

GERALD DURRELL'S CORFU 2014



3-10 May 2014

*Yet another wonderful week in Corfu
discovering the world that Gerald
Durrell grew up in, amongst the
people who knew him and his work
and know where to find the same magic!*

A report on the week spent reliving the life of Gerald Durrell with a team of experts and friends of the conservationist who refers to Corfu as The Garden of the Gods.

Once again we were delighted by the demand for another ***Week in the Life of Gerald Durrell's Corfu***. We have asked those who attended the week to give us their evaluation. We have endeavoured to incorporate their comments and photos within this report.

The group was made up of several nationalities amongst them were: British, Greek, Irish, American, Swiss and Asian. The interests of the group was varied. This year we were joined by Peter Sutton, as our entomologist, as well as bringing expertise in herpetology, as Matt Wilson was unable to join us.

The weather was not as kind as we hoped for for the first two days. For the first time ever we had to move indoors for the welcome reception, where Rosemary Bellamy gave an excellent introductory talk on the importance of the olive tree in the Mediterranean.

It also rained on the first morning, so we decamped to the local cafeneon (taverna) and rigged up the necessary IT. David Shimwell gave an outline of what to expect from the week and the impact Gerald Durrell has had on the island of Corfu. He explained how his brother Leslie's love of shooting wild birds inspired Gerry into a life of conservation and read the extract about Hiawatha the Hoopoe.

Bosse our herpetologist gave a practical talk on the snakes and amphibians we were likely to see this week and illustrated the only venomous snake in Corfu, so that everyone could identify it. This session attracted some local people whose willingness to listen and learn resulted in them joining the group; education is, after all one of our aims.



We were delighted to experience a follow up from the local authorities, who were concerned enough to check that our local herpatologist Bosse, did indeed hold the relevant license for collecting snakes for this purpose.

This is was very gratifying, as there is an illegal trade in removing snakes from the island for sale elsewhere, which is clearly endangering some species on the Island.

Day 1

Luckily the rain stopped by the time we arrived at the Beach of White Lilies and David Shimwell familiarised us with the passage from *My Family and Other Animals* when the family came here in the 1930s for a picnic and Theodore told the young Gerry about the rare white lilies. Although there are still some remaining, they are endangered by the increase in tourism in this area and by people digging them up; which is a tragedy as they will not grow in a normal garden. David Shimwell explained how they propagated and the group spend a few minutes helping nature with this process.



Young Gerry and Spiro Americanas 1937



The same spot some 77 years later

This a walk the botanists really enjoyed, as the plants were abundant and in their full glory after the showers of rain and warm temperatures. Eventually this took us to the first lunch, with plenty of time to discuss everything we had seen, before setting off to wander through the most incredible wild rockgardens bordering the edge of the sea.

All manner of things were found and photographed, and as our walks are never brisk because there is just so much to stop and see. The flora and fauna in this area exemplifies why Corfu is as special today as it was in Gerry's day.



Left getting to know one another over a traditional Greek lunch



Right a glass lizard was having a quiet sun bathe until we arrived

Day 2

The sun was back with us for the second day, which was scheduled to be a long one, so we set off early for the first stop which was visiting an old Venetian Manor House, the one used to depict *The Strawberry Pink Villa* in both filmings of *My Family and Other Animals*. Apart from the obvious link to Gerald's famous book, this location is one of the most unspoilt areas and has a collection of wild orchids, herbs and plants not found elsewhere. The monastery of St Onufrios provided a lovely setting for David Shimwell's talk and a chance to explore the historic aspects of this area.



The next stage of the day was the pilgrimage to Mouse Island which is where some of Gerald Durrell's ashes are scattered, as it was one of his favourite places. After an afternoon of hunting and exploring Corfu Town we headed home stopping en route for a dinner at The White House, where Lawrence and Nancy lived, frequently visited by young Gerald, who used to love exploring the bay at Kalami. The White House has been extended and provides tourist accommodation and a restaurant with dishes on offer such as *Prospero's Pasta* and *My Family and Other Animals Salad*! A good night was enjoyed by all.



Day 3

Tribute was paid with a reading from *The Corfu Trilogy* by Jo who was a similar age to the young Gerry in the book

Lee Durrell joined us a little later than planned due to a memorial service of her great mentor at the weekend. Without a chance to catch breath she gave a lecture on the work the Durrell Conservation Centre does in Jersey and how their programme is developing both there and in other countries. Lee of course started this work with Gerald when they were first married and began saving endangered species from around the world.

As the locations on this day were



Exploring the pond life under the waterfall



David Bellamy finds an orchid in the undergrowth

remote with no tavernas to provide food, we all brought a packed lunch and had a very pleasant picnic amongst the olive groves. This also provide an opportunity to catch a few snakes and scorpions:



Above *Picnic in the Olive Grove*



Above *Boys inspect a four line snake*

Day 4

This day was one of the favourites according to the evaluation. Great excitement from the herpetologists en route, when David Ashcroft found a juvenile glass lizard, which are quite a rare find. Nonetheless was happy to pose for photographs, tortoises, butterflies and Balkan green lizards were also found amongst the interesting flora.



After which we descended down into Megali Grava, one of the amazing caves in Loutsos, which, although a steep descent, was well worth the effort.



We then travelled up the mountain to the ancient village of Anno Perithia which was the domain of the entomologists and botanists. Peter Sutton was very excited to find a trap door spider, as described by Gerry in *My Family and Other Animals*. Peter had been trying to find this particular spider for sometime - he was somewhat exasperated when Philip found one immediately afterwards after searching for a few minutes!.

After a long morning of discovery, a long and lazy lunch at the taverna O Foros. Where Tomas and Vasso provided *Sigari* made from wild greens and many local dishes unique to this area.

Finally back to the study centre for David Shimwell's session on 'The Cyclaman Woods' from The Trilogy.

As if the day had not been packed enough with exiting finds and learning opportunities the evening gave the chance to experience more Greek culture with an evening of Greek Dancing, led by local young people from the village.



Marietta was so patient and with the help of her brother Angelos, who provided the music; with a lot of stopping and starting we eventually all got the hang of it!



This proved to be very useful, as there was a local panagheri (village festival) the following evening and those members of the group who went, were able to join in with the locals and their traditional festivities.

Day 5

This day provided the chance to walk the lovely coastal path from San Stephanos to Avlaki, encompassing the lakes, rare birds and flowers in this habitat, which is under threat from developers who have plans to build a hotel and series of luxury villas. Hopefully this will never happen, as there is strong opposition from the local communities.



It was quite a challenge after a night of dancing and over indulgence, but the landscape and habitat as usual provided everyone with inspiration and exiting finds.



Peter finds some terrapins in the lake which rouses a lot of interest.



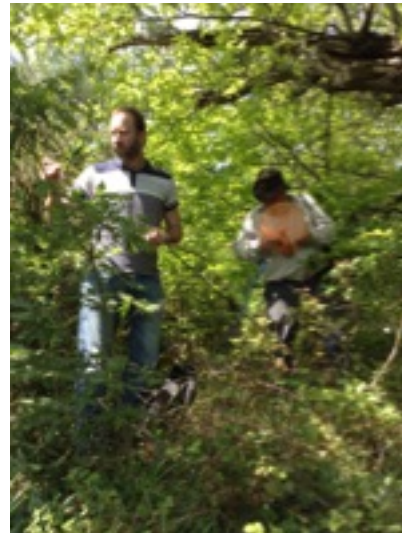
David Shimwell explains that the Strawberry trees found on this archipelago are amongst the largest he has ever seen and are unique. As a conservation group we will endeavour to convince the developers that these trees should be preserved should the development begin.



After a long walk we all collapsed at the local gelateria for home made ice cream as a well deserved treat. Finally returning to the study centre where Lee Durrell gave an inspirational presentation on the work done by Gerry and herself on the conservation of endangered species.

Day 6

The final day was a totally different environment of thick deciduous forest of rare Valonian Oak typical of the Balkan Mountains, with shaded glades and banks covered in thick moss and ferns, which provided us with flora and fauna we had not seen anywhere else. As we climbed onto the ridge, magnificent views opened up looking over the sea to the mountains of Albania.



As this was a rural location with no taverna en route it was another picnic lunch. Local resident Michael, was kind enough to let the group picnic in his garden, which afforded wonderful views over to Albania whilst we contemplated the next leg of the walk. Michael and his house guest also provided us with a glass of wine.

Later that day we ended the week with a farewell BBQ, giving everyone the opportunity to reflect on the week and say their goodbyes.

