

December 2009. A Tale of Two Halves.

Contributed by Jos

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Another month set to be of two halves, the first mopping up the dribbles of winter in Lithuania, the remainder feasting on foreign delights in pastures new. Despite dankness and uninviting weather, highlights in the first two weeks included Waxwings, an Arctic Redpoll and movements of Hawfinch.

1-9 December. All started well enough, a trip to Baltoji Voke on the 2nd notching up both Arctic Redpoll and a flock of 70 Waxwings, plus a Muskrat and lingering flocks of up to 50 Whooper Swan and ducks assorted. Meanwhile, up at feeders, action continued apace - the woodpecker count at the Labanoras feeders throughout the first week standing at seven Great Spotted Woodpeckers, two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and the male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. With relatively mild conditions in play, no sign of the White-backed Woodpecker in recent days. A few days more, on the 9th, with threats of sub-zero on the forecast, it was time for another visit to Baltoji Voke. Heavy murk, grey gloom, general yuk, the day's weather promised little. A quick glance at Lake Papis seemed to confirm this expectation, a drastic decline in bird numbers had occurred - though a very late Great Crested Grebe bobbing about confirmed that not all birds have equal brains! Neighbouring gardens, rich in rotting apples and shivelled grapes, are always worth a wander in early winter, not least for the chances of Waxwing. A flock of 70 the week before, so hopes were high. An occasional Fieldfare here and there, an impressive flock of 15 Hawfinches atop an old apple tree, but where were the Waxwings? Then a swirl, nine Waxwings overhead, a quick fly-by and off they went, the Waxwing spectacle very brief! But no worries, the real star was still to come! Dismissing the meagre dozen or so lingering Whooper Swans, blinking at the last 30 Common Teal and via various Common Redpolls, two looking very Arctic-esque, and there he was - the star of the day, a major rarity for a winter day in Lithuania. All alone, his millions of chums now littering Brighton Pier and reedbeds in sultry UK, a single Starling looking most dandy. That warmed me up, but do hope he gets motoring, real winter is not far away! Also spotted a Kingfisher. 12-14 December. Final Offerings, Temps Down. As mercury took a tumble, a dusting of snow across land and garden, it was my last weekend to savour my feeders and the country around. A flock of 69 Waxwings got things going, but predictably it was Labanoras that shone bright. Increasing the number of feeders, topping up the mega-feeders, all as set to last out the weeks I will be away - non-stop food on tap till I return. And the birds were certainly flocking in, dozens and dozens of Great Tits swamping the feeders, a super neat set of woodpeckers to bid me farewell. Settled in the cabin and down they came - frequently five or six woodpeckers at a time, the day's total amounted to about six individual Great Spotted Woodpeckers, two Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and, with the addition of a new male, two Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers too. Adjacent, across the ice, splinterings of a shattered trunk revealed the presence of a Black Woodpecker, all too soon in he flew too, content to demolish another stump nearby. Long-tailed Tits, in snowy garb, paid a brief visit, and then the star of the day - a hundred metres from the feeders, a male White-backed Woodpecker. Superb, both male and female now reside in the forest, a good winter ahead. Meanwhile, with temperatures now minus 10 and falling, the garden feeders were equally busy - Tree Sparrows packing in, regular Nuthatches and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, one Crested Tit. A mouse has discovered my house, hope he pushes off soon! 16 December. Farewell. Overnight temperatures minus 19 C, heading that way for subsequent nights. Garden feeders heaving, the trees absolutely crawling with birds, perhaps as many as 150 Great Tits alone. Off on foreign travels in the next days, so the garden got its mega feeders too today, birds well catered for. A parting shot from Lithuania, the city centre early afternoon...