

HOOKER'S KINGDOM

Rhododendron hodgsonii, Dzongri, Sikkim



Arisaema nepenthoides, Lachen, Sikkim



Primula calderana, Dzongri

For those of us in the north the optimism of spring is fast approaching, when all manner of botanical delights will appear once again and anything seems possible. For those that revel in seeing wild plants in wild places the problem then becomes choice, in fact too much of it. Roughly sixty-eight percent of world's land mass is in the northern hemisphere and a significant chunk of that contains temperate flora. Does one go to see crocuses and snowdrops or tulips and foxtail lilies, orchids and antiquities, blue poppies and primulas or lilies and gigantic trees. Decisions, decisions. Many years ago Chris dreamt of spending an entire season in the Himalayas, moving up down or along this endless mountain chain as the season progressed, experiencing the changes and seeing flowers come and go, replaced by different species as spring turned to summer to autumn when the first frosts would burnish the high turf, by now sprinkled with the sapphire of gentians indicating it was time to retreat. Alas, that was all before he needed to work for a living and had his lovely boys to look after.

Instead, he now needs to take bite-sized chunks to try and cover the most interesting parts rather than the entirety. China's botanical excellence has long featured as a regular stamping ground,



Coelogyne corymbosa



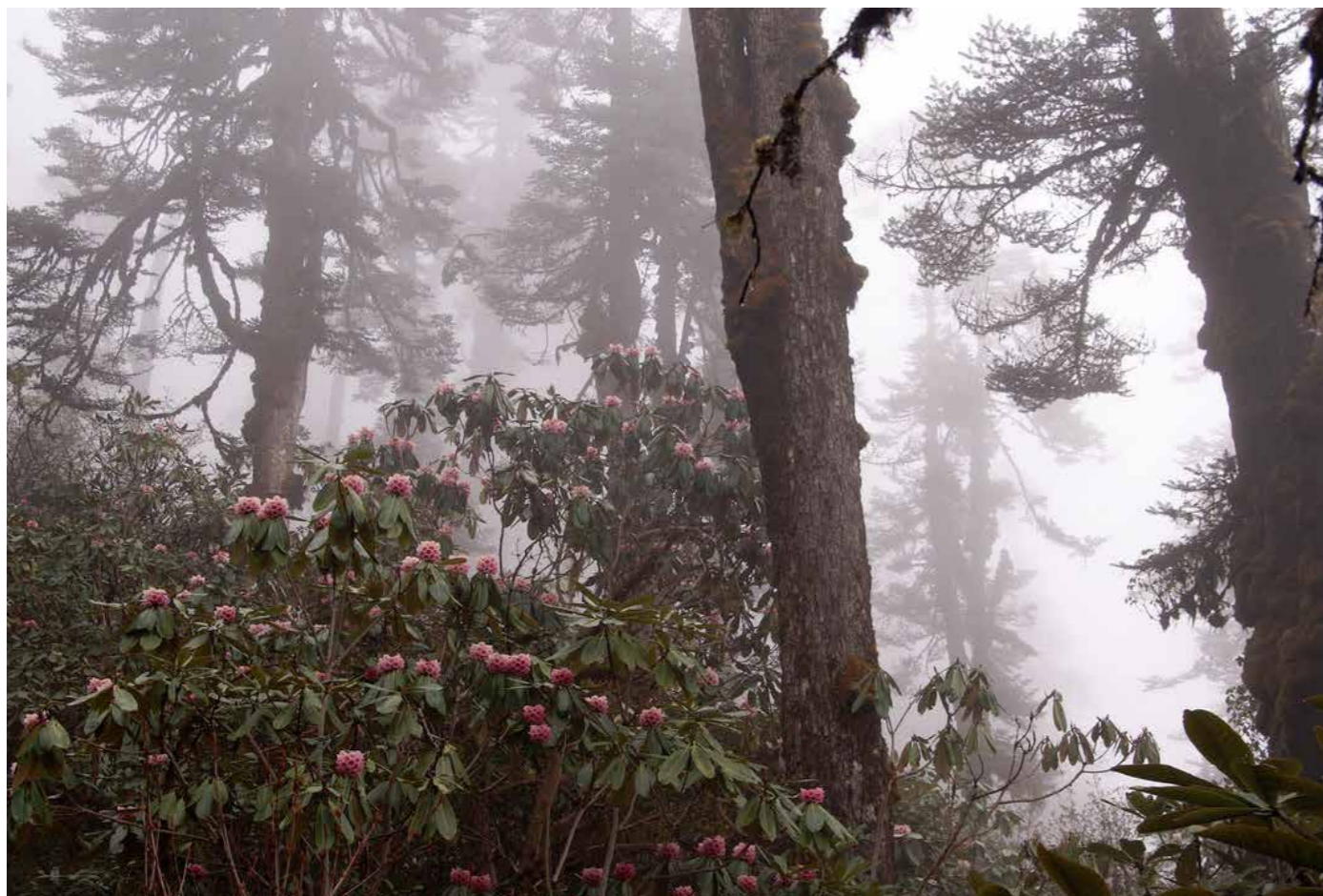
Mount Pandim from Dzongri



Rhododendron dalhousiae, Menam, Sikkim



Grandala



Rhododendron hodgsonii among silver firs, Dzongri, Sikkim

including this year's forthcoming trip to the vast grasslands and alpine uplands of Qinghai in June-July, with its feast of blue poppies, primulas, dangling *Cremanthodium* and peculiar *Saussurea*. Despite a burgeoning population and mass internal tourism, significant wilds remain and it these sweeping wildernesses that sum up Asia for us, a continent where one can wander and soak up the great outdoors without fences and 'no trespassing' signs. Much of Turkiye is like this, Central Asia too. As are the magnificent Himalayas. The whole Sino-Himalayan eco-region is incredibly diverse with many localised species and every valley worth investigating. But, so much of it means a long trek to reach the best parts. Thankfully, the eastern corner; Sikkim-Arunachal Pradesh is (by Himalayan standards) accessible, with roads getting the botanist to high altitude without the need for long treks in the rain. Of course, it will rain some of the time, this is a monsoon flora, but it's not constant and the rewards are some stunning plants such as the remarkable *Swertia hookeri* and the delightful shell-pink orchid *Pleione hookeriana*, both named for Sir Joseph Hooker, the first Western botanist to venture into Sikkim and whose subsequent arrest and detention led to the annexation of the state by

the British in 1850. It was Hooker's introductions that changed the course of rhododendron hybrid development and the fascinating story of the man (and those like him) even led to a publication; *The Plant Hunters* (1998), but more importantly it kindled a growing interest in seeing wild plants in their native lands. And pilgrimage followed, with in-the-footsteps trips into Sikkim in spring to find and enjoy the multi-coloured rhododendrons and carpets of primulas. These were memorable trips, hiking deep into valleys and spending time at some very dubious campsites. The plants were great, but the glory of the peaks remained hidden unless you were prepared to be out of the tent at first light and hiking to ridges for stunning vistas. Chris knows no other way. One occasional really sticks in the mind and that was on a high camp at Dzongri (c4000 metres). It had been raining all day and we actually arrived in light snow. This was not all bad, the foul weather had forced many Grandala, a gorgeous species of Himalayan thrush to descend from the high slopes and they were hopping all about with deep purple-blue plumage. Then a square of sky blue appeared among the clouds, the snow stopped and over the course of twenty magical minutes the landscape cleared. Chris was already half a mile



Primula denticulata & *Rhododendron thomsonii*
Shingba, Sikkim



Rhododendron falconeri, Dzongri, Sikkim.

Kanchenjunga through prayer flags.

across the alpine turf heading for a ridge lined with iconic chortens, arriving in time to see (and photograph) the most magnificent view of Mount Pandim as it opened up, the peak clad thickly in glaciers. Twenty minutes later the clouds returned and the mountains were never seen again! Always be ready. What struck him just as much was that some of the pristine forested valleys and slopes in that region had most likely never seen a human footfall, their remoteness and tough terrain a buffer and guarantee. This trip had been about rhododendrons, arisaemas and early primulas, but there is a great deal more later in the year when the high turf and woodland edges are filled with some gorgeous *Meconopsis* such as deep blue *M. simplicifolia* and candelabras of yellow *M. paniculata* together with sumptuous *Primula calderana* along with so many other jewels. Arunachal Pradesh is itself an undiscovered gem, so watch this space for what turns up there. All in all, it should be mouth-watering fare for a Chinaphile and lover of east Asian flowers and Chris will be taking part in a research trip this June to find the best areas so look out for this tour in 2026.

What's more he's hoping it won't involve traipsing behind dzos with a heavy backpack and soggy campsites, though the leeches might still find him!

