

January 2011. Winter Travels.

Contributed by Jos

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January is usually a quiet month for me, rich pickings at the feeders, but little else of note. Not so this year - assisted by a few planes, the month saw such goodies as Great Spotted Eagles and Desert Finches alongside the Gulf of Aqaba, flocks of Red-throated Pipits and assorted wheatears in the deserts of Rum and, as a contrast, White-backed Woodpeckers and an asiatica Nuthatch in the snowy wilds of Lithuania, along with impressive flocks of many hundred Red Kites in Wales and a vagrant Lesser Scaup in England.

1 January. Year Listing, the Middle East.TBC 2-4 January. Back to Reality, Snow in Lithuania.New Year's Day, sunset, a Mourning Wheatear to a glorious sky of reds, a hazy desert vanishing into darkness. Sunrise on 2nd January, a Hooded Crow, heavy grey skies, a mountain of snow!An overnight drive of 300 km and a flight of six hours, I was back in the snowy wilds of Lithuania. Dumped my warm weather gear, clambered into multiple layers and headed off into the snow, straight to Lananoras to check my feeders and see who was home. What a battle to get there, blizzards on the previous day had left roads near blocked and absolutely no hope of me driving across my land. Waded the last kilometre and a half though snow almost up to my waist on occasion, how I missed my sandals and tee-shirt of the day before!!!Topped up the feeders, collapsed into my cabin - wouldn't be seeing too many species on this day, I think the final total barely scrapped ten - one Buzzard overhead, the regular White-backed and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers on the feeders, a bevy of titmice to add a splurge of activity. Knackered from a night of travel and the long stagger through the deep snow, I did not bother with exploration of the forestlands - Black Woodpeckers no doubt still there, hopefully the Pygmy Owl somewhere too. Time will tell.Over the next days, the weather distinctively hit and miss, out to my garden I also ventured, all the favorites still in place - Crested Tit on the feeders, an abundance of Tree Sparrows and chums. However, it was for the kitchen visitors that I was really impressed - from the lone Great Tit at the winter's beginning, more and more seemed to be learning the trick! Total tally of birds actually inside my kitchen now stood at six Great Tits, one Blue Tit, one Nuthatch and, almost in, one Tree Sparrow sat on the doorstep pondering the next move! 7-9 January. Britain, Quaint Lands.Day One.Having not flown for all of five days and eager to bring my 2011 carbon dioxide emissions up to a respectable level, I decided it was time for another short foray overseas. To the west of Lithuania lies Great Britain, a green and pleasant land full of birds. And so it was, battling through a raging blizzard, I left work on the Friday afternoon and trusted myself into the welcoming arms of Ryan Air, my flight arriving south of London just in time to plonk me on the M25 simultaneously with an enormous rain storm, a resultant multi-car pile-up promptly closing all but one lane of the motorway, thus leaving me in a nice traffic jam. Welcome to Blighty. Day Two.As a young whippersnapper based in Gwent way back in the 1980s, in an era before the reintroductions elsewhere in the UK, it was my annual pleasure to take a trip up to the magical mountains of mid-Wales, land of the Red Kite, still then a rare and endangered bird. A couple of Peregrines, a few Buzzards, a few Red Kites if lucky, my day would be made. Ah nostalgia. As years went by, slowly the number of kites increased, trips notching up a dozen, then even twenty. A farmer, most enlightened, began a feeding operation - 2 p.m. every afternoon, choice meat dished out, local corvids no doubt rejoicing. The place was Gilgrin Farm, a few kilometres from Rhayader. Today the place needs little introduction, from those early days, the spectacle has simply eclipsed anything that could have been imagined. A half dozen Red Kites in the first year, up to 20 or so soon after, but in the intervening years, I have watched from afar as the news trickled out, the kite numbers reaching stratospheric proportions - supposedly many hundreds of birds now in regular attendance. And to think, in my days, there were just 20 to 30 pairs in the entire country! Time for reacquaintance. A day trip in glorious landscapes, touring first the picturesque Elan Valley - the first Red Kites already hugging the horizons, quartering the hillsides and floating above stunted oak woodlands. Quite unexpected, the weather held fine, bright sun knocking aside a few heavy clouds. Bar the kites, few other birds of note - the reservoirs largely frozen, the woodlands near silent. Ravens perched upon the sheep, a few Common Buzzards soared as the day went on. 1 p.m. approached, there was only one place to be - Gilgrin Farm. And what an amazing spectacle, the skies were already absolutely full of Red Kites, swirling flocks mewling above, dozens more in treetops in all directions. A definite wow factor in play! Had a quick talk with the farmer, the numbers were even greater than I had expected - an incredible 600 had been visiting during the snows of the previous weeks, an estimated 500 still dropping in daily for the 2 p.m. hand outs. And two leucistic birds two.Eyes a goggle, I wandered down to the hides - Red Kites and Common Buzzards already waiting. Time ticked by, the flocks grew ever larger, the purr of a tractor appeared from behind, food on its way. And with the growing rumble of the engine, a frenzy amongst the kites, the sky almost darkening as the flocks pressed in. Into the field came the tractor, its bucket totally full of chopped meat. Round the meadow he cast the offerings, Red Kites now going berserk, dive bombing and snatching morsels. The tractor departed, and thereafter unfolded one of the great bird events of Europe - an incredible hour of activity, hundreds of Red Kites in non-stop action, swooping to grab what they could, 30 or so Common Buzzards also lounging about, with Rooks, Ravens, Jackdaws and Carrion Crows not knowing when to duck and when to stuff their faces! Even one Grey Heron strutting in to take his fill. And there amongst them, the two leucistic kites - one near pure white, a right eyesore, the other more piebald, the first time I have seen such. Very nice birds they were.The hour passed, the intensity of action slackened, so too did the sun vanish behind a cloud. A memorable afternoon indeed, time to depart, still Red Kites abundant above. Day Three.Something different. A quick look at the feeders in my mother's garden, one male Blackcap on the apples, then off to Slimbridge - a twitch in action, again nostalgia at work. Back in those halcyon days, when this Gwent lad would pop up to the Welsh mountains in search of elusive kites, the evil of twitching had also taken hold, me criss-crossing the country in search of the rare and new. One such bird had been in March 1987, travelling up to the 'wilds' of Staffordshire to see the first ever Lesser Scaup to touchdown in the UK. Common as muck now, a mere 150 or so seen in the years since! However, for me, this would be my second in Europe, and Slimbridge is a mighty fine place,

so not much difficulty in deciding to pay a visit. My memories of the first Lesser Scaup were of a relatively distant blob that needed much scrutiny. Slimbridge provides its birds in rather more agreeable conditions! Sat in the nice heated hide, even sporting a carpet, out the window I gazed, a couple of hundred Bewick's Swans trumpeting and squabbling, various geese honking and ducks aplenty - Pintail, Shelduck, Gadwall, Pochards, Tufted Ducks, hundreds and hundreds of them, not hazy things off in the distance, but literally paddling just the other side of the glass! Hardly even needed binoculars. And there, almost served on a plate, floating between the two nearest islands, the Lesser Scaup, nicely lined up with two Greater Scaup and plenty of Tufted Ducks. Ah twitching is so much easier now! And with that, I then had the rest of the morning to explore Slimbridge, the Severn flats bustling with flocks of Wigeon many thousands strong, plus occasional flocks of White-fronted Geese and the usual feral Barnacle and Canada Geese. Snow and ice now a thing of the past, so too was one meadow a carpet of waders - large numbers of Dunlin and Lapwing concealing a few added extras, Curlews and a Ruff or starters. A good morning, but regrettably it had to come to an end at midday, I had a flight to catch at 2.30 p.m., the Ryan special from Bristol back to Lithuania. Unfortunately, I didn't catch it! But that is another story!!! 11-18 January. Mild Days. Mildness in Lithuania, quite unseasonal, temperatures hovering either side of zero - snow one day, light rain the next - driving conditions a nightmare, streams of water flowing across ice atop snow, fun stuff. Most of the activity on the bird front came from a few precious hours watching stuff in the garden - all the usuals, Crested Tit still active, oodles of Tree Sparrows, a lone Blackbird (not an abundant species in wintertime Lithuania). Did manage a few forays further afield - the warm water outflows at Electrenai producing little above a heap of Goosanders, a half dozen Grey Herons and assorted winter passerines - Fieldfares, Bullfinches and the like, but the feeders at Labanoras lived up to their usual standards. Despite the warmer conditions, still plenty of birds - Blue Tits considerably up in numbers, both White-backed and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers busy on the feeders, a pair of Black Woodpeckers as usual in the alder woods, demolishing stumps. 22 January. Oops! Snow all day, temperatures below freezing again, set to drop more ...and I took a plunge in the water, the ice on my forest lake giving way as I pursued the tapping of a woodpecker! Brr, rather chilly indeed, fortunately the ice not totally caving in and thus dunking me only to my knees! Good birding regardless - a female White-backed woodpecker rejoining the regular male at the feeders, plus the pair of Black Woodpeckers as usual and, accounting for all the birds suddenly scurrying for cover, a Great Grey Shrike coming to hunt at the feeders. Not a common sight at the feeders, but by no means the first time these shrikes have visited - in past years I have seen them knock Great Tits from the feeders and take a Blue Tit in flight! Goshawk, Sparrowhawk, Pygmy Owl and Great Grey Shrike, not a bad haul of predators at the feeding station so far this winter! 23-27 January. Visitors from the East. Constant snow for days on end, an abundance of tracks around my various feeders - Elk, Roe Deer, Red Deer, Red Fox and Raccoon Dog, plus some smaller pads I assume to be a martin. Interesting visitors, a clear europaea Nuthatch appearing at Labanoras, plus soemmerringii Jackdaw in Vilnius city. Elsewhere, big numbers of Goldeneye on the river at Kaunas, a total in excess of 2500 in the immediate area of the hydro-electric plant, plus 11 Whooper Swans, a single White-fronted Goose, one Scaup and the regular gang of Mute Swans awaiting hand-outs. By the 27th, with temperatures dropping fast, the garden was the best place to be - Yellowhammers appearing amongst the Tree Sparrows, the regular Crested Tit now joined by a second and, feeding on the few berries left, three Fieldfares. Top bird though, indeed bird of the month at the feeders, a special guest - small and quaint, an asiatica Nuthatch mingling with the usual intergrade ceasia Nuthatches. A rarity in Lithuania, this was a most welcome newcomer to the garden.