

Kyrgyzia

Bulbs of the Celestial Mountains

A Greentours Trip Report

26th April to 7th May 2025

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Tulipa
tetrphylla

Issyl -Ata Valley and Borolday

Luckily our comfortable hotel was right on the edge of Bishkek and on the side we needed to get out of the sprawl pretty quickly. After a nice, relaxed breakfast we were soon out of the city and into farmland and then vast areas of green undulating steppe with a backdrop of high snowy mountains.



Tulipa kolpakowskiana

Showy *Astragalus sieversii* were abundant by the roadsides and fallow areas. Corn Buntings seemed to be on wires between every other telegraph pole and Hoopoes were frequently seen too. The landscape gradually became more hilly and with deep road cuttings. It was here that we saw our first Tulip species – *Tulipa zenaidae*. Our first proper stop was in one such cutting where we also found some nice ‘Horned Poppies’- *Glaucium elegans* and *G. fimbriigerum* and *Tragapogon roseum*. Occasional *Cerasus tienshanica* grew here but the dominant shrub was *Atraphaxis pyrifolia* and was at its best covered in fresh white flowers at this time. We then followed the course of the Issyl-Ata



Pedicularis semenovii

river before turning up a side valley. Here the steppic terrain was full of singing Skylarks. The landscape had increasingly large areas of scrub as we gained a bit of altitude. Again *Atraphaxis pyrifolia* was common but here it grew in combination with more or less equal amounts of *Caragana camilloi-schneideri*. We stopped here to search for *Tulipa zenaidae* and soon found a few of the stunning red form. This species is pretty much unique in the genus in its preference for growing amongst dense shrubs – those that are seen in more open areas are usually ones that have persisted despite over-grazing. In more open areas we found a couple of Louseworts – *Pedicularis semenovii* in its white form and the curious looking burgundy coloured *Pedicularis albertii*. Crumbly areas by the trackside provided ideal conditions for large and showy *Adonis chrysocyathus*. Moving on we flushed a pair of Chukar and we would do so again and again in this valley, they seemed to be absolutely everywhere! Our next stop was at a ravine

on a tight hairpin. On the hotter aspect there were good numbers of *Tulipa ostrowskiana* as well as a colony of very robust multi-spiked specimens of *Phlomooides speciosa* and a very nice *Astragalus* from the neo-bromus section. On the cooler aspect amongst thickets of *Spirea hypericifolia* and *Rosa platycantha* were occasional *Corydalis glaucescens* and the attractive woody *Astragalus schrenkii*. We then drove back down and on to the Boroldai valley. Entering the valley, the lower slopes were covered in flowering wild fruit trees particularly the ancestor of the cultivated apple of commerce – *Malus sieversii*. We stopped for our picnic by a narrow fast flowing river. There was a fantastic



Tulipa tarda

specimen of the apple growing on a tiny island that was barely bigger than the trunk. On a rocky area near the track *Cerasus tienshanicus* was also at its perfect flowering peak and attracted many butterflies particularly Eastern Clouded Yellow and Queen of Spain Fritillary. After lunch we carried on up the valley that became abruptly narrow and steep sided. New plants were soon found including *Parrya subsiliquosa* and *Rosularia latifolia*. Driving up the valley we began to notice *Tulipa tarda* growing out of cracks in the rocks and on

precarious narrow ledges where enough soil had accumulated to sustain them. It was fascinating to see them growing like this. A selection of this species is grown by the million for the bulb trade by the



Paeonia hybrida

Dutch and usually ends up in pots or tubs on peoples' patios. Given its very discerning natural choice of habitat it seems amazing that it has proved so amenable to often carefree cultivation. On damp overhangs above the river grew another treasure - *Primula kaufmanniana*. Often awkward to get at we eagerly risked getting wet feet to get photographs. Driving up to the plateau above the valley we found increasing numbers of an orange/yellow Tulip – apparently a new species currently being described by the Kyrgyz botanist Georgi Laskov. It is clearly very very closely allied to *Tulipa ostrowskiana*. Just before leaving

we found a ridge covered in *Paeonia hybrida*. There were hundreds of plants in bud tantalisingly close to flowering. After quite a bit of searching we thought we would just have to be disappointed, but eventually a couple of their magnificent crimson blooms were found. The display would doubtlessly be spectacular in the coming days. It was then on to our hotel in the Kapchagai valley. This part of Kyrgyzstan isn't really geared up for tourism and there isn't a lot of choice when it comes to accommodation so it was a very nice surprise to find that our hotel though simple was very comfortable and clean and the hosts very welcoming. As a bonus the internet signal was probably the best of the trip so far!

Kapchagai valley and Chatyndy – Kerkol pass

A fine sunny start to the day, walking to the breakfast room we could hear and then see a splendid male Ring-necked Pheasant (native here) strutting about the grounds. Soon we went back on our way down the Kapchagai valley making a couple of stops, firstly for *Scutellaria transiliensis*, *Tragopogon roseum* and a very large flowering specimen of *Crambe kotschyana* then a bit further along for another 'skullcap' – *Scutellaria mesostegia* along with *Phlomidoides sogdiana*. Our next stop was on a large sandy tump by the roadside – here was a colony of *Helianthemum songaricum* a few *Callianthemum anemonoides* (syn - *C.tragacanthoides*) and an attractive cream coloured prostrate *Astragalus*. We then drove into montane habitat and followed the Chu river that forms the boundary between the Alexander and Terskey ranges. We pulled up a side valley made of beautifully coloured rocks in various shades of gold, yellow and rust. Low scrub of *Caragana kirgizorum*, *Zygophyllum kyrgensis*



Tulipa kolpakowskiana

and *Artemisia sp* dominated the hillsides here for the most part, but on some banks were colonies of yellow *Tulipa kolpakowskiana* s.l. We then crossed the river where there were yet more of the same Tulip but this time growing with lots of *Geranium transversale*. We explored for a while before Sergey skillfully drove us up a very rough track that leads to the pass between Chatyndy and Kerkol constantly passing groups of the

Tulip until their numbers became seemingly unfeasible – literally millions of their backlit brightest yellow goblets making an unforgettable sight. Other plants of interest were *Arnebia guttata* and *Allium galanthum* – an onion valued highly by the locals for its flavour. On the way down we surprised a large female Shikra that had clearly only just taken a Chukar. It flew up to rocks above and started to eat the piece it had managed to detach undoubtedly eagerly waiting for us to leave before retrieving the rest of its prize. As much as we wanted to, we didn't linger as we didn't want to disturb this magnificent bird for too long. We then had a late lunch in the welcome shade of some Hawthorns in the now quite stifling heat before the last leg back to Bishkek.

Serafimovka valley

We didn't need to travel too far out of Bishkek today. After about an hour of driving through attractive but mainly featureless rolling steppe we turned down a track that at first seemed to have little more to offer, but after quarter of an hour or so gradually morphed into very steep undulating hills and dunes of the Serafimovka valley. The cooler aspects have a very attractive small tree and shrub community with flowering *Cretaegus songarica*, *Lonicera tatarica* and *Rosa playcantha* being particularly attractive at this time of year. The main reason for our visit though was to see the very narrow endemic Foxtail – *Eremurus zoeae* – a wonderful medium height soft-yellow species. We were lucky enough to see thousands of them and although they were very slightly past their best, if you didn't look really closely at the flowers they still put on a beautiful display. The variety of slope angles and aspect created several different microhabitats – some areas dominated by the enormous leaves of *Crambe kotshyana* and *Couzinea umbrosa* while others has communities of the *Eremurus* with *Tulipa ostrowskiana*, *Lappula macrocarpa*, *Haplophyllum latifolia*, *Scutellaria mesostegia* and *Glaucium fimbriigerum*. There were also a lot of *Iris kuschakewiczii* in seed too, apparently this colony of Junos is well known for the unusual number of colour variants but sadly that would have to be for another tour! The whole time we were here a pair of Long-legged Buzzards drifted in and out of view. Heading back towards Bishkek, Sergey took us through a large area of pretty uninspiring cultivated land before pulling up at a steep grassy bank that had managed to escape the plough. He had brought us here for a small population of *Tulipa greigii*. It isn't a particularly common species in Kyrgyzstan and so it was pleasing to find them in perfect condition. The flowers were beautiful but the area otherwise not that interesting so, once photographs were taken, we quickly moved on to our last stop of the day. This was another area of rolling green steppe but with small spinneys of low growing shrubs. This was very similar habitat to the areas we explored on the first day and typical for *Tulipa zenaidae*. We were hoping to find the typical form of the Tulip which is bright yellow with a unique very small black central blotch. It was obviously having an off year at the site as they weren't at all obvious at first but spreading out we eventually found a few. Occasionally we would get great views of Lammergeier and driving back we saw our first Golden Eagle of the trip – a first winter bird with very conspicuous white wing patches that could be seen even at distance.

Kashkar-suu

After a short drive we approached the very green lower foothills at Kashkar-suu – driving through Picea forest and onto mountain tracks, we did our best to ignore lots of beautiful things as Sergey suggested we should drive straight to the top and work our way down. We were whisked up to the top at circa 2400m to a fabulous area of short turf amongst prostrate mats of *Juniperus sabina*. The plateau afforded a wonderful panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. Dozens of Red-billed Choughs circled overhead

and we had several charms of Grey-necked Goldfinches flying to and fro as we explored and botanised. The turf was full of bright yellow wide open stars of *Tulipa dasystemon* and *Gagea filiformis*, making it almost impossible not to walk on them. They were also joined by lots of *Primula algida* in places – always a pleasing colour combination. On the way back down, at just a few hundred metres lower altitude, we spotted a few *Tulipa zenaidae* in an alpine meadow setting. It was a very pleasant surprise as this is an atypical habitat for them. They were gorgeous compact specimens only - 10cm or so high - probably as a result of the growing conditions. In the surrounding area the very first of the seasons *Trollius altaicus* were just beginning to push through. Much lower down in a side valley we found good



Corydalis glaucescens

numbers of *Pedicularis albertii* and the occasional *Rhodiola linearifolia*. Yellow *Viola acutiflorus* as well as violet *Viola suavis* were common in woodland edges and we unintentionally disturbed several sleepy slightly abraded over-wintered Camberwell beauties as we poked around in the undergrowth. We had lunch in the shade of Junipers in a spot that just happened to be home to a colony of *Corydalis glaucescens*. We spent quite a bit of time looking for the best ones before one last stop towards Bishkek for a few flowering clumps of *Iris loczyi* atop a crumbly bank. Seeing them



Corydalis glaucescens

proved fortuitous for as we explored the slope above we found *Oxytropis ferganica* and some flowering *Paeonia hybrida* with one or two plants covered in flowers.

To Talas via The Kara - balta gorge, Teo-Ashu pass and The Suusamy valley

A change of direction today and the relatively long transfer towards Talas and the Talas Alatau. Leaving the suburbs of Bishkek we saw our first Roller of the trip followed by a spell when we would see several at a time obviously just arriving on migration. An hour or so into the trip we entered the Kara-Balta - a very deep steep sided gorge. Our first stop was at an area of loose scree where we hoped to find a few late *Iris orchioides*. Unfortunately we could only find a few plants in seed but were pleased opportunistically to find one or two *Onosma irritans*. On ledges above us were quite a few *Eremurus fuscus* and also some flowering *Sorbus tienshanica*, a really attractive Mountain Ash that seems surprisingly scarce in cultivation. Gaining altitude we entered an area dominated by prostrate Junipers. The inclines were making the engines labour somewhat so we made a stop to let them cool for a while. We made use of the time by walking up a small valley following a fast-flowing stream. Red-billed Choughs were very common



Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum



Tulipa dasystemon

and there was a Grey Wagtail feeding young. We also got our first glimpse of scampering Red Marmots, a sight that would become very familiar in the coming week. We then pushed on to the Teo-Ashuu pass at 3150m – accessed via a slightly ominous poorly ventilated ex-soviet tunnel, not a nice experience really but over soon enough. As soon as we were through we were amply rewarded on the edge of a hairpin bend where we could park and get an extraordinary view. Even better was the nearby flower-filled slope. Innumerable *Tulipa dasystemon* were once again quite literally the star of the show growing with *Dracocephalum nutans* var *alpinum*, *Chorispora sibirica* and a lovely dark form of *Corydalis ledebouriana*. Wandering a bit further we found a few *Trollius komarovii* in the damp areas around a stream. After half an hour or so we

began the descent of the other side. We checked an area that Sergey knew for *Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum* but sadly without success but were happy to find the beautiful leaves of emerging *Richteria Leontopodium* and tiny *Androsace fedtschenkoii* on rocky bluffs. We then dropped right down (or at least it felt like it!) to the very wide Suusamyry valley, but we were still at 2200m. In places the road was lined with *Tulipa tetraphylla*. Pulling over to take photographs we noticed a number of raptors circling above us on the thermals including a pair of Pallid Harriers an Egyptian Vulture and several Himalayan Griffons. We got to see just how huge the Griffons were when they flew close to the other species. We stopped for lunch at a really good restaurant that was a real surprise considering just how “in the middle of nowhere” we were. After a very pleasant meal we wandered behind the buildings where there was an amazing display of *Tulipa tetraphylla*, *Chorispora sibirica* and *Ranunculus albertii*. A few miles on, the disturbed soil created by a road cutting created perfect conditions for another *Chorispora* – this time *C. bungeana* in several shades of blue through to white. We then searched several areas of low undulating hills for *Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum*. Assuming the season was just very early we had pretty much given up hope when we found a



Tulipa tetraphylla



Chorispora bungeana



Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum

bank with just the right aspect that had hundreds of them, many of which were in perfect condition and showed wonderful variation. As a bonus several Citrine Wagtail males in their superb breeding finery showed very well, often landing quite close on Caragana branches. The last leg took us through an area of snow patches where we were thrilled to find a few absolutely tiny *Colchicum kesselringii* and then over the Otmok pass where we could see the Talas range that we would be exploring in the coming days.



Crocus kesselringii

Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum

Besh-Tash

An hour or so from the hotel we entered the Besh-Tash nature reserve – at first the habitat was mainly comprised of dry sandy hills. It was here that we found a large colony of the showy Spurge – *Euphorbia ferganica*. It was just starting to ‘go over’ which is probably the best time to see it as it changes colour



from glaucous-green to a multitude of shades of pink and crimson. Following the river, the valley quickly became a very steep sided gorge. Before long we were finding *Iris albertii* and *Eremurus fuscus* on ledges above thickets of *Lonicera tienshanica*, *Berberis sphaerocarpa* and *Ephedra equisetina*. There were plenty of Green Hairstreaks that posed nicely for photographs and a pair of Golden Eagles soared overhead. This was followed not long after by a stretch of beautiful riparian forest mainly of *Populus*

talasica and *Betula tienshanica*. Gaining altitude, the trees gradually petered out giving way to grasslands and rocky bluffs. It was on one such bluff that we noticed a few *Iris orchoides* in perfect condition which was very nice to see, as they were well and truly over everywhere else so far. On the Northern aspect we found Brittle Bladder-fern (*C. fragilis*), *Rhodiola liniarifolia*, *Valeriana ficarifolia* and delicate *Androsace sibiricum*. We didn't get much further up the road before we were abruptly stopped by two squabbling



male Chukar that were so engrossed with their tiff that they were completely oblivious to our presence. When they finally got out of the way we drove a mile or so further to the beginnings of the Tien Shan Spruce zone (*Picea schrenkiana*).

The river broadened here and we noticed some *Allium fedtschenkoanum* on one of the many small islands in mid-stream. Luckily there was a small bridge that allowed easy access to one of them. These little islands seemed to be the preferred habitat for this fabulous hollow-stemmed onion – we would see many colonies in due course but never on the main river bank. Higher still we saw some small white Tulips growing in a compacted track in front of us. These turned out to be *Tulipa dasystemonoides*. Searching the turf around us we were very pleased to find tiny *Gentiana karelinii* and plentiful *Pulsatilla campanella* but perhaps most exciting was a fantastic clump of the recently described and little known *Tulipa laskovii* – a marvellous thing with gorgeous deep chocolate brown outer tepals contrasting beautifully with the golden yellow inners. We discovered later that this proved to be a new site for the species. Driving on we had hoped to get to a lake at the top of the valley but a late snow patch across the road made it impossible to get any further. It was in a nice spot with fantastic views so we decided to have our lunch using convenient sized boulders for chairs. A quick look around revealed one or two *Colchicum luteum*. Heading back down we noticed lots of Red Marmots scampering to get back to their burrows and flushed a small flock of Hill Pigeons – a really striking species. Our last stop was in an area of tussocks in boggy ground to get a better look at a large colony of *Trollius komarovii* that we had noticed on the way up.

Urmal gorge

Our day began by driving through the wide low pass at the extremes of the Alexander and Karatau mountain ranges. We arrived at an area of rocky slopes and mounds that is the type locality for another recently described Tulip species – *Tulipa talassica*. We searched some time before realising that the hot dry early spring meant they had already finished for the year. However there was an attractive mound with lots of *Helianthemum songaricum* and good numbers of *Phlomis speciosa* and *Phlomis sogdiana*. As we left, we watched a displaying Roller and added Oriental Turtle Dove to the bird list. As we had had no luck with the Tulips we tried again in the nearby Urmal gorge. This was a beautiful place of soft yellow rocks and soils with an attractive shrub community of *Atraphaxis*, *Berberis* and - best of all - at this

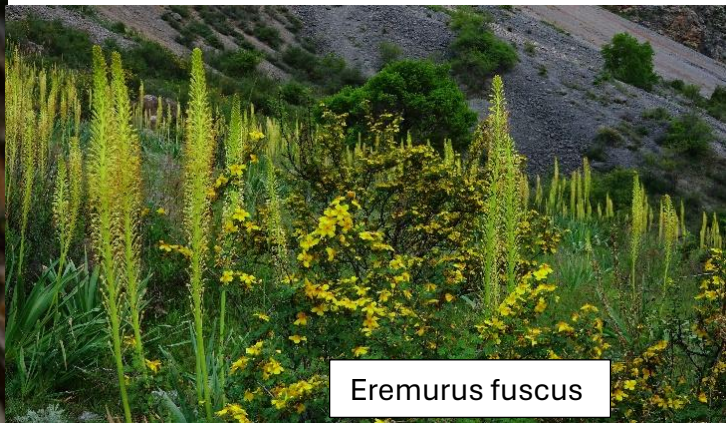
time a great many *Rosa kokanica* absolutely covered in flowers. We stopped at a slope for a small isolated colony of *Eremurus lactiflorus* before moving higher up the valley to beautiful area of scree and deep steep sided ravines. There were a lot of nice plants here including *Acantholium alatavicum*, *Scutellaria mesostegia*, *Capparis herbacea* and the really unusual little dark stemmed Soapwort - *Saponaria sewerzowii* – a really lovely thing. Thinking we had missed the Tulip here too we tried various different aspects and crags and were delighted to eventually find about a dozen or so in nice condition by a shady overhang. We also had a nice opportunistic find of a few *Allium karataviense* in a nice pink form on the way.

Kok Bel pass and Kara suu lake

We spent the morning retracing many of the previous days steps spending some time on one of Sergey's favourite 'secret places' - a modest sized roadside damp ravine. The whole area is by default floriferous but this place especially so. Thousands of *Dracocephalum nutans var alpina* grow alongside similar numbers of *Viola rupestris* and *Corydalis*



Trollius komarovii



Eremurus fuscus

ledebouriana in many different colour forms. In the very wettest areas we had another chance to enjoy *Trollius komarovii* too. Not far away the hillsides were covered by millions of *Primula algida*. In the afternoon we headed towards Kara suu lake. The valley leading

up was at first quite broad and was the scene of an astonishing spectacle in the shape of millions of *Eremurus fuscus* at their perfect peak of flowering. Climbing higher the track became really quite rough but Sergey once again demonstrated his excellent 4 x 4 driving skills before getting us to a plateau overlooking Kara suu lake. The habitat up here was mainly of mixed scrub and woodland with occasional open areas. It was in the clearings that we found big mats of *Iris ruthenica var brevituba*, most had started to go over but there were one or two pristine ones for us to enjoy, as well as the showy Milkwort – *Polygala hybrida*. Just before moving on we found a colony of *Primula kaufmanniana* in a very unusual pinkish form in a cool slope at the base of a Juniper. Making our way back down we stopped near the entrance to the valley for a large colony of *Ixiolirion tatarica*. These are by no means rare in the area but the sheer numbers made them irresistible. By chance on the opposite side of the road in cool shade by the river was a nice colony of *Allium pseudowinkleri* for us to enjoy too. On the main road back to the hotel we thought we had finished botanising for the day when Sergey made a screeching halt by a crumbly roadside slope. As ever he had been scanning for things to show us and had noticed a colony of the beautiful magenta flowered *Chesneya ferganensis*, a wonderful last treat for the day.

Karagul valley

Today we found ourselves in Karagul, yet another beautiful valley . This time we were searching for the very localised *Fritillaria ferganensis*. Sergey stopped at the base of some cliffs that he knew from experience to be a site for this somewhat cryptic species. He disappeared into the dense undergrowth of shrubs while we all looked around too. We were easily distracted by a colony of *Iris albertii*, especially as this usually unvarying species was in a number of colour forms including the typical vibrant blue but also in several other shades and even some exciting pinkish forms. There were also lots of *Allium dodecadontum*. Sergey came back from his foray to tell us that he had found some plants but they were all in fruit. This was disappointing but we knew we would be gaining quite a bit of altitude if we pressed on up the valley and that might just buy us some time season-wise in our pursuit of the Fritillary. A mile or so up the valley we came across yet another stunning display of *Eremurus fuscus* but this time made even more special as they were growing amongst hundreds of bright yellow *Rosa ecae* – yet another truly unforgettable sight. We eventually followed the valley track to an area of thick shrubs at 1700m. This was again a site known to Sergey for the Fritillary. We looked high and low for quite some time without success. We started the drive back down feeling a bit sorry for ourselves with Sergey still constantly scanning as he drove. All of a sudden he stopped as he thought he had seen something. Getting out of the car he rushed to a scrubby bank and cried ‘yes’. He had quite miraculously seen a shape out of the corner of his eye that was the object of our desire. It was even more amazing that even when he was pointing at it we struggled to see it at first but when we eventually ‘got our eyes in’ it was a very joyful and satisfying way to end the day.



Itagar valley

Our overnight hotel was in the Chichkal valley situated right next to the very fast flowing eponymous river. A very pleasant place to stay, we had regular great views of Blue Whistling Thrush from the hotel terraces. An ornamental bridge allowed access to *Abies semenovii* forest on the opposite bank where we found nice flowering plants of *Clematis alpina* var *sibirica* draping the Firs and plentiful blue drumsticks of the local endemic *Allium chichkalensis*. Whilst eating breakfast we could see Azure Tits pecking at food items in the dining room windows. We set off on the last leg of our journey back to Bishkek for our last proper stop in the field in the Itagar valley – a spur of the Chickal. We drove up to an area of fir forest



with shrubby thickets on one side and cliffs on the other. Sergey had brought us here as it gave us another what seemed slim chance of finding *Fritillaria ferganensis*. We spread out to search for them and to our delight it didn't take long to find one and then another. They were in perfect condition at this site It was more or less at the same altitude that we saw them yesterday (c. 1700m)



but obviously cooler here some 200km further North. This species has coiling tendrils that are used opportunistically to attach to nearby twigs but it was fascinating to see them wrap their tendrils around each other when the plants happened to grow side by side often almost strangling each other in their search for support. As in Karagul they grow in dense scrub on one side of the valley but here, on the other side, we also found some fabulous multi-flowered specimens growing pendulously from cool shaded rock faces. The conditions on this side clearly suited *Primula kaufmanniana* and *Cortusa turkestanica* very well too as there were some superb clumps to enjoy here. This was a wonderful couple of hours and arguably among the best stops of the whole trip!



Primula
pamirica



Eremurus
cristatus



Allium sp