

Searching for wild tulips in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan

October 30 2018, by Vicky Wilkins



Tulipa greigii was one of the species recorded on the expedition. Credit: Georgy Lazkov

Tulips are one of the world's most iconic flowers, but their wild existence is still somewhat shrouded in mystery. Thoughts may turn to Holland, but no! Wild tulips actually carpet the stony slopes of the mountains of Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan alone is home to 27 wild tulips, a third of all global species. The spectacular Greig's tulip, *Tulipa greigii*, with its large red flowers, is one of six local endemics. Greig's tulip is found only in the North and West Tien Shan mountains and is of high importance for selection in the cultivated tulip trade. Tulips also have great cultural significance in Kyrgyzstan, where they feature in displays across cities and are embedded within the designs of handmade traditional felt carpets known as 'shyrdak'.

Despite their global popularity, wild tulips are threatened with extinction. Eleven are listed in Kyrgyzstan's Red Data Book – a compilation of the country's most threatened species. Threats to tulips include overgrazing, trampling by livestock and recreational cutting. These pressures are intensified by a lack of knowledge around wild tulips, an absence of formal protection and management, as well as low public awareness of their importance.

This summer, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) embarked on an expedition exploring a new project focusing on the conservation of Kyrgyzstan's endemic tulips. FFI partnered with Cambridge University Botanic Gardens, who received funding from the Darwin Initiative, and local organisation, Bioresource. The group collected field data, conducted community surveys and held a workshop with stakeholders. Across the 14 day trip, the expedition team was extremely excited to find multiple tulip populations across the north and south of the country. Species recorded included eight of those in Kyrgyzstan's red Data Book: *Tulipa affinis*, *T. anadaroma*, *T. greigii*, *T. kaufmanniana*, *T. ostrowskiana*, *T. korolkowii*, *T. rosea* and *T. zenaidae*.



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The montane grasslands of Kyrgyzstan are globally important for biodiversity, harbouring large numbers of endemic plants. For centuries, Kyrgyz people have grazed livestock, and today pastoralism remains integral to mountain communities. Sadly, these grasslands are now severely degraded: references quote approximately a quarter of the total area as overgrazed. The expedition team explored opinions on grazing in those living alongside tulips; surveying 68 people in the communities of Suluktu, Baul, Chatkal, Sary Chelek, Kichi Kemin, Kemin, Chon Kemin and Shamschy.

Responses showed that pasture owners were keeping cows and sheep, plus a few horses. To improve pasture conditions, people want to see

livestock numbers regulated and land management controlled. When asked about tulips, nearly everyone was aware of their existence, but were often confused over what a tulip looks like and whether or not populations were declining. Where a decline had been seen, this was attributed to recreational cutting and impact of livestock. Very encouragingly for the team, 88% of those surveyed wanted to learn about tulips and to get involved in their conservation.

This successful trip ended with a one-day stakeholder workshop held on 14th July in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, which was attended by 17 of the country's conservation and sustainability experts. The FFI team has since shaped the findings into project focusing on threatened endemic [tulip](#) conservation, for which we are now seeking funding. This project will complement FFI's existing work in the region, where we are also protecting Kyrgyzstan's precious fruit and nut trees.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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