

A new species of yellow-flowered *Daphne* has been found in a limestone valley in China

# Valley of the daphnes

ROY LANCASTER relates how he was shown an unusual new *Daphne* on a recent trip to China

IN EARLY APRIL 2012, after an absence of close on 20 years, I found myself once again in China's Sichuan province. It was a relatively brief visit, no more than a week and in the company of friends.

We were led by the Japanese botanist and plant explorer Mikinori Ogisu, whose knowledge of, and respect for, China's native flora is now internationally recognized. Ogisu's plan was to show us some of the interesting plants he had seen in the mountains of western Sichuan in the previous 30 years. Our intention was simply to photograph them and enjoy the experience.

The weather throughout was kind to us. Over a period of a few days we travelled through valleys and mountains on what felt like a botanical pilgrimage. We paid our respects to a host of plants which

included primulas, aspidistras, rhododendrons, *Corylopsis*, *Stachyurus* and the Chinese hellebore, *Helleborus thibetanus*. The last was in a hillside copse with the added bonus of a nightingale singing its heart out.

### Into a valley

Towards the end of the week we found ourselves heading for a place in Ebian county which Ogisu had last visited some years ago. At one point we crossed the Dadu river and the Chengdu-Kunming rail route along which I remember travelling overnight in October 1980.

Eventually, we found ourselves entering a long valley running north-south through which a shallow river meandered.

After a while our vehicles pulled off the narrow road to park. Following Ogisu's lead we climbed

out and stood for a while surveying the scene. The valley had steeply sloping sides with pale brown and grey cliffs and rocky outcrops, including limestone, especially on its east-facing flanks. Ogisu told me that the soil is alkaline clay and not free-draining. Other than a mainly deciduous scrub including *Rubus*, *Rosa banksiae* subsp. *normalis* and *Baubimia brachycarpa*, these slopes at a distance seemed dust dry and devoid of more obvious colour. The one exception being scattered populations of a low-growing shrub with bright yellow flowers.

### *Daphne* discovery

Close inspection revealed this to be a species of *Daphne* of a most distinct habit. The populations occurred on both sides of the valley at an elevation of 550–750m. ➤



Most plants have a solitary stem, bare except at the apex (above).  
The valley vegetation is mostly scrub (right).

Individual plants consisted of an erect, single, occasionally forked, dark stem of 30–100cm, bare of leaves except towards the apex where they formed a bold ruff. The leaves were leathery and evergreen, oblanceolate in shape, 7–8cm long, matt green above and paler beneath. The flowers were tubular, expanding at the mouth into 5 spreading lobes (normally 4 in *Daphne*), and rich yellow in colour. They were borne in stalked clusters of 10 or more flowers. Each cluster was 7–8cm long, held in the upper leaf axils, and about 10 clusters collectively formed an impressive domed or rounded head.

The dark, bare, relatively smooth stems gave this shrub a stark, top-heavy appearance, but there was no denying its floral quality. For the



next hour or so we wandered from drift to drift, intent on obtaining as many photographs as possible to illustrate its distinctive form and habitat.

Ogisu explained how he had discovered this *Daphne* quite by

accident in March 2005 when, from a passing car, he saw a broken flowering stem lying on the roadside. This alerted him to the plants on the slopes above. Realizing this was likely to be a new species, he took the specimen home with him to



A bold ruff of evergreen leaves encircles a dense cluster of yellow flowers (above).

Mikinori Ogisu (left) examines the new species.



under the name *Daphne ogisui* in recognition of its discoverer. The name, illustrations and an account of its discovery were published in a book by Ogisu entitled *My World of Plants* in 2008 .

Having feasted our eyes on the daphnes, we left the valley, our spirits lifted and the song of yet another nightingale ringing in our ears.

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Japan to examine it more thoroughly and to check the literature.

#### A new species

The following October, now convinced it was an unnamed new species, he consulted with his friend

Prof. Li Zhenyu at the Beijing Botanical Institute, Chinese Academy of Science, who agreed with Ogisu's assessment.

A botanical description of this plant and validation of its name will be published in the near future,