

## April 2008. Spring stumbles in, month of yawns!

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Last Updated Thursday, 01 May 2008

April 2008, not the most exciting month in history! Spring migration was a mere trickle throughout most of the month, the best arrivals all occurring in the latter half of the month - Wrynecks, Hoopoes, Golden Orioles and Black Terns, all birds that help to flavour the Lithuanian summer. Prior to these birds, the best of the bunch were the ever faithful White Storks in my garden, now incubating, and a variety of raptors from White-tailed and Lesser Spotted Eagles to Black Kites and increasing numbers of Marsh Harriers. On a brief cross-border run into Poland, Aquatic Warblers and obliging Elk ended the month on a high note.

1-7 April. Spring days, dog food.

In days that couldn't decide whether to be warm or cold, dry or wet, the spring slowly continues its steady progress. Up on the land in Labanoras, the White Storks on the house were getting down to business, possibly the first egg being laid by the 6th, the same day also seeing the first Black Redstarts back on the adjacent barn. Bitterns booming, the odd Marsh Harrier drifting about, things ticking along quite nicely.

It's that season again, management work rears its ugly head! So, project one began its evolution, an upgrade of the raptor view point - proper seats for the season, a paved base and even an integrated barbecue ...will be a season of luxury beneath the eagles this year!

Meanwhile, down at Baltoji Voke, dribs and drabs were beginning to trickle in - the first Shovelers, the first Little Ringed Plovers, more Garganey, plus an albino Black-headed Gull. On the 5th, in anotherwise uneventful day, I did spot four White-tailed Eagles perched in adjacent pines. Being rather warm, nice and almost sunny too, I stopped a while and watched them, the only minor distraction being the Labrador bouncing around on the rear seat - but then, into my mind popped an idea!

Some time back, when the mutt had been swimming, a White-tailed Eagle had taken a passing interest, so I thought 'why not, let's try that again. Send the dog into the water, not a problem, he loves swimming, then see if it lures in an eagle!' Opened the door and out jumped the willing participant, splosh into the water and out he paddled, his head bobbing off into the distance. Pow! I was surprised, even a tad alarmed I have to admit, two White-tailed Eagles almost immediately launched into the air and headed straight for the pool, arching round over the hapless mutt, oblivious to the giants overhead eyeing him up as potential dinner! I guess a black head swimming must look somewhat like a beaver or muskrat, both easy food sources. I supposed they would drift off, but they didn't, they were certainly very interested and gave another close fly by, so easy to get photographs with a pet dog in tow!

However, with a mind of what the dog's owner would have in store for me if I went home with photographs rather than dog, I eyed the eagles as they eyed the dog! Suddenly one hesitated and looked it was about to dive, I bottled and jumped out of the car! Fortunately that was enough to ensure a happy ending! Seeing me, it was all over, the eagle abruptly changed course, again climbing higher. Also seeing me out of the car, the dog decided enough of swimming, dog and eagle parted company!

12-16 April. Mucking in.

After a day of effort on the 12th, when cold rain did its best to wash out the whole day at Baltoji Voke, the next day was the turn of my garden and land. Woke to the bill-clapping of the White Storks on their nest, so that was nice, but when I looked out it was dull, grey and blustery. And the thermometer said just eight degrees, groan I thought, here goes another! So, there I sat at the window and looked at the meadows yonder, seven White Storks plodding along together, three Cranes too, but having not taken a coat, the wimp that I am persuaded me to stay at the window rather than wander out. An adult White-tailed Eagle appeared in the sky, so too a male Marsh Harrier, so the day was going reasonable well for a stay-at-home kind of event. Then, at the feeders, amongst the Nuthatches and other bits and bobs,

a female Brambling came down to the sunflower seeds, very nice indeed. One Black Woodpecker flew over.

Early afternoon, I did decide to venture out - what a mistake! Drove the car across my meadow, then hit a real boggy bit, the car made a shlosh kind of noise, came to a halt and thereafter sunk in gunk! And there it is still, five hours of effort got it all of five centimetres, so gave up, walked 12 km back towards the main road and finally got a friend to come fetch me. Up comes a week without a car!

So came a few city days - glorious sunshine, a Black Kite drifted north, a few Hawfinches knocking about too, then it was time to try to retrieve my car ...hmm, this could only lead to further problems! With three days of sun, I thought it would be easy - in borrowed car, up there I went and almost immediately the first plan failed miserably, the only result being the second car also stuck! 60 km from home and both cars not going anywhere! Sat and pondered, two Marsh Harriers in courtship flight drifting past, oodles of Meadow Pipits about. Walked a kilometre to a farm, but the guy with a tractor wasn't there, so walked back! Early Golden Orioles calling in the woods, very nice. Plus, quite bizarre, very vocal Tawny Owls, calling loudly somewhere near their box. Then I spotted a distant tractor and muck-spreader trundling along, over I scampered. Ten minutes later, with tractor doing all the hard work, out popped my first car - a nice sucking sound and it was free, three days of mud prison over. Then for the second car, bing, and it was out too. Drove them both back to the drier part of the track, then glanced back ...and the tractor was stuck! Up to its axles almost and floundering rather badly. Skipping the next two hours, which involved lots of fruitless attempts to get it out and a tour of the local area to find further help, and my land began to look something like an agricultural convention! Three tractors, one muck-spreader and two cars all huddled on the hill top - bar the cars, the others all got chained together and at the wave of an arm, engines erupted in unison, three tractors ploughing up my turf, but ultimately successful, the sunken giant lurched up and out, finally he was free at last. The Marsh Harriers were back, probably smirking no doubt! In a pit of mud, the hole near a metre deep, White Wagtails immediately came to feed. With my time almost over, quickly popped into my garden to leave one car there - the White Storks sat happy on the nest, my first Swallow was back in the barn and, a surprise, to Grey Partridge were feeding on the lawn!

19-26 April. Migrants galore...at last!

In roll the summer goodies...

Two pairs of Bearded Tits looking ready to breed, Savi's and Sedge Warblers, Yellow Wagtails, no less than 5 Hoopoes, an Osprey overhead, the 19th got off to a reasonable enough start at Baltoji Voke, even better so for the first damselflies of the year - a couple of Siberian Winter Damselflies. With that, I then decided to head off to my land in Labanoras. Planting a few bits and bobs and a Wryneck starts singing away, very nice, sounded to be down near a nestbox used last year. Coffee on the garden bench, one Bittern booming and Marsh Harriers drifting back and fro, two Common Cranes plodding the marsh below ...it seems they might be nesting there this year, that will be nice. Twelve Hawfinches appeared in the garden and Tree Sparrows all over the shop, at least six pairs now nesting. And, of course, the White Storks happily incubating, I watch on as a nervous father.

Next day, over on the land, a bit of maintenance work, plus putting the finishing touches to the new raptor viewpoint - now sporting a bench so you can lie on your back and watch things go over. Did that for a while, male Marsh Harrier very busy in display, one Black Kite looking like he was at the edge of the stratosphere, a male Sparrowhawk and several Common Buzzards much closer. More Common Cranes calling in the wood, plus another Wryneck, one Golden Oriole, both Black and Grey-headed Woodpecker and, occupying the nestbox for another season, the Tawny Owl was again calling mid-afternoon.

By the 23rd, the temperatures were up, the sun was doing its business and yet more migrants were pouring in - Hawfinches all over the city, Lesser Whitethroats in the garden and, at Baltoji Voke, Willow Warblers, Little Gulls and a flock of Black Terns. Siberian Winter Damselflies were in the best numbers I have ever seen, at least ten along a favoured track, and a scatter of butterflies were out enjoying the sun - one Map Butterfly, several Brimstones and the odd Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock.

Glorious weather continued unabated, the 26th seeing temperatures almost touching 20 C, very pleasant up at Labanoras. Wandering around, a bunch of new migrants had obviously taken advantage of the weather - two Whinchats sat atop posts in the meadows, several Pied Flycatchers sang in the woodlands and at least five Tree Pipits popped up in areas of regenerating growth, Willow Warblers here too. In addition to these, Foxes seemed to be having a nice time in the sun - no less than three were out strolling in the early afternoon! Small Tortoiseshells, Brimstones, Orange Tips and a Map Butterfly completed the action for the day.

27 April. Poland

The cat wondered what on earth was I doing getting up at 3 a.m., me too! The cat was none too amused to be turfed off the end of the bed, I apologised and stumbled into the kitchen. Three hours later I was photographing Elk in deepest Poland, a young animal grazing in the misty expanses of the Biebreza marshes. T'was a good couple of hours here, a little stop over en route to somewhere else. In all directions, Snipe, many dozens, towered and fell in display, whilst Black-tailed Godwits and a couple of hundred Ruff also appeared, decked out in their finery. It was a week or so early for the valley to be at its best, but a short walk soon began to notch up more rather nice birds, a second Hoopoe of the morning (the first being a singing bird as I got out of the car), a dozen or so Cranes yodelling off yonder, a pair much closer, a flock of 35 Ravens gronking across the valley. It was a warbler that I had stopped in to see though - not the Savi's Warblers that buzzed left and right, nor the Sedge Warblers, Whitethroats or Blackcaps, but a few minutes more and the distinctive brr brr suggested I had found my goal for the morning. Up it popped and there it was, a fine Aquatic Warbler edging its way up an exposed stalk. I hadn't been a hundred percent sure they would have already arrived, but just to prove they had, two more appeared soon after, flitting across and showing on and off. On I wandered, another Elk, an absolute massive one, plodded across the valley a half kilometre off, Roe Deer barked from cover, a single dashing across my view.

A little bit more and off I went, to the non-delights of Warsaw for the day, a right slum of a city it has to be said. At least it was hot and sunny!

With a little spurt of speed, I made the effort to be back in Lithuania for dusk - pulled in at a sunny lake in the south of the country - to a setting sun, I had a look round for Ferruginous Duck, not having my scope did not help, but still, flights of Greylags, Great Reed Warblers grating away, a Bittern booming and a Serin on the wires all did a good job to end the day in nice fashion.