

MOONFLOWERS &
TURBANS
Part One

Fritillaria eduardii





Relfections of the Tien Shan



Papaver pannonicum



Fritillaria reserve (backwards!).

Tulipa rosea (left)

The receding snows of Kyrgyzstan set free a fabulous abundance of spring bulbs and other plants. Arriving into Bishkek at an unsociable time, and then blundering bleary eyed to a vast breakfast, strong coffee more or less woke me up. Before I knew it, I was on a plane of some description (I can't honestly remember whether if it was a modern jet or lumbering ex-Soviet prop plane, but nonetheless I arrived in far-flung Batken and the western extremity of this scenic and charming 'stan'. A second breakfast was thrust upon me on arrival.

By late morning I was driving to a rather special place, announced by an impressive entrance sculpture of 'Aigul'. I managed to photograph this backwards as you'll notice! Aigul is the local name for the spectacular *Fritillaria eduardii*, a close relative of the crown imperial and one which, though common in parts of Tajikistan, it is hard to reach good populations without climbing as local boys over-collect the flowers to sell by the roadside. Here couldn't be more different. Here young children are used to patrol the carefully guarded reserve, chastising any adult seen threatening to pick the flowers. I enjoyed a wonderful couple of hours here, not only seeing the frits, but also *Tulipa korolkowii*, *Leontice albertii* and flowering bushes of wild almond.

Eremurus albertii





Colchicum luteum

Fritillaria sewerzowii

As I walked down past the many locals who were arriving to admire the display, I suddenly became the centre of attention and was accosted by a two TV crews, one local and one national. I had to give an interview to both, and genuinely expressed by positive feelings about not only this place but Kyrgyzstan in general. Harsher lands lay beyond Batken and I was on a mission to track down a rarely seen beauty, *Tulipa rosea*. I found them growing amidst the most austere stony steppe, their cerise flowers like rubies in the desert. That evening my guide took me to a somewhat dubious nightclub and extolled the health benefits of vodka and we toasted frits and tulips over some local interpretations of pizza.

Next day we drove out across the flat steppe finding shimmering fields of *Papaver pannonicum* growing with various *Arnebia* and *Ixiolirion tartaricum*. Closer to Osh an earthen bank had the most wonderful stands of my favourite foxtail lily; *Eremurus albertii*, with stout flesh-pink spires. Central Asia is defined by steppe and the mountains that punctuate it and we were now heading for the iconic Tien Shan, cresting low passes with plenty of bicoloured *Tulipa tetraphylla* and stands of *Fritillaria sewerzowii*. The latter was even more common

Corydalis ledebouriana





Iris kolpakowskianum



Iris kuschakewiczii

as we climbed higher into the Ala Bel, sharing moist slopes with *Corydalis glaucescens* and then incredible sheets of *C. ledebouriana* carpeting the alpine turf. Higher still and there were many thousands of golden *Colchicum luteum*. Oddly, enough as we descended and then climbed once again for a second pass, there were countless purple and white *C. kesselringianum* instead. These sometimes grew with *Tulipa dasystemon*. Other valleys had sumptuous *Iris kolpakowskianum* alongside abundant *Crocus alatavicus* and *Tulipa turkestanica*. There was still plenty of time for a confusion of tulips on this short trip and after I'd found the endemic *T. talassica* we headed for Bishkek, seeing plenty of early-flowering *Eremurus fuscus* and dark-centred *Tulipa zenaidiae*.

My final day was a wonderful bulb-filled one, with the familiar *Tulipa tarda*, growing with *T. tetraphylla* and fiery *T. ostrowskiana*, whilst, a smattering of velvety *Iris kuschakewiczii* gave some respite from the hot colours. I photographed a cryptic pit-viper warming itself on a bank on the way down too, a little reminder as to where to put one's boots.

As far as I was concerned, I needed to put them on Central Asian soil as often as possible.

Tulipa tetraphylla

Tulipa ostrowskiana

