagoons this year. Careful scanning with binoculars and by Richard (armed with his 'scope) the trip birdlist was rapidly ramped up and we added Greenshank, Grey Plover, Common Sandpiper, Wigeon, Mallard and Spoonbill to name but a few. But more excitingly, for the first time in many visits, we had eight Sandwich Terns and six Caspian Terns. Just as we were leaving Gerry noticed a Kingfisher flash past. It was then the last leg of motorway to our comfortable hotel and a delicious seafood dinner in a waterside taverna. Some of the group would be going home in the morning while the rest of us would have the joy of carrying on to the next tour of the Peloponnese.