



A TALE OF TWO FRITS

Fritillaria eduardii



Colchicum kesselringianum



Corydalis ledebouriana

Spring in the north spans a truly vast area and it is possible to visit only a small part in any given year. However, despite this enormity every so often the opportunity arises for that special combination of plants, even if these plants reside thousands of kilometres apart. There are few more stately bulbs than the twin giants of *Fritillaria imperialis* and *F. eduardii*, magnificent, robust species that can both occur in large numbers, making them even more remarkable and memorable. This season threw up the chance to combine these two; one growing in Central Asia the other in Western Asia. First glance suggests they are closely related and their choice of habitat is unsurprisingly similar too. I arrived in Kyrgyzstan and the first view out of my hotel room window in the morning was of a long line of snow-capped Tien Shan mountains that spanned the horizon. From Bishkek we crossed the 3200 metre Tor Ashu pass seeing *Tulipa zenadiae*, uncountable numbers of *Colchicum kesselringianum*, a slope peppered with gorgeous *Iris kolpakowskianum* followed by mind-boggling quantities of golden *Colchicum luteum*, drifts of *Corydalis ledebouriana* and *Tulipa dasystemon*. It's fair to say travel in Kyrgyzstan is not fast and the roads not the best, but the compensations are screes filled with the fabulous big-leaved *Allium karataviense*, *Iris graberiana*, red-and-yellow cups of *Tulipa ferganica* and fine stands of *Fritillaria sewerzowii*. Wending out way



Iris kolpakowskianum



Colchicum luteum



Crocus alatavicus



Tulipa tschimganica



Fritillaria eduardii

past the stony hills of Toktugul we reached Osh and then a slow trundle east past the dry steppe we arrived at the end of the Pamir Alai. The relatively low, but nonetheless dramatic hills around Batken provided the backdrop for the first of our duo. Aigul-Tash is a special reserve dedicated to protecting a large population of *Fritillaria eduardii*, with thousands present in the reserve. Alas, in order to maintain its' integrity the authorities have closed this area for the near future. This is all the more important when one considers the large-scale pillaging by local boys of the species in neighbouring Tajikistan, where huge bunches are sold to passing motorists for a pittance, which makes finding accessible populations to show guests a challenge. Back in Kyrgyzstan, luckily, a second large population exists on a neighbouring mountain and it was these that we got to see. Reaching Aigul is never straightforward, and to get to these involved a climb up a steep slope and across limestone rock sheets before we reached a boulder-strewn slope studded with floriferous *Amygdalus spinosissimus* as well as hundreds of stunning and pristine frits. They really were in perfect condition and time was spent slowly climbing to the base of the cliffs above us where the uppermost plants could be found. The brooding skies only added to the spectacle. Before leaving this corner of the country we also got a look at pretty deep pink *Tulipa rosea* and rounded off the journey with the hefty salmon-pink spikes of *Eremurus alberti*. My trip continued across Uzbekistan to the western end of the Tien Shan where we found more tulips, frits and crocuses. In fact, the latter were very much replacing the melting snow, coating the turf in a generous dressing of thousands of crisp white flowers, interspersed with abundant buttery *Gymnospermium albertii*, both in numbers I'd not seen before. A separate canyon had some superb displays of various colour forms of *T. tschimganica* and the elegant scarlet vases of *Tulipa greigii* that blazed in the sun of my final day there.

I had a 'spare' day in between this tour and my next in northern Greece. My Tashkent-Istanbul flight



Fritillaria imperialis



Fritillaria imperialis



Puschkinia scillioides white form (?).



Euphorbia denticulata



Corydalis sp.

arrived early morning so what better than to connect with the first flight to Van and from there travel onto Yuksekova in south-eastern Turkiye for frit number two. *Fritillaria imperialis* is widely spread (though scattered) from central Turkey east into western Iran and apparently on into the western Himalaya (though I have never seen any photographs taken of the populations there). Even better I got to spend these two field days with my lovely Basak. Both species of frit have a preference for limestone and in the past I have seen the vast displays in the Iranian Zagros at Chelgerd and Aligoudarz. With these rather off the agenda at present I've been keen to find good populations elsewhere and this corner of Turkiye has some of the finest stands. The easiest to see were those that had established dense and thriving populations in graveyards around Van, planted many years ago and creating a dramatic setting among the tombstones. Various other showy plants are used in graveyards in this area too, including *Eremurus spectabilis*, *Iris paradoxa* and *Allium akaka*, but none of these quite matched the spectacle these hefty frits create. They have become something of a tourist attraction with (mainly Turkish) tourists coming to Van to experience the display. Wonderful though they were we were after truly wild plants and



Iris reticulata





Bellevalis rixii



Iris aucheri and Basak

drove on to the most south-easterly corner of the country nestled between Iran and Iraq. On the way to Yuksekova, we found yellow *Tulipa koyunci*, little amethyst spikes of *Bellevalia rixii* and superb cushions of *Draba polytricha* wedged into rock crevices (that rather mimicked the *Dionysia* of Iran), whilst *Ranunculus kochii* and *Colchicum szoutisii* appeared in great quantity. Reaching Yuksekova, we were among some of the most spectacular mountain country imaginable, hemmed in by snowy ranges on every side. Heading out the next morning we stopped for reflections of this mountain glory in flooded fields and caught sight of *Iris aucheri* flowering on rock outcrops. These grew alongside the first few (nearly open) *Fritillaria imperialis*. A side road passed by flowery bushes of an attractive *Cerasus sp.* and spinier *Amygdalus orientalis* (very similar to the *A. spinosissimus* that accompanied *Fritillaria eduardii* in Kyrgyzstan) then our first stands of open *Fritillaria imperialis*. We had agreed to meet a local botanist for some information on locations and the village lay amidst truly stunning scenery. Various conversations followed and we set off for a couple of rocky knolls. The first had a strong population of greenish *Fritillaria persica*, *Bongardia chrysocoma*, an undescribed *Bellevalia* sp. as well as some well positioned *Fritillaria imperialis*. The second knoll was even better with pure white forms of *Puschkinia scillioides*, an elegant *Corydalis sp.*, sky-blue *Scilla sibirica* and then higher up in clearing in the oak scrub were plentiful *Eranthis hyemalis* and the deep purple of *Iris reticulata*. Bursting from the ground thereabouts were hundreds of fast-emerging stems of *Fritillaria imperialis* (this was a late year) but luckily the plants on the limestone rocks were in bloom, some with fine mountain backdrops. One thing is for sure, both of these impressive frits grow in equally impressive places, surrounded by other wonderful plants.

If only there was a direct flight between them!

Lake Van view with *Amygdalus orientalis*.