

November 2008. Waxwings, Ural Owl and chums.

Contributed by Jos
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An excellent month, beginning with a record-breaking flock of 64 Black-throated Divers, a Black-necked Grebe and a White-backed Woodpecker all at Lake Dusia, then progressing with impressive numbers of Waxwings arriving in ever greater numbers, more than a 1400 seen in Vilnius alone. Later in the month, other highlights included two Arctic Redpolls, the return of my Grey-headed Woodpeckers to the feeders and an absolutely stunning Ural Owl in north Lithuania. Had Europe's first ever Slaty-backed Gull, found near Klaipeda, stayed around an additional couple of days, then the month really would have been staggering!

1-3 November. Diving numbers, diving birds.

1-2 November

Grey gloomy skies, chilly mornings and departing birds, a typical November day in north-east Europe! And that is exactly how the month started - two days of dankness, split between my land at Labanoras and Baltoji Voke.

Labanoras, the meadows and forests echoing to an eerie silence, the only salvation was at the feeders. Now prepared for winter, thanks to the purchase of 150 kg of peanuts, the first waiting mouths were already waiting. Amongst numerous Great Tits, six squabbling Great Spotted Woodpeckers, two female Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, a half dozen Long-tailed Tits and both Blue and Marsh Tits by the bucketload. House Sparrows in the village. All was shaping up for another excellent feeding season ...bring on the snow!

Meanwhile, down at Baltoji Voke, though ducks and geese still lingered in good numbers, the overall picture was of bird totals in nose-dive - just seven Great White Egrets, five White-tailed Eagles, a mere handful of waders and almost no migrating passerines, bar 30 Waxwings, hopefully precursors of more to come. Still, Baltoji Voke is Baltoji Voke and the lingering ducks and geese continued to offer a glint of the excellent birding potential - over 2000 Mallard, 700 Teal, 800 or so Bean and White-fronted Geese in a mixed flock and a sprinkling of notable extras, not least four Scaup and counts of 70 Gadwall and 55 Goosander.

3 November

Most un-November in character! Not only sunny and relatively warm, but packed to the beams with birds! Venturing into the south of Lithuania, I had decided to spend the day at Lake Dusia, a large shallow waterbody that frequently holds a few surprises late in the season, perhaps a diver or two, maybe a seaduck.

Little had prepared me for the excellent day that I was going to have! Arriving early, the skies still in their morning grey, an initial scan of the waters revealed nothing outstanding, but a nice collection nonetheless. Plenty of Whooper Swans, loads of Mute Swans, a pod of Bewick's Swans too, but relatively few ducks and no divers in sight. Still, already the sun

was beginning to break through, a White-tailed Eagle was climbing into the mist and, first bonus of the day, a Green Woodpecker appeared in a distant tree (not an abundant bird in Lithuania). Off to the left, rafts of Coot, Goldeneye and Tufted Duck extended into the distance and, over the top of them, a Black Woodpecker flopped across the sky, woodpecker number two!

Truly a large lake, I set off upon my drive around, stopping every kilometre or so to scan the water. Stop number one, hundreds of Coot, a few dozen Goldeneye, several Goosanders and, best bird so far, one Red-breasted Merganser, a female-type. Also, very distant, one Black-throated Diver. Ah, the birding was beginning to get better! 40 Waxwings flew over, droves of Fieldfares piled into berry bushes, Great Spotted Woodpecker tapped in the pines. Then things went mental - after several stops that were reasonably routine, I peered through my telescope and couldn't believe the sight in front of my eyes ...Black-throated Divers, dozens of them!!! One Black-throated Diver is quite good on an inland water in Lithuania, two or three would make an excellent day, but here there was a massive, tightly-packed flock! A flock that turned out to have 46 birds in it, amazing! Then I scanned right and found more! The end total was 64, certainly more than I have ever seen in one go and I'm pretty sure a record count for an inland water in Lithuania. There I sat rubbing my eyes in wonder, then thought I should double-check my counts, yup 64 it was - plus one Red-throated Diver for good measure!

After savouring the flocks for a while, I decided to continue my journey, onward round the lake. Couldn't hope to match the diver flock, but ...! Things ticked along very nicely, a few Cormorants, more Whooper Swans, a Red-necked Grebe amongst the Great Crested Grebes and ... odd, what's that? Blimey, a summer-pumaged Black-necked Grebe! None too rare in the country in spring, not too hard to find in summer either, but I don't remember ever seeing one even in October, I'd wager that this might be the latest record ever for this species in the country. Hmm, impressive day.

Then I wandered over to another nearby lake, seeing not a lot, bar 130 or so Great Crested Grebes, so I decided upon another loop of Dusia, retracking my steps of the morning, still the Red-breasted Merganser in place, still all the swans ...but there was one very nice added extra, the real cream to top the day off, a splendid White-backed Woodpecker, my first for about five months! Onward I potted, it appeared the large diver flock might have departed, but no worries, I was more than happy with my day's birdwatching.

4-9 November. Waxwings and eagles

A traditional sound of the November city, amid grey blocks, above traffic circles and atop trees now bare, the annual Waxwing movements were well underway. With birds noted daily across the city, the year's bumper berry crop was attracting plenty of birds, flocks of 50 alongside a major thoroughfare, above a busy flower market, in gardens on the outskirts, everywhere bringing colour to more sunny days.

Winter looming, a sharp frost on the 8th brought ice to pools and lakes. Down at Baltoji Voke, where Lake Papis was already partly frozen, bird numbers seemed to be in their final terminal decline, all the Gadwalls gone, Mallard reduced to just a few hundred. One Scaup and one Smew present, 13 Great White Egrets too. And of course a few Waxwing, about 35 scoffing into apples. As for the neighbouring fish pools, they were positively devoid of birds - just 11 individuals present! Four Mute Swans and seven White-tailed Eagles! Not very often that White-tailed Eagles are the most numerous bird somewhere!

12-19 November. Arctic Redpolls and more, in they come.

Grey skies back in control, autumnal gloom gracing the day. Yet overhead, blobs of colour - more and more Waxwings. Sat in the city, in a queue at traffic lights, the exhaust pipe in front hardly offering great visual stimulation, when suddenly over they flew ...hard on the shoulder of two Goosanders, a splendid 120 Waxwings exiting the city centre, heading for the grey pastures of suburbia. Lights changed, beep beep from the car behind, off I had to go.

Next day, the 13th, under skies rather better, I popped down to Baltoji Voke - two Smew on the lake, a few hundred Mallard, otherwise just a lone White-tailed Eagle and two Great White Egrets, remnants of better numbers in earlier weeks. And then the colourful ones arrived, another flock of Waxwings, 170-strong, diving into gardens to stuff themselves, apples and grapes the order of the day. Over at the fish pools, now almost totally devoid of waterbirds, my visit would have been fleeting, but for the Mealy Redpolls - with odd flocks here and there, it seemed there were birds on the move, nice birds and always worth a check, so I thought. And then I stumbled upon a flock of about 60, I stopped the car and down they came, feeding on trackside weeds just metres off. Scanned through, Mealies everywhere, a few nice pale ones too, then one facing towards me - lightly streaked, small stubby bill, rather pale. Hmm, the features seemed promising, then the bird swung over a weedhead, out puffed a stunning pinkish rump, unmarked and extensive. Unmarked undertail coverts, an Arctic Redpoll and a very classic one at that! Very nice indeed, my first in Lithuania for a couple of winters! One hour later, ten kilometres away and I stopped for another flock of redpolls - at least 150 birds ..and

another Arctic Redpoll! Not such a classic bird, rather duller, but no complaints, two in one day is a treat indeed.

And so on went the month, Waxwings very much the birds of the moment. Birds all over the city, flocks of a hundred and more gracing berry trees from suburb to city centre. Then came the 16th, the best of the lot, 'cos they were all in my garden! Stepped into the front garden to an almighty whirring of wings, 85 Waxwings were flocking down to stuff themselves upon the berries in my hedge. Very nice indeed. Later the same day, up on my land, I had some work to do - cutting grass back before the snows. Busy with the strimmer and over the noise of the engine, I heard a familiar little call ...looked up at 40 more Waxwings were tucking into apples! That was nice, flocks in both of my gardens in one day!

Next day, the biggest flock of the autumn so far - right on the busiest thoroughfare in the city, an enormous flock appeared in the skies above! Quickly swopping lanes, I did a bit of an emergency stop in a convenient lay-by and marvelled, 500 and more doing spirals in the sky! Then came the first of year's snows, temperatures dipped to minus five, Waxwings continued to appear and the month seemed to be ticking along perfectly normally, then...

20-22 November. A first for the Western Palearctic ...so near, so far!

What? Could it be? It was Thursday afternoon and news was hitting the grapevines ...a Slaty-backed Gull had been found and identified on a rubbish tip in Klaipeda, just 300 km to my west. Not only would this be the first for Lithuania, but first for the whole of Europe and the Western Palearctic, what a staggering record!!!

Phone calls came flooding in, e-mails and messages, international birders were waiting on further news before buying tickets to fly in! By evening, having seen the pictures, there was no doubt, the record was genuine, the bird was indeed a Slaty-backed Gull! So, it just needed to stay a couple more days and then I could be there ...of course that is not how it worked out!

Despite negative news on the Friday, there still had to be a reasonable chance the bird would reappear, so at 4.00 a.m. Saturday morning up I got and prepared myself ...Lithuania's Biggest Ever Twitch in History

Eight hours on a stinking rubbish dump, temperature minus five rising slowly, a cool breeze bringing occasional snow, no Slaty-backed Gull wishing to spend the weekend in similar style!

But that said, it was actually an enjoyable day!

As said this was Lithuania's biggest ever twitch ...rightly so, given it was a bird first for the Western Palearctic. The crowd swelled, people barged for position, fights broke out between Lithuania's pager-bearing twitchers and bolshy photographers, cars were parked in old grannies' gardens and the police made 87 arrests for unruly behaviour, locals complained about disturbance and rubbish left in their wake. Birds from heaven to hell were flushed non-stop and weaklings amongst the brood, bird and human alike, were trampled underfoot as the raging masses ignored pleas from frantic marshalls to please refrain from unbecoming activities.

And all that was before 9.00 a.m.

And then I blinked again! I and two companions had arrived at sunrise, the lone security guard at the dump permitting us to drive right in to park amongst the piles of rubbish and there we sat, solitude amongst the birds. Two hours we searched for the bird alone, a first for the Western Palearctic and nobody else there to tread on our toes ...how many would be in the UK, upward on a thousand I'd guess! And then arrived one more birder, an hour later four more, then another, gee it was getting 'busy'.

Didn't need estimates for crowd size, fingers and toes on one foot did it - a mega fourteen people, including the only two people in the world who have ever seen a Slaty-backed Gull in Europe! And that was it, two Latvians, ten Lithuanians, plus a Finn and I representing the rest of the world. No joke though, this is the biggest twitch ever!!!

As for birds, upward of 3000 Herring Gulls, perhaps 35 Great Black-backed Gulls, five Common Gulls and one gaelssi Lesser Black-backed Gull. Plus several thousand Jackdaws, a few migrating Skylarks and Starlings, and guilty of flushing the gulls throughout the day, one male Goshawk.

By evening when it was clear the bird would not show, the original finder of the missing star bird decided to provide entertainment for the masses - to do a bit of ringing of gulls. Method was to throw a net into the gull flock at random and then go extract the single gull caught. With the tip holding 3000 + gulls and the only hint of a Caspian Gull being one seen the day before, what were the chances of the trap landing on one?! But yep, that's exactly what it did - we caught a young Caspian Gull that had sneaked in!!!

23 November. Back to reality, the return of an old friend

The snow was piling down, a virtual blizzard most of the day. After adventures on the coast, it was time for birding on my home patches, ie. at my feeding stations. Slithered and slid up to Labanoras, did a little rally type drive across the fresh snow carpeting my meadows and strolled down into the wood. Oo, birds galore at the feeders, the arrival of the real winter very evident. Topped up all the feeders, put out an additional feeder a little further left, then retired into my cabin. By chance I had arrived at exactly midday, so I decided to do an 'activity index', an hour-long log of main happening at the feeders

12.00. Finished chucking the food out, closed the door and began the wait.

12.01. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker arrives, female, straight onto front feeder.

12.02. Middle Spotted Woodpecker arrives, also female. Jumps onto the new feeder placed less than 3 minutes earlier. About 35 Great Tits on the other assorted feeders, 6 Blue Tits, 2 Marsh Tits.

12.03. Mealy Redpolls in trees above. Mouse in roof starts rustling.

12.05. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker departs. 5 Marsh Tits now.

12.06. Nuthatch arrives.

12.07. Second Nuthatch appears, Middle Spotted Woodpecker departs.

12.08. Female Great Spotted Woodpecker arrives, also onto new feeder. Both Nuthatches leave.

12.09. Middle Spotted Woodpecker briefly visits, female but different bird.

12.10. Nuthatch arrives, probably different bird.

12.11. Lull in activity, c. 18 Great Tits, 4 Blue Tits, 4 Marsh Tits present, plus the Great Spotted Woodpecker.

12.14. Numbers building up again, c. 25 Great Tits, etc. Jay arrives.

12.15. Male Middle Spotted Woodpecker arrives. Great Spotted Woodpecker leaves feeder and drinks in pool in ice.

12.16. Great Spotted Woodpecker chases off Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Nuthatch in, another Nuthatch shortly after. Middle Spotted Woodpecker returns.

12.17. Nuthatches leave, Jay visits again.

12.18. Mouse rustling again!

12.19. Marsh Tit numbers up to five. Plenty of Great Tits.

12.20. Female Great Spotted Woodpecker displaces Middle Spotted Woodpecker.

12.21. Female Grey-headed Woodpecker appears on front feeder, first recorded visit this winter, a welcome return visitor.

12.22. Grey-headed Woodpecker displaced by Great Spotted Woodpecker.

12.24. One Jay arrives. Two mice rustling in roof. Nuthatch back on feeders.

12.25. Great Spotted Woodpecker departs.

12.26. Jay in, another Nuthatch too.

12.28. Female Great Spotted Woodpecker returns, then departs again. Jay returns. Birds spooked and dive into cover, probable Sparrowhawk about. Birds begin to come out again, 15 Great Tits, 2 Marsh Tits, etc.

12.30. Middle Spotted Woodpecker arrives again, chased off by Great Spotted Woodpecker again. Snow getting heavier.

12.32. Great Spotted Woodpecker moves to tree 20 metres off, 'guarding' feeders.

12.35. Female Middle Spotted Woodpecker arrives. Jay on next feeder. Great Spotted Woodpecker chases off Middle Spotted Woodpecker yet again.

12.36. Middle Spotted Woodpecker returns, both Great and Middle Spotted edge up trunk together out of view.

12.37. Two Jays in, Great Spotted Woodpecker flies off. Mouse noisy in roof.

12.40. Middle Spotted Woodpecker returns, Great Spot returns! Up and down, tree to tree chasing.

12.41. Great Spotted Woodpecker returns to feeder. Nuthatch in. Tit numbers climbing again.

12.43. Jay on birdtable, male Middle Spotted Woodpecker returns, chased off again. Second Jay onto feeder.

12.44. Woodpeckers still fighting.

12.45.and still fighting.

12.46. Nuthatch in.

12.47. Great Spotted Woodpecker returns, I chase it off!

12.50. Quick tally - 35 Great Tits, 2 Blue Tits. One Nuthatch.

12.52. Jay in. Another Nuthatch.

12.54. Two Jays, the female Great Spotted Woodpecker returns.

12.55. Great Spotted Woodpecker moves off a few trees, Jays still hopping about, one on new feeder.

12.56. Four Jays, two on feeders.

12.59. Jays all depart, same female Great Spotted Woodpecker returns.

13.00. The hour finishes. Great Spotted Woodpecker still feeding. 15 Great Tits, 3 Blue Tits, 3 Marsh Tits. One Jay back. Female Grey-headed Woodpecker returns, briefly onto feeder, Great Spotted Woodpecker chases it off.

And so completed my mini activity log, dominated by one particularly bolshy Great Spotted Woodpecker, but the absolute highlight the return of Grey-headed Woodpecker for yet another winter. Over the next hour, the pattern remained much the same - all four woodpecker species dropped down onto the feeders again, a male Sparrowhawk scattered all the feeding birds and the snow continued to fall.

29 November. Nocturnal Escapades in search of Ural Owls

In the far, far north of this fabled land, there lies a forest, an expanse of deep depths home to beasts and birds whose very names evoke images of the exotic and mystical ...Lynx, Wolf, Ural Owl, Pygmy Owl, a mouth-watering concoction to warm any a winter's night.

In stands of fir, alder, oak and birch, our target was the enigmatic Ural Owl, an elusive denizen in Lithuania, confined to select forests, mostly in the north, rarely easy to find.

Leaving Vilnius at dawn, a pause midway paid immediate dividends, within five minutes of exiting the car, both Black and

Grey-headed Woodpecker had flopped across the track, a promising start to the day indeed. An hour or so further north, we arrived at our destination - the forests that straddle the border with Latvia. Our secret weapon, two superbly friendly and knowledgeable local birders joined our team and into the forests we went. 'Needle in a haystack' came to mind, as we scoured the forests in the hope of finding any of the owls during the day - past favoured stands of fir, down dank tracks heavy under the afternoon dampness we trudged. Birds were few and far between, 14 Waxwings, a Raven calling, a few Bullfinches, but no blobs big or small to even hint at a possible Ural or Pygmy Owl. Not disheartened though, the forest had already begun to reveal its secrets - Roe Deer on its edge, several Red Deer in its heart, Wild Boars trotting across a track. And soon, as the short winter day edged towards its finality, darkness would surely reveal a few more of the special lurkers of the undergrowth and moss-coated tangles. As the light faded, a White-backed Woodpecker appeared overhead, pecking away, the very last bird before darkness transformed the forest into a new world.

And now it was dark, the real search began, round and round we went, traversing tracks, scanning woodland edge, our lights frantically scraping at the impenetrable blackness, hoping to pick out eyes staring back. This was 'owling' at its best, the potential of encountering almost anything ensuring adrenaline levels remained high ...eyes appeared ahead, dodged down the bank, then reappeared, almost certainly Raccoon Dogs, but lost to the night before we were close enough, then a Red Fox, then a true Raccoon Dog, a big chubby one trotting down the path. The hours ticked by, not a whisper of an owl, not a fleeting glimpse, we stopped and listened, we drove and looked, darkness, silence. Talk turned to the possibility of Linx, maybe one would face us down.

No, no, nothing, after five hours of me perched upon the car, braving the winter chills, we stopped and concluded the night had probably beaten us, the forest fantastic but unyielding. We would return again, probably in February, when the owls would be calling and the adventure repeated. We began our drive back to civilisation, me now back inside the car. Then we stopped, absolutely amazing, on a low branch by the road's edge, peering down at the ground, one stunning Ural Owl!!!! Transfixed, there we sat and admired, a real beauty of a bird barely giving us a second glance. Slowly, quietly, we exited the car, the bird sat unconcerned. With no flash on my camera, bar the little built-in flash, photography seemed a fanciful hope, but after we'd all watched for a most pleasurable eternity, I slunk a little closer, inching along the forest edge to get to a point barely eight metres from the bird, still intent of the grassy embankment below. Now, just in range of the weak flash, I managed just a couple of pictures of note. Then the bird flew, a ghostly shape effortlessly, silently, cruising across to trees opposite, disappearing back into the night, leaving us in awe.

Home we went, rather pleased to say the least, but still we will be back, a wonderful way to pass the cold nights!