

April 2010. Big Beasties.

Contributed by Jos

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Big beastie start to the month - an excellent array of species, including a herd of European Bison, three Elk, both Red and Roe Deers and, top of the lot, a European Polecat. Raccoon Dogs a week later. Birds also not bad - Tawny, Pygmy and Tengmalm's Owls all in voice, Hazel Grouse and at least 30 Woodcock on a nocturnal foray, plus increasing numbers of migrants, including Marsh Sandpipers, Black Storks, Caspian Terns and Hoopoes.

1-3 April. Butterfly Season Opens. A warm spring day to start the month on the Eastern Front, butterflies appearing in numbers for the start of the season - Brimstones and Small Tortoiseshells on sunny slopes, a Peacock here and there, a splendid Camberwell Beauty the highlight. The first Chiffchaff of the year in song, Black Redstarts back on city blocks, spring much in evidence. White-fronted Geese flying to the north, pods of Garganey arriving on pools, the ice ever shrinking. With Robins, Chaffinches, Wren and Starlings all back from winter quarters, now mingling with the Siskins and Greenfinches, my garden takes on its brief annual Britain-lookalike image. Hawfinches at the sunflower seeds and Crested Tits on the peanuts somewhat shatter the illusion. All too soon, the arrival of Golden Orioles and Icterine Warblers will quash it absolutely, Rule Britannia out, Eastern flavours again in dominance. A five minute stroll from my house takes me to a large lake, splendid reedbeds and much potential. Despite its proximity however, it is rare I actually wander over. Did so on the 3rd, the visit notching up a few nice bits and bobs - three Lesser Black-backed Gulls on the remaining ice, a pair of Smew in a bay, rafts of Tufted Duck and Pochard on the waters - none of which have I ever recorded from my garden itself, careful observations of my airspace required in coming days! Elsewhere on the same day, more new arrivals at the local patch - Bittern, Black-tailed Godwits and Gadwalls, plus more Smew and a big female Goshawk too. 4-5 April. Out and About at Night. Quite against the forecast, another warm sunny weekend. Up at Labanoras, Brimstones on the wing, Cranes in the meadows, my White Storks content on the nest, but for me it was off to the deep dark forest for a night in search of beasties, big and small. Arrived a few hours before sunset, trawled the tracks and paths to unearth any critters already on the move. Tracks of Beach Martin, plenty of signs of hooved animals, but the evening's glories were still some time away. A positive feast of birdsong in the meantime, various thrushes in full force, Robins abundant, but all playing second fiddle to one denizen of the forest - haunting cries echoing out, either from birds flying over or others in hidden corners, Common Cranes set the scene for the evening. The sun began to dip, out came the first mammals - a pair of Roe Deer in a clearing. A White-backed Woodpecker began to drum, I did not pause long. White Storks drifted over, heading back to nests yonder. Then came the first true reward of the evening, a chance glance to the right and three enormous shapes dominating a side track. I dare not stop, they would evaporate into the depths of the forest. Instead I continued another couple of hundred metres, turned around and sneaked back, the three animals still at their spot. Three splendid Elk, a mother and two well-grown calves. Moderately common animals in Lithuania, but rare I get such good views. With fading light, onward - two Red Deer lurked in the depths of spruce, two more Roe Deer appeared on forest edge. Then small blobs began to appear by the track's side, little scurrying blobs - Woodcock, all relatively newly arrived in the country. Splendid views of many as they sat in the car lights, more roding overhead - at least 30 seen by the evening's end. Now completely dark, expectations rose, almost anything can emerge from these forests under the cover of night! Several owls out and about - three Tengmalm's Owls and one Pygmy Owl, but I was still focussed on mammals. Three hours wandering and not one single animal more was seen, I decided it was time to call it a night, take a break until the pre-dawn hours which would see me once again in the forest. A good move - my chosen exit from the forest took me directly on a trajectory to three more mammal species! First a Red Fox darting along, pausing to watch as I passed, then a small mammal directly in front, stopping in the lights of the car. A distinctive face and shaggy coat, one European Polecat, the absolute prize for my night's work. Scanning around, his intent was soon apparent - bounding away, a Brown Hare. Got to my hotel without further ado, but in just a few short hours I was back on the road, 4.50 a.m. leaving my cozy bed to return to the forest. A Tawny Owl hooted away, yet more Woodcock rose from the track as I went and soon mammals again, Red Deer in a herd of five, Roe Deer in pairs here and there. Nothing more of note till dawn, then a Red Squirrel scampering across the path. Common Cranes kicked off an almighty din, a Hazel Grouse strutted its stuff, then a female White-backed Woodpecker appeared in an old birch adjacent. The sun was up and shining, my night of adventures over. Back at the hotel, White Storks on a nest, a Smew and Marsh Harrier on adjacent lake, two Common Cranes flying over, not a bad backdrop to breakfast. With the whole day to kill, I then took a meander across the country - in the heart of the nation, along the valley of the Nev žis River, reside a population of European Bison. Part of an ongoing reintroduction programme, dating back a couple of decades, the numbers currently stand at about 56 free-ranging animals, with a further couple of dozen in a breeding centre. The wild animals roam far and wide, though have largely settled in an area of mixed forest and pasture some way to the south ...and that is where I encountered them. Looking most impressive, a single herd of 34 animals resting in an extensive meadow to the backdrop of birch forest. Two Roe Deer amongst them. Also decided to pay the breeding centre a visit - easy way to cheat and get photographs of the Bison! 8-12 April. Land and Garden. Swallows on the pools, more Garganey, a few Smew, the first Common Toads, spring continued apace. 1.30 a.m. on the 10th, a rare nocturnal saunter across my land, a Red Fox prances across the meadow, a Raccoon Dog retreats from the pools, presumably a drink well-deserved. In the water however, two bright beady eyes peered from the reeds, something lurking in the shallows. A Beaver seemed unlikely, it would have dived and disappeared, so closer I wandered to take a look. In jumped my dog for a paddle, totally unaware of the eyes. Round and round the dog swam, two metres from the eyes on occasion. I puzzled over the owner of the eyes, the eyes puzzled over the dog no doubt. Then an almighty shriek in the darkness, the critter had had enough of sharing the water. Out jumped my startled dog, up popped the eyes - a second Raccoon Dog, presumably it had deemed it safer to retreat into the water on our earlier approach. I slept this night in my cabin, none too warm, but dawn was a

treat - Redwings in song, a flock of 15 Bramblings around the feeders, a pair of Goldeneye on the waters between the last ice. 'Twas a day of maintenance however, birding limited to the those by the way, Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers excavating a nesthole, Great Spotted Woodpeckers mating. Cleared many fallen trunks blocking my paths, a task made ever more laborious by the endeavours of my Beavers! In the distance, a Bittern boomed, overhead an occasional Hawfinch ticked. Tawny Owls hooted near their nestbox. A long day of graft over, I took a break upon my raptor viewpoint - still a week early for the return of the local Lesser Spotted Eagles, but with the sun bright, I lived in hope. They did not materilise, but ample compensation in the form of a passing Hen Harrier, not an abundant bird on my land. The next two days, the land bathed in warm sunshine, migrants continued to arrive - Greenshank, Little Ringed Plovers and other waders at Baltoji Voke, a strange race White Wagtail in my garden. Highlight however was not the migrants, but the growing flock of Siskins at my garden feeders - an impressive 70 now hogging the feeders and decorating virtually every tree in the garden. One Hawfinch drinking at the garden pond too. 15-18 April. Tumbling Temperatures. Days of warmth all too short-lived, temperatures now returning to a mere 10 C by day and not far off zero at night. However, the days of sun had done their stuff - additional migrants appearing at sites wide and far. At Baltoji Voke, falling water levels exposed mud just in time for returning waders - seven Greenshanks, a dozen Green Sandpipers, fourteen Black-tailed Godwits, six Ruff, but the wader highlight of the spring so far, one Marsh Sandpiper. Penduline Tits in several localities, Common Terns and Savi's Warblers on Papis and the fishpools, Lesser Spotted Eagles displaying over the Palukna Meadows, all spring migrants arriving. Lesser Whitethroats too, plus more Swallows and a healthy dose of Garganey. Despite temperatures nothing spectacular, still butterflies on the wing - Small Tortoiseshells and Peacocks sunning on sheltered banks. Evening visit to my lands on the 18th, the White Stork in the image above stalking the meadows, a Tawny Owl in flight near the nestbox. I decided a start to small mammal surveying was in order, put down the live-catch traps baited with peanut butter, one hour later two Bank Voles scurrying about inside, my first catches. One Roe Deer crashing though the forest too, plus bunches of Swallows back on the scene. Meanwhile, back in Vilnius, Hawfinches on the rise in the garden - near a dozen present, drinking at the pool, using the peanut feeder, lining up along the lane. 23-28 April. Climatic Cocktail Minus three overnight, plus 16 C by day, a cocktail of sleet, snow and sun completing the mix, a right muddle of weather! Battling the elements or basking in the sun, migrants poured in. Serin in the city; Black-necked Grebe, House Martins and Yellow Wagtails a short stroll down from my house; Tree Pipits, Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warblers in my Labanoras woodland, plus my first Willow Warbler of the year. However, for pure pleasantness, whilst I sat upon my veranda on the 24th with a Middle Spotted Woodpecker on the adjacent feeder, up started a familiar call - the first Wrynecks to return, one of my favourite birds on my land. The ringing call continued, on a bough I spied the male, perched a mere few trees away. On and off all day, he sang. Midday, suddenly action - a second Wryneck, the pair in unison - down to a nestbox, he sat atop singing, she immediately vanished inside. Will be right nice if they choose this box - in perfect view of my deckchair! Other wildlife also in abundance - Brimstone, Small Tortoiseshell and Peacock on the wing, plus both Red Fox and Roe Deer in the forest and a brief play with the small mammal traps immediately paid off, three Bank Voles again, soon scampering on their way. However, the glories of the week were to be had at Baltoji Voke - two visits, one on the 24th in sleet and wind, the second on the 26th in stunning warm sunshine, birds galore on both! On the second visit especially, spring was surely on a stomp - on semi-drained pools, a feast of waders awaited - Ruff in numbers approaching 350, a couple of dozen Greenshank, my first Wood Sandpipers of the year, already 28 present, plus two exquisite Marsh Sandpipers in their midst. Overhead a Black Stork soared on summer thermals, whilst amongst the chattering classes, Great Reed Warblers grated away and Lesser Whitethroats churred from bushes. On Papis, two Caspian Terns arrived, as did the first Black Terns and Little Gulls, the latters rising to five and 45 respectively. Two Hoopoes also flew across the lake, further birds singing and on show nearby. Last, but not least, a good showing o butterflies in the sun - plenty of Brimstones, Peacocks and Small Tortoiseshells and, making their maiden fights of the season, both Map Butterfly and Orange Tip. The season is well and truly open! In the days to follow, more Serins in the city, a Cuckoo calling, plus increasing numbers of Pied Flycatchers in my garden, nestboxes being investigated.