

November 2010. Feeder Days.

Contributed by Jos
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Excellent month at Labanoras, the feeding station a buzz of action - Black Woodpeckers being attacked by a Sparrowhawk, a Pygmy Owl spooking the smaller birds, increasing numbers of White-backed Woodpeckers, plus two Grey-headed Woodpeckers, a female Goshawk and a male Hen Harrier nearby. Elsewhere, Smew, Hen Harriers and Bewick's Swans, plus occasional flocks of Waxwings and an inland Pomarine Skua - all in all, quite a good month.

1-2 November. Black Magic. Fantastic birding at the feeders of late, chock-a-block with woodpeckers, Marsh and Willow Tits by the bucketload, a Lesser Redpoll adding a flavour of the rare. However, for simple captivity, the first days of November were right up there with the best. After tripping over potholes in my turf, a by-product of over-eager Wild Boar, and looking with some disdain at another tree felled by a Beaver, into my cabin I went, a session of gazing out of the window to follow. All hunky-dory, Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and the other regulars appearing on cue, the woodpecker taking pride of place on the very closest of the feeders, a metre or so from the window. Beyond the cabin, dotting the swamplands that stretch out, assorted alders and birches in varying states of decay, some still clinging to life, others long since succumbed to waterlogging borne of beaver activities. Into this mosaic of habitat, my woodpeckers flock, a healthy breeding population, an even better congregation in winter. And this winter is already shaping up to be a classic, most of the major species as of now back in place, the White-backed Woodpecker on the feeders, a pair of Black Woodpeckers resident in their winter territory. Each year the Black Woodpeckers seem to seek out a favoured patch of alders to demolish, returning day after day to the same trees, huge piles of woodchip accumulating as the trunks are hollowed and finally crash to the ground. And for this year's action, I am most fortunate, their patch of choice is right in front of the cabin, nearby trees sporting fine scars from their action. So to my day, a moderately warm affair, slightly misty, none too bright. The Middle Spotted Woodpecker tapped away on the feeder, a second dropping in for the cuisine on offer. All too soon, in flopped a Black Woodpecker, onto a trunk 40 metres out, a cavernous hollow being hammered out, the bird engrossed in his endeavours. What followed next was a spectacle to watch, a drama of hawk seeking dinner, its overly optimistic sights set on the Black Woodpecker, a bird bigger than the Sparrowhawk itself! Attack one, a sudden assault launched from a maze of trunks beyond, the Sparrowhawk coming in fast and low, swinging up at the last moment, almost knocking the woodpecker off its trunk, more by surprise than any potential for physical might. Quickly Señor Woodpecker regained his poise, standing ground to the hawk, the latter trying his luck on a return swoop ...the woodpecker by now prepared and hardly startled, merely edging round to face the incoming bird. With the element of surprise gone, I would have imagined the Sparrowhawk might have accepted this one lunchbox too large ...but no, back and back the hawk struck, launching repeated attacks every so often, the battle of wits lasting a good hour, one Black Woodpecker slowly becoming less and less fussed by the attacks, barely bothering to shuffle out of the way one Sparrowhawk showing incredible persistence. As the hour reached its end, with the Sparrowhawk having not bothered any of the numerous Great Tits and Nuthatches sneaking in to feed nor harried the regular White-backed Woodpecker as he arrived to swing from his favourite feeder, suddenly he must have thought he was seeing double, then triple! Or at least I did - on the trunks in front, not one Black Woodpecker, but three! Two males and a female, an excellent tally for my forest and obviously a cause of confusion for the Sparrowhawk, this little raptor last seen swooping around chasing whichever appeared closest! As Sparrowhawk departed and calm returned, the feeders began to bulge, plenty of birds flocking in, Great Spotted Woodpeckers joining the melee, a male Grey-headed Woodpecker edging in. A fine day by any standards. Elsewhere, in a mini run round the country, early winter picking - a male Hen Harrier, a few Smew, 13 Bewick's Swans, seven Scaup, an amazing flock of 2180 Golden Plovers and estimated 3500 Lapwing, the latter counts pretty high by east Lithuanian standards. All in all, especially given that 1st November is 'Day of the Dead' in Lithuania, a quite good start to the month - nothing dead about the birding! 7 November. Top Day at the Feeders. A male Hen Harrier quartering the meadows on route, an ever-increasing number of Marsh and Willow Tits on arrival. Had pondered not taking my camera today, more the fool I would have been ...a special guest was to rudely gate-crash my feeding station today! All started well, under a weak autumnal sunshine, I was sitting outside with Willow Tits almost so tame I could brush them off the feeders when in came my first woodpecker of the day - a Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Down the trunk she shallied, hopped onto the feeder, started feeding most content. Off yonder, the swamplands echoed, yodelling Black Woodpeckers calling to each other, edging up a decaying tree. Off they flew. Over to the right, much consternation amongst the neighbourhood Nuthatches, I could only suppose the week before's Sparrowhawk still lurked nearby. And then arrived White-backed Woodpeckers, two at the feeders together, a first for this winter. An hour passed, Jays in and out, an occasional woodpecker, then an almighty racket - one female Goshawk, a large immature, hurtling through the tops of forest, two Ravens in hot pursuit. Nice, not so frequently I see them on my land. A while more passed, all strangely quiet - one or two Great Tits at the feeders, a few birds alarming some way off. After a while, with nothing happening at the feeders, I decided to have a look at the latest Beaver damage, saplings downed just behind my cabin. Busy cursing the Beavers, wishing they went somewhere else, when I became aware of quite a fuss amongst the birds - Nuthatches and Great Tits now very intense in their desire to see something off. I gazed up. And then I saw it, a right little corker, one Pygmy Owl perched atop a stump glaring down at my feeders. Peered to the left, then right, then swooped a few trees further, landing right by the path. Along I went, stunning views the reward, the Pygmy Owl totally unconcerned by an observer alongside. Most splendid, the fourth ever at my feeding station - the previous birds all appearing during February or March around the feeders. No reason this bird should not hang around all winter, hopefully more sightings to follow in the next months. 8-12 November. More days pass, grey skies and rain coming to dominate.

Little birding, a few Great White Egrets linger at Baltoji Voke, the usual White-tailed Eagles too. A complete lack of Waxwings in the streets of Vilnius, westward they seemed to have gone, few venturing this way. Weekend forecast, rain showers and cold, no big expectations. 14 November. More Woodpeckers. Barely mid-November, yet already it is turning into a classic winter at the feeders. Temperature 10 C, an unseasonably mild day at Labanoras, but still many a bird about - at least four different Great Spotted Woodpeckers in and out with regularity, plus the regular Black Woodpeckers and a couple of Middle Spotted too. Stars of the day however, White-backed Woodpeckers, male and female visting together and the arrival of a female Grey-headed Woodpecker, only the second time this winter she has actually come to the feeders. Also a late Chaffinch, plus Marsh and Willow Tits in ever higher numbers and Long-tailed Tits hurrying through. Regrettably, no sign of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker - this abundant bird from winters past yet to appear this year - but approxiamte totals of visiting woodpeckers now stands at:

- Black Woodpecker - two males, one female.
- Grey-headed Woodpecker - one male, one female.
- White-backed Woodpecker - one male, one female.
- Great Spotted Woodpecker - approx. six individuals.
- Middle Spotted Woodpecker - two or three individuals.

Trees nibbled, turf rooted, stumps demoihsed, assorted critters continue their assault - guilty parties Beaver, Wild Boar and Black Woodpecker respectively. 20-21 November. Greyness Creeping. Those yuk November days, a dank gloom prevailing, drizzle and mist hanging in dripping forests, a perpetual twilight adding effect. On the forecast, snow by midweek, temperatures heading towards minus eight, bring it on, winter now most welcome. In these days most unagreeable, saw absolutely nothing on a night of exploration in deep forests, mist reducing visibility, eye shine an immediate casualty. Next day, in weather equally unappealing, a visit to Baltoji Voke notched up a few birds of note - in addition to the usual White-tailed Eagles and Great White Egrets, a lone Pomarine Skua lingered on, harrying the gulls, dive-bombing and stealing a fish from one hapless victim. A rare bird in Lithuania, this was though my second at this inland destination - a similar late autumn bird many years back. Subtle shades, outlandish crests, a warm trilling, upon wires did they sit, 45 Waxwings attempting to brighten a dull day. None too abundant this season, these were just my second flock of the winter. Hopefully not the last - snow and ice on the forecast, perhaps the push to bring birds south. 24-28 November. Whoa, Here Comes the Snow. Vilnius garden transforming. From a picture devoid of colour, the dark skeletal limbs and lifeless flowerbeds the left-overs of a summer long gone, to instead a land white and vibrant. Birds flocking in at the feeders, Tree Sparrows in their dozens, a Sparrowhawk buzzing, woodpeckers busy and yet more Waxwings - a flock of about 70 on the 24th, another eight on the 25th, winter is about to hit in force. By the 26th, temperatures were dropping fast, daytime highs of minus twelve, a chilling wind to boot. Fantastic selections at the feeders, a Sparrowhawk daily in the Vilnius garden, the Pygmy Owl again hunting visitors to the Labanoras feeders. A right chilly day on the 28th, not helped by me forgetting the keys to my cabin - half froze to death huddled on the veranda, but plenty of rewards - oodles of Willow Tits now, almost outnumbering the Marsh Tits, plus no shortage of woodpeckers, the male White-backed Woodpecker performing particularly well.