

November 2009. White-back is Back!

Contributed by Jos

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Temperatures dipping to minus six, deep snow, birds arriving on the feeders, a very late White Stork at Baltoji Voke, the first days of November signalled a notable change in conditions from the tail-end of October. With birds departing and localities falling quiet, the best of the action in the first weeks was at the feeders, the highlight the return of a White-backed Woodpecker, a nice compliment to the Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers that had arrived a week earlier. From mid-month, with a Great Northern Diver snatching the headlines, a mini-influx of seaducks and divers livened proceedings, as did the first Waxwings of the season.

1-7 November. Woodpeckers and Snow. 1st November, peered out of the window, pond frozen, birds packing in at the feeders. Light snow a day earlier, winter had arrived! But yippee, with the cold, so opened the woodpecker season! A Great Spot in the garden, another at the feeders at house number two and, after a month of low activity at the feeders, the Labanoras feeders were now sporting a right burgeoning little club - three Great Spotted Woodpeckers at minimum, a female Middle Spotted Woodpecker and a young male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, both the latter two new arrivals. More should arrive in days to come, hopefully Grey-headed Woodpecker in a week or so too. Also visited Baltoji Voke, half of Lake Papis was frozen, some of the fish pools too, but still plenty of birds lingering - one late Kingfisher, no less than than 320 Mute Swans, 43 Whooper Swans and over a thousand dabbling ducks, headed by 925 Mallard and 88 Wigeon. Goosander numbers also up, a flock of 108 looking most splendid. As for passerines, however, mere dribbles - virtually everything had already departed, 35 Starlings the remnant of flocks long gone, a solitary Hawfinch, that was about it. Before heading home, I decided to check the 'raptor fields' - just about perfect time for Rough-legged Buzzards to be passing through. Traversed almost the entire area, barely a bird seen - two Common Buzzards the top! Then noticed a black mass jumping about in the field - scoped it and there hopped about 25 Ravens and a Red Fox prancing about in their midst. Drove up closer and the source of their delight was apparent, a dead Roe Deer in the field. Settled to watch a while, three White-tailed Eagles circled in, an adult and two youngsters, then the hoped-for Rough-legged Buzzard made an appearance, flying directly overhead, Ravens seeing it off. Quite a good day this was turning out to be, then a real surprise flew over, a White Stork! This was one very late bird, all his buddies had departed almost two months earlier, he needed to get going! One more good bird to finish the trip, a male Hen Harrier winging purposely across the meadows, the joys of early winter birding. And as the days ticked by, so went down the temperature ...minus 6 C already by the 3rd, brrr! Feeders getting busier by the day, Crested Tit back in the garden after a few days absence. Tree Sparrows packing all the available feeders, Nuthatches active. By the 6th, winter had truly arrived - some 15 cm deep, snow carpeting the garden and all around. Birds active at the feeders like no tomorrow! And the snow did the trick - by the 7th, though the snow was decidedly dripping by now, the Labanoras feeders were a treat. Forgot the keys to the hide, so slunk down with a blanket slung over me and enjoyed the spectacle ...woodpeckers galore, first the male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker straight onto a feeder just metres away, then two argumentative male Great Spots flitting back and fro, onto feeders, off again, back again. Jays hopped in, snatching peanuts in the snow, a flock of Siskins descended into overhead Alders. Off yonder, big bang bang bang, then in swung a Black Woodpecker, the first in the woodland for a while, back for the winter I assume. Watched him edging closer and closer, then got distracted by the comings and goings of Great Spotted Woodpeckers again, a pair this time. Many Great Tits too, plus the usual Blue Tits. Moments later, in flew a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, immediately veering left and vanishing into the Alder swamp. Strained to see where it had landed, but there instead spotted the star of the day, the returning female White-backed Woodpecker - first time since the breeding season, this much-awaited mega back for another winter. Very good news. So woodpecker tally at present - minimum four Great Spotted (plus three at other feeding stations), one Middle Spotted, one Lesser Spotted, one White-backed, one Black. Next due, Grey-headed Woodpecker. 8-12 November. Gloomy Skies. Snow in rapid melt, a traditional November grey dampness engulfing the landscapes. Had a quick trip to Baltoji Voke on the 8th, the lake and pools remaining semi-frozen. A week of sub-zero nights had pushed out many of the lingering birds - no Great White Egrets, barely any Grey Herons, no Lapwings or Starlings. Wildfowl numbers were actually up on the previous week, but given the tally basically comprised 1090 Mallard and 368 Mute Swans and a mere dribble of other species, the outing was not to last long. Scanned through passage Common Redpolls, one Brambling flew over. That was about that! And so continued the murky skies and mists, a dribble of Siskins over, a smattering of wildfowl, nothing much had changed by the 12th. Time, me thinks, for a trip out of Vilnius. 14 November. Diver Day. With autumn creeping towards winter, November traditionally sees the last major movements of the year - the arrival of seaduck and occasional divers. Mostly coastal, a smattering of birds can nonetheless be seen at select inland waters, most frequently the southern lakes of Dusia and Metelys. A few days earlier however, it was the turn of Kauno Marios to take the limelight - not only had a few scoter been reported, but so too a Great Northern Diver, a major Lithuanian rarity. So it was, on this day I decided to turn my attention westward. A mere 70 km from my home, I was there bright and early, enjoying the first sun for a few days and admiring a most picturesque autumnal lakeside. Rafts of Goldeneye and Goosander abundant, both numbering in their hundred, Tufted Ducks too. Tons of gulls, a late Little Gull a bonus. However, not a diver in sight, nor seaduck to compensate. Bumped down various tracks, scanning wherever I could. A Kingfisher skimmed across the surface, then I spied a mass of birds. Relocated and settled to scan - two Common Scoters, then a Red-throated Diver, this was more like it. A hundred metres more and there sat a treat - not only another Red-throated Diver, but alongside and dwarfing it, the impressive Great Northern Diver, the 5th record for Lithuania. A rather pleasing bird, I have to admit. With that under the belt, onward. Many more rafts of duck, two more Red-throated Divers, plus a total of four Velvet Scoters too. At the lake's end, a White-tailed Eagle and a Goshawk, rather good variety for an early winter's wander. 15-21 November. Call of the Wild. On the progression to winter marched, a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker arriving on the feeders, a

compliment to the now-resident male, and better still the first punks of the winter - the honourably smart Waxwings. Eight seen near Lake Papis on the 16th, another seven an hour or so later, a warming sight to an otherwise chilly day. Also, heaps of ducks and swans still present and, continuing the diver theme of previous days, a Red-throated Diver on the fish pools, a rare sight at Baltoji Voke. On the 21st, with skies a firm grey and much of the landscape the same, it was back to Kaunas for another helping of passage birds. Large flocks of Fieldfares hinted at movements, late Chaffinches numbering a hundred or so too, but it was waterbirds that were to offer the best pickings of the day. Scanning from the north bank of Kauno Marios, the lingering Great Northern Diver was quickly located, bobbing near the far bank, all alone. Rafts of Goldeneye, Goosander and Tufted Duck stretched to the left and right, much as in previous weeks but the next bay held a few new arrivals - a smart pod of Smew, about fifteen in all, several cracking males in their midst. Great Crested Grebes seemed to have departed, so too most of the other divers. By early afternoon, with unspectacular sightings along the way, I rolled into the bay favoured by the Great Northern Diver. The bird was close offshore. I settled to watch, but I was in for a treat - rare for a winter bird, it began to call. Mournful wails rising, truly a haunting sound in harmony with the drape of mist-laden pines behind, an evocative moment, ever heightened by the brr of Crested Tits and yodel of Black Woodpecker. An hour in the bay, further scans producing a Black-throated Diver nearby and another flying past, plus two Common Scoters, then it was onward. A few more stops, producing little more than a flock of Coots and hundreds more Goldeneye, then it was time for home. 22 November. Bad Mammal Day. By day's end, three dead Raccoon Dogs, several mighty peeved Beavers. Up to my land, a wander down to the feeders, all ticking over nicely - despite the mildness, all three spotted species of woodpecker were in and out with regularity. However, one glance at the water level and I could see I needed to take some action - the pesky Beavers, not content with felling prize trees, have steadily ever deepened the central lake, drowning yet more trees and threatening to turn the whole forest into one open swampland! But now, with the water level encroaching on my cabin, it was time to take action - dam busting! Dog in tow, off we went - a humongous dam stretched across the lake outflow, no wonder water levels were so high! An hour of paddling and bashing, the dog taking much delight in helping, and then a raging torrent replaced the tranquil waters. Mighty peeved will the Beavers be, but hopefully the replacement dam, for surely it will come, may just remain a little lower! And as for the dead Raccoon Dogs, a tragedy on my land, a tree collapsing onto power lines bringing live wires onto the forest floor, the three Raccoon Dogs electrocuted as they tried to cross. A sorry sight. And just when I thought I'd had enough mammal surprises, I was not too amused to discover Beavers have now moved onto my excavated pools, argh! Five years with no Beavers on these pools, the numerous freshly chewed stumps of Silver Birches testified this a very bad piece of news. Hmm! One day on, the wintering Great Grey Shrike reappears.