

October 2008. Migration, migration!

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As autumn approached this northern land, the annual exodus of birds began. Flocks of birds, thousands strong, provided some of the year's most exciting birding. Early in the month, from the odd Black Redstart in the city to tens of thousands of birds on the coast, passerines, raptors, waterbirds were all on the move.

Later, a quick trip to Britain offered chance to catch up with these fleeing birds, along with a nostalgic amble through the marshes of North Norfolk, a backdrop of geese, waders, Spoonbills and Snow Buntings.

4-5 October. Migration doors open.

Weighed down under the weight of talk relating to 'clouds of birds' at Kintai and Ventes, 300 km to my west, I began my weekend's birding at Baltoji Voke. Out of the car, I glanced up and there they were, birds on the move - Chaffinches streaming over, a few Brambling in their midst, then Skylarks and Siskins and the first of the day's Bullfinches. This inland locality could never hope to match coastal districts, but the signs were good for an interesting day. In the trees, a super flock of about 45 Hawfinches paused a while, a treat indeed, rare I see quite so many together. Down in the reedbeds, Bearded Tits pinged, their little flock part of the day's overall movements. Fieldfares, Song Thrushes, Starlings, all winged south, sat atop trees or simply gathered in fields.

For all the early hints of a big movement, soon the skies quietened and I settled down for a day's 'normal' birding! Across Lake Papis and the fishpools, wildfowl numbers totalled about 2200, mostly Mallard and Teal, but also a Red-breasted Merganser. In numbers slightly better than I'd expected, the fishpools still held plenty of birds - 171 Great White Egrets congregating onto a single pool, six White-tailed Eagles and waders still holding out, tops being six fairly late Wood Sandpipers, 69 Dunlins and 42 Snipe. Still 20 Ruff too, plus a Curlew and a couple of Grey Plovers. All scattered as a male Merlin hurtled through, again as occasional Sparrowhawks drifted through, also on their southbound migration. Marsh Harriers too, soon will be gone.

All very nice, but lure of the coast was pulling, did fancy some of those clouds of birds...

And clouds indeed there were! Birds, birds, birds! I'd got to Ventes Ragas, a premier migration hotspot, at dawn and at least thought I'd have time for coffee, but barely had I poured it and I'd already notched up three species of raptor - Sparrowhawk, Peregrine and a White-tailed Eagle! Nice start, but they were the mere padding to the spectacle that was really unfolding - a simple glance up and it was immediately clear that this was going to be one unforgettable day, masses and masses of birds were streaming over, thousands upon thousands filling the skies, the flocks all being concentrated by the lie of the land. Standing in awe for a few moments, I realised that this, along with the day before, was probably the peak movement, a mass push of birds that can number into the millions of birds in just a few days.

At that early hour, just after 7.00 a.m., the vast bulk of birds were Chaffinches, so that's where I started! After a few practise counts, I then did two ten-minute counts, extrapolating up to estimates for the hour. As numbers overhead either increased or decreased, tallies were recalculated, but throughout, the figures were absolutely mind-blowing, totalling an approximate 120,000 per hour from dawn till about 9.30 a.m., thereafter slowly dropping off towards mid-morning. Absolutely staggering, 380,000 Chaffinches by the morning's end!!! Even allowing for major inaccuracies that could have slipped in, the spectacle was most impressive. In amongst their midst, hundreds of Bramblings per hour, many dozens of Serins and plenty of 'added extras' - ranging from the expected Skylarks and occasional Woodlarks to the downright ludicrous, not least, right in amongst the Chaffinch flocks, at least 25 Nutcrackers, one Black Woodpecker and, almost funny, 12 Black-throated Divers, all in summer plumage. Over and above them, in periodic flocks many dozens strong, Wood Pigeons and Starlings added to the whole atmosphere of the day, while attracted by the feast that awaited them, a constant swirl of ten to fifteen Sparrowhawks harried the many migrants, even trying to down a Nutcracker on one occasion.

At the absolute peak of the movement, it was just incredible. Standing on the tip of the peninsula, I found myself ducking several times as birds came hurtling in, veering to avoid me only at the last moment. Which way to look? At the Nutcracker squawking from the bush above your head? At the White Stork that had managed to snatch a Great Tit from the sky the previous day? At the swirling flocks of Starlings in the hope of a Rose-coloured Starling? Or simply at the sheer movement as a whole?

And if all those birds weren't enough, there was also another layer of birds - those moving through the bushes!!! And jeeppers, these were even harder to count! Great Tits, Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits, Goldcrests, all on the move, all streaming south. Again, probably not exactly accurate, but counts put the tallies at 16,000 Great Tits, per hour, 750 Blue Tits per hour and both Long-tailed Tits and Goldcrests in their hundreds, but not counted to arrive at any meaningful totals. Morning totals sat at approximately 64,000 Great Tits and 3,000 Blue Tits!!! Add to them, thrushes, a Common Redstart and a good offering of other species and you'd think it couldn't have got any better ...but there was one more bird that needs a special little mention! About an hour into the morning's entertainment, my phone went, a fellow birder also on the headland announcing 'we've got a Geltonbruve pecialinda'. Oo, says I, knowing that to be a Yellow-browed Warbler, where? 'In the box' comes the answer! The ringers had caught it, so a two minute trot back and there it was, a little treat amongst the far bigger treat unfolding all around.

What a good morning it had been! But I also wished for a good afternoon, so as midday approached and the migration finally began to ebb, bar Bramblings which seemed to be increasing, I decided to potter off for the next segment of my very successful day. At the nearby Kintai fishpools, two Black-winged Stilts had been found a week earlier, only the second ever for Lithuania (as the first were not submitted, these take the official title of 'first for the country'). Though common as dirt across much of the world, a Black-winged Stilt is always a most stunning of birds, so despite having seen many thousands the previous month, I was naturally very pleased to hear they were still present. Half an hour later, after being temporarily waylaid by a flock of some 600 Bramblings in a field, I was standing enjoying this pair of birds, both first year birds and as smart as any stilt ever is. Eight or ten White-tailed Eagles lazily sat about or flopped across the sky, a Rough-legged Buzzard hovered in nearby meadows. So that was that, all in all, a pretty good day! Chaffinches and Great Tits alone totalled 445,000 birds, chuck in all the rest and it equals one heck of a lot of birds, vis mig at its best!!! 11-18 October. Dribs and drabs. 300 km inland and a week after the massive movements on the coast, and the birding continued - dribs and drabs filtering south, but more a story of departures rather than overhead movements. Light drizzle, dull featureless landscapes the backdrop, Baltoji Voke on the 11th was beginning to show a cloak of emptiness - waders were down to just four species, Great White Egrets had fallen from the previous week's high of 171 to just 52 and wildfowl numbers were in that state of flux, rising a little before the final drop. Mallards and Teals were both up in numbers, at about 1200 and 1015 respectively, but Wigeon, Pochards and Tufted Ducks were all in lower numbers. Gadwalls too followed the trend, still clocking 45, a very good total for this locality, but significantly down from the record totals earlier in the season. Not all gloomy - other than they were doing their best to hide in the depths of the dank mist, two Scaups were nice, as was a lone Shelduck, the latter a local scarcity. White-tailed Eagles sulked in the rubbish weather, a half dozen lounging about, whilst on the passerine front, Great Tits and Long-tailed Tits continued to migrate through, though the movements could better be described a trickle than the flood of the previous week! Meanwhile, in my Vilnius garden, Tree Sparrows and dozens of Great Tits were beginning to flock onto my feeders, whilst up at Labanoras, a day of management on the land was in order. Shifted trees felled across paths by Beavers, put up a new bird table and designed a new mega-feeder (the previous winter's two 25 kg capacity feeders caused the tree to fall down, new approach needed this year!). Not much on the bird front, a Great Grey Shrike back in residence, all three of the spotted woodpeckers already using the feeders. Otherwise, a few Bullfinches on the move, a Red Fox darting across the meadows and that was about that. By the 16th, the weather had simply given up on any pretence of being nice - it absolutely bucketed down, roads flooded and birds seen were limited to those braving the rain to feed on my feeders! 19-20 October. Birding nostalgia, best of Britain. Enough of the dodgy temperatures and dull days, it was time to join the exodus of birds and fly on down to Britain! With two days at my disposal, what better place to plonk myself than the North Norfolk coast. Nigh on 18 years since my last visit, a real walk down memory lane, the day's pleasure was in finding so little changed - still the evocative marshes echoed to flights of Pink-footed Geese, swirls of waders pattered down onto coastal pools to roost at high tide ...and still two Spoonbills paddled ever faithful at the back of the main lagoon at Titchwell!!! But, hmm, the passage of time had left its mark - across the saltmarsh, on the freshwater pools, Little Egrets everywhere! Dozens of them everywhere, I don't remember a single one on any of my previous trips all those years ago! Likewise for a Cetti's Warbler belting out its stunning song, eeks they are in Norfolk as well these days! T'was a special of south coast visits back in my day, shucks I must be getting old! So, my day had started at Titchwell, a favoured ex-haunt. Before even pulling into the reserve, several hundred Pink-footed Geese dropped into adjacent arable, scattering Red-legged Partridges and Pheasants on their wake. Honking filling the air, reviving memories of many a good day in this area, they were just pleasure to watch, hundreds more joining the assembled ranks in the field. Not many moments later, as the first Bearded Tits went pinging past, I was gazing down at the pools - hundreds of Golden Plovers bunched onto the scrapes, Bar- and Black-tailed Godwits, Curlews, Ruffs and Dunlin adding to the numbers. And there were the ever-faithfuls, the two Spoonbills sat up at the back fast asleep! A very nice start, I sat down in the hide and scanned the wader flocks - one Curlew Sandpiper, a few Snipe, squabbling Avocets and dopey Lapwings. Plus Greylags, mixed dabblers and a passing Marsh Harrier. Close scrutiny of the Golden Plover flocks revealed a surprise ...my first for several years, a juvenile Dotterel!!!! Time for a wander down to the beach - blustery wind, rather sunny. Assembled folk peered out to sea ...'ouwt about?' I enquired. 'Not a lot' came the reply. But for the birder long-starved of the Norfolk coast, I was quite content - not just the Slavonian Grebe on the sea, not just the summer-plumage Red-throated Diver, but the simple birds of the coast

...clockwork Sanderlings by the score, Turnstones in droves, Brent Geese paddling the shallows and, never a bird I can tire of, a little flock of Snow Buntings, seven of them feeding at the dune edge. Then a shopping break - the RSPB shop, ah the pleasures of life, a shop full of bird feeders, bird books, squeaking bird toys and virtually everything else with a bird upon it! Don't get things like that in Lithuania!!! Next stop was Cley, one of Britain's premier birding spots, high on nostalgia for me. Didn't see a great deal this visit, plenty more Pink-footed Geese, a few Greylags and Brent Geese too. Off the beach, where memories wandered back to Boy George the Glaucous Gull, a Red-throated Diver was just about tops of the pick. Likewise quiet on the main reserve - Slender-billed Gulls paddled here back on one of my former visits, now just waders by the bucketload, a few Little Egrets and assorted ducks sleeping. As day crept towards evening, I returned to Titchwell, the Spoonbills had woken, Avocets flew about, the ageless marshes echoed to the melody of the Pink-footed Geese. As I left, yet more flocks descended, the calls a fitting farewell, I had to drive back. Next day was my birthday, happy birthday to me! Treated myself to a present I couldn't afford. Spent half the morning in shops, then took a drive back across the UK to catch my early evening flight back to Lithuania. Unexpected Merlin hurtled across the road somewhere over the Cotswolds. 25 October. Lithuanian Bird Rally. 7.00 a.m., cold, dark, windswept. Not a rustle of a bird to disturb the tension, the day was about to begin and with it, the annual Lithuanian bird rally, a mad 12-hour dash to try and record as many species as humanly possible. 23 teams this year from the length and breadth of the country, plus single participants from Finland, Bulgaria and Britain (me!). And so there we were, small groups huddled in the chill, all strategically scattered across the peninsula that is Ventes Ragas, the country's number one migration hotspot. A cackle of a Blackbird in the darkness, species number one, the race had started! In previous years, I had scraped third place twice, second once. So here I was, along with team member Remigijus, to try and at least match the achievements of past years. Muted whispers drifted across from other teams as the first hints of dawn streaked the eastern skies, they too were recording their first birds. Then the seep of a Redwing, a tuck of a Robin and high-pitched calls of Goldcrests, the day was coming alive - soon the movements would begin. And so they did, as the day truly began to take control, birds appeared overhead, streaming south - flocks of Chaffinches, Bramblings, Redpolls and Siskins, Fieldfares dived into cover, a few Crossbills went chip-chip-chip as they joined the southbound train. Such a feature of Ventes Ragas in autumn, soon the swirl of Sparrowhawks was in evidence, harrying the migrants, a White-tailed Eagle lumbered its way across, two Hen Harriers winged south. The day was storming ahead, the bird tally rising fast, one Woodlark, one Hawfinch, several Serins, loads of Long-tailed Tits, plenty of Great and Blue Tits too, plus both Coal and Willow Tits thrown in for free. In past years, I made the mistake of staying at this site too long, so at 8.30, with birds still streaming over, we left the headland. A quick stop a kilometre up added Scaup, Pochard and Tufted Duck, plus various other bits and bobs. We had now seen about 43 species, a total that would soar at our next port of call, the nearby Kintai fish pools. Though only 5 km distant, the trip took some time - stops for Great White Egrets and Grey Herons, also flocks of Bean and White-fronted Geese, various gulls and a hordes of Bramblings. At the fish pools, still rather misty, White-tailed Eagles sat as ghostly giants, ducks dabbled, a Marsh Harrier made a pass and waders of various description stretched off into the distance on the vast mudflats. Lapwings and Golden Plovers by the hundred, Snipe and Dunlin reasonably easy too. Everything else required a bit of effort - careful scoping adding Ringed Plover, Spotted Redshanks, Ruff and Greenshank. Then we got evicted! Usually access to this site is unhindered, but due to rain in previous days, cars weren't permitted on that day ...and we had a car! Oops, anyhow we'd seen all we wanted, including two unexpected Shelducks, so rather than return on foot, which was allowed, we decided to push on. A quick detour through Kintai village and a couple more settlements added Black Redstart and House Sparrow, then we began the mad dash up to Palanga, 70 km or so to the north. Rough-legged Buzzard, Grey Partridge and the crucial Kestrel lightened the trip and we pulled into Palanga on the stroke of midday. Palanga was a control point for the rally, all teams needed to sign in between 12.00 and 14.00, but over and above this, the town also offers the very best seawatching in the country. Gusting winds, but none too cold, we were soon settled on the end of the town's pier to squint out to sea - hmm, nothing out there! Where were the rafts of Long-tailed Ducks? Where were the divers that frequently sat about? This seawatch was looking not too hopeful! Then I glanced down. Wow, almost under our feet, there was a Slavonian Grebe, none too abundant in Lithuania and not a species I had expected on this day! Beyond, a flotilla of Scaup loafed, then two Common Eiders plopped down, Great Crested Grebes in their wake and much further out, a Red-necked Grebe too (plus several more Great Crested Grebes). More squinting at distant waves and in almost an hour of watching a near empty horizon, several Little Gulls passed south, one Velvet Scoter too, then two Red-breasted Mergansers and finally four Long-tailed Ducks. One Black-throated Diver went the other way. Almost ready to leave, we stopped a little longer to enjoy the Slavonian Grebe, then on a last scan, found three Common Scoters bobbing about 50 metres the pier and a Red-throated Diver just to the left! The seawatch had done us proud and invigorated our rally effort, we took a fifteen minute lunch break, pure extravagance. We totalled our species count ...96 species! Wow, remembering that this rally actually takes place after most birds have migrated out of Lithuania, I was pretty impressed, especially given that my previous year's rally total had been 102 for the whole day! Eighty kilometres south, we arrived at Rusne fish pools. I had high hopes for a few species there, but even before arriving we added a few more - Crested Tit before leaving Palanga, a Waxwing in a village midway, one White Wagtail on Rusne bridge, plus a Little Grebe on the river, as well as a flock of 40 Cranes circling overhead (though we had already heard this species earlier in the day). Into the fish pools, very much a whirlwind tour, a two-minute scan of each pool and then onto the next! Dozens of Smew, quite a few Goosanders, a good flock of Whooper and Bewick's Swans and that was that. Onward. It was now 3.30 p.m. and our list was standing at over 100, but we still had some glaring holes in it, almost all relatively common woodland birds. Naturally, keen to plug the gaps, we then hit the woods - Zalgras Forest the main focus. Treecreeper proved easy, Marsh Tit not so hard, got lucky with a Middle Spotted Woodpecker and even luckier with a flushed Woodcock. Try as I might, I could find no Lesser Spotted Woodpecker nor Nuthatch, the latter species one I have never found on any of the annual rallies! Two hours left, so we returned to Kintai ...somewhere lurked two more species of geese that we had missed earlier. Round the roads we went, stopping and scanning, driving more,

stopping again ...and finally, there they were, in amongst mixed Bean and White-fronts, a super Brent Goose (uncommon in Lithuania) and with a flock flying over, a lone Barnacle Goose too. The day was coming to an end, the bird tally was bulging, but still the absence of Nuthatch niggled ...one last attempt, walked a 2 km track along the edge of Kursiu Marios, the large coastal lagoon. And what did I see? One Goshawk launching from tree, Bearded Tits pinging in the extensive reeds and, as it began to get dark, a bonus Water Rail squealing at the reeds' edge ...but no Nuthatch! The rally was over, we crossed the finishing line a few minutes before the 7 p.m. deadline. Teams were back and waiting, we handed in our results and joined the mingling birders. Who had won, who had taken the crown? As for us, we'd managed a massive 115 species, smashing all my previous bests (though one of our species, White Stork, got disqualified on the grounds that it could have been a semi-feral bird raised by hand after falling from its nest some years before). So, there we were, twelve hours in the field, approximately 300 km covered and 114 species to show. The results ceremony began ...two hours later, it was clear - by luck or by good planning, we had squeezed into top place, we were four species clear of the team in second place!!! Many thanks to L.O.D. an event well-organised and thoroughly enjoyed.