

August 2008. Flying high.

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An excellent start to the month, the Rollers fledging in Labanoras, plus the garden White Storks near ready to fly. On top of that, still butterflies in abundance, including such delights as Swallowtails and Camberwell Beauties, a Large Grizzled Skipper, nine species of fritillary and three new species for me - a Lesser Marbled Fritillary at Labanoras and both Little and Turquoise Blues near my Vilnius home.

1-5 August.

As July finished, so August began ...butterflies!

1 August

Having hatched the idea to try to see 60 species in Lithuania this summer, I still had a little work to do - with effectively only three weeks of the summer left (before I depart for foreign lands), I needed a final spurt to edge myself towards my target. So, with a few hours to spare, the first day of the month saw me exploring the edges of Rudninkai Forest, sunny glades, shrubby clearings and abandoned meadows. Butterflies in abundance, but would I see any new species? Spotted Fritillaries, in abundance two weeks earlier, had declined to just the odd individual, but in their place dozens of freshly-emerged Silver-studded Blues, simply exquisite. Also plenty of Graylings and Rock Graylings too and, in a massive concentration centred of a super patch of thistles, a whole host of species - dozens of Commas and Silver-washed Fritillaries, Peacocks and Map Butterflies by the bucketload and, amongst the smaller species, both Small and Scarce Coppers, Small Heath and Mazarine Blue. No species new for the year though! Ah well, can't win every day I thought and began my drive home. Two kilometres down, I almost ran over a Swallowtail sunning on the track! Managing an emergency stop, out I jumped ...and naturally off he flew! Rats, followed it around for a while, getting a few so-so photographs, but then my eye caught a glimpse of something else! Oo er, a skipper, but not one I had seen before! Yup, a new species for the year - sunning on a leaf, not a care in the world, there it was, a Large Grizzled Skipper, very nice indeed. A very co-operative little thing too, I got all the photographs I wanted, allowing me to head off home rather happy. Three hours in the field, 25 species, quite acceptable!

2 August

Having rather neglected Labanoras of late, next day was to be spent on my land, a check of all the birds and, naturally, hopefully a few butterflies thrown into the equation. I was not to be disappointed - on arriving, not only were my White Storks looking absolutely fantastic, just days off fledging, but the Rollers had also fledged, moving a whole two kilometres up the road. It was the start of a good day!

After admiring the two stork chicks for a while, right smart things they are, I then took a wander over to forest. Rising from the canopy, a Honey Buzzard kicked things off, shortly followed a male Goshawk powering its way through the trees. Much racket in the forest, young birds everywhere, but the steady grarr grarr that echoed from not far off was the one that caught my ear, a familiar sound that could only belong to a Nutcracker. Through the trees I tried to creep, not helped by Goldeneyes exploding from the adjacent waters, and then I was beneath them - a whole family of Nutcrackers! Not too fussed by the appearance on an observer in their midst, the two parents spied down at me on occasion, but the demands of squawking fledglings seemed more pressing, back and fro the adults flew, bringing in food to the waiting mouths! Not too often I get such good views of this often elusive bird! Overhead, Cranes yodelled and flew across, a pair

with two youngsters in tow. Back out in the meadows, in glorious sunshine, Marsh Harriers and a male Montagu's Harrier quartered the yellowing fields, Red-backed Shrikes busied themselves with youngsters and a lone Great Grey Shrike sat atop a post, all was okay on my land!

And then it was back to butterflies, an afternoon scouring my land and then the extensive pine forests that stretch forever east. Phenomenal, no other word for it - the next few hours saw me admiring no less than 33 species, a personal record for the Labanoras area. Not only an impressive variety, but also very high concentrations, many species such Silver-washed and Dark Green Fritillaries in immense numbers.

Slowly cruising the area, stopping whenever I saw butterflies in abundance, the tally soon began to soar - totals listed below, but the absolute highlights were a Camberwell Beauty sailing past and a super Lesser Marbled Fritillary sharing a flower patch with some 40 Peacocks, a few Red Admirals, a couple of dozen Dark Green Fritillaries and a similar number of Silver-washed Fritillaries, plus occasional Weaver's Fritillaries and assorted coppers, blues and skippers, truly a sight to behold.

The totals:

Large White - 5

Small White - 40+

Green-veined White - 25+

Wood White - 5

Brimstone - 30+

Small Copper - 2

Scarce Copper - 25+

Sooty Copper - 4

Holly Blue - 10+

Silver-studded Blue - 6

Mazarine Blue - 2

Common Blue - 1

Camberwell Beauty - 1

Small Tortoiseshell - 10+

Comma - 30+

Peacock - 60+

White Admiral - 1

Red Admiral - 5

Map Butterfly - 5

Silver-washed Fritillary - 80+

Dark Green Fritillary - 40+

High Brown Fritillary - 15

Lesser Marbled Fritillary - 1

Weaver's Fritillary - 2

Heath Fritillary - 15+

Meadow Brown - 60+

Dusky Meadow Brown - 6

Ringlet - 1

Small Heath - 15

Chestnut Heath - 1

Essex Skipper - 5

Small Skipper - 20

Large Skipper - 10+

In amongst this impressive total, an additional butterfly of special note was a Silver-washed Fritillary of the valesina form, a most attractive olive-brown individual.

3 August

Though my butterfly tally was impressive by any standard, it still stood at 57 for the year, three short of my target. Glaring gaps, ones that should take me safely towards the big 60, were Pale Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady, both species that are migrants to Lithuania and are reasonably common in the latter parts of the season. To plug the last little hole, however, I would have to work a little harder - likely possibilities had included Poplar Admiral and Lesser Emperor, though the season was now a little late for these, so I now stood a better chance with any from Large Tortoiseshell, Pallas's Fritillary, Brown Hairstreak and Purple-shot Copper, all of which should still be on the wing, but would require some dedicated searching!

I decided the hunt should be for Pallas's Fritillary! So it was, another sunny day and I started out at Ropejos Forest, my favourite butterfly location and one that usually promised up to 30 or more species on any given day. Moreover, in past years, a few select sunny banks have supported Pallas's Fritillaries in reasonable numbers. All started well - both a Swallowtail and a Camberwell Beauty were enjoying the morning sun. As I progressed, all the signs were good - butterfly numbers were high, particularly amongst Map Butterflies, Commas and Silver-washed Fritillaries, all freshly-emerged. Amongst them, a few Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries, my first for some weeks, plus the usual good mix of coppers, skippers and the like. Then I reached one of the best spots of all - a small, flower-rich meadow, bordering a stream and surrounded by woodland. Butterflies of all colours and sizes abounded, Sooty Coppers by the dozen, High Brown Fritillaries and, on a patch of pink waterside flowers, now known to be Hemp Agrimony, about 40-50 mixed butterflies, a treat to wade through. And there, of course, the star of the show, a stunning Pallas's Fritillary in all its glory! This butterfly really is one of the more stunning of the fritillaries, so always a treat. A second briefly appeared, but I was content with the first, not least as he settled to allow photographs!

4 August

Feeling acutely lazy, I had thought of staying home this day - an idea made all the more attractive by the abundance of birds returning to the feeders, Great Spotted Woodpeckers hogging as usual, Nuthatches flitting in and out, etc. However, overhead a burning sun screeched 'butterflies' at me, the run of good days made the chances of Pale Clouded Yellows ever higher and perhaps something else too. For a change, I decided to venture not to any of my usual spots, but to take a wander in the meadows a couple of kilometres from my Vilnius home - a delight of Lithuania is that unkempt meadows, a riot of colour are still the norm, even on the outskirts of the city.

Ten minutes from my door, standing in a meadow alive with flowers, I almost immediately spotted an absolute midget of a butterfly. Off it flitted along an embankment and, being a little speck of a thing, I almost immediately lost sight of it! Ten minutes later, it was back. And then it landed to reveal exactly what it was - my first-ever Little Blue! A good start to the day and Lithuanian species number 59 for the year! Back at the car, I was just pondering driving off when a larger blue

butterfly fluttered by, a fairly pale thing. Hmm, maybe a Large Blue I thought, a species I have only seen once before, so out I jumped again. Quite a co-operative individual, he kept landing on a damp patch by the roadside, allowing me to sneak in real close. Hmm again, that's not a Large Blue I thought ...and indeed it was not, it was my second new species of the morning, a Turquoise Blue!!! Now this was not a species I had even thought of seeing, so this really did add a sparkle, especially given it was the magical 60th species of my Lithuanian butterfly quest. Yippee!

Some kilometres up, in a meadow absolutely crawling in butterflies, not least several Short-tailed Blues, another exquisite species, I was to find yet another that I had hoped for - in amongst Brimstones and Weaver's Fritillaires, the first three Pale Clouded Yellows of the season fluttered from flower to flower, a fitting finale to an excellent morning virtually on my own backstep.

By the 5th August, with work to do, butterflies took a little break, but still there were things to see. Whilst watching the feeders in the back garden - Great Spotted Woodpeckers still the dominant bird - a small bird appeared in the plum trees adjacent to the pond, making little sorties into the air and back to the same perch. Darted into the house to grab the binoculars, the third-ever Red-breasted Flycatcher for my garden was paying a visit. It briefly dropped down to drink, then vanished into the plum tree, a smart first-year bird, most welcome.

10-17 August. The butterfly season, hints of the end.

The weeks had rolled by, a fantastic season locally with 61 species recorded, but as mid-August approached, the riches of the year were beginning to decline. Still plenty of butterflies overall, but a marked drop-off in coppers and skippers, plus more of the fritillaries and browns becoming faded and worn and, for some species, the season was over.

On the 10th though, still much to enjoy - 26 species in the meadows, two Swallowtails topping the list of the 'bold and beautifuls', but far better for me was the season's second Large Grizzled Skipper, along with the second Amanda's Blue and my second-ever Reverdin's Blues!!! Bucking the trend somewhat, a few species appeared in greater abundance than before, most notably Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and Small Tortoiseshells, both species clearly having emerged in force in the last days, all individuals very fresh and smart. Pale Clouded Yellows, a migrant now arriving in the country, also defied the general slump, with at least six seen today.

Still things holding up on the 15th - I managed to record the 62nd butterfly species of the Lithuanian year, a quite stunning Brown Hairstreak, with a second individual a little later. Sadly though, unless Painted Ladies happen to influx in September, it was also probably the last additional species for me in Lithuania in 2008!

The day, however, was good - I notched up 23 species, albeit in numbers a mere shade of a couple of weeks earlier. Best of the lot, in my best ever year for this species, I did see another Camberwell Beauty, the fourth in a week. Also one very ragged Reverdin's Blue, a fresh Pallas's Fritillary and the first Queen of Spain Fritillary for some weeks. Plus a Large Grizzled Skipper, tons of Small Tortoiseshells. Otherwise, all in decline - only three coppers, almost no blues and, bar the Large Grizzled, no skippers.

Fortunately, as butterflies began to decline, birds began to pick up! All at Baltoji Voke, two Ospreys on migration, three White-tailed Eagles floating about and a dribble of waders coming through (12 species in all, mostly Wood Sandpipers) down at the fish pools, waders heading south. By the 17th, the picture was looking very healthy - eighteen White Storks flying over, more White-tailed Eagles goofing about, plus two very nice Grey Plovers in full summer plumage, six Temminck's Stints, a few Little Stints too, a trio of Whimbrel and a good flock of Ringed Plovers, a couple of Little Ringed Plovers thrown in. Chuck on the assorted Wood Sandpipers, Green Sandpipers, Common Sandpipers, Snipe, Lapwing, Ruff, Dunlin, single Curlew, Greenshanks and Blackwits and that just about sums it up.