

# The Peloponnese in Autumn

## A Greentours Trip Report

Lead by Kurt Vickery and Fiona Dunbar

Daily Report by Fiona Dunbar, Species Lists by Kurt Vickery

### Day 1 Monday 21<sup>st</sup> October To Kefari

Various strands of the group all gathered at the airport, coming from Crete, Delphi, London and Birmingham. It was lovely to see so many familiar faces amongst the customers, For five of the customers this was their second or even third or 5<sup>th</sup> time on this tour, for Kurt his 10th time; as this was my first time leading in the Autumn Peloponnese tour, I felt there would be a certain amount of role reversal!

We arrived in the lovely village of Kefari with time for a swift wash and brush up before supper in the taverna next to the hotel. Excellent food, the aubergine baked with tomato and feta was particularly noteworthy.

### Day 2 Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> October To Gythia via Myceanae



After an excellent and relaxed breakfast in the small hotel dining room which boasts a beautiful, frescoed ceiling, we were on our way to the World Heritage Site of Mycaenae.

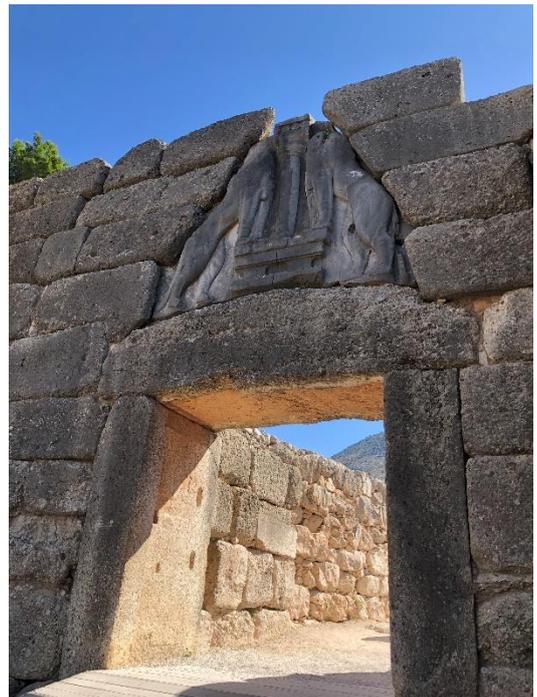
Walter was casually pointing out patches of crocus and Gail cyclamen even before we pulled over for the first stop. Here were *Crocus cancellatus* ssp *mazziaricus* and a scattering of purple *Colchicum cupanii* on a grassy slope scattered with *Pyrus spinosa* and *Quercus coccifera*. Some of the nicer grasses, all golden at this time of year included Hares-tail (*Lagarus ovatus*) and Rough Dog's tail (*Cynoceros echinatum*) and there was scented *Micromeria juliana*, Butchers Broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*) and *Cystus* sp. The exceptionally dry summer meant that *Cyclamen hederifolium* ssp *crassifolium* were mainly restricted to shaded places. Stonechats, Linnets and Corn Buntings flitted around and as the sun came out so did a Clouded Yellow or two.





A second stop was for an area of *Sternbergia sicula*. Many had flowered already but there were still plenty of golden stars scattered around. Trees here were different, with both forms of *Cupressus sempervivens* *Pinus halepensis* and Strawberry Tree *Arbutus unedo*. Heliotrope (*Heliotropium europaeum*), and Lead Plant (*Plumbago europaea*) were in flower. Mallow Skippers joined several Clouded Yellows. Amongst the golden, architectural remains of Cistus, Bear's Breaches (*Acanthus* sp) and Field Eryngo (*Eryngium campestre*). Walter spotted a large green Praying Mantis and an egg case of the same was found, somewhat like a small wasp's nest.

Onwards to the 3000-year-old fortress of Mycenae. In the second millennium BC, Mycenae was one of the major centres of Greek civilisation, a military stronghold which dominated much of southern Greece, Crete, the Cyclades and parts of southwest Anatolia. The period of Greek history from about 1600 BC to about 1100 BC is called Mycenaean in reference to Mycenae. At its peak in 1350 BC, the citadel and lower town had a population of 30,000. Strongly linked to the Homeric epics, it was reputedly built by Perseus son of Zeus and amazingly it was continuously occupied from the early Neolithic because of its strong defensive and strategic position, good farmland and an adequate water supply. The Lion Gate was constructed in around 1250 BC in the form of a "Relieving Triangle" in order to support the weight of the stones; the largest stones including the lintels and gate jambs weighed well over 20 tonnes. Mycaenae was among the numerous Aegean sites destroyed as part of the Bronze Age Collapse around 1200 BC, and by Roman times it was being visited as a tourist attraction.



Below the fort, *Sternbergia sicula* flowered in shallow dips, and on the top of the site was a scattering of *Cyclamen graecum* and *Convolvulus althaeioides*. A Blue Rockthrush called from the hillside opposite and there were frequent sightings of Western Rock Nuthatch around the ruins. Toby and Cris saw a Little Owl.

A late but delicious lunch was in a nearby taverna.

Heading on towards Gythia we had one further stop – an unprepossessing looking track had some gorgeous white *Crocus hadriaticus*, with one lovely clump of about 6 flowers. Further on was *Crocus biflorus ssp melantherum*, just a few flowers, but another new species for the trip and for me personally.



Supper was in a taverna on the sea front on the harbour close to the hotel. A fine end to the day.



### Day 3 Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> October Monemvasia, Sikia & stops

My room overlooked the small harbour at Gythio, something which I appreciated with a coffee on my balcony before heading down to join the group for breakfast. Walter and other group members spotted the local Kingfishers whilst sitting at tables on the harbour front over the next 5 days.

Our first stop was a pull-in with an incredible view along Valtaki beach with the skeletal wreck of the Dimitrios beached half way along. In the architectural golden category of plant here was Shrubby Ptilostemon (*Ptilostemon chamaepeuce*), an aster with pine-like leaves. Our first Plain Tiger of the day was seen.

Moving along to the village of Sikia, we parked by a large and entertaining patch of Squirting Cucumber (*Ecballium elaterium*). Kurt led us along a track through a boulder strewn slope where we were soon delighted to find lilac *Crocus goulimyi* and *Cyclamen graecum* amongst the spiny Hairy Thorny Broom (*Calicotome villosa*), Spiny Euphorbia (*Euphorbia acanthothamnos*) and merely a bit scratchy Thyme (*Thymus capitatus*). Delicate *Allium callimischon* were flowering. The tortuous limestone rocks and terra rosa made a great background for the various flowers. Plain Tigers were joined by a number of Eastern Bath Whites and some sharp-eyed person spotted a gorgeous Crimson Spotted Footman moth resting on a rock. Another new crocus for the trip – White *Crocus boryii* with long, feathery orange anthers was scattered under the *Acer sempervirens* trees. Toby found a lovely group of them. A large boulder by a tiny chapel was covered in concretey round bee's nests or similar, each with a single hole for an entrance, not entirely dissimilar to the larger flask-shaped but similarly constructed Western Rock Nuthatch nest which Kurt pointed out on a huge boulder. This nest has been in use at least as long as Greentours has been running the tour, so 10 years or more. Pliny the elder believed that these birds inspired man to build homes of earth in imitation. Ravens and Buzzard cries could be heard, and a Painted Lady drifted past as we returned to the vans.



From here we drove along the coast road, past a crashing sea of deepest blue to bright aquamarine. Lunch was at a little harbour by a chapel built on a tiny island accessed by a short causeway, which was not easily passible today because of the waves. Kurt and I put out a magnificent spread on the picnic mat and we helped ourselves to the excellent pies, freshly made salad fresh bread and cheese etc before sitting on the harbour wall watching shoals of tiny fish, Sardinian Warbler and a couple Kingfishers. On our way out from this

lovely spot Kurt checked an area on a bend of the road – and there were *Colchicum sfkasianum*. One group were so attractive that Kurt had to nip back for his defuser, and the photographers were off again, Jean providing the defuser-holding services.



On to more lovely stops. As we climbed a series of hair pin bends it seemed almost cruel to be passing stunning patches of Cyclamen all along the roadside, but Kurt knew where he was going. Stopping at a tiny village we piled out to admire a series of terraces dripping with *Cyclamen hederifolium* ssp *crassifolium*. A friendly local came out to see if we needed anything, and chatted to me in Greek for a while, talking about what a dry season it was and that the olive and orange trees were not green because of lack of water.



Onward, passing a lovely stand of Crocus by the side of the road... Pulling in shortly after we were soon searching and finding *Crocus goulimyi* – but here they were mostly the pure white subspecies *leucanthus*. Not all though, there were some lilac individuals, and my favourite were ones where the inner three tepals were white and the outer three palest lilac. We walked down to the Crocuses that were by the road as these were great too.

Onto the final stop of the day. Monemvasia was entirely carved on the back of iceberg-like slab of rock with sheer cliffs rising 100s of metres from the Aegean Sea, during the Medieval period, at which time the only way to reach it was by boat. Founded in the sixth century, it is one of the oldest continually inhabited fortified towns in Europe. The

historic, narrow streets were a pleasure to wander, or those more driven climbed to the top of the citadel where *Sternbergia sicula* were flowering. Others rested in a courtyard and were treated to views of a young Western Rock Nuthatch not yet in adult plumage. A good crop of golden Wild Leek seed heads stood outside the entrance to the town and Richard and Ann spotted the very local endemic *Stachys spreitzenhoferi* growing on the cliffs above the town.

Another excellent and less tardy supper was at the taverna on the harbour.

**Day 4 Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> of October**

**Harouda**

Our first stop today was in an area dominated by green domes of Tree Euphorbia (*Euphorbia dendroides*) growing through and around an old field system or possibly the remains of a settlement. At first we found purple *Crocus goulimyi*, then large white cups of *Crocus boryi* began to appear. There were Narrow-leaved Biarum (*Biarum tenuifolium*) leaves and some flowering Friars Cowl (*Arisarum vulgare*). One little rock garden had *Crocus boryi*, *Allium callimischon* and Rustyback Fern (*Ceterach officinarum*) all together. I saw a couple of large, dark Greek Wall Lizards and a number of Brown Argus were seen.



Generally during the day Plain Tigers were flying, quite easy to pick up even when driving along! Our next stop was for an extensive area of *Narcissus serotinus*, not nearly as many as usual because of the dry year but still around a hundred flowers with more in bud. Eastern Bath White and Lang's Short-tailed Blue were seen in small numbers as well as a Praying Mantis. Other plants noted were lots of young Goldendrop rosettes (*Cerinth major*) and Field Marigold (*Calendula arvensis*).



Next the type location for *Crocus niveus*, with white inner and pale purple outer tepals. Ravens were overhead and there was a Swallowtail laying eggs on Fennel. Richard found a plastic id card for Christopher Grey Wilson, dated 2015!

Lunch was by the 11<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine church dedicated to all the archangels – Taxiarchos, at the village of Harouda. Kurt and I put out another fabulous spread while the group explored the fields around the church, which consisted mostly of large, low limestone rocks emerging from terra rosa. Here were thousands of *Cyclamen graecum*, many of which were going over but by no means all. Also close to the church were our first *Stenbergia lutea ssp lutea*, some starting to show the broad green leaves with no central pale line. This Sternbergia is often

found around churches and habitation, quite possibly it is an archeophyte but clearly has flourished and spread in this locale. Richard spotted Black Redstarts and a Pied Flycatcher, and Red- and Blue-winged Grasshoppers were everywhere. Lunch was topped with a sumptuous tray of baclava courtesy of Walter.

As we drove off towards Kastro Kelafi a nice female Black Restart was sitting prettily on a rock by the track. The ruins of the impressive castle had commanding views down to the coast. Chris found one of the few Autumn Ladies Tresses (*Spiranthes spiralis*) close by, and Walter found a beautiful young Hermann's Tortoise and also spotted a Stoat!



From here the vans had different destinations – my van went for a swim and a coffee at a quiet beach on the way back to Gythio, Kurt's van investigated the peninsula on which stands Gythio Lighthouse, where they found more Autumn Ladies Tresses and Richard saw a Short-toed Eagle.

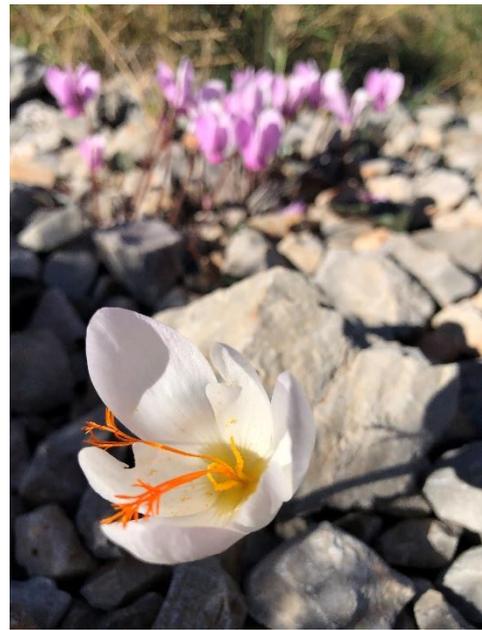


Day 5

Thursday 24th of October

Lampokampos

After a leisurely breakfast we were on our way by 9.30 as usual. Heading West, we gained altitude to reach the first stop of the circuit - a jagged limestone area with a hefty scattering of *Crocus niveus* and *goulimyi*, passing three Buzzards close to the road on the way. Many of these *niveus* had long anthers that dangle out of the tepals, which some would say is subspecies *panonicus*. Raven, Crested and Calandra Lark were seen.



Having driven over a high point marked by two round archaic towers we dropped into another valley and stopped at an open area where we again found *Crocus niveus*. A Hummingbird Hawkmoth went past and *Centaurea raphanina* was noted. Not too far from here Kurt



stopped so we could get close to a couple of fabulous *Quercus ithaburensis* ssp *macrolepis* with acorns that resembled artichokes more than anything! A friendly farmer was tending and harvesting his olive trees and was very happy to have a chat. Cris found a splendid dark clump of *Crocus goulimi*.

An area that has been used for dumping rubble proved very varied. Herbaceous plants were dominated by red flowered *Putoria calabrica*, Heather (*Erica manipuliflora*), Caper (*Capparis spinosa*), Thyme, Penny Royal (*Mentha pulegium*) and *Santolina chamaecyparissus*. Amongst these grew *Crocus niveus* again and a single dark purple *Colchicum cupanii*. There were a fair few birds around with Blue Rockthrush, Black Restart, Stonechat and Whitethroat. Eastern Bath White was very obliging as was a Grecian Grayling and more Hummingbird hawkmoths were around.

Driving to the next stop we noted Cleopatra and Red Admiral as we passed through an area increasingly dominated by Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*), Eastern Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus andrachne*) (which is similar but with smaller fruit and beautiful red-purple bark) and Smoke-tree (*Cotinus coggygria*), some of which was turning to autumnal reds and browns.



We parked at the edge of the village of Lampokambos and walked in. Even in the gardens and groves in the village we could see good numbers of *Crocus goulimyi* and odd patches of *Sternbergia sicula*. Reaching an area with ancient, gnarled *Acer sempervirens* and several large old threshing circles there were thousands of Crocus and large areas of Stenbergia. Of course I should mention that *Cyclamen*

*crassifolium* was everywhere all day.... I am assured that this was a poor display and it has been better in other years but it looked pretty fantastic to me. Small Coppers, Brown Argus and more Hummingbird Hawkmoths were around the blooms. A final stop before lunch was in an area dominated by both Arbutuses and the Smoke Tree, and most of us took the opportunity to try the fruits – not too bad if good and ripe but probably better to look at!

Lunch was at a remote, purpose-built picnic area which we had to ourselves. Kurt and I laid out the sort of spread that the group has become accustomed to while they wandered round finding *Crocus hadriaticus*. Before leaving here I found a few somewhat dry *Colchicum bivonae* by a threshing circle full of bee hives.

Our final stop before heading for Gythnio was at a series of small terraces where we found a few cream *Crocus laevigatum* with dark purple markings – a very nice finale.

## Day 6 Friday 25<sup>th</sup> of October

### Vatheia and Cape Matapan

Today we were in for a fabulous circuit to Cape Matapan. Even before we reached our first stop, we had seen a pack of nine Golden Jackals (Gail picked them up and I was able to reverse back) very close to the road. At first we could see three or four trotting away under the olives, then from right next to us more animals trotted out. It was fantastic!



They were very dark russet and looked big and

healthy. We then parked in a pretty village and walked out along the quiet road looking for *Colchicum bivonae*. A patch of yellow, sunlit *Dittrichia* had a host of butterflies nectaring – around fifteen Painted Ladies, Small Copper, Brown Argus, Common Blue Clouded Yellow, Plain Tiger and Red Admiral. Of the *Colchicum bivonae* there was one nice group with goblet-shaped purple, deeply checkered tepals just the other side of the fence but the few others we found were mostly over. Right by the tarmac on another road we found *Colchicum parlatoris*, pink with a white centre.

An old bridge where none-native Stranglewort (*Cynanchum acutum*) grows was our next destination,



but on the way we had a very close Buzzard and a tenth Golden Jackal of the day trotted through the olive groves parallel to our track! Chiffchaffs were flycatching in the trees. The *Dittrichia* was covered in nectaring Plain Tigers. Kurt pointed one out that was ovipositing, and we were then lucky enough to find one which had just emerged from its chrysalis. A damp riverbed had Red-

veined Darter, a Migrant of some sort and an Eastern Willow Spreadwing. Lunch was prepared at the pretty coastal village of Geromolinas, where the group went for a coffee or other beverage while Kurt and I put the picnic together. Blue Rockthrushes were on the cliffs above.

Moving onto the plateau above we could see a classic fortified village with tower houses whilst photographing *Colchicum parlatoris*, glowing purple stemless Pine Thistle (*Carlina gummifera*), some nice patches of dark pink *Cyclamen graecum*.

Next was the stunning village of Vatheia, an iconic example of the south Maniot architecture as it developed during the 18th and 19th centuries. On 13 April 1805, William Martin Leake by-passed Vatheia on the way to Cape Matapan, but his journey was briefly interrupted by a band of local armed men. His guides, being Maniots themselves, negotiated passage and informed him that Vatheia has been divided in two warring parties for the past 40 years. They estimated that about 100 men had been killed since the beginning of this clan war.



The last part of the afternoon was an incredible drive round Cape Matapan, with numerous fortified villages, steep hillsides with abandoned terracing and old wall systems - Cape Matapan was the site of the city of Taenarum, one of the oldest settlements in the region of ancient Laconia. The city found fame for its green marble and marine Murex snails, which yielded the prized Lacedaemonian purple dye. Roadside patches of *Dittrichia* were just alive with butterflies particularly Plain Tigers in large numbers. Flocks of Linnets were frequent. With shimmering sea inlets on either side, at the very tip stands a ruined Byzantine church built on the site of and with the stones of the death oracle of Poseidon Tainaros, where pilgrims could seek answers from the dead. In legend, at the tip of this promontory Hercules killed Cerberus, the three-headed hound of Hades, with his bow, while Arion, the finest singer of his time was rescued when a dolphin carried him ashore.

There was a fine pair of Stonechats, and this is the type locality for a newly described sub species of Autumn Squill (*Prospero autumnale ssp latifolium*) with very wide leaves with huge (for Prospero) flowering spikes. Richard snapped a migrating Sedge Warbler.

Our return journey round the other side of the peninsula seemed even more scenic, with two short stops for a fantastic area of *Campanula versicolor* with Wall Rue (*Asplenium ruta-muraria*), and a tiny rough-built church large enough for two people to stand up in.



**Day 7****Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> of October****Mystras and the Langada Pass**

Our last full day! On the drive North to Mystras patches of *Campanula versicolor* flowered by the road, and as we approached the site, lot of *Cyclamen graecum* and *Sternbergia sicula* were seen also. The group were dropped off at the top and walked down through the ancient buildings to be met by the minibuses at the bottom.



Mystras is a stunningly located fortified town situated on Mt. Taygetus. Built in 1249 as an amphitheatre around the fortress by the prince of Achaia above ancient Sparta, and below a Frankish castle, it served as the capital of the Byzantine Despotate of the Morea in the 14th and 15th centuries, Mystras remained inhabited throughout the Ottoman period, when Western travellers mistook it for ancient Sparta. In the 1830s, it was abandoned, and the new town of Sparta was built. As an exceptionally well-preserved example of a Byzantine city and because of its testimony to the development of Late Byzantine and Post-byzantine art, Mystras was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1989.

We drove along a superbly scenic mountain pass to our lunch spot where Kurt and I laid out the picnic on shaded tables by a chapel while the group wandered in the valley bottom filled with gnarled Plane trees. Here was a scattering of *Galanthus reginae olgae* mixed of course with *Cyclamen hederifolium*. Maidenhair Fern was all along the road in under hangs, and in the shaded valley bottom were Polypody, Maidenhair Spleenwort, Rustyback Fern and Male Fern. After lunch Kurt led the way to a less obvious area of the valley where Galanthus proliferated and the photographers and galanthophiles went wild.



Then it was time to head along the new motorway to our hotel in Athens for the last night. A pair of Scops Owls were calling as we took our luggage off the van.

**Day 8      Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> of October**  
**Athens and home**

A really excellent buffet breakfast was followed by a relaxed morning around the hotel. The lavender bushes outside were attracting lots of butterflies, mostly Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Cleopatra and Painted Ladies, also a gravid Praying Mantis.

Cleopatra and Painted Ladies, also a gravid Praying Mantis.

A short drive took my van to the airport having said our goodbyes to Kurt and his van full.