

## October 2010. Royal Flush all round.

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A most peculiar start to the month, warm enough to bring a late flush of butterflies, including several Wall Browns, my 78th species of the year in Lithuania, yet also distinctively autumnal with movements of passerines and a woodpecker bonanza at my feeding station, all the specialities back nice and early - White-backed Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker and Grey-headed Woodpecker amongst the cast, also late Cranes passing over. By mid-month however, with Hen Harriers, Bewick's Swans and Smews, plus a flurry of snow, there was no doubting, the winter was on its way!

1 October. Royal Flush, Butterflies. Rare indeed is it that October brings any butterflies, early frost knocking out all but the occasional Red Admiral and Peacock. This season, however, the turn of the month really exceeded all expectations - a trip to southern Lithuania, intended as a bird sortie, was simply staggering for the numbers and variety of butterflies still on the wing. Fluttering across meadows and feeding on embankments, no less than 11 species noted, quite remarkable for such a season. Not just an impressive species tally however, but also very good numbers too - heading the cast, an absolute minimum of 80 Pale Clouded Yellows, many egg-laying, along with perhaps 40 Peacocks, at least 50 Small Whites and assorted lesser numbers of Small Tortoiseshells, Red Admirals and Common Blues (this a surprise). Also, single representatives of Brimstone, Small Copper, Queen of Spain Fritillary and Speckled Wood. However, butterfly of the day, was most certainly Wall Brown - a total of six seen, not only was this my 78th species of the year in Lithuania, but also my first in the country for six years! Not what I expected on an autumn day! 2-3 October. Vis Mig. Poor butterflies, no sooner had I been celebrating bumper numbers and along came the first frosts! Bye bye butterflies, mere stragglers now noted, a Small White, a Peacock, one Red Admiral. However, autumn in Lithuania means exodus of passerines. Any glance skyward stands reasonable chance of seeing birds migrating over. Any trip to the coastal migration hotspots stands good chance of migrant overload, sometimes tens of thousands of birds per hour pouring over. And so it was, I decided to make one of my annual autumn visits to Ventes Ragas, the country's premier migration watchpoint. Dawn, a cool crisp morning. Flocks of Chaffinches and Siskins on the wing, hundreds of them, thrushes, Stock Doves and Starlings on their midst. With winds not conducive, this was never going to be a day of mass movement, those splendid days when countless thousands of birds fill the sky, but the spectacle of dawn was still impressive enough - layers of birds streaming south - finches at the top, Song Thrushes, Fieldfares and Starlings mostly lower and, at canopy level, above and below, non-stop Great Tits, Blue Tits and Long-tailed Tits, all moving in their hundreds. Occasional extras - a flock of Crossbills now and then, a Hawfinch or two, some Serins, several Sparrowhawks harrying the migrants on their way. At bush level however, all was relatively quiet - plenty of the titmice moving through, Robins and Dunnocks too, also a couple of Common Redstarts and three Black Redstarts nearby, but very few Goldcrests and almost no warblers, a few Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps about all. One day earlier, both Red-flanked Bluetail and Pallas's Warbler had been caught at the ringing station. I however would have to make do with a scarce bird of lesser status - a humble Rock Pipit, found earlier by the ringing supremo and only the second in Lithuania in 2010, a below average showing for the species. By mid-morning, all action was effectively over, the skies near empty, the bushes resounding only to the twitter of Long-tailed Tits still dribbling through. No point hanging on, a quick look at nearby Kintai, White-tailed Eagles present as always, a few flocks of Greylags, but otherwise all quiet. Morning over, 300 km drive back to home. 4 October. Royal Flush, Woodpeckers. By November, as tradition goes, I hope to have a reasonable selection of woodpeckers on my feeders in Labanoras, usually Grey-headed Woodpecker returning in that month, so too a White-backed Woodpecker if I am lucky (though the latter is often a treat reserved for the coldest days of winter, somewhere in the depths of January or February). This year however, all the goodies were early in - even in early September, a female White-backed Woodpecker had been nosing around the feeders and, as from last week of September, Black Woodpeckers had returned to the flood forest and a young male White-backed Woodpecker had begun to grace the feeders. So, here I was, sat in my cabin on a sunny morning barely a few days into October, what would land before me? Joining the resident Marsh Tits, two Willow Tits, usually none too common, were already feeding, a Long-tailed Tit also making a brief appearance. As for the woodpeckers, I did not have long to wait, the first Great Spotted Woodpecker dropping down onto the peanuts about ten minutes after my arrival, a second moments after. Next came a female Middle Spotted Woodpecker, an individual that has been visiting for some weeks now. Pleasant enough, the standard fare of my feeders. An hour passed, in and out the two species came, feeding, occasionally harrying each other. A Black Woodpecker flopped past, 'Good', thought I, 'my regular wintering bird is back'. And then a 20 minute session of woodpecker madness! A Black Woodpecker flew in to feed on a rotten stump some way across the swamp - I presumed it would be the male of the previous week, but nope, it was a female, thus a second bird! And no sooner had I discovered that and in few the male, landing on the same tree and then engaging in display, the two birds peeping around the trunk at each other. Meanwhile, metres in front, both Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers arrived on the feeders together. Wishing to get a photograph of the Black Woodpeckers, I sneaked out onto my veranda. Click, click of my camera, then swoosh of wings, I glanced up and ...the male White-backed Woodpecker had just landed above the feeders a few metres distant. I swivelled to photograph this mighty bird, fearing it would quickly depart when it saw me, only to have it fly straight to the closest feeder, a mere two metres from my nose and too close for my lens to focus! Up to a branch he then shuffled, shoving off a Middle Spotted Woodpecker in the process, click click click, a few quick photographs, then back to the Black Woodpeckers still playing malarkey on the trunk over the water. 'Oo er, what's making that noise?', a whimpering call coming from behind my cabin, a poked my head around - one female Grey-headed Woodpecker, her first visit to the feeding station this autumn!! needed a little sit down, it is for moments like this that I bought and maintain my land, always a real pleasure. Only Lesser Spotted Woodpecker awaited, my full winter complement then in place! 9-11 October. Yodellers at the Feeders. Autumnal sun in control, frost and morning ice chilling the land. Up at the Labanoras feeders,

another day of enjoyment - one Black Woodpecker swooping past, a male Grey-headed Woodpecker joining the rich woodpecker mix, at one time sharing a trunk with both White-backed and Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Highlight of the day however, sending me running from my cabin, a musical overture echoing through the woodlands - skies alive, Common Cranes migrating over. Got to the open meadow and there they were, an impressive 47 soaring and doubling back, their cries one of the best sounds nature has to offer. Pairs and small groups frequent on my land, but flocks a rare treat, sat upon my raptor point and watched them go, quite likely my last Cranes of the year. With sun warm and not a breath of wind, still too a few insects out and about, the frosts not yet to catch them, a Brimstone and a Peacock, a Black Darter and an aeshna, won't be many more this year! Meanwhile, down in my Vilnius garden, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker has also established himself on the feeders there, a most welcome addition, he being the first regular bird since 2007. Also, plenty of Nuthatches and the usual mix of Tree Sparrows and Great Tits, etc. Further south again, despite frosts, Baltoji Voke also still full of birds - Great White Egrets numbering near 200, a handful of White-tailed Eagles flushing them on occasion, plus assorted waders including Snipe and Ruff and good numbers of wildfowl, Bean Geese amongst them. Passerines on the move, Bramblings in smart plumage, overhead flocks of Siskin and Chaffinch. 16 October. Lithuanian Bird Rally. By long tradition, as birds flee the country and temperatures begin to warn of the giddy lows ahead, a dozen and more teams of Lithuania's finest descend to celebrate the autumn's end with a madcap dash around the coastal regions trying to desperately scrap together as many species as possible, hoping for the odd summer bird lingering, searching out early visitors from the north. Joining the Lithuanians, a scatter of teams from further a field, this year's merry bunch including several Finns, a Bulgarian and four Poms, myself included. Let battle commence. An hour before dawn, a half hour before the rally kicked off, out a few stumbled from assorted accommodations, crunching onto a frost, shivering in the morning darkness. Off yonder, hoo hoo hoo, the haunting call of an Eagle Owl echoing out from alder forests, damp waterlogged affairs hugging tepid waters. Thirty minutes later, eight kilometres south at Ventes Ragas, a legendary migration hotspot, twenty teams clambered from cars, a few boots stomping in the cold. Bang, a firecracker launched into the night sky, the rally officially began. Ventes Ragas truly is the place to be at dawn - hundreds of thousands of birds passing over on the best of days, success on the rally absolutely demanding a hour or two here, a careful ear tuned to the skies above, eyes trained on the abundant flocks moving through the cover. With the race now underway, most teams vanished into the gloom, wandering off to await the birds at favoured spots towards the tip on the small headland. One team however returned to their car, slipping away in the darkness ...'hmm', thought I, 'not a bad idea'. There was still a good thirty minutes before dawn would reveal more the occasional alarming Blackbird, so I had plenty of time to play with. Team mate and I jumped back into our car, zooming back to Kintai where we had slept - the prize we sought was the Eagle Owl so vocal just a little earlier. A light shower falling onto iced roads left the track an ice rink, also accounting for many road accidents we later encountered, but would the rain shut the owl up? Almost so! Fortunately, after a good few moments, the owl decided to give its final hoots of the night, most appreciated, species number one! Back to Ventes Ragas, a shadowy ghost rising in the darkness turned out to be a Grey Heron, Robins and Blackbirds began to appear on the road, a few slight slips on icy corners slowed me down a little. Arrived back at Ventes, walked out to the point, occasional nods to groups scattered about. Dawn came ...and went. Where were the mass movements? In skies above, now clear of cloud and promising a most glorious sunny day, birds were certainly on the move, but it was evident this was not going to be a classic migration day. Still the species were there - assorted thrushes and flocks of finches quickly notched up, Brambling, Serin, Hawfinch and Crossbill amongst the early rewards. Marsh and Willow Tits common enough, a trickle of Long-tailed Tits also moving through, plus the expected Sparrowhawks harassing the flocks of Chaffinches and Siskin passing over. Whooper Swans in melody winged over, a migrant Middle Spotted Woodpecker made several half-hearted attempts to conjure up the courage to fly out over the water crossing ahead, finally giving up and ditching into a Rowan tree. Overall however, birds were few in number I thought, already I was not expecting a big species count this year - 100 species would be a challenge. 9.00 a.m., most teams had already left Ventes Ragas, we had lingered, dragging out a Chiffchaff, a Dunnock and a Kingfisher, the latter always a valuable rally bird! With total somewhere around 45 species, it was time to again return to Kintai, this time focussing on the rich fish pools and adjacent meadows. White-tailed Eagle capital of the Baltics, a good autumn can see 50 or so congregating, so it was no surprise to soon see their hulks lumbering across skies, gulls and waders parting in their wake. Linnets and Yellowhammers, Reed Buntings and Tree Sparrows, all added species. At the fish pools themselves, I found the gates locked, so abandoned the car to walk - time consuming and meaning I didn't visit many of the pools, a move that cost me several species. Really should have paid more attention the evening before - access was possible by car via another route, but I hadn't been listening, so didn't know! Anyhow, one pool in particular did its business - semi-drained and full of birds, many additions to the day's list added in just a few minutes. Amongst hundreds of Lapwing and Dunlins, plenty of other waders including Little Stint, Ringed Plover, Greenshank and both Grey and Golden Plover. Also, plenty of Grey Herons, a bunch of Great White Egrets and gulls of assorted type. Tally for the day was now over 65, neighbouring meadows adding Skylark, Meadow Pipits and Greylag Goose (but not unfortunately White-fronted and Barnacle Geese which I was later to hear were grazing in a gully just beyond!). With mid-morning pushing, it was time to rally north, relocating to Palanga some 70 km to the north. Famed for its winter Steller's Eider, this seaside resort town and its strategic pier should, if all went to plan, afford me a few nice marine species, perhaps a diver or two, maybe even an auk, the latter not exactly common in the Baltic. With the sea a millpond and the day now blessed by super autumnal sun, our hour on the pier was a pleasure indeed - even if somewhat slow birdwise. Flocks of both Common and Velvet Scoters frequently skimmed the waters close to the horizon, many mere shimmering dots, but closer at hand several Great Crested Grebes, a lone Long-tailed Duck and, even closer, sat on rocks, one female Common Eider. No divers however, nor auks, and certainly not a Steller's Eider, this latter typically arriving late in November. Surprise of the day however was a blob that popped up right alongside a Common Gull - a rare sight indeed in Lithuania, it was a Grey Seal! Only the second I have ever seen in Lithuanian waters, this impressive beastie would not help me in the bird rally! I was

however, climbing to about 80 species, added extras also including things like Great Spotted Woodpecker in Palanga town. After a stop in a petrol station for take-away coffee, we then decided to make a second seaside stop a few kilometres further up the coast - a good move, adding both Red-breasted Merganser and Red-throated Diver, along with several Little Gulls and, flying down the coast, Bean Goose. One or two extra species in the neighbouring pine forest, then a wasted twenty minutes having a friendly discussion with the local constabulary, I really should have paid heed to a little red sign with a horizontal white stripe! Fifty litas lighter in the pocket, it was then a drive of 80 km to the far south of the coastal region, the excellent Nemunas Delta - a complex of flood meadow, wet woodland, fish pool and lagoon. Summer home to exotics such as Aquatic Warbler and Great Snipe, not to forget huge populations of Corncrake and assorted waders, the delta is also of international significance for its staging flocks of waterfowl, particularly geese and swans. For the purposes of the rally however, it was the wet woodlands that I sought, hopefully producing a few key passerines, and thereafter to the Rusne fish pools, several ducks still on the 'needed' list. A bit of luck en route with a Black Woodpecker flying over, then immediate success in the woodlands - Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Redpoll nicely complemented by a male Hen Harrier floating over adjacent meadows, a Moorhen added shortly after in a canal. Tally now stood at 88, reaching the 100 species milestone was now going to be a struggle. I was still missing many relatively common species, birds such as Great Grey Shrike, Collared Dove, Mistle Thrush and White-fronted Goose, plus an assortment of ducks. My next port of call, Rusne fish pools should help plug a few gaps ...and indeed it did. Smew and Bewick's Swans aplenty, also Pintails and Gadwall, Goosanders and Shoveler, a lone Little Grebe - all carrying us ever higher, a splendid 97 little ticks on our list. Huge numbers of Cormorants present too, plus Great White Egrets and White-tailed Eagle. With just an hour or so before the deadline, the rally's end, we decided to head out across the polders - a good chance of White-fronted Goose, a reasonable likelihood of Grey Partridge. In the event, saw neither - a flock of distant geese flying into the sun being the closest shave. However, what we did see rather dwarfed them all, rounding a corner, a pipit landed on rank marsh just adjacent, ...a quick scope revealing it as a major Lithuanian rarity, a Water Pipit! Feeding along the edge of water channel, this winter plumage bird served admirably as bird number 98. Further along, an observation tower offers a panorama over vast reedbeds, home to Bitterns and Marsh Harriers and all number of reed-dwellers. Maybe we could eek out our list a degree or two ...nope, no Bittern played ball, Marsh Harriers all seem to have departed already and the last hope, Bearded Tit, refused to ping at all! Refused to ping that is till we were back in the car ...we'd driven barely 50 metres and the reeds resounded to 'ping ping ping'. An abrupt stop and there they were, Bearded Tits most smart, a flock of about 18. Popping right out on reeds immediately adjacent, these were most enjoyable. It was now 5.45 p.m., the rally would close at Kintai at 6.30 p.m. we had to get a move on. With a few futile stops en route revealing nothing new, we decided our finale would be a brief stop at Minge, our hope still to connect with White-fronted Goose. Tick, tick, tick, the clock was not in our favour, we found no geese and with just six minutes to spare, we cut and ran. Moments later, a cloud of dust as we hit the brakes ...6.27 p.m., Great Grey Shrike on wires, species number 100. Rally end! As evening merriments proceeded and results filtered in, our hundred species proved insufficient - the crown would not be heading our way this year, several teams getting five to eight species more. We did however find the rarest bird of the day, the Water Pipit turning out to be the fourth record for the country. Game over. 23-24 October. Birdless Backache. Pottering about on the local patch - a few Smew about, but access barred to the fish pools unfortunately. First time in ten years this has ever happened, I can only imagine they were permitting shooting and didn't wish birdwatchers to see what was being shot. Bad development! Otherwise the weekend was spent trying to destroy my back, transplanting trees and shrubs, carting a half ton of rocks across my Vilnius garden. Middle Spotted Woodpecker still on the feeders, Tree Sparrows by the bucketload, a Hawfinch over. 25 October. Winter Wonders. The feeding station in its glories, adjacent peanut feeders sporting three in a row - one stonking White-backed Woodpecker, one Middle Spotted Woodpecker and one Great Spotted Woodpecker. Also ever-growing numbers of Marsh and Willow Tits, a bumper year indeed for these, along with busy Nuthatches, the latter most welcome after their sudden departure the winter before. Even better, a rare bird in Lithuania, one dainty Lesser Redpoll dropped in for a visit, drinking in the pool beneath the feeders. Back in Vilnius, more winter wonderland - the arrival of Waxwings, a splendid flock of 220 descending to gobble berries roadside. With masses reported in southern Finland, hopefully the forerunners of many more to come. Roll on the winter.