

**Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:****2nd hiking through the Astrakiano-Gorge (Kounavoi – Skalani)**

At each season another face; Natural environment with bio-richness

An article from our NLUK Members [Stephanie & Nina Krips](#), Crete

Preface: The first hiking through the Astrakiano-Gorge for a leaflet in the Kreta-Umweltforum took place in 2010; therefore see our homepage (www.kreta-umweltforum.de) at: [http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/340-10E.pdf] In 2011 the Gorge was so sorely afflicted by vegetation that it was not walkable. Biotope nursing care created remedy which we want to examine with a 2nd hiking in 2012 (on the 29th of April). Therefore hereinafter our impressions; to be described with: “**A magical hiking**”.

We never walked so early in the year through this ravine and therefore it again gave so much new to see. At each season there is something else to discover, really fascinatingly. Already on the way to the entrance of the ravine the view is bound by the colorfulness at the edge of way (see fig. left), hereafter a few steps downward, where the smell of sage and thyme accompanies us, next over a small timber bridge (see fig. right) and from one moment on the others we are in a green fairy tale forest with purling water and sunbeams, which shine through the green sheet roof – fantastically.



This impression of the fairy-tale or enchanted forest accompanied us the largest part of the walk. There are many sections and places which seem enchanted; e.g. you have, among other things, to go over this “wish footbridge” (see fig. continuation page left) and you are rewarded again and again with marvellous motives. However, on the approx. last mile of the hike you have the impression that a bad witch has also taken a piece of the forest. Thorny vines and ivy, as well as fallen trees and down fallen branches make a coming through somewhat difficult. However you will see everywhere that something was done, in order to make this beautiful way accessible again.

Directly at the beginning of the ravine we see the first turtle. The shell approx. 20 - 25 cm long, and somewhat further meet some more 6 - 7 turtles. Unfortunately it is not easy to be photographed. As soon as our shade falls on the small river, while we go more closely, they dive away. We could get one before it disappeared (see fig. continuation page right).



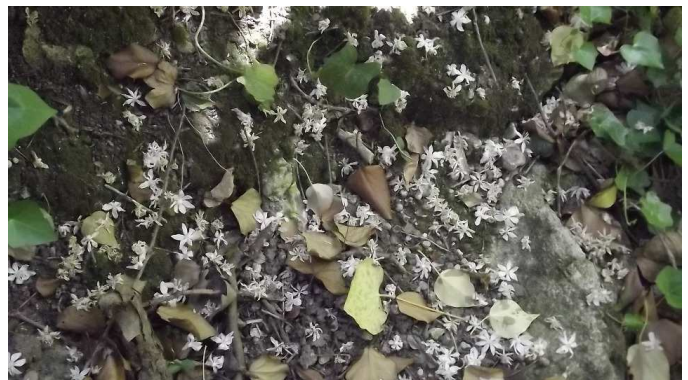
A little further on we see a beautiful turtle taking a sun bath. It is dark grey, nearly black with a bright red circular mark on the cheek; probably a red-eared slider, which is actually not domestic on Crete and was probably set out by someone. However it seems to feel very well in this environment.

We discovered 3 more turtles until the end of the ravine. Among others a quite large, its shell was approx. 30 cm long. Except the turtles there are also a high number of butterflies. Unfortunately this time we did not see a woolly bear, it is still too early in the year for them. In addition there are naturally beetles, spiders, water runners, birds and rodents.

The small brook still leads much water at this season and so we had to hop from stone to stone several times (see fig. left), like the many frogs here, and/or balance over thin trunks (see. fig. right). I feel like in gym class: triple-jump at the stones and balancing beam with the trunks. But what can happen? Some wet feet and shoes! Nothing else! However it would not be very pleasant to walk in wet shoes. Thanks God, our remained dry.



Between the beginning of the ravine up to the last third we feel like “the Star Money” to keep to the fairy tale topic. Hundreds and thousands of small white stars (see fig. right) lie to our feet - a view upward and you see that these are star shaped blooms from very large shrubs with elliptical sheets. This shrubs, or small tree is the *Styrax* (see in addition our info leaflet on our homepage at: http://www.kretatumweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/276-08E.pdf), in Greek also called *Astrakia*. May be the gorge received its name from this tree.



Then the view is bound again by other colours and forms, like for example at the 3rd Watermill. Here bloom yellow dandelion, pink to crimson gladiolas and violet-blue grape hyacinths. You can get the bulbs of this flower everywhere on Crete on the markets. They are pickled like pearl onions into vinegar (*Volvi*), but have a bitter taste.



Everywhere, on the right and on the left of the way there, are wonderful blooms to see. To be honest, most of the time I do not know the names of the flowers and also my smart booklet isn't very helpful and I can't find any answers. Probably these flowers are not worth mentioning in a book, however they please our eyes.

And as it is right and proper for a fairy tale forest, we could also see carnivorous plants during the entire walk. Fortunately no danger for us. These small pitcher plants are content with flies or beetles. It is probably a representative of the species *Nepenthes*, from which about 100 species are known world-wide. For and on Crete is

known the endemic "Cretan birthwort" out of this family; therefore see also our leaflet on our homepage at: [http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/289-09E.pdf].

Then we see a tree where we are really not sure is it an animal with leaves or is it a tree with fur (see fig. left) and somewhat further on we find a reproduction of the Gordian knot directly at our way (see fig. right). We truly and really are within a bewitched forest.



An about 1 meter long flower with a white oblong blossoms crown and with purple-coloured marks flourish in a large number in the centre of the ravine. Could it be about *Petromarula*? Too bad that we are not sure because the blooms (and sheets) of *Petromarula* are edible. Right now, a small lunch would have been quite good. Afterwards we could make a secured determination: it actually is the Cretan bellflower (*Petromarula pinnata*); a new separate leaflet about this endemic member of the Aegean relict flora will be written shortly and afterwards published in the Crete-Ecological forum.

However you will find something to "nibble" all year long. Among other things prosper here figs, cherry- and pear trees, blackberries, walnuts and medlar.

While talking about food: there is also very much "Chorta", thus edible growing wild vegetables and herbs, which we collected industriously, in order to prepare dainty refreshment from it in the evening, after our hike.

In the last third of the ravine the giant horsetail still prospers, not yet so enormous at this season, as well as the Cretan cistus. In addition we find, like so often on Crete, also the Cretan ebony shrubs, a plant species endemic on Crete, which probably meanwhile knows every Crete lover and also knows that cushions were filled with its blooms in former times. What a "fairy tale like" way to take care of beautiful dreams on a healthy way.



Something completely new awaits us within the last third of the ravine: **Fossils!**

Partially very large rock fragments have fallen down to the path by the violent rainfalls and storm during the last winter. In this rocks are many larger and smaller fossils, which fascinated us.

A nearly unbelievable association, that millions of years before, the sea and thus shells were here, which remained in these stones.

Thereby we actually are at the end of our hike. But as already mentioned at the beginning, there is probably a “bad witch” in each fairy tale forest

also. Unfortunately the whole waste in this beautiful ravine is however not to be attributed to a witch, but simply us humans. Plastic bags, wine bottles, cleaning agent bins, sun protection, water bottles, mattress, water tank, bins for insect poison and much more besides we find on our hike.

We also met 3 persons from *Archanes*, which likewise made photos of this measurement, in order to make attentive on the waste problem. Hopefully the mayor is open for a cleaning of this wonderful area; we (4 persons) are gladly ready to help with an action. In this context I would like to mention that in this year, every 14 days, guests of the TUI cruise ship “my ship 1” will walk through this ravine. Naturally I am proud that I was asked as a NLUK member by a TUI travel companion several times for details to this hike. Nature experience? Yes, but should all this people really see the “the civilization garbage“ in this biotope? I would find that very sad for the ravine, for Crete, for Greece...; the local government policy is asked here – it is there responsibility!

Perorating some pictures of contrasts to the nature without comments:

“Clutter in the Astrakiano-Gorge”



You can find multiplicity of contributions to the topic „environment and garbage“ on Crete at the Website of the Crete Ecological forum; navigator column “Ecological- / Nature conservancy”; e.g. [http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/037-04E.pdf].