

“*Meconopsis* from NE Yunnan” by David Rankin

(written up by Evelyn Stevens)

David Rankin’s talk was on a trip to Yunnan and Sichuan made in early June this year (2009) by himself, his wife Stella, Pam Eveleigh, who runs the Primula World web site (www.primulaworld.com) and Wu Zhikun, who has a PhD in primulas and who now works at the Kunming Institute of Botany. The trip was primarily to study primulas (they saw about 50 species). It included going to the mountain of Wu Meng Shan in NE Yunnan, only 3 or 4 hours from Kunming. Towards the upper end of the Rhododendron forest area at around 3900 m, they found two rare species of *Meconopsis*. One was *M. wumungensis*, a distinctive dwarf blue species, “not like other dwarf blues”, growing on cliffs. They only saw about 3 plants of this species. Plants with this name had been distributed in Scotland for some years, but they have proved to be the second, tall species seen by David and his party.

This second species was the main topic of David’s talk and it was growing a little lower down in a scrubby area amongst rhododendrons. Despite much research of the literature, looking at photographs and discussion with various people, David still does not know the identity of this species, and is therefore nick-naming this very fine, tall, monocarpic plant with beautiful violet flowers, *Meconopsis* X, awaiting an eventual diagnosis. It is obviously in the same Series as *M. paniculata*, *napaulensis* etc., i.e. a member of Taylor’s Robustae. It is very similar to plants grown by Jamie Taggart at The Linn Botanic Garden, Cove, Helensburgh (www.linnbotanicgardens.org.uk) from seed collected on Wu Meng Shan in 1995 and distributed mistakenly, as mentioned above, for several years as *M. wumungensis*. David’s new find must surely be conspecific with Jamie Taggart’s introduction, although the latter’s plants never have the red pigmentation in the stems and mid-ribs of the leaves which occurs in the plants seen by David’s party. David mentioned in passing that the two species on Wu Meng Shan probably represent the most easterly distribution of the genus *Meconopsis*, with the exception of a couple of rare *Chelidoniae* species.

David then went on to discuss further in some detail the possible identity of *Meconopsis* X. He showed excellent pictures taken by himself and Pam Eveleigh of *Meconopsis* X and pictures of other species, taken by other people, which could conceivably be conspecific with *Meconopsis* X. These were *M. violacea* (not a recent or good picture) and a new species recently described by Chris Grey-Wilson. The latter is *M. wilsonii*, with 2 subspecies, *M. wilsonii* subsp. *australis* and subsp. *wilsonii* (Curtis’s Botanical Magazine, vol 23, pp. 177-211, 2006). To complicate assessing his plant, David pointed out several apparent inconsistencies and errors, as he saw them, in the Grey-Wilson article. These concerned both details of distribution and anatomical features. Regardless of these, however, for none of the species/subspecies listed above was there a full correspondence with the features displayed by *Meconopsis* X. The features that David discussed will only be listed here, with full discussion being left until a later occasion when a definitive decision has been made on the identity of *Meconopsis* X. The features were: far separated geographical distribution of the various species and sub-species; flower colour (violet range for *Meconopsis* X, a wider range for the others); leaves (different number of lobes on the margins amongst the different species, sizes of leaves, colour of hairs on the leaves, stance of the leaves), stigma colour (purple in *Meconopsis* X and white in *wilsonii* subsp. *australis* for example), and size of the fruit-capsule.

David said that he had been discussing *Meconopsis* X with a number of people over several months and he had changed his mind frequently as a result of all the discussions, new information, pictures etc. he had received. In his view that is good science where, with discussion amongst a number of people, a consensus is eventually reached. He suggested that deciding where the dividing line between species lies is actually subjective, and that the concept of a species (or other level of taxon) in plants is a human construct. So the search is not necessarily for a clear distinction that is there in nature, but for a boundary that can be broadly accepted.

David concluded by again asking the question “Is *Meconopsis* X conspecific with *M. wilsonii* subsp. *wilsonii*, or with *M. violacea*, or is it a yet another sub-species of *M. wilsonii* or is it a completely new species?” Further work is needed to resolve this. One thing is certain, it is a fine plant and it would be desirable if it were to become more widely grown in cultivation. Pictures shown in the talk, plus some others, can be seen on The *Meconopsis* Group web-site: www.meconopsis.org; follow the links: [Plant Portraits](#), [Species in the wild](#) and [M. wilsonii](#).

David thanked the following for help with pictures, literature information, and discussions for his investigations into the identity of his *Meconopsis* X: Pam Eveleigh, James Cobb, Paul Egan, Joseph Atkin, Jamie Taggart, Toshio Yoshida, Wu Zhikun, and Evelyn Stevens. Pictures taken by Sun Hang and Susan Kelley were also included.