

The Dolomites

22nd - 29th June 2024

Led by Paul Harcourt Davies & Lois Ferguson



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With Paul Harcourt Davies & Lois Ferguson



Androsace vitalina © PHD



Gentiana verna © PHD



Tusilago farfara © PHD



Soldanella alpina © PHD



Primula minima © PHD

It is surprising how quickly things change in any Alpine region and the Dolomites are no exception. Much depends on when the winter snows melt for this governs the beginning of the parade of spring and summer flowers which can vary by a few weeks in successive years... though the flowering tends to catch up eventually. We time things carefully so that in the first week we might find some of the early flowers such as Crocus and Ladies Slipper Orchids in perfect condition. In the second week there is usually a greater variety of flower species and in most years (but not 2024) good numbers of butterflies. However, because of the change in altitudes we encompass, we make good use of cabin lifts. There is considerable overlap from one week to the next as the reports for successive weeks demonstrate. The itinerary is designed so that days (and even parts of days) are interchangeable to optimise what we see.

Day 1

After the drive from Venice, through some spectacular mountain scenery, we arrived at our base in Campitello di Fassa, checked in, refreshed and then went for a short walk to where the local hayfields were in glorious flower... a great introduction to the region. With plants of Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum odoratum*), Orange Lily (*Lilium bulbiferum*), and many others in colourful and varied display.

Day 2.

The day began with grey skies and so we decided to keep things local since rain was forecast. To lift the spirits, we visited a local site where there are some superb plants of Lady's Slipper Orchid (*Cypripedium calceolus*) in an ancient Pinewood. Growing between the plants, there were also some tiny Coralroot Orchids (*Corallorhiza trifida*) and a few metres away were some magnificent spikes of the Birds Nest Orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*). We walked back along a track whose flowery banks revealed numerous montane species amongst them various orchids... both Common Fragrant orchids (*Gymnadenia conopsea*) and Long-spurred Fragrant orchid (*G. odoratissima*), Greater Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*) and a small population of the rather unassuming, green-flowered Single-leaved Bog Orchid (*Malaxis monophyllos*) which Paul had happened across a decade before....Like many common names a bit of a misnomer since most had two leaves. It was just coming into flower in a place well hidden from view. But the Creeping Ladies Tresses (*Goodyera repens*) was still in bud just a few metres away.

Butterflies were not in evidence since it had started to rain and we thus opted to have our picnic under under cover at the hotel. With unpredictable weather you watch the clouds and take your opportunities. When the rain stopped we took a path leading alongside the river which at this time of the year is more of a torrent caused by melting snow higher up in the mountains. There are some wonderful displays of wildflowers here with huge rocks that become miniature rockeries with several saxifrage species. There were plants of frog orchid (*Orchis viride* var *lancibracteatum*) taller and with longer, thinner leaves than usual. Patches of pine woodland grew along the river bank with thick moss cushions. There was Herb Paris (*Paris quadrifolia*) with the Small White Orchid (*Gymnadenia albida*) and several species of Wintergreens pushing up through the moss. One-flowered Wintergreen (*Moneses uniflora*), Round-leaved Wintergreen (*Pyrola rotundifolia*) and Nodding Wintergreen (*Orthilia secunda*)



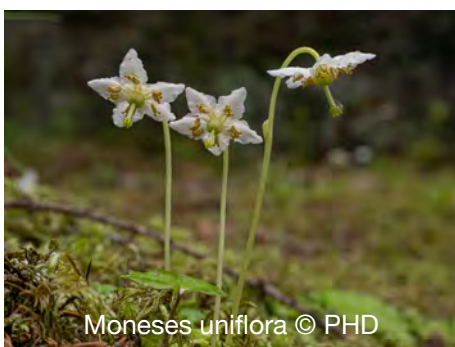
Polygala chamaebuxus © PHD



Rhodiola rosea © PHD



Geranium phaeum © PHD



Moneses uniflora © PHD

Day 3

The lift to the Col Rodella (circa 2200 m) is within walking distance of our hotel. At the top, there was a great deal of construction work in progress where a new lift was being created. Yet only a short distance away on the hillsides on what seemed a featureless scree were some extremely attractive alpine plants... yellow patches of Yellow Rock Jasmine (*Androsace vitallina*) some with several small tortoiseshell butterflies eagerly nectaring, clumps of Alpine Toadflax (*Linaria alpina*) with purple and yellow flowers, a few plants of Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifrage oppositifolia*) and many others such as the bright pink Least Primrose (*Primula minima*). There was a highly photogenic clump of the Snow Bell (*Soldanella alpina*) and some walked up to the top where there is a second Rifugio with incredible views and more alpinists such as the Least Snowbell (*Soldanella minima*). Before our descent we gathered in the refuge nearest the cabin lift for coffee with a view to slopes below where there was Sulphur Pasque Flower, (*Pulsatilla alpina* ssp *apiiflora*) a few white crocuses (*Crocus vernus*) and some Oxlips (*Primula elatior*).

We went to our riverside picnic spot and then later travelled to the Passo Pellegrino where only one of the lifts to the Costabela at 2245m was open. There were superb Sulphur Pasque flowers and many Alpine Butterworts (*Pinguicula alpina*), Trumpet Gentians (*Gentiana acaulus*) and interesting colour variants of Spring Gentian (*G. verna*) with cotton grass in the boggy areas. Several snow patches revealed both white and purple variants of spring crocus and quite a few Alpine Snowbells showing the season here was still early spring. There were a few marmots in evidence here but, as always, the sentinels were very wary and whistled piercingly as warning.

Day 4

Below the vast bulk of the Marmolada lies the Fedaia Pass which is rich in alpinists, especially in gravel areas close to the artificial lakes created by dams. There were numerous small plants and a number of Alpine willows (*Salix* sp), yellow Twin-flowered Violet (*Viola biflora*) and some productive snow remnants in gullies where we were able to find Alpine Snowbell and then the exquisite and tiny Least Snowbell in small numbers as well as white Alpine Pasque flower (*Pulsatilla alpina*), Mount Baldo Anemone (*Anemone baldensis*) and the distinctive Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea*).

Our picnic spot lay down a lane on the descent from Fedaia and it was here we found the first of the tiny, almost black Vanilla Orchids (*Gymnadenia rchelliana*, aka *Nigritella nigra*) just coming into flower and numerous Bird's Eye Primulas (*Primula farinosa*) and a few long flowered Primulas (*P. longiflora*) similar but with extended corolla tube and slightly taller.

There is a walk alongside the torrent from here and we passed through flower-rich woodland with one-flowered wintergreen and two species of shrubby honeysuckle: Alpine Honeysuckle (*Lonicera alpigena*) with orange flowers in pairs and Blue-berried Honeysuckle (*L. caerulea*) with pale lemon flowers. There were quite a few Dark columbines (*Aquilegia strata*) with their deep maroon-red flowers, Wood Geranium (*Geranium sylvestris*) and the Dusky Cranesbill (*Geranium phaeum*).

Day 5

From Campitello di Fassa the road ascends to the Sella region and its four passes - a magnet for cyclists and, unfortunately, numerous motor bikes. We managed to get off the beaten track to an area where there are huge boulders creating numerous microclimate areas, rich, sheltered habitats for alpine species ... There are some good and productive paths where we found numerous Bird's Eye primrose,



Cyaniris semiargus © PHD
Mazarine Blue



Coenonympha darwiniana © PHD
Darwin's Heath



Carterocephalus palaemon © PHD
Chequered Skipper



Melitaea aurelia © PHD
Nickerl's Fritillary



Melitaea aurelia © PHD
Nickerl's Fritillary - underside



Pieris bryoniae © PHD
Dark-veined White

Trumpet Gentian and Spring Gentian. The weather had held but now it poured almost too heavily for even the stalwarts to photograph a Red Vanilla Orchid (*Gymnadenia rubra*). All thoughts of a picnic were abandoned and we had soup for lunch in a nearby refuge. Fortunately the rain abated and we were able to explore the open gravel area below an impressive waterfall and the surrounding shrub-filled countryside with plants such as shrubby milkwort (*Polygala chamaebuxus*).

Day 6

Today we queued for the taxi bus into the Val Duron since other vehicles are not allowed up the narrow road. It is a favourite spot for visitors to the area though we were able to wander away from people and enjoy the natural beauty. Wandering slowly up the valley we encountered a range of habitats from extremely rich flower meadows to wet areas and rocky hillsides with grassy slopes characteristic of higher altitudes. There were marmots, too, and not just calling, but close enough to be able to see with binoculars or photograph with the telephoto lens.

There were quite a few vanilla orchids and many other Alpine species, including blue Alpine Aster (*Aster alpina*) en route to a refuge further up the valley. After a beer we crossed the river and took a track back through woodlands. It was not as flowery as we had hoped, but it did yield a small population of the tiny Lesser Twayblade (*Neottia cordata*) and also several places with coral root orchid. We then followed a track down from the village of Pian through particularly rich flower meadows with orange lilies acting as bright beacons together with many other species. We were lucky to catch them before they are cut for hay in the traditional manner. There were a few more butterflies around today, including mountain ringlets, Mountain Green-veined White and several chequered skippers in a woodland clearing.

Day 7

Today, we again made good use of our cabin lift passes from Alba and then up to an extensive, gently rolling upland area full of yellow Sulphur Pasque flowers (*Pulsatilla alpina* ssp *apiifolia* aka *P. sulphurea*) which flowers rapidly after the snow melts but not as speedily as the Spring Crocus (*Crocus vernus*) with only a few patches left by what little remained of the snow. Where the soil changes to acidic on a peaty base we found the Pink Snowbell (*Soldanella pusilla*).

In this predominantly alkaline environment there are outcrops of much older acidic rocks pushed up through the alkaline marine deposits of the Dolomite. An elusive prize is the delightful King of the Alps (*Eritrichium nanum*) a forget me note relative with its vivid blue flowers on clumps of silvery grey leaves. We were lucky to find a few plants just beginning to flower.

We descended on the last cable car before they shut for lunch and again picnicked by the river where there were tables. We then travelled along the valley to where there is an astonishingly flower rich meadow with Saint Bruno's Lily (*Paradisea liliastrum*) and thousands of fragrant orchids (*Gymnadenia conopsea*) as well as many other colourful species such as orange Golden Hawksbeard (*Crepis aurea*). Again, butterflies were few and far between.

There are a numerous cabin lifts further down the valley and we took one up to about 2000m with an open area where we found the Hairy Alpenrose (*Rhododendron hirsutum*) which is very similar to Alpenrose (*R. ferrugineum*) but flowering on calcareous soils rather than more acid conditions. Along a lane there were flowers of Wood Sorrel (*Oxalis acetosella*), Alpine Clematis (*Clematis alpina*) and Alternate-leaved Golden Saxifrage (*Chrysplenium alternifolium*) to finish off.