

Flowers of Crete

Holiday Report

1 - 8 April 2017

Led by Sotiris Alexiou



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Introduction

The main focus of this spring tour was to enjoy a good sample of the diversity of plants for which Crete is famous. Our week was spent exploring the western side of the island, from our base on the outskirts of Chania. The guests joining guide Sotiris for the week were Jean, Christopher Jill, Bryn, Nicholas and Linda.

The following is an outline of the week with a daily diary, followed by a gallery and list of the most interesting, local and endemic plant species seen.

Note: all photos © Sotiris Alexiou unless stated otherwise

Outline Itinerary

Day 1, 1st April: Arrival at Chania airport and transfer to hotel

Day 2, 2nd April: Falasarna, Polirinia & Agia Lake

Day 3, 3rd April: The White Mountains - Omalos plateau & Sougia

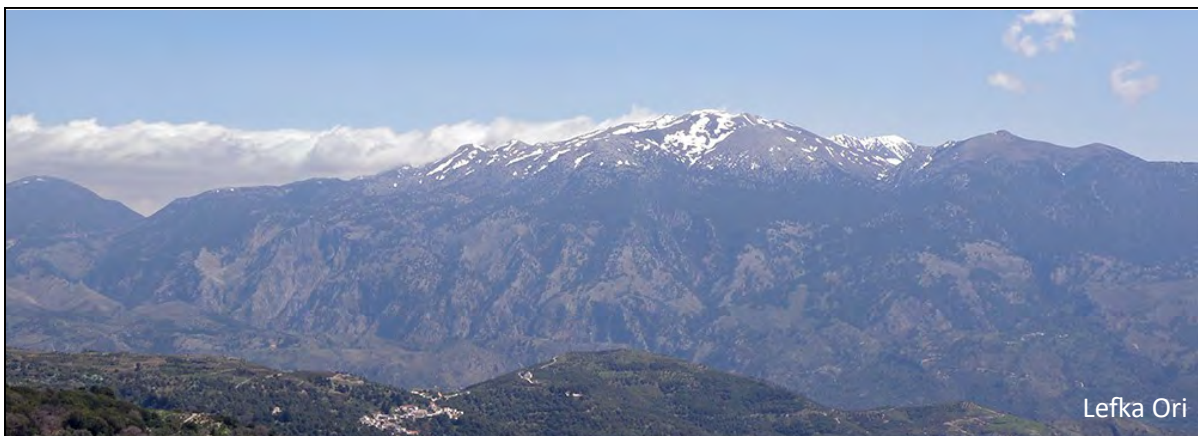
Day 4, 4th April: Gorges Day - Imbros & Aradena

Day 5, 5th April: Spili

Day 6, 6th April: Akrotiri peninsula & Delianon Gorge

Day 7, 7th April: Topolia Gorge & Paleochora

Day 8, 8th April: Akrotiri peninsula and transfer to Chania airport for departure



Day 1: Saturday 1st April

After a wet and cold winter, Crete was starting to show its well known face. Sun and warm temperatures were just starting to appear upon the snowy White Mountains. The heavy winter snow was still very evident as we were landing at the airport of Chania this spring! So, spring was late this year, after all these low temperatures that prevented plants from flowering at their more typical time.

Jean and Christopher arrived earlier in the day and had time to spend at the sandy beach of our hotel; the rest of the group flew in later. Once met we had a short drive to the hotel and the necessary introductions, a good late dinner was appropriate, followed by a good night's sleep. A lovely week was about to start and we all needed to be in our best shape!

Day 2: Sunday 2nd April

The eggs from Mrs Aristeia's hencoop would be the main part of our breakfast for the rest of our trip! The sun was shining today, although still quite cool as the wind was cold.

Falasarna

We drove for half an hour and reached the west part of the island. The Minoan city of Falasarna, a very important port once, was in front of us. At least what was left to be above ground, as sea water has advanced a lot the last centuries.

The sandy beach of Falasarna is very popular among tourists visiting the island during summer time. But at this time of the year in spring the place was ours alone and at our disposal!

Being very careful where we were stepping, we met a rare and threatened Knapweed of the eastern Mediterranean, *Centaurea pumilio*, half buried inside the hot sand. The white-wooly *Inula candida*, endemic to the south Aegean area was growing on the rocks, not in flower yet, while Striated Catchfly, *Silene colorata* and Three-Horned Stock, *Mathiola tricuspoidata*, with the three horns on the tip of the fruit, were abundant on the sand. The same two plants made nice carpets in the sand of our hotel also. A second *Silene*, *S. behen*, was also present in the area away from the sand. We encountered some common Mediterranean plants such as Crown Daisy, *Glebionis coronarium*, Sea Spurge, *Euphorbia paralias*, Salsify, *Tragopogon sinuatus* and *Geropogon hybridus*, among others. A Nightingale could also be heard for a while, singing from its cover, inside a bush.



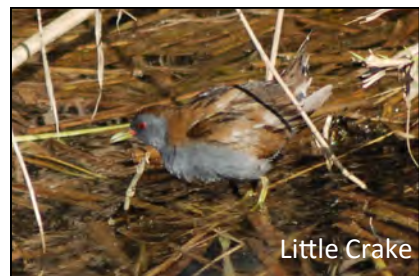
Polirinia

A short drive away, and after passing the modern town of Kasteli, we ended up at the hill of the ancient city of Polirinia. We left the car almost at the foothills, enjoyed our lunch at a spot with great views and took the path that leads up to the old Acropolis. A male *Podarcis cretensis* lizard,



endemic to the island, with its beautiful colour pattern, was playing hide and seek with us and our cameras.

The first Bee-Orchids would soon appear, *Ophrys sicula*, Sawfly Orchid, *O. tenthredinifera* and Bumble Bee Orchid, *O. bombyliflora*. Also, Giant Orchid, *Himantoglossum robertianum*, was there. Giant Fennels, *Ferula communis*, some of them over two metres high were abundant. As we moved up and passed an old church with a small cemetery, butterflies were observed, the beautiful endemic Cretan Festoon, *Zerynthia cretica*, Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*, Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*, Wall Brown, *Lasiommata megera* and one Mallow Skipper, *Carcharodus alceae*, on its food plant. Clusters of the endemic Pheasant's Eyes, *Adonis cretica*, in its fine yellow flowering form was seen along our path, as well as the white-flowering Woundwort, *Stachys spinulosa* and Crown Anemones, *Anemone coronaria*. The view from the ruins of Acropolis was majestic and the breeze refreshing!



Agia lake

Some nice refreshments seemed appropriate after our walk, so we drove to the artificial lake of Agia, a well-known birdwatching spot. A flock of Yellow-Legged Gulls, *Larus cachinnans michahellis* was resting on the opposite side of this rather small lake. Coot, *Fulica atra* and Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*, were the first birds to see, but soon we observed a female Little Crake, *Porzana parva*, and later the more colourful male, hiding inside the reed. A Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*, came flying in, but was driven away by the gulls very quickly! A number of Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*, were swimming up and down, and a Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, was diving for its

food. A pair of Balkan Green Lizards, *Lacerta trilineata*, were watched basking on a rock, a terrapin was seen in the water, as was a giant Goldfish. A large brown dragonfly landed on a branch of an olive tree and great effort was needed in order to track it, although it was a couple metres away from us and with its wings open!

Day 3: Monday 3rd April

As winter was late this year, we decided to drive up to the White Mountains today and try to find the very interesting winter endemics of that mountain. Plants we wouldn't normally see during a more typical April!

Omalos plateau

We took the road to the famous Omalos plateau. As we expected, no tulips were in sight yet! *Tulipa saxatilis*, that forms famous carpets up here, still needed a couple of more weeks to appear. But, no complaints! There were the Cretan endemics *Crocus sieberi*, with the amazing variation in mauve stripes on the outer side, and Cretan Glory of the Snow, *Scilla nana*!

We moved to the other side of the plateau, and found one of the rarest and least known plants of Crete, *Gagea omalensis*, described at 2013 and restricted on this plateau. Many *Romulea bulbocodium* were there also.



Sougia

We took the road that leads to the south coast, to the village of Sougia. We made a couple of stops looking for orchids. A flat area covered with phrygana rewarded us with many lovely species! *Ophrys omegaifera*, *O. tenthredinifera* with huge variation on tepals colour, of course *O. sicula*, *O.*

phryganae and *O. bombyliflora*. Also, a lot of *O. spruneri*, a few *O. cretensis*, a handful of *O. herae* (one of them hypochromatic!), *O. cretica*, *O. iricolor* and *O. phaedra*. A few *O. heldreichii* and *O. episcopalis* were seen also. A few *Anacamptis collina* and *A. papilionacea*, and *Neotinea lactea* at the end of its flowering period. And we continue at this orchid locality! *Orchis anthropophora*, a lot of *O. italica*, *O. pauciflora* and *O. quadripunctata*. Nice stands of the white form of Turban Buttercup, *Ranunculus asiaticus* and the south Aegean endemic *Anemone hortensis* subsp. *heldreichii*. Small rounded shrubs of the south Aegean endemic *Lithodora hispidula*, were in full flower. A stop was made only to admire the Bee-Orchid with the largest lip, *Ophrys grigoriana*, with a lip reaching 3 cm length!



Finally we reached Sougia and some refreshments were appropriate! Tables by the sea, next to the waves and under the evening sun. A few relaxing moments were enjoyed before we hit the road to drive back to our hotel.

Day 4: Tuesday 4th April

This day was dedicated to the gorges of south Crete and some culture! Whilst Christopher and Jean took a day off to visit the Museums of Chania, we took the road to Sfakia. Nicholas and Linda decided to walk Imbros gorge, from the entrance down to sea level. An easy walk that took them around 4 hours. Gill and Bryn, with Sotiris, drove to Anopolis, a small village facing the sea. We walked through the village and all the way to the famous Aradena gorge. The white-flowering *Cyclamen creticum*, was there. Also, some nice *Ophrys cinereophila*.



The fields were covered with White and Yellow Asphodels, *Asphodelus albus* and *Asphodeline lutea*. Butterflies were flying around; most common was the Cretan Festoon. On the other side of the bridge, over the gorge, we enjoyed some nice refreshments with the locals, most of them working on their bee-

hives. A big group of Griffon Vultures came over the gorge and flew down, through the gorge!

After collecting Nicholas and Linda from the exit of Imbros gorge (tired but happy!), we drove straight to the harbor of Chania, to meet Christopher and Jean and enjoy dinner, with local Cretan delicacies and *raki*!



Day 5: Wednesday 5th April

Spili.

Spili is a well-known destination for people visiting Crete for its treasure trove of flowers. Among the orchids we had not seen so far, we saw *Ophrys creberrima*, one plant of *O. ariadnae* and *Anacamptis boryi*. *Neotinea lactea* were there in millions, and of course many of the species we had already seen in the previous days (and had no problem seeing them again!). A small population of the hybrid *Ophrys X sommieri*, with the parent species *O. tenthredinifera* and *O. bombyliflora*, were there. *Tulipa doerferi* was not in flower yet, so we enjoyed the plants in bud. Widow Iris, *Iris tuberosa* and Algerian Iris, *Iris unguicularis*, were both in full flower. The tiny bulbous *Romulea linaressi* subsp. *graeca*, with the dark mauve flowers was also observed among others.

A coffee stop inside Spili was much appreciated as well as a visit into a local monastery.



Day 6: Thursday 6th April

Akrotiri peninsula

The morning was windy and black clouds were hanging over us. After breakfast we drove to the area of Akrotiri peninsula. Christopher and Jean visited the Monastery and the Museum of Agia Triada and the rest moved to the north part of the peninsula. The Dragon Arums, *Dracunculus vulgaris*, were in flower, with their carrion-smell diffusing into the air. Some *Ophrys* were seen, mainly *O. tenthredinifera*, *O. heldreichii* and *O. sicula*. And many of the Mediterranean plants that flower in this rocky place were also observed. The path leading down to the sea, through a steep gorge, was followed for a while.



Delianon Gorge

A nice, easy to walk path led us through Delianon Gorge. Mandrake, *Mandragora officinarum*, with their huge leaves were seen next to the path. Butterflies like Speckled Wood, *Pararge aegeria*, Large White, *Pieris brassicae*, Small White, *Pieris rapae*, Cleopatra, *Gonepteryx cleopatra* and Holly Blue, *Celastrina argiolus* were flying around. A few *Ophrys herae* were also observed on the side of this gorge.

A colony of Griffon Vultures thrives inside this gorge. We counted 18 flying around! We spent some time watching them coming in and flying out of their nests, on the vertical rocks of the gorge. We could even see some of the juveniles inside the nests, being now about 2-3 months old.

A well prepared dinner was expecting us at the port of Chania, so we drove straight there!



Day 7: Friday 7th April

Topolia gorge

Another day dedicated to the south part of the island. We drove south through Topolia Gorge. We stopped to admire the Agia Sophia cave, with an old church being built inside it! The large entrance of the cave holds some interesting plants, like *Verbascum arcturos*, endemic to Crete and *Ranunculus creticus*. A few steps lead to the entrance of the cave. Crag Martins and Rock Doves were seen, they were nesting inside the cave.

Paleochora

An area covered with phrygana was chosen again to explore, close to an abandoned village, in order to spot some more orchids. A few plants of *Ophrys episcopalis* were seen for the first time on this trip and also *Orchis simia*. A total of around 25 different species were counted! We took a break under an Oriental Plane, next to a spring, for lunch. Linda was the first to spot a monster plant of *Anacamptis papilionacea*, with three lips in every flower! More than that, a nice hybrid of *O. pauciflora* and *O. quadripunctata*, *O. X pseudoanatolica* was spotted by Linda, among the parental species.

We enjoyed nice refreshments at Paleochora, a small city by the sea. Hoopoe flew in front of us and landed inside a Tamarisk. Two Night Herons were seen flying above us, so at least one couple should be nesting at the small rivulet next to the town.

Bryn enjoyed a swim and the rest a few minutes in the town, until we returned to our hotel.



Day 8: Saturday 8th April

And so the last day of our trip had arrived! We all had late evening flights home from Chania. After checking out from our hotel, we drove to Akrotiri peninsula. We stopped at a nice olive grove and looked for orchids. We did observe around 10 different species, among them *Serapias linqua* and *S. bergoni*, *Ophrys cretica* and *Anacamptis pyramidalis*.

Afterwards, a short walk inside a small gorge revealed some more of the endemic or interesting flora of Crete. Our first *Petromarula pinnata*, this very peculiar and isolated member of Bell Flowers family, was hanging from the rocks as well as the tiny Mediterranean *Campanula erinus*. Some more tiny Mediterranean plants, like *Convolvulus siculus* and *Malcolmia chia* were also growing inside the rock crevices.

Christopher and Jean were the first of our group to take the plane back home. The rest of us celebrated our last hours on Crete inside a nice field with Field Gladiolus, *Gladiolus italicus*, and several orchid species. A flock of the impressive Alpine Swifts arrived and flew low above us for the first time on this trip. Some of us then remembering how much Christopher wanted to see them; wished he could maybe see them now, perhaps through the plane window!

Our week had come to an end but we all left feeling we'd enjoyed seeing a good amount of the flowers and other wildlife (and culture) of this wonderful Greek island.



Photo Gallery

Anacamptis collina



Crocus sieberi



Neotinea lactea



Ophrys cinereophila



Anemone hortensis



Lathyrus albus





Jean and Linda at Paleochora



Ophrys iricolor



Ophrys ariadne



Ophrys omegaifera



Ophrys grigoriana



At Sougia

Species List - Monocots

Araceae

Dracunculus vulgaris

Arum concinatum

Asphodelaceae

Asphodelus ramosus

Asphodelus fistulosus

Asphodeline liburnica

Hyacinthaceae

Muscari comosum

Muscari spreitzenhoferi

Ornithogalum creticum

Iridaceae

Crocus sieberi

Gladiolus italicus

Iris unguicularis

Iris tuberosa

Morea monophyla

Romulea bulbocodium

Romulea linaresii subsp. *graeca*

Liliaceae

Gagea graeca

Gagea omalensis

Tulipa doerfleri

Orchidaceae

Anacamptis boryi

Anacamptis collina

Anacamptis pyramidalis

Himantoglossum robertianum

Neotinea lactea

Ophrys ariadnae

Ophrys bombyliflora

Ophrys cinereophila

Ophrys creberrima

Ophrys cretensis

Ophrys cretica

Ophrys episcopalis

Ophrys herae

Ophrys heldreichii

Ophrys iricolor

Ophrys omegaifera

Ophrys phaidra

Ophrys phryganae

Ophrys sicula

Ophrys spruneri

Ophrys tenthredinifera

Ophrys X. sommieri

Orchis anthropophora

Orchis italica

Orchis pauciflora

Orchis quadripunctata

Orchis simia

Orchis X pseudoanatolica

Serapias bergonii

Serapias lingua

Species List - Dicotyledons

Aceraceae

Acer sempervirens

Apocynaceae

Nerium oleander

Vinca major

Asteraceae

Anthemis altissima

Anthemis rigida

Centaurea argentea

Centaurea pumilio

Centaurea raphanina

Centaurea redempta

Crupina crupinastrum

Galactites tomentosa

Helichrysum orientale

Inula candida (in bud)

Ptilostemon chamaepeuce

Staehelina fruticosa

Boraginaceae

Echium italicum

Alkanna sieberi

Lithodora hispidula

Onosma graecum

Onosma erecta

Symphytum creticum

Campanulaceae

Petromarula pinnata

Campanula creutzbergii

Solenopsis minuta

Caryophyllaceae

Dianthus xylorrhizus

Fabaceae

Ebenus cretica

Lathyrus albus

Lamiaceae

Lavandula stoechas

Nepeta scorditis

Phlomis cretica

Scutellaria sieberi

Stachys cretica

Stachys spinulosa

Linaceae

Linum arboreum

Myrsinaceae

Cyclamen creticum

Orobanchaceae

Orobanche crenata

Species List - Dicotyledons

Ranunculaceae

Adonis cretica

Anemone hortensis subsp. *heldreichii*

Ranunculus asiaticus

Ranunculus creticus

Rosaceae

Crataegus monogyna

Prunus webbii

Saxifragaceae

Saxifraga chrysosplenifolia

Scrophulariaceae

Verbascum arcturus

Verbascum macrurum

Verbascum spinosum

Valerianaceae

Valeriana asarifolia