

ARMENIA TRIP REPORT 2018



Iris acutiloba subsp. *lineolata*

Day 1 6 May To Istanbul

Unfortunately, an annoying thirteen-hour reschedule by Atlas Global meant most of the group spent a night in Istanbul, enjoying a rooftop meal in Sultanahmet rather than joining Penny (who had arrived via Dubai) and I in Yerevan sampling some delicious Armenian cuisine.

Day 2 7 May To Gyumri & Ashotsk

Penny and I spent the morning looking at beautiful *Iris iberica* subsp. *elegantissima*, the Hellenistic temple of Garni and the impressive Geghard Monastery before meeting the rest of the group at the airport. We quickly left the city and stopped by a field of *Consolida orientalis* for a good picnic lunch. An hour on from here and we found another population of the lovely *Iris iberica* subsp. *elegantissima* with a variety of colour forms as well as *Scutellaria orientalis*, *Onosma microcarpa* and *Arenaria dianthoides*. They all grew in an area of old lava fields, but the landscape quickly became greener and softer as we approached Gyumri. To the north the road climbed towards Ashotsk where we found a drift of *Muscari neglectum* (including two white forms), various colours of *Pulsatilla albana* subsp. *armena* from purple to yellow and *Ajuga orientalis*. Further on, past villages punctuated with huge White Stork nests, the landscape was riven with sinuous streams and marshy flats. The ice-blue of *Scilla rosenii* peppered one such area, the tepals of the flowers gracefully recurved. Another marsh patch had lots of pink drumsticks of *Primula algida* and the deep indigo of *Bellevalia paradoxa*. Time was moving on and we drove back through the remarkable highland landscape of old, rounded volcanic cones swathed in green, with drifts of golden buttercups and rather solemn villages.

Dinner was a delicious feast of barbequed sturgeon washed down with thyme tea and white wine.

Day 3 8 May Puschkin Pass

Leaving Gyumri, we stopped briefly to look at a traditional Armenian graveyard with some interesting headstones and even larger than life stone



Scilla rosenii

statues of those buried. A military commemoration was taking place at the same time. The main stop for the morning was in a rocky valley with many good plants. Each of the facing slopes had different species on. The lovely white flowers of *Centaurea armena*, *Globularia trichosantha* and the tiny *Polygala stocksiana* adorned the steeper stony parts and in grassier patches were both mauve and yellow forms of *Pulsatilla albana* subsp. *armena*. The white stars of *Ornithogalum transcaucasicum* were sprinkled throughout. In a sheltered gully, there was a population of sweet-scented *Daphne glomerata* a rather unusual location for this species, which normally occurs in wetter places. *Fritillaria pinardii* subsp. *hadjastanica* had been found higher on the slope and more were found lower down right across from the facing slope where many *Fritillaria crassifolia* subsp. *kurdica* were growing. There seeming to also be many hybrids which retained the silvery tepals of *hadjastanica*. Further across on a rockier section were the yellow plumes of *Astragalus cicer* and the deliciously-scented onion *Allium struzlianum* as well as the bonus of three fine red *Tulipa julia*. Heading back down we went across to look at *Salvia staminea* (syn. *armeniaca*), a yellow *Iris pumila*, another fine *Allium struzlianum* and the tracksides were lined with abundant *Veronica orientalis*.

Moving on a little way we stopped in a small valley to prepare lunch. The nearby slopes had superb purple *Iris paradoxa* mingled with the black-centred red of *Papaver commutatum*. On the rocky slopes were an *Onosma* sp., plentiful *Nepeta mussenii* and the rocks were encrusted with rosettes of *Sempervivum armenum*. After a very pleasant picnic we set off for the higher ground of the Puschkin Pass. The weather which had been brooding now turned and the first rain arrived. Luckily this stopped when we arrived at a rocky bank with the endemic *Viola somchetica*



Iris paradoxa

in full flower. The rich-yellow of *Primula veris* subsp. *macrocalyx* coloured the turf above with some fine plants along the roadside too with *Erysimum cuspidatum*. George scampered up to a fine spike of *Orchis mascula* before we climbed higher to the pass. Here the turf was peppered with hundreds of *Primula ruprechtii* that varied in colour from white to pale yellow with the odd pink form thrown in. Golden cups of *Trollius ranunculinus* were scattered throughout and a few *Fritillaria collina* were also found, but the *Gentiana verna* subsp. *pontica* had now closed as we were enshrouded in fog. The fog turned to rain and we made just one more stop for another *Fritillaria collina* in the woods alongside the pleated leaves of *Veratrum album*. The rain turned torrential as we drove down through the mixed beech and hornbeam forest to the main road and on past some impressive gorge scenery. Turning a bend there were a few purple *Iris pumila* and the rain had also stopped so there was a quick plant stop.

Moving on we descended into the dramatic gorge and were confronted with a very ugly soviet eyesore of decrepit copper mills and belching chimneys set within the stunning emerald slopes of the gorge. Rising above all of this we climbed to the stunningly positioned and architecturally impressive Haghpat Monastery. Time was spent exploring the site, the dark grey stone reflecting the sombre skies and somehow enhancing the solid stonework, which had withstood elements and earthquakes for a thousand years. Tamar took us to her favourite parts and explained the various elements of the churches and the stone work, also showing as a fascinating manuscript vault of big jars buried in the ground.

Our hotel was nearby and during dinner another intense storm moved through.

Day 4 9 May Simyonovka & Selim Passes

A fine sunny morning with clear views down the valley and a few *Eremurus spectabilis* clinging to the rocks. After breakfast, we drove east stopping for a fine colony of *Orchis purpurea* subsp. *caucasica* along the roadside. A nearby meadow had many more within a sea of buttercups. Also in the meadow were many *Pedicularis sibthorpii*, dainty pink or purple *Polygala caucasica* and the unusual orchid *Steveniella satyroides* together with some peculiar hybrids of *Orchis purpurea* and *O. punctulata*.



Fritillaria collina

Moving on we moved through pleasant countryside with extensive woodlands and meadows, stopping after an hour at a potential site for *Iris pumila*. Unfortunately, in this early season they had finished but there were instead some flowering *Dictamnus albus* and a lovely bright green tree frog. Lunch was on the Simyonovka Pass which was swathed in *Primula veris* subsp. *macrocalyx* and a fair sprinkling of larger-flowered *P. elatior* subsp. *pallasii*. White dusting on the nearby slopes was from thousands of flowering *Anemone narcissiflora* and though we couldn't reach these the slopes above had a fair number and some lovely pink forms too. Also on the slope were *Pedicularis wilhelmsiana*, *Myosotis lithospermifolia*, *Euphorbia glaberrima* and a few *Arnebia pulchra* with their distinctive purple-spotted yellow flowers.

Reaching Sevan Lake, the clouds were thickening and rain accompanied the first part of our journey to the highlands. However, this stopped when we reached good populations of *Primula auriculata* growing in large marshes on a broad green plateau with late snow patches clinging to the hills and golden ribbons of *Caltha polypetala* lining the streams. Elsewhere were large numbers of *Bellevalia paradoxa* and oceans of golden buttercups. Some locals had been collecting *Puschkinia scilloides* leaves, and Tamar explained how they plaited them and stored them to eat in the winter. Stopping a fine view down the valley and a 10th Century caravanserai the thunderclaps started. We had a quick look inside the building and then retreated. But we had to venture out again to try and find one more flower at our last stop. Fortunately, there was still one *Iris pseudocaucasica* in bloom on the bare gritty ground along with some very closed *Tulipa julia* and the odd *T. biflora*. From here we drove direct to the hotel and our dry rooms.

Day 5 10 May Noravank & Gomk

The plan for the day was to first drive to Novavank Monastery. However, this fairly short distance took all morning as there was a succession of interesting flora on the way. Things began with the striking spikes of *Phlomis laciniata*, growing with *Verbascum varians*, diminutive *Verbascum orientale* and *Ixiolirion tartaricum* around a large old cross-stone. Lower down were the lovely fluffy plumes of *Stachys lavandulifolia* next to two roses *Rosa canina* and *R. corymbifera*. Then we stopped for a fine flower-laden shrub of a third rose, *Rosa hemisphaerica*. Close to this was the golden-flowered *Astragalus caraganae* and a suite of papaveraceae with *Roemeria refracta*, *R. hybrida*, *Papaver arenarium* and *Hypercoum pendulum*. It was interesting to see the various capsule designs of the different genera. In fact, poppies were an enduring theme throughout the day with no fewer than ten species seen. Indeed, our next stop was for a fabulous swathe of *Papaver macrostomum*, a large red flowered species with white-bordered black blotches inside. Across the road were more,



Anemone narcissiflora

mingled with impressive stands of tall *Consolida orientalis*. Turning off for the monastery we made a botanical stop finding two more species of poppy, tall and slender red *Papaver lacerum* with (newly described) pink *P. roseolum*. These grew with *Gladiolus atroviolacea* and a solitary *G. kotschyanus* and *Salvia inflatus*. Incredibly yet two more stunning red poppies awaited at the Noravank Monastery, a fine piece of thirteenth century architecture in warm-toned stone. Distracted from the culture we found both *Papaver commutatum* and *P. ocellatum* growing together, the latter with a superb bull's-eye design. An impressive spire of *Verbascum armenum* (?) also grew nearby.

Descending again for lunch we gather supplies first and then stopped in rocky valley, where the slopes had some fine displays of *Dictamnus albus* subsp. *caucasica* and the pretty pink *Lotus gebelia*. After lunch, we wandered further along the road finding *Campanula bayerniana* in the rocks, fine specimens of *Gladiolus atroviolaceus*, *Ornithogalum transcaucasica*, delicate *Linaria armena*, many *Leopoldia caucasica*, *Allium akaka* and yet another poppy, orange *Papaver fugax*.

Driving higher we climbed to a spectacular valley with big views of the complex hills beyond. It was tantalisingly close to the Nakhichevan border. Climbing a lush slope, we found many *Dactylorhiza flavescens* (all pale yellow, bar one pink form), big spikes of deep pink *Orchis mascula* and then a couple of stunning scarlet *Phelypaea tournefortii*, an amazing parasitic plant. Also on the slope were many flowering bushes of *Spiraea crenata* and a few *Campanula stevenii*. The latter were also present at our last stop, a slope with many red *Tulipa julia* and *Fritillaria kurdica*. A bit higher up were the woolly heads of *Rindera lanata* and fine views of late afternoon light playing across the contours and ridges that were dressed in various cloud forms.

Day 6 11 May Goris & Tatev Monastery

Leaving Hermon, we stopped shortly after the village for the tumbling masses of *Lathyrus rotundifolius* and yellow *Malabiala dasyantha*. Then we spent time in an interesting area of steppe flora with *Allium akaka*, *Ornithogalum hadjastanica*, *Bungea trifida*, *Lotus gebbelia*, *Orobanche ramosa* and *Linaria armeniaca*. The road climbed higher to a wide open green landscape backed by snowy ridges and distant mountains. We stopped for a good colony of *Iris caucasica* mingled with *Bellevalia fominii* and pink (or white) *Centaurea triumfetii*. The weather was looking a touch moody and not long after we had arrived at our lunch site a hail storm swept through. Fortunately, it did not last long and we had time to enjoy our picnic as well as stands of *Iris imbricata* before it returned. A nearby waterfall was a bit on the brown side after the downpour.



Papaver pannonicum

Moving on we stopped for an interesting Bronze Age astronomical observatory, where holes had been made in large standing stones that (apparently) aligned with particular stars. Then it was onto the main event for the afternoon and our spectacular cablecar ride to Tatev Monastery. We were lucky to have the car to ourselves for the journey high above the cliffs and thickly forested valley below. A pair of Egyptian Vultures soared across and we could see them from above as well as the older parts of the monastery complex, deserted villages and canyons.

The showers and grey skies added extra mood to the grey-stoned Tatev Monastery, and we dodged the worst to appreciate various parts of the complex. A few *Campanula armena* were starting to flower among the cross stones. There was a misty return journey in the cable car.

Day 7 12 May To Kapan

Our departure from Goris took in a quick look at the cave dwellings perched in cliffs above the town and then a fascinating look at a bakery where they were preparing the traditional thin bread, lavash. It was still being done the traditional with the elastic dough prepared by one lady and passed to a second who stretched it over a board and slapped it onto the side wall of a brick oven. A few seconds later it was hooked out by a third lady and put on the pile. There was also the chance to see some of the interesting architecture of the town before we moved on, trying to stay ahead of the weather. Our main stop was for a superb colony of *Iris acutiloba* subsp. *lineolata* with dozens of plants scattered under bushes and on greasy slopes, including some large clumps of many flowers. A few pink *Gladiolus szovtisii* were also here with *Anacamptis morio* and the odd *Campanula sibirica*. There was another interesting area of oak woodland with a variety of colour forms of *Orchis purpurea* subsp. *caucasica*, some of which were very close to the Iranian *O. adenocheila* in appearance. A pure white monkey orchid *Orchis simia* was also found amidst many of the typical colour form. Low boughs held some mistletoe *Viscum album* too.

Lunch was by a hidden monastery tucked among the beech woods and swathed in mist when we arrived. Fortunately, the rain eased during lunch and allowed us the chance to see the chicken sacrifice at the church altar as well as some towering *Orchis mascula*, little drifts of *Lathyrus laxiflorus* and a solitary *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *mammosa*.

Alas, after lunch the rain intensified and botanising was cut short with a warm hotel a better option.



Iris imbricata

Day 8 13 May Kapan circuit

Our final day in delightful Armenia and it was a dry if cloudy start. First up was a rocky area with a few *Eremurus spectabilis* and *Iris imbricata*. Then we moved on to the upper slopes of the Meghri Pass stopping by a long gully. Climbing up we managed to find a few decent *Corydalis persica*, alongside plenty of *Puschkinia scilloides*, a few *Anemone caucasica* and emerging spikes of a *Dactylorhiza*. Reaching the pass, we walked across to the large snow patch where there were a few lovely *Crocus adamii*, *Colchicum raddeana* and plenty more ice-blue *Puschkinia scilloides* mingled with masses of bright yellow *Gagea lutea*. In a marshy patch below this gathering was the dark blue of *Scilla sibirica* subsp. *caucasica* too. From here we drove down much lower (2000 metres lower) to the Iranian border. In fact, we were so close you could have thrown a pomegranate to an Iranian on the other side of the Aras River. Lunch was in a rocky area with *Stachys inflata*, the fine-lined flowers of *Onobrychis michauxii*, slender pink *Crupina* sp. and *Alkanna orientalis*.

Higher in the rocky hills we found a population of *Iris acutiloba* (supposedly these were *grossheimii*, but they seemed identical to *I. acutiloba* subsp. *lineolata*). Then it was up further into the mists to a superb colony of tulips. The slope was generously coloured with wonderful, shapely red and yellow tulips. The red was *Tulipa sosnowskyi*, the yellow *T. florenskyi* but they were identical in shape and structure, even the bulbs so it does raise the question as to whether they are not just colour forms of one species. On the opposite slope were many *Tulipa confusa* with typically paler outer tepals. It was a mesmerising display sadly cut short by incoming rain. We had been rather unlucky with the weather this week which is usually drier, but spring is spring.

There were a couple of stops on the way down through beautiful emerald forest, first in a rocky cut for the impressive thistle *Jurinella speciosus* and then for a couple of green-yellow *Orchis punctulata*.

A final tasty meal rounded off this part of the tour.



Tulipa sosnowski

Day 9 14 May To Iran

Most of the group set off at 8.30 and drove to the border, crossing into Iran where they met Jalil and continued onto Jolfa.

Unfortunately, three of us non-desirables had not secured visas and instead left at 5.00 and drove to Yerevan, flying onto Turkey for a tour of the north east.



Jurinella speciosa

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Consolida orientalis