

January 2010. Snowfield Birding

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With King Eider, flocks of Harlequin Ducks and scoters galore, the first days of January were spent on the Massachusetts coast of the U.S.A, with additional days further south to add many raptors and delights such as Cedar Waxwing, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and numerous passerines such as Fox Sparrows and White-throated Sparrows. Back in Lithuania, with temperatures plunging to minus 30 C, birding focussed on the feeding stations, the highlights a White-backed Woodpecker and Grey-headed Woodpecker at Labanoras and two Crested Tits in the Vilnius garden. An unexpected mid-winter bonus, Lithuania's first-ever Pygmy Cormorant, initially found at Christmas, was also present much of the month, along with White-tailed Eagles and Kingfishers, all adding flavour to an excellent month.

1-4 January. The Tail-Ends of Winter Birding, North America. In temperatures that dipped to minus 23 and in snows up to a metre deep, an excellent voyage into the wilds of Canada and the coast of the north-east United States. With a focus of gulls, seaduck, owls and raptors, plus the boreal specialities, the trip was an undeniable success, with mouth-watering birds such as Snowy Owls, Black-backed Woodpecker and Grey Jays amongst the many highlights, plus two truly memorable encounters with Eastern Grey Wolves. A full account of this trip is now in preparation. 5-10 January. Lithuania, Feeding Story. Back in Lithuania, temperatures were dropping, snow was falling. Priority number one, get to the feeding stations and check the mega-feeders, designed to hold up to a month of food, had they lasted out? And indeed they had, crunching through the snow to my garden in Vilnius, a familiar flurry of birds met my arrival - Tree Sparrows by the dozen, throngs of Great Tits. Topped up the feeders, put out a few more. Nuthatches arrived, Marsh Tits in and out, a churr churr alerted me to a garden favourite, my Crested Tits still using the feeders, a pair of them active. Picture much the same up at Labanoras, manic activity in the deep snow - bucketloads of Great Tits, close to a hundred packing in around the feeders, but Labanoras has its specialities, I was eager to see who was at home. Into the cabin, out I peered - a few minutes later, Great Spotted Woodpeckers arrived, one quite bolshy, a few minutes more Middle Spotted Woodpeckers too. Had forgotten to refill the gas, so only gave it a couple of hours, but no Lesser Spotted Woodpecker to complete the trio, though I am sure he's still about. A quick stomp across the ice, however, did reveal two other stars - the female White-backed Woodpecker that often frequents the feeders, plus just beyond a male Black Woodpecker, busy as ever demolishing rotting alders. 12 January. Pygmy Bonus. Found on Christmas Day, whilst I enjoyed the wilds of an Canadian island, Lithuania's first-ever Pygmy Cormorant was a somewhat unseasonal find, swopping its sultry south-east Europe wetlands for the frozen waterways of Lithuania. Little wonder it vanished barely a day after its arrival ...except that it didn't! In temperatures heading towards minus 18 C, this Pygmy Cormorant reappeared on the 11th January, favouring the same channel as originally found - the warm water outflow of the one of the country's largest power stations. So today, juggling work, down I went - arrived to a certain crunch of the snow, walked all of 50 metres and there sat the bird, one Pygmy Cormorant perched low on a waterside branch. Nice bird, unfortunately a mere few minutes later, it decided to fly, vanishing upchannel. Two hours of searching, no further sign. For mid-winter Lithuania, this little ice-free oasis did, however, sport a respectable bunch of other birds, a few Goosander paddling along, 60 or so Coot in a huddle, a Kingfisher on a sidewater. Further wanders, surrounded by Fieldfare and Bullfinches, added Grey Herons at roost, a dozen strong, and upon an island, etched in ice, two brassy White-tailed Eagles. Not a bad day for an extended lunch time, not that lunch actually figured! 15-18 January. Snowfield Birding. Turning on the kettle for the morning cuppa, ice cracking as it begins its mournful boil, so begins another subzero day of existence. Scraped a patch in the iced window, kitty paws her frozen water bowl. Out yonder, the day is dawning - cloudless skies and a weak sun climbing, the forest and garden a frosted artwork of ice crystal and snow. The temperatures this night, a cool minus 19.7 C, pushed me out into the garden, topping up the feeders, birds flocking as ever. Puffed balls of feather, Great Tits and Tree Sparrows took the garden population to well in excess of 100 birds at a time, the usual extras padding the totals. With a churr, the regular Crested Tits appeared at the kitchen window. Inside, the milk was frozen, I had forgotten to put it in the fridge, I popped a chunk into the now steaming tea, life in this primitive little home of mine is just idyllic. Gas heater now on the go, soon all was cosy, birds buzzing, action galore. Rare winterers in Lithuania, a couple of surprises this morning - a female Chaffinch amongst the Tree Sparrows, a male Blackbird on apples beneath a tree, but for the biggest surprise, I needed to look no more than two metres from the kitchen, a beady-eyed Roe Deer sauntering past, a garden first. Meanwhile, upon my land a 100 km to the north, my car mobilised as a battering ram to clear a path across my snow-decked meadows, a most excellent day was ahead at the feeders. Quite a flurry of woodpeckers in and out, all the Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers in regular attendance, the resident Black Woodpecker as ever engaged in trunk demolition. Clambered into my cabin, stoked up a gas fire and settled back to enjoy. With every lake, stream and marsh frozen in the vicinity a block of ice, an immature White-tailed Eagle was an unexpected sight overhead, circling low over the feeders and seeming to take an interest. Hooded Crows rose from trees adjacent, a trio of birds harrying the eagle till departed. Life returned to the feeders, dozens of birds clambering over the various hoppers on offer. A female White-backed Woodpecker appeared, not the same individual as earlier in the season, so it would seem two are now visiting, but ten minutes even better - directly onto a peanut feeder, the return of a Grey-headed Woodpecker, my first sighting at the station this winter. Birds came and went, the afternoon ebbed away, no sign of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, it would seem I have lost my regular feeder bird. More puzzling still, the entire forest's population of Nuthatches seems to have vanished - abundant at the feeders in Vilnius, abundant here in previous seasons and winters, they suddenly departed in November and not a single one since. Most odd. Got the car a tad stuck on the way out, a sneaky drift engulfing it as I attempted a slalom out. A bit of huff and puff, and out the car crawled, eventually slithering onto the iced track and freedom. Homeward bound. Next day. By the dictates of climate, waterbirds of any description are notable things in mid-winter Lithuania, the layers of ice sometimes

up to a metre thick not conducive to the average dabbling or diving bird. Truly impressive concentrations do occur at the Kaunas hydro-electric plant and Mallard, Goosander and Goldeneye are all easy enough to find elsewhere on sheltered city rivers, but other than that you take your rewards where you can get them …thus, all the more surprising was it to have a waterbird residing as a first for the country, i.e. the Electrenai Pygmy Cormorant. I popped down for a second helpings on the bird today. Walked many kilometres, finding the area far more extensive and productive than I had supposed - through snow and ice-crusting fringe, I marched channel upon channel, all in the vague hope of finding a wintering Bittern. No such luck, but the Pygmy Cormorant did appear, settling upon a branch about two hours after I arrived. One Great Cormorant too, plus an adult White-tailed Eagle and a Rough-legged Buzzard. 23-26 January. The Cold Arrives. Minus 30 C, the killer cold strikes again. Had ideas of canoeing down a river today, but the only ice-free river left was rapidly becoming a minefield of ice slabs, floating bergs and blockages, parts already totally frozen over. In the garden, looking helium-filled, Blue Tits and Great Tits resembled little tennis balls, puffed into perfect spheres. Crested Tits continued to visit, as did a lone Chaffinch, surely now regretting its decision to winter in these northern climes. Chucked out extra rations, a few apples for the Blackbird, handfuls of sunflower seeds and peanuts for the masses. Two Jays swooped down, Nuthatches shimmied along branches and hopped onto the feeders. In my house, the kitchen was positively Arctic, the milk even freezing inside the fridge now, the last bastion of relative warmth. Gas fire on full, the temperature crept up, the dog gratefully accepting a bed against the fire. Fingers freezing, I braved the garden for a while, then took the softie approach, deciding to venture out in my car. Just 30 km west, the warm water outflow of Electrenai power station would surely be ice-free, perhaps still home to the Pygmy Cormorant of recent weeks. Spooky mists rising off the waters, warm hitting chill, the channels did indeed remain ice-free, the waterside reed and shrub a delicate sculpture of hoar frost and crystal. Out on the lake, Mute Swans paddled on serene waters, drifting as ghosts into evocative shrouds of mist. Left the car and took a walk, inside of nose freezing, a traditional nose-tingling indicative of the extreme lows. A Great Cormorant peered from reed's edge, a White-tailed Eagle flopped from a birch, Goosanders sat in rafts. Took much time over a flock of Bullfinches, 25 feeding on fallen ash keys, then set out to find the Pygmy Cormorant. And there he was, now a month into his visit, perched on iced branches overlooking dark waters. Along another channel, the dog decided a swim would be mighty nice - a head case for sure! Crashed through the ice and had his paddle, in had gone a dog, out came something resembling a frozen hedgehog, his fur almost instantaneously freezing into spikes! Back to Vilnius, a massive female Goshawk flew over on route, so dark came and the temperatures again began to plunge. Forecast is chilly again this night - minus 27 C in the city, happy days for school kids - minus 25 C and school becomes optional. A couple of days on, the poor blighters (school kids) had to head back to the classrooms to suffer more - night temperatures had risen to an almost tropical minus 22 C, the schools were open again. Around the city, snow now beginning to fall, a few birds of note - flocks of Fieldfare here and there, a couple of Hawfinch too. 30 January. Snow Blob. Temperatures sub-zero, ice half a metre thick, your average self-respecting Beaver in Lithuania spends the whole winter snug in its aquatic lodge, isolated from the world outside. Not so the pesky one that resides on my pools - despite temperatures touching minus 30 C during the week and heavy snow overnight, the blighter has gnawed a tunnel from his underwater lair! For two weeks, padded flat, a trail has meandered through the snow from the frozen pool off yonder to a stand of birch, freshly nibbled stumps evidence of guilt. Today, with snow drifting in parts up to half a metre deep, my meadows yet again snagged the car, a particularly deep patch of snow serving admirably as an impromptu car park. From there, it was on foot. Labouring forward, I tramped through the snow, adjacent Bullfinches feeding on exposed seed heads, a Goldfinch tinkling overhead. Tracks of Red Fox and Roe Deer crossed my path, I looked up and there it was, the 'Blob'. A blob, dark and low-slung, was shuffling along the Beaver path, I was staggered - never have I have seen a mid-morning Beaver risking a land crossing. I ducked and watched it go, directly into my prize birches, the swine. As fast as snow allows, I darted across. Evil thoughts entered my mind - with only a single bolt hole, finally I would have chance to catch the thing and relocate him to better waters, possibly happy Beaver, definitely happy me. I didn't do it, instead I crouched on a bank of snow and awaited his return - three or four minutes later, back he came shuffling, a birch sapling in his chompers, another three metre tree on its way to a watery grave. Straight past me he went, down his hole and gone, my best ever views of a Beaver. This individual, almost certainly a young animal, arrived on the pool only in the late autumn, I presume having insufficient time to then store enough food before the freeze set in, hence the need to now forage in mid-winter, a high-risk strategy. Despite many on my land, I only ever see a Beaver every year or two, so very much a red letter day! As for the feeders, strangely quiet on this day, dozens and dozens of Blue and Great Tits as usual, but a poor showing by the woodpeckers - one Middle Spotted, a couple of Great Spotted and a noisy Black, roll on February!