

October 2009. Shrike Delights.

Contributed by Jos

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Exodus on the Lithuanian front, geese heading south, passerines departing. Crested Tits and others at the garden feeders. Highlight of the month, however, was a trip to the UK - a double-billing of Brown Shrike and Red-flanked Bluetail, backed up by Spoonbills, Grey Phalarope and flocks of Snow Buntings.

1-6 October. Autumn Clear-Ups.

Would like to have said I was birding, but with the winter not so far away, the 'Beaver Chomping Season' was upon me, many more of my prized trees at Labanoras would fall. So it was, two days of management, identifying particular trees to protect, giving them sleeves of chainlink - a rather time-consuming task! Long-tailed Tits had begun their autumn migration, plenty of Siskins on the move too. Otherwise, quiet on the bird front, still relatively low numbers at the feeders.

10-16 October. Fogs, Snow and All.

What a pickle of weathers! Started off with an aborted trip to Baltoji Voke on the 10th, arrived to a Pea Soup, the result a few overhead Siskins and Common Redpolls, a few wailing Whooper Swans in the fog, but predictably almost nothing else!

Next day was the turn of the sun, a fine day to shoot south to the Metelys and Dusia, the Southern Lakes. A tad early in the season, these tend to score seaducks in November, but nevertheless a most pleasant wander round - nothing especially out of the ordinary, but the first Bewick's Swans arrived, plus about 350 Mute Swans and 40 Whoopers. Plus

too some 600 Tufted Ducks and at least 2250 Coot. A brave Swallow drifted south, a Moorhen paddled the shallows, not an abundant bird here. However, barely had I had time to enjoy the sun and away it went, a cold wind began to build, and a greyness returned to hang over the sky.

And that cold wind brought a small surprise - the first snow of the year. Woke a couple of mornings later to a white garden, somewhat a shock for so early in the season. Great Spotted Woodpecker, Tree Sparrows, Crested Tits and pals, all busied at the feeders, winter was approaching. With a weekend away, also nipped up to my land, filled the feeders, hungry times ahead!

16-19 October. Euro-twitching, UK.

Day One. Touchdown at Stansted, 6.30 p.m., local time. Picked up a hire car, 30 minutes later arrived at the home of Paul Hackett, good buddy who was to kindly put me up for the night. Birding news, Brown Shrike still present at Staines, Red-flanked Bluetail still at Minsmere, the targets for the next day set. Day Two. Hit the road early, round the M25. Arrived on site pre-dawn, parking at a near-deserted Hithermore Road, one car was disgorging birders. Robins and Dunnocks opened a dawn chorus, a deafening roar drowning them as a Boeing 747 thundered overhead, the runways of Heathrow Airport just a few hundred metres to the south. Into the still dark morning off I strolled, following where I presumed the other birders had gone. What a mistake, I soon realised my route didn't seem to match the crude map I was carrying. Half an hour I milled around, I was not alone - another half dozen birders seemed equally lost! A Green Woodpecker looped over, Long-tailed Tits chattered through bushes, quite a while since I'd seen the dainty UK race. Met up with a couple more birders, then backtracked. Eventually located Staines Reservoir, bearings now obvious with daylight. Fifteen minutes later, emerging from a path through marsh, there stood a line of 60 or so birders, we had arrived! An unlikely birding spot, the M25 snarled just yonder, planes of Heathrow straining into the skies from behind, but in between a patch of rough pasture dotted with bushes just perfect for passing shrikes. 'Is it showing?', twitcher terminology for hello, and yes indeed it was, it had emerged from roost just ten minutes or so earlier. A quick adjustment of the scope and there it was, Britain's fifth-ever Brown Shrike atop a Hawthorn bush, taking in the hints of a sunny London morning. And so it continued to do so for the next couple of hours, occasionally flitting from bush to bush, frequently perching just above the ground, views were just perfect. Adding the exotic, flocks of Ring-necked Parakeets screeched over, two sitting in a nearby tree. With my fill of Brown Shrike, it was time to get moving - Suffolk calling. Round the M25 again, stopped in the services to get a map, then at Abberton Reservoir to gawp at three Spoonbills. Early afternoon, I arrived at RSPB Minsmere, a fantastic reserve - but not exactly overflowing with birds on this mid-October day. Wandered past the famous scrapes, barely a bird to be seen. A couple of Swallows streamed south, six Brent Geese sat upon a pool, plus two Bewick's Swans. My destination however were the 'Sluice bushes', a patch of willows in the lea of the coastal dunes. Arrived and wondered which bushes to check - not a birder in sight, strange thought I, somewhere here hid a Red-flanked Bluetail! Soon however, the reason for the apparent absence became clear to understand - the birders were in the bush! A small path led right into the bush and there, huddled in the depths, about 20 birders. The Red-flanked Bluetail, none too easy to see, was frequenting the deepest depths, but regularly moving up and down the lengths of the bushes. Strategy was to sit and wait - 20 minutes later, my first glimpse, a first-winter bird, but nonetheless a stunner. Another ten minutes and patience paid dividend, out it hopped into full view, popping up onto a small stump in a hollow just metres in front of me, jolly good. To this spot, it returned several times, apparently a favoured feeding area. Also one Cetti's Warbler edged through. Pleased with the goings so far, it was time to celebrate, a pot of tea and fruit cake in the Minsmere restaurant, very nice too. Still an hour or so of light left, a Barn Owl would be nice I thought. Tonight's destination was Sea Palling, home of Tim Allwood, good man. At his recommendation, I stopped at a couple of localities just short of his village. First place, nothing. Second, the village of Horsey, one stunning Barn Owl quartering. To a setting sun, fifteen minutes of non-stop Barn Owl, several hundred Pink-footed Geese descending to roost. Day Three. A day of birding the North Norfolk coast, guaranteed a pleasant affair. Started off with an attempted seawatch just north of Sea Palling - there we sat, Tim and I, staring out to sea, but barely a breeze blowing, there lay little promise of heavy passage. And indeed there wasn't - two Red-throated Divers south, a dozen or so Common Scoters north, Gannets back and fro, two Little Gulls and, looking right out of place, one Egyptian Goose seemingly intent on heading back to Egypt! Heaps of Pink-footed Geese landing in the fields behind, but an hour on the beach and then we cut our losses. A quick coffee, then I bid Tim farewell, to North Norfolk I went. Popped in at Cley, popped down to the coast near Stiffkey, but basically my destination was Titchwell, another splendid RSPB reserve. Stacks of birds present, the reserve occupied my whole day. On the freshwater pools, Bearded Tits pinging, Marsh Harriers quartering, stacks of wildfowl and a scattering of waders. Settled into a hide, scan as I might, I could not locate a reported Jack Snipe, but one Avocet paddled, along with plenty of Ruff and Dunlins. Masses of dabbling ducks too - Wigeon, Teal and Mallard the most numerous, Pintail and Shoveler scattered in. A sudden fluttering and in landed 22 Snow Buntings, up from the beach to bathe in the shallows. A reported Grey Phalarope had gone AWOL, so took a wander down to the beach - the tide was out, the sea beyond an expanse of sand and low rocks. Glorious sunshine, strolled down to the rocks, waders plenty. Ranks of Oystercatchers, flocks of Knot, Turnstones busting around the rockpools. Sanderlings darting at the approaching sea, a

drake Common Eider offshore. As afternoon crept on, returned to the reserve centre for lunch, Pheasants and Wood Pigeons on the adjacent feeders, a well-stocked accessory shop also a minor distraction. With all done, headed back for the fresh water marsh. Perfect timing, the Grey Phalarope had returned and was now waddling along the water's edge, looking most splendid in the afternoon sun. So too was a Blue-headed Wagtail on show, a female-type feeding quietly just adjacent to the path. I did consider an early departure, but dusk was only an hour away, and with dusk one special spectacle, so on I stayed. At 6.00 p.m., it was in full swing - the flight of the Starlings to roost, 70,000 wheeling and climbing, flocks evolving into shinnering balls, then spreading to drape the skyline. A most impressive way to end the day, 800 Pink-footed Geese also dropping in, plus a ringtail Hen Harrier quartering and, just nearby, another Barn Owl. Very nice day, then returned to Hertfordshire for another night under the hospitality of Paul, a further Barn Owl on route. Day Four. Plastic Fantastic. With a lack of rares nationally, back to Abberton I opted to go. Stacks of waders, flocks of Black-tailed Godwits, 14 Avocets, dozens of Ringed Plovers, heaps of Dunlins. In them I spied two Little Stint, but for the second time this weekend, not the slightest hint of the White-rumped Sandpiper, dip number two! Ah well, still plenty to while the time away - absolutely jam-packed with Coots and assorted ducks, Gadwall by the hundred, Wigeon and Teal equally abundant. One Ruddy Duck out in the middle, plastica floating about in the form of one pair of Black Swans, towing five cygnets, and one Egyptian Goose. Full on exotic flavour, also a good dozen Little Egrets and three smart Spoonbills still wading the shallows. With that, one wasted journey to the coast for non-existent Shore Larks, then en route to the airport a quick detour to Chelmsford city centre. Round the one-way system a couple of times, finally located the Central Park, even later a suitable parking spot. Into the park I went, and there he was, a Red-throated Diver on the small duck pool. What had enticed the bird onto such an unlikely setting I do not know, but the views were unbeatable - frequently fishing as close as two or three metres from the shore. Pity the weather had begun to break, there was now a light drizzle following, yuk. And that was the last bird of my UK break - half an hour later, I was back at Stansted, not much more and then aboard a flight, next stop Lithuania. 24-31 October. True Autumn. No doubts about it, autumn was in the air. Leaves spiralling down, cool breezes, birds becoming thin on the ground. At Baltoji Voke, a pleasant day - 34 Great White Egrets lingering, a lone Kingfisher zipping across a pool. Sights and sounds of autumn, a mixed flock of Bean and White-fronted Geese drifted over, yodelling down, while duck numbers began to tumble on the fish pools - Mallard struggling to reach 500, Teal barely 600. Amongst them, a handful of Shoveler, a few Pintail. Waders almost all gone now, just nine Snipe and perhaps 40 Lapwing. Otherwise, just a handful of gulls, three White Wagtails and a White-tailed Eagle. Approaching in November, the dullest and greyest month of the year out here. Up at Labanoras, a cold snap would be appreciated, the feeders unnaturally quiet - in four hours, just one Great Spotted Woodpecker, a trickle of Great and Blue Tits and the occasional Nuthatch. Jays livened things, but, as always, a nearby Nutcracker stubbornly refused to grace the feeding station. One very big birch brought down by Beavers, Red Deer active in the meadow. And to finish the month off, light snow overnight. On the 31st, a dusting across the meadows at Labanoras - and what a difference a week makes. Big activity at the feeders, tons of Great Tits, better still the return of woodpeckers - one young male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker in several times, one female Middle Spotted Woodpecker and at least three Great Spots, jolly good, the winter feeding season now underway. Out in the meadows, a Great Grey Shrike atop birches, the return of another wintering species.