

December 2008. Rain in Lithuania, sun in Oman.

Contributed by Jos
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What disgusting weather in Lithuania to start the month off, rain, rain and more rain!

In the first days, I did see a wet and bedraggled flock of 40 Waxwings in the city centre and manage a quick visit to Baltoji Voke, but the rain and low temperatures did little to encourage further outings. Come the weekend of the 6th and 7th, however, I decided it was time to venture out again - not only would this be my last weekend in Lithuania of the year, but I had inklings that a good bird or two might be lurking on Dusia Lake in the far south. Velvet Scoters, both Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, large numbers of Waxwings, the trip was impressive.

With no change in the weather though, fortunately I left Lithuania on the 11th for sunny Oman - a very nice trip indeed. Perfect weather, brilliant birds and splendid desert backdrops. With Socotra Cormorant, Yemen Serin and Great Knot as the primary targets of the trip, with Crab Plover, Grey Hypocolius and Eversmann's Redstart as much desired too, I criss-crossed this fantastic corner of Arabia for 17 days, seeing birds in abundance at every turn. Wonderful days from start to finish.

6-7 December. Birding in the Rain.

So it was, dawn in Vilnius, the rain tipping down, the car's 'ice alert' beeping, two idiot birders preparing to drive south. For 140 km it did nothing but rain, we stopped to watch 285 Waxwings in the rain, drove in the rain, arrived in the rain. Stepping out of the car, paddling through the puddles, the lingering doubts as to the sanity of this trip were dispelled by the sight of three Black-throated Divers just offshore, very nice. To the right, 70 or so Whooper Swans did a musical rendition of 'Singing in the Rain' and a quick scan revealed more birds in all directions.

Early December can see all watercourses already frozen and totally birdless, so I guess the rain was serving some purpose - signs hinted at a good day's birding ahead, albeit a damp one. Stood under a shelter, telescope pointing out into a mono-colour of water and sky, the lake was as flat as a millpond. Mute and Whooper Swans stretched left and right, two Bewick's Swans hid in their midst, but the real pull of this lake is its propensity to attract seaducks and divers. Today was no exception - no less than 10 Black-throated Divers graced the waters at this point alone! Far to the left, masses of birds sat in the gloom, cue a short drive to our next couple of viewpoints, both rather soggy due to no cover, but infinitely better for birds. Rafts and rafts of birds huddled just off the bank, Tufted Ducks by the hundred, scores of Goldeneyes, loads of Goosanders, but better still the much-desired seaducks - two Red-breasted Mergansers, then a real treat for the inland birder, a flock of 11 Velvet Scoters. Right smart birds, these super things were feeding almost non-stop, diving to reach shellfish and coming up with huge mouthfuls! As a backdrop, a single flock of 730 Tufted Ducks, 160 Pochards and 1350 Coots vied for attention.

Yet more Black-throated Divers hugged the waters further out, also several Great Crested Grebes, two Smews did a fly-past.

Still the rain came down, still the birding continued. Flocks of Fieldfares, Tree Sparrows, two late Blackbirds, more Black-throated Divers, further we drove, stopping at key points around the lake to continue the count. Atop an old castle mound, on a brief moment almost free of rain, a whole vista of the lake came into view. All birds distant, but slowly totalling the birds on show, I then found another most welcome bird. Three birds swimming together turned out to be Red-throated Divers, their slender bills upturned and beady eyes highlighting even in the gloom. And way off behind them, two small grebes at a distance that could have put them into Outer Space! Stared at them, scoped them and squinted like crazy, they were Slavonian Grebes, but for all the detail we could see, there wasn't much to appreciate. Ah well, onward - next stop produced few birds, but was a good excuse for a very nice coffee! Once refreshed, and still not drowned, we then quickly scooted round to a neighbouring lake for more punishment - jeeppers, also bird-packed! Over 2500 Coots, almost 200 Mute Swans, two White-tailed Eagles.

By the day's end, during which time the rain had never let up, the notebook told a happy story - just over 6800 waterbirds, including three Red-throated Divers, 29 Black-throated Divers, two Red-breasted Mergansers, eleven Velvet Scoters ...and 4700 Coot!!!

8-9 December. A Lady with Attitude!

My last chance to top up my feeders in the gardeen and at Labanoras ...and to try to resolve one little problem with a 'problem woodpecker'! In past years, up to 20 woodpeckers have co-existed at the feeders, frequently up to six birds of

four species feeding on adjacent feeders at the same time. Not this year! A particularly bolshy female Great Spotted Woodpecker arrived in late November and since then totally dominated the feeders, chasing off every other woodpecker from Lesser Spotted to Grey-headed, also driving off Nuthatches and Jays! When not feeding, this lady with an attitude would just guard the feeders non-stop, thereby preventing anything else access.

All to no avail, I tried moving feeders in an attempt to prevent her blocking access to all, but she simply patrolled them! Something needed to be done. With some regret, I decided she needed to find a new home, so today I caught her and transported her 10 km to another excellent area of old forest. Not an intervention I would usually contemplate, but in the interests of the feeding station overall, I considered it a move necessary.

12-29 December. Desert Birding, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

A fantastic seventeen days, notching up about 220 species to backdrops of superb landscapes and amazing weather. Highlights included White-collared Kingfishers in mangroves, White-tailed Plovers and Cream-coloured Coursers on watered grasslands, tens of thousands of exotic waders on tidal flats that stretched to the horizon and concentrations of raptors that included numerous Imperial Eagles, a single flock of 350 Steppe Eagles and plenty more too. Most of the target birds, from Great Knot to Yemen Serin and Socotra Cormorant to Arabian Partridge, were seen. For full trip report, [click here](#).

31 December. Back in Lithuania ...and she's back too!

With just this single day free between my travels in Oman and my next voyage, I decided the best way to spend it was up at Labanoras, replenish the feeders, see what was about. And what was about? The bolshy Great Spotted Woodpecker!!! Ten kilometres I had taken her, ten kilometres of continuous forest for her to wander in any direction. How she had found her way back I don't know, but there she was, back on the feeders, every bit as aggressive as before, seeing off everything that tried to approach!

(pictures to follow, please check back)