

# GERALD DURRELL'S CORFU 2015



## 8th -16th May 2015

A week spent celebrating Gerald Durrell's Corfu 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Week. Eighty years since Gerry arriving on the island of Corfu - an island he referred to throughout his life as "paradise".

A report on the week organised in Corfu in collaborations with  
Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust

**The celebration of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Durrell Family's arrival in Corfu in 1935 began on Saturday, 9 May** with a welcome from 'Kyrios' David Ashcroft, followed by an outline of the aims and objectives of the programme by David 'Chunky' Shimwell. The title chosen for the first day – A Multicoloured Lilliput – was a phrase used by Gerry in chapter 2 of *My Family and Other Animals* to describe the wealth and diversity of animal life, particularly entomological, in the gardens and surrounding landscape of the Strawberry Pink Villa, the family's first home in the village of Perama. The basic theme of the day was that this diversity of wildlife still exists on the island today and that it would be possible to enjoy the multi-coloured Lilliput in and around the Villa Alexina, the study centre for the week's experience. In another sense, the Venetian architecture and décor of Villa Alexina was more akin to that of the Daffodil Yellow Villa, the second home of the Durrell family, so we were doubly privileged to relive the genius loci of Gerry's days in Corfu.



***Left Dan Danahar introducing the theme of the butterfly count. Above The butterflies are caught, identified and released***

There was a brief introduction to the many groups of insects and spiders which contribute to the multi-coloured Lilliput and the topic developed with specific reference to one of the more brightly coloured group, the butterflies (Lepidoptera) by Dan Danahar with an overview of the rich fauna of the island. The group transferred by minibus to the lower slopes of the Pantocrator Mountain complex above the village of Loutsis and Dan got the week off to the best possible start with a Butterfly Count competition between two enthusiastic teams, sweeping along tracksides of flowering bramble, Jerusalem sage and Spanish broom. In a short time 114 specimens of over thirty species of butterfly were netted, recorded and released, the relative individual totals for the two teams being 49 and 65 respectively. Most frequently caught were the Glanville Fritillary, Small Heath and the Green Underside Blue; three different species of Gerry' much-loved swallowtail – common, southern and scarce – were also recorded.

Back at the study centre, Lee Durrell outlined the influence of the island of Corfu on Gerry's life and work, referring to it as the 'crucible' of his lifetime's interest, and showing photographs of the years from 1935-39 the family lived on the island. In the evening, she and Alexina Ashcroft cooked Gerry's favourite curry, an authentic Indian recipe from his mother's original cookbook, for a gathered throng of approximately forty acolytes and invited guests – a veritable tour de force much enjoyed by all!



Above Lee talks about her life and work with Gerald.



Right A toast to Gerald before the celebrations making 80 years since the Durrells moved to

**DAY 2 Sunday 10th May a prelude to the theme An Entertainment with Animals.** First resident Swedish herpetologist, Boss Stille, illustrated the diverse reptilian fauna of the island with live specimens of the common toad, glass lizard, worm snake, horned viper and others, commenting that the fauna had apparently been affected by the wet winter and specimens were not common as yet. The two resident Hermann's tortoises had only recently come out of hibernation and the Dalmatian algyroides were to be seen scuttling over the villa walls. Second, was a presentation by Rosemary Bellamy on the ecology and importance of the olive in the ecology and economy of Corfu, after which the group set out for a session of pond-dipping and stream-walking at the Nymfes waterfall. Common newt, toad and Epirus water frog were soon caught and observed and then Valentin Tschepego called attention to a large specimen of the freshwater crab in pools at the foot of the waterfall – only the third record for the island. A picnic lunch was taken in a delightful olive grove with a rich herbaceous flora in which Neapolitan garlic, birthwort, hairy flax and butcher's broom were prominent. Dave Bellamy led an olive tree-hugging exercise of some of the more ancient trunks.



LEFT: Crows roost high above the trees  
RIGHT: David Bellamy shows Lee Durrell one of his finds amongst the ancient trunks





In the afternoon we continued our freshwater faunal research further down the catchment of the Nymfes stream at the communal washing facility in Xathates and the surrounding ditches and irrigation channels filled with emergent aquatic vegetation. We were privileged to have an impromptu talk on the development of the site by the son of the mayor who had instigated the project some fifty years ago. He spoke of newts, eels, crabs and terrapins and almost on cue, Valentin discovered a specimen of the Balkan stripe-necked terrapin. Peter Sutton caught specimens of some of the rarer Corfiot darter dragonflies and demonstrated both male and female of the beautiful demoiselle mayfly. Kyrios David propose a toast to the goddess of the spring and to a continuing entertainment with animals. The day was completed by a discussion on the day's activities followed by an illustrated lecture from Lee on the books and television programmes she and Gerry had produced.



LEFT: Female Red Damselfly

RIGHT: Waterfall at Nymfes where the group found many species of amphibians



**Monday, 11 May was destined to be a full day of Durrelliana**, with the connecting theme linking the family's life on the island in the late 1930s and how its presence has been remembered and celebrated in recent decades. We began at Villa Fundana, the location for the filming of many scenes from both versions of *My Family and Other Animals* (1986 & 1998), a large Venetian villa which was similar to the Durrellian Strawberry Pink Villa only in the colour wash of its external walls. The views east and west, however, were extensive and stunning, from Gouvia Bay and the location of the Daffodil Yellow Villa at Kontokali in the east, over the complex of small lakes where Gerry and Theodore Stephanides spent so much time; and over the grazing lands of the Ropa Valley and the vineyards of coast hills to the west. We walked through Kermes oak scrub and thyme phrygana to the Monastery of St Onufrios where many types of animal life were observed, but few lizards and no snakes.

The minibus tour took us to the marina of the village of Kanoni, south of Corfu Town, from where we took a ferry to Mouse Island (Pondikonnisi), off the coast of which some of

Gerry's ashes are scattered. We began by an am-dram re-enactment of Gerry and Margo's encounter with the irate priest; Erick That eloquently narrated from 'The Bay of Olives' in *Birds, Beasts and Relatives*; his sister, Tobey, played Margo and role of Greek Orthodox priest was filled by the irascible Chunky. Sanity returned almost immediately when Peter turned a rock to discover three geckos and a spiteful mistral/sirocco wind blew up to remind us of the time when Margo got into trouble in *Bootle Bumtrinket* and had difficulty returning to the Bay of the Olives. Back ashore, Peter led a party across the German WWII barrage to pay a brief visit to The Chessboard Fields with the village of Perama and the refurbished, grandiosely-named Gerald Durrell Strawberry Pink Pool Villa in a prominent position



TOP This unique walk gives the group the opportunity to explore an environment which has not been spoiled by spraying or the general public destroying the flora and fauna. With spectacular views overlooking the basin of the Ropa Valley and series of lakes and grasslands.



BOTTOM The pilgrimage to Mouse Island where some of Gerry's ashes were scattered; includes a reenactment from *Birds, Beasts and Relatives*. Erik as Gerry, Tobey as Margo and Chunkie as the outraged Papas.



We transferred into town where there was choice of free time, an excursion led by Peter to watch the starred agama lizards besporting themselves on roofs by the Old Fortress, or a guided tour led by Kyrios David around the haunts in which Gerry and his family spent some time, beginning at The Liston, visiting the Jewish Quarter where Gerry received tuition and the church of St Spiridion where Margo kissed the feet of the mummified saint in his sarcophagous. The opportunity was provided today but no-one availed themselves. The tour ended in the Bosketto Durrell, in which bronze busts of the hellenophile brothers, Gerry and Larry, were erected and the gardens re-dedicated in 2007. In the evening, the minibuses took the party northwards to The White House Restaurant in Kalami, the former

home of Larry and his wife Nancy, and the choice of a variety of dishes identified by rather incongruous Durrellian epithets, such as *Durrell's Chicken* and *Seafood Risotto My Family and Other Animals*.

**On Tuesday 12 May the group headed for 'Lake of the Lilies'**, the much-loved venue for Theodore Stephanides and all members of the Durrell Family, as described in *My Family and Other Animals*. We began our activities amongst the daffodil-like leaves of the 'lilies', still dormant bulbs awaiting the spectacular flowering of ivory-white blossoms in late July and August. The plant is only known in two localities in the island and the beach of St Spiridion, between Lake Antiniotissa and the sea is the better site. Our exercise was designed to enhance the conservation of the species, first by throwing seeds into the sea, without removing the outer, buoyant, polystyrene-like coat, for marine dispersal; then removing the outer coat and pushing the seed into the dune sand in situ. Anne Binney read appropriate passages as we re-enacted the drawing of lots for which side of the lake Theo and Gerry should take for their natural history investigations and which side Leslie should have for his shooting.

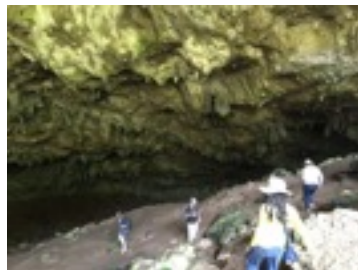
We stood on the bridge and watched the teeming mullet below, in the place where Spiros Americanos, in his underpants, had fished with trident in hand, some eighty years ago.



Then, it was onwards down the track across Nissos Island, birding, bugging and botanising and noting the diversity of habitats along the way. Of particular note were the aestivating snails on the stalks of sand leeks and other plants, the decomposing litter of the marine flowering plant, Neptune grass, and the wind-cut, hedgehog-like, evergreen scrub. After a traditional lunch of a variety of mezes at Taverna Zephyros in Almiros, beneath a colony of swallows feeding young, we followed the rocky coastal footpath around Cape Ekaterini, the northernmost point of the island, stopping to study the maritime habitat with its endemic species of rock sea-lavender and white lawns of camomile in full flower. At the study centre Lee gave a presentation on her escapades with Gerry in their attempts to conserve a variety of spectacular animals as well as endangered species of what Gerry referred to as LBJs (little brown jobbies).

**The theme for Wednesday, 13 May, 'The World in a Wall'** began with a descent into the spectacular Great Cave (Megali Grava) of Loutsas, with its towering natural limestone walls, led by Kyrios David. The cliff faces were alive with a cacophony of jackdaws, no doubt the descendants of Gerry's pet, Gladstone. Their guano and discarded nesting materials encouraged the growth of a smelly, nutrient-loving weed vegetation around the entrance to the cave, in reality a large rock shelter with an entrance some 40-50m wide. Pipistrelle bats were flying between the stalactites and the floor of the gloomy shelter was covered with a luminous growth of thallose liverworts. We searched the damp walls in vain for the minute, colourless troglobitic spiders and discussed the remains of recent unsuccessful excavations in search of a Pleistocene mammalian fauna. Meanwhile, those who did not venture down into the chasm searched the Jerusalem sage phrygana for a variety of insects.

RIGHT *descent into the cave.*  
FAR RIGHT search for insects whilst others looked for tortoises and snakes.



Across the valley at the foot of Pantocrator, Kyrios David gave an informative outline of the history of the village of Old Perithia, before setting out on the second round of a Butterfly Count led by the ever-enthusiastic Dan and his acolytes, young and old. A highlight was provided by Lee and Sammy Kendle, the former removing some external stucco from a dilapidated wall to reveal two excellent specimens of black scorpions, the latter catching them in a butterfly net for display and photography. Wild mountain honey, rich in the pink pollen of scabious and other mountain herbs, was bought from Spiro Bees (aka Spiro Mel) and colonies of mason bees building their nests and doing their best to restore the old buildings provided an entertainment before a splendid Ionian Banquet Lunch at Taberna Siritis.

Back at Villa Alexina, Sammy fulfilled the role of Mother Durrell through her interest in the culinary and medical uses of herbs, giving a succinct and delightful practical demonstration of the uses of a variety of plants as tisanes. The tasting session included linden blossom tea and the wild mountain tea infused from the leaves of ironwort to enchant the postprandial calm and to strengthen the constitution in readiness for a stroll in search of 'The Cyclamen Woods', the tubers of the eponymous plants being found, lying dormant



before the spectacular autumn blossoming. Finally, an opportunity to learn some traditional Greek dances was provided by the tuition of Marieta Dimitra.



LEFT: The group masters the art of Greek dancing

RIGHT: Two scorpions perform their own style of dance



**The coastal walk from San Stephanos to Avlaki on Thursday, 14 May** began with the examination of the remains of a stranded loggerhead turtle that had probably been wounded by the propeller of a ferry or other vessel in the strait of water between Corfu and Albania. Reference was inevitably made to the Gerry's dissection of such a dead specimen as told in the Cuttlefish and Crabs chapter in *Birds, Beasts and Relatives*. There shortly followed a brief seminar on the various adaptations of Mediterranean plants and vegetation to the hot, summer period of drought and desiccation – endurance, evasion and escape – the three Es, potentially the subject of a university module itself, exemplified with reference to the hard-leaved and spiny shrubs, the bulbs of the sea squill, and the already drying annual grasses as examples of the three plant strategies.





In the first coastal embayment there was a fine example of a saltmarsh dominated by sea lavender and sea rush, and then the first coastal lake developed behind a shingle bar, known by the name of Bromolimni, which George Kaloyiannis translated as 'Dirty Lake'. This was the first of the 'Pygmy Jungle' habitats into which Theodore and Gerry dipped so often, and right on cue, George caught the very type of water spider that had entranced Gerry and the visitors to his aquaria. The second lake was named Akoli which George translated as 'No Arse', clearly a vulgar, vernacular indication that this water was not dirty but fresh and unpolluted by either sea water or other effluent. The 'jungle' here was formed from a prolific growth of fennel-leaved pondweed in which a pair of little egret dabbled for freshwater shrimps. Lunch was taken on Akoli Beach and several people took the opportunity to study the cuttlefish, crabs and coral of the inshore marine ecosystem – in popular parlance, went for a swim. Moving reluctantly on, the next topic of study was a fine example of Gerry's 'Myrtle Forests', a characteristic type of Mediterranean evergreen tall maquis, often dominated by myrtle, but here a mixture of other hard-leaved species, notably strawberry-tree and tree-heather, growing to a height of between four and five metres and casting a deep, gloomy shade. Regrettably, there are plans to develop this headland and further coastal areas for the construction of a complex of villa and other recreational facilities and the continued existence of the maquis will be threatened unless a sensitive development programme incorporates plans for its conservation.

The third of the three 'Pygmy Jungles' in the lake behind the spectacular shingle bar beach of Avlaki is a third type, a nutrient-rich freshwater lake covered with a scum of duckweed and surrounded by a fringe of common reed which is difficult to penetrate. Nevertheless, the more intrepid youngsters in our party were able to get a glimpse of the plopping European terrapins. Back at Villa Alexina, Lee rounded an excellent day off with a presentation on the subject of Gerry's work in wildlife conservation and the continuing role of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust.

Local wildlife enthusiast Samantha Kendle rounded the day off with a demonstration on the properties of local plants and her belief that we should reap the health benefits by including them in our daily diet.



Samantha is a keen drinker of herbal teas and believes that we should reap the health benefits by including them in our daily diet.

**Friday 15 May, the final day, concentrated on discussions on the Gerry Conservation Legacy** on a walk through the native Valonian Oak Forests of the extreme north-west of the island, from the village of Porta down to the church of St Sofia, above Cassiope. These forests are comparatively rare in the south-eastern Mediterranean region, in the southern Balkans, Ionian Islands, Greek mainland, Turkey and Asia Minor. They are broadleaved, deciduous woodlands dominated by the valonian or Greek oak, sweet chestnut, ash and maple. In the first part of the walk the trees formed an uncommon closed-canopy forest and much fun was had in the measuring of gbh (girth at breast height) of a sample of trunks; the record for the oak was 260cm and for the sweet chestnut an impressive 346cm. But certainly the highlight was the discovery of a small colony of trapdoor spider burrows in a mossy bank beneath an oak.



*Left: A rare opportunity to watch the trapdoor spider operating the entrance to her home  
Right: Measuring the girth of the oak.*



A picnic lunch was eaten on the grass near the village of Santa with excellent views over to the coast of Albania and beyond into the distant high Balkan Mountains with snow still lying on their peaks. Sarah led half the party on down the hill through the second type of open oak wood-pasture (silvi-pastoral), the more common type in the eastern Mediterranean, used as a free range environment for goats and sheep and originally the favoured habitat for wild boar to feed on the pannage of acorns. There was more gbh measuring, two dead tortoises were found and excellent exposures of contorted strata of metamorphic limestone photographed. The car park of St Sofia's Church was alive with black masonry bees, collecting building materials from the edge of small puddles in a natural flowering lawn of pink sand spurrey. A Bonelli's eagle circled silently high above.

The week ended with a farewell BBQ and everyone had a chance to say good bye to their new friends and review the hi-lights of the week. Peter Sutton was undoubtedly one of the most excited with the discovery of a fish on the critically endangered list, proving that Corfu still has so much for the enquiring mind to discover.

## PHOTO GALLERY



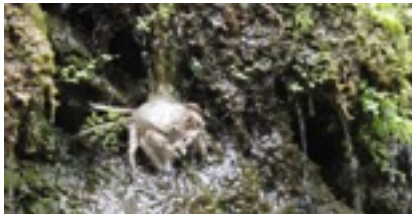
LEFT: Close examination of a glass lizard  
RIGHT Every day an award is made for some outstanding find or act. Here is Sarah with the award for the day.



LEFT: All hands to prepare for the evening meal.  
RIGHT: Picnic in the olive groves, ideal place to refuel and study the flora and fauna.



LEFT A novel way to collect the varieties of flowers found  
RIGHT End of a long day in The White House where Lawrence and Nancy Durrell lived and Gerry and his family visited.



Two very exciting finds made during the week. Fresh water crabs in a new location and the ..... fish listed as on the 'critically endangered list'.



The week provides many opportunities for participants to discuss the day's developments and share knowledge.



This week was very exciting with the discovery of freshwater crabs in a new location and a very unusual fish.







Left George shares a find with Chunkie.  
: Jane reads a passage  
My Family and Other  
Animals



from



Left Old friends, Sammy  
and Tomas who have  
supported US for years  
Right Valentin who has  
returned once again



Left: Marietta shows  
us how to do Greek  
Dances

Right: Michelle and  
Alex try to remember!

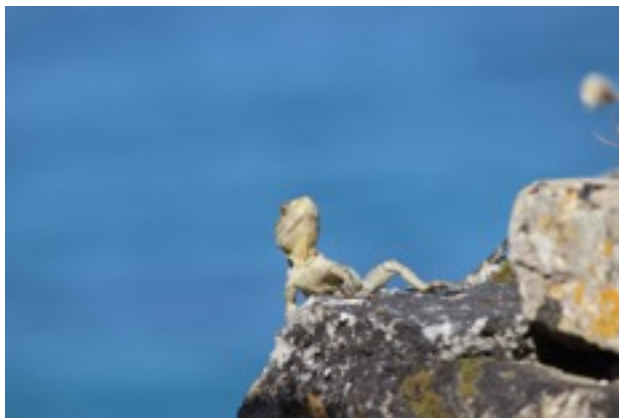


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Left Sheela left  
with mother duty  
on butterfly nets

Right Collecting  
seeds from the  
white lilies to  
propagate in  
same place.



Last Last but not least - some of the other  
animals

