

## February 2010. Baltic to Balkan.

Contributed by Jos  
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European Wild Cat, thousands of Red-breasted Geese, Bulgaria provided the best of February's highlights, but Lithuania also turned up a few trumps. My Labanoras feeders attracted both White-backed Woodpecker and Grey-headed Woodpecker, as well as a Great Grey Shrike and Pygmy Owl, both the latter hunting passerines at the feeding station. Elsewhere, Crested Tits and various finches continue to visit in the garden in Vilnius and, in the wilder countryside, the Pygmy Cormorant remained at Elektrenai and Shore Larks appeared by country roads.

1-6 February. Garden Watch. Oh boy, the snow kept coming down! Struggling to reach my home, the car got dumped a hundred metres short for a couple of nights before I finally cleared my route in. Night views across the garden pretty though, a Roe Deer again making a nocturnal visit too. Garden birds active - two Crested Tits daily, still the wintering Chaffinch lingering, plus a mini invasion of other finch types - two Greenfinch at the sunflowers, one male Siskin, plus a couple of Bullfinches feeding on berries in the bush. Apples proving popular, resident Fieldfares munching on the daily offerings, an occasional Blackbird popping in too. 7 February. Out and About. With flocks of Shore Lark occurring across the country, the unprecedented influx bringing reports of birds almost daily, I decided to take a most circular route to my Labanoras land on this day. Under blue skies and a chill of minus ten, stop one was Elektrenai. Favouring its usual roost, still the Pygmy Cormorant remained in residence, approaching its seventh week. So too Kingfishers, a pair flashing blue down the channel, and gracing the ice beyond two White-tailed Eagles. Leaving the site, a Great Cormorant also flying over, the next destination was the country roads of Kedainiai district, the area favoured by many of the Shore Larks. Snow-caked tracks, glistening in the sun, a few Common Ravens sauntered past, the first Red Fox of the day appeared in a field, sunbathing on the snow. Massive flocks of Yellowhammer here and there, a report of Shore Larks filtered through, right on my intended route. An hour ahead, a Great Grey Shrike off to the right, three Red Foxes in a field together, I slowed to view, then overhead they swirled, a flock of Shore Larks. Most flighty, briefly they would touch down, feeding on the road's edge, only to rise again and spiral off, landing nearer or further. Much as I would have enjoyed to stay in the area longer, my land was calling - my last chance to top up the feeders before an imminent trip out of Lithuania. 25 kg of food in tow, the deep snow unfortunately left my feeding station near two kilometres from the nearest car access. A long deep trudge followed, the food on a toboggan, me up to my knees. Regardless of the sub-zero, I arrived absolutely boiling! Tracks of animals zigzagging everywhere, Brown Hare, Roe Deer and Red Fox, tellingly no Beaver, his run now snowed over and deserted. Sleeping in his underground lodge or finally predated? Onward, slumped on the veranda of my cabin, a winter wonderland in front of me. Much action in the forest this day, swarms of Great Tits on the feeders, ever increasing numbers of Blue Tits too, plus an excellent showing of woodpeckers - all the expected Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers on and off the peanuts, the regular Black Woodpecker smashing away at rotting alders, plus the two stars - females both, a single Grey-headed Woodpecker and a White-backed Woodpecker, the feeders proving most attractive. Highlight of the day however, was a Great Grey Shrike - not out in the meadows as usual, but inside the forest and hunting at the feeders. Mesmorizing, like a giant butterfly floating round the stick piles, trying to drive out lurking Great Tits. From the comfort of the cabin, metres in front, the action played out, up he would swoop, out popped the birds, back down he would come. Fifteen minutes, the game went on, no success, back to the meadow he went. Me too, a slog back through the snow, a quick shove to free the car, homeward bound I went - not a bad day, Pygmy Cormorant, Shore Lark, White-backed Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker and hunting Great Grey Shrike. 11 February, Hawfinches in the city, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker too, but for me, time to leave Lithuania for a few days, foreign birding beckoning. 12-16 February. Winter Birding in Bulgaria. Vast flocks of Red-breasted Geese, backed up by an impressive array of other waterbirds, raptors and select specialities, the coast of the Black Sea offers some of the best winter birding in Europe. A five-day mini break, this trip combined a couple of days birding the riches of the Durankulak area with excursions to lakes surrounding Bourgas and a short trip into the Western Rhodopes mountains. To a setting sun, the evening flight of 70,000 White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese was the major highlight of the trip, all the more evocative for the Hen Harriers circling in their midst and the Golden Jackals calling in the background. In weather that far exceeded expectations, other memorable birds included Dalmation Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Syrian Woodpeckers and Sombre Tit. However, for all the birds, it was a mammal that truly stole the show - sunbathing outside a cave, a stunning European Wild Cat, a bonus I really did not expect. Click [HERE](#) for full story. 20-21 February. Food Run, Owl Day. Fresh back from lands afar, my feeding stations beckoned. For the first time in two months, temperatures in Lithuania reached the zero mark, a degree above in the capital. At the feeding stations, it was time for my annual census, an attempt to gauge bird numbers. First up, had to get there! Yet more snow in the preceding week left little hope of getting the car near. Another trek was required, me up to my thighs, a toboggan loaded with peanuts in tow. Action-packed at the feeders, high numbers of Great Tits and Blue Tits as usual, a steady stream of woodpeckers in and out - at least four Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, plus a resident female Grey-headed Woodpecker on the closest of the feeders. Jays swooped in, Great Spotted Woodpeckers hogged chosen feeders, a Treecreeper looked most out of place, foraging on the snow beneath a feeder, picking up fallen crumbs. All was peace and calm ...then it wasn't! One minute feeding quietly, the next moment scattering in alarm in all directions, birds shot into thickets and off into tree tops, loads of churring and scolding. And the cause? A Pygmy Owl! Came in low and fast, straight through the feeding area, hurtling after a hapless Great Tit, the chase in vain I believe. Off swung the owl, across the snow, now with woodpeckers in pursuit and much commotion. Mere seconds after its entrance, the bird was gone, vanishing into distant trees. Try as I might, no further sign, my third record of this species on my land, all in mid-winter around the feeding station. Further walks added both Black and White-backed Woodpecker, then it was back to the meadows. Pesky Beaver had been active again, but the weather was turning not too pretty, back across the snow I tramped. An excellent day at its end.