

February 2011. Feeder Month.

Contributed by Jos
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Deep winter, temperatures hitting minus 25 from mid-month onwards. Feeder highs - Grey-headed Woodpecker joining the medley, several Middle Spots also and two White-backed Woodpeckers as regular as ever. Top birds of the month however, an Eagle Owl in Labanoras forest, a first record for my land, and Steller's Eiders on an adventure-packed weekend north.

1-2 February. As one month finished, so started the next in a similar vein - two Crested Tits still in the Vilnius garden, White-backed and Black Woodpeckers still active at the Labanoras feeders. Temperatures sitting at a mild minus one or two. River in the city largely ice-bound, a few Goosander and Goldeneye in the free patches. 5-6 February. Rain and Shine, out pops an Eagle Owl. Most out of character for February, a season that should see temperatures nearer minus 20, it was a weekend of temperatures above zero, the 5th blighted by snow rapidly turning to rain, the next a much brighter affair, sunny and pleasant. And what a cast of stars at Labanoras - on the feeders, the regular White-backed Woodpecker and allies were joined by a few additions - one new male Middle Spotted Woodpecker, the return of a Grey-headed Woodpecker, a female popping in twice to sample delights on offer, plus the first Willow Tit since the mini-invasion of early winter. All looking good for the mid-winter 'high season'. Taking my usual stroll across the frozen forest lake, in search of the Black Woodpeckers and possible Pygmy Owl, led to two surprises - one rather cold, one rather pleasant! The first was my second dip through the ice in the space of a month, plunging my legs into the icy cold waters beneath, brrr! Having clambered out, back to my cabin I trotted, my one foot in particular feeling very cold. Through the forest, a hulk on the move, reminiscent of a Lancaster bomber on a slow mission through the lower canopy. T'was an Eagle Owl, most certainly I had flushed it, and a quite remarkable record, not only the first I have seen on my land, but first in this area. Species number 149 for my land. 10-16 February. Winter Chill. Temperatures on the down, heading to minus 22 and below, true winter at last! Birding at the feeders remains excellent, the Labanoras tally now including six Great Spotted Woodpeckers, three Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and the regular male White-backed Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker lingering in the swamps beyond. For the second week in a row, a Treecreeper seems to be favouring the feeding area, perhaps attracted by fallen titbits. Three Red Foxes and a herd of five Roe Deer added extras. As temperatures plunged ever lower, comings and goings in the Vilnius garden got better and better - still the two Crested Tits, but less usual were the visiting Yellowhammers, six now joining the Tree Sparrows. 19-21 February. Four Go Bonkers in the Sub-Arctic! Day One. Steller's Eiders bobbing about on the waves, vast rafts of other seaduck, maybe an owl or two, the promise of a winter trip to the Baltics. And so it was, three intrepid UK birders landed in Lithuania, licking their lips, all prepared for their first-ever venture in the Baltic states. 'Is it Baltic in your bathroom?' By chance, our birder buddies had skillfully timed their trip to coincide with some of the coldest days of the winter. Regardless, onward with the trip - destination one, in a nice plush rental car, lay some 700 km to the north, a remote peninsula on the Estonian island of Saaremaa. Departed Vilnius 1 a.m., temperature a mild minus 16 C. In-car thermometer did a fine job of plotting the fall, minus 18 in northern Lithuania, minus 20 by Riga, minus 22 at the Estonian border, and so it continued to fall - a bone-chilling minus 26 by the time we reached Virtsu, the small port to cross the sea to Saaremaa. Out we all stumbled, shock number one for the gang the temperature, exposed fingers and noses immediately none too happy. Shock number two, the absence of any sea - instead, a vast ice sheet as far as the eye could see, a Roe Deer plodding its way across where in a milder year a seal or diver might bob! Our ferry doubled as an ice-breaker, crashing through its regular route, ice slabs half a metre thick. Oo er, I cautioned, if conditions were the same on the west coast, our quest for Steller's Eider was going to be a little fanciful! Icebound roads and sparkling snowfields, across to the west of the island we went, hoping the seas might still be ice-free. Stop one, a small port where I had encountered huge flocks of Common and Velvet Scoters a year earlier ...oh eeks, mountainous ridges of ice from horizon to horizon, three ships locked in ice and about as much chance of seeing a seaduck as encountering a pixie in your back garden! I no longer thought there was likelihood to merely dip on Steller's Eider, but rather to dip on the entire sea! A handful of kilometres further, the car now abandoned due to drifting snow leaving the road unpassable, we began to walk, the last chance of open water being the head of the Undva Peninsula. We arrived upon the beach, two stately White-tailed Eagles perched on ice, a third flying south a little later. And the sight that greeted us could equally have been at the north end of Spitsbergen - contortions of ice, the sea yet again a frozen icescape. Temperatures were on the rise, now only minus 20, we decided to plod on - ahead a small patch of pure water appeared in the offering. And indeed it was, a two-hundred metre patch of ice-free water between the ice blocks - and upon it our first waterbirds, three Goldeneyes and a Goosander, magic. Hope renewed, we scanned the horizon, a seawatch to spot patches of sea! In distant 'heat haze', a blur of gulls appeared to suggest the possibility of water further along. Arctic explorers, forward march. Two kilometres along a windswept beach, ice flows to one side, snow drifts the other, and we arrived at the top of the peninsula. And what a spectacular sight befell our eyes - under a dazzling blue sky and stunning landscapes all around, a chunk of open sea, a few hundred metres wide at best ...and there bobbing on the water, birds galore. Hundreds of Mute Swans, hundreds of Goldeneyes and, almost the first birds I clapped my eyes on, a pod of Steller's Eiders swinging in to drop down right in the middle, most splendid. All thoughts of the cold evaporated with a bird spectacle in front - truly birding at its best, a combination of species, landscape, atmosphere and adventure. To our right, several White-tailed Eagles occupied an ice peak, but the true delight was scanning the waters - aside the numerous Goldeneyes and swans, and the obvious highlight in the form of a pack of synchronised swimmers, a.k.a. Steller's Eiders, the next hour was just good birds non-stop ...flocks of Smew, occasional Velvet Scoters and Common Eiders, a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers, assorted gulls and more. Shattering the peace, White-tailed Eagles flying low to spook birds into the air, swirls of Goldeneye, parties of Long-tailed Duck. A close fly-by of the Steller's Eiders, males in resplendent buffy orange. All good stuff.

All feeling rather chuffed, time for the long trudge back to the car, a surprise en route back - one Black Guillemot on the smaller water patch we had passed earlier, quite a good bird for these parts.

Back at the car, coffee and biscuits, talk of the next destination, perhaps check out some local woods. Slithered off down the road, an icy snow-packed track through the forest. Then suddenly an unexpected 90 degree turn ...oh heck, there was no way the car was going to make that corner, and even less chance of it stopping on the ice below. A surreal slide, time to brace, then a loud thud as we hit the snow bank and a crunch as we rose to perch atop. Oops, we were now looking at the sky! Into reverse, back our car wobbled, bouncing back to the track ...unfortunately not the entire car, the snow littered with a shattered bumper and fragments of glass and metal. Bugger it, we had knackered the car!

All clambering out, nobody injured, we admired the damage, none too pretty. Still the engine worked however and, despite the radiator appearing to be in two parts, not a drop of fluid seemed to be leaking. Tied a few bits together, twisted some metal back into place, stopped to watch a White-tailed Eagle fly over, then limped the car onward, hoping to reach Kuressaare before it gonked out. A most beautiful flock of Waxwings had us stop a little further, 35 birds feeding on juniper berries, glorious.

And then the car began to complain, driver panel warning lights flashing a problem with fuel injection just as clouds of black exhaust spluttered out the rear. Severe lack of engine power, 40 km we egged the car on, finally making our destination. Into a hotel for the night, a few phone calls to the rental company. All sorted, a new car would be delivered next morning, all we had to do was make it back to the ferry! Day Two. Bar a loud bang as the remainder of the bumper disintegrated, we managed to get the car back to the ferry without significant event. One Great Grey Shrike en route. And there at the terminal, another car waiting for us...only one problem, after a trip of several hours atop a truck in temperatures of minus 25, the darn thing would not start! Half an hour later, having been towed back and fro in an ultimately successful attempt to start the contraption, all was set - we abandoned our old car, now spewing oil across the front wheels, and headed off to the wilds of the Estonian interior. A short stop in Parnu police station to try to get documents relating to the previous day's crash, then to Soorva for the afternoon. An excellent area, surely worthy of longer exploration, the extensive forests of Soorva boast quite a number of gems, cracking mammals and birds alike. A winter afternoon is not perhaps the best time to sample the national park however - stark and beautiful most certainly, buzzing with birds definitely not. In many hours of walking, umpteen animal tracks criss-crossed the area, everything from elk to Hazel Grouse, but the species total of critters spotted was rather low - one very bushy Red Fox, one cracking White-backed Woodpecker mashing a rotten stump, one Lesser Spotted Woodpecker tapping away on an old spruce. Otherwise, a few Willow Tits, a Common Buzzard here and there, plenty of nice snow scapes. Dusk was approaching, a drive to find mammals proved spectacularly unproductive, then we discovered the latest mishap to liven up our trip ...the new car had no low-beam headlights!!! Ahead lay a 600 km drive across three countries, the challenge now being how to drive through the night without either crashing due to no lights or otherwise totally narking off every driver in the Baltic states. A bit of carefully placed sticky tape and the improvisation was in place, specially designed lights - we could see, yet no dazzling of oncoming drivers. I thought our light job was a pretty plush thing ...pity the Latvian policeman didn't, we picked up a 40 euro fine for having an unroadworthy vehicle! Ah well, a crash in Estonia, a traffic infringement in Latvia, I wonder if we could achieve a Baltic hat trick by getting up to some misadventure in Lithuania. Over the border we went... Day Three. After a midnight arrival in Lithuania, the third day of this Baltic challenge saw us popping up to my land, woodpeckers very much of the desired menu. Another day of sparkling blue skies and temperatures touching minus 22 C, classic winter and perfect conditions for a good day at my feeders. With me needing to be back in Vilnius for mid-afternoon, it was decided to take two cars, the intrepid three in their rental, me in mine. On my land, overnight snow had already frozen to a firm crust, the conditions having allowed us to drive a little closer than in days of late. Loaded up the sledge with birdfood, trudged the kilometre or so to the feeders, Ravens overhead, a Black Woodpecker zipping off as we approached, Marsh Tits and Great Tits churring as we sat upon my veranda. Intriguingly, clear as day, tracks of Hazel Grouse criss-crossed the snow, the only record on my land of this species to date being a pair in May 2005. Into the cabin we settled, the woodpecker show then to start ...and they did me proud, a fine performance of up to six or seven woodpeckers at a time, dropping onto the peanut feeders and chunks of lard. In total, perhaps eight different Great Spotted Woodpeckers in constant attendance, plus three Middle Spotted Woodpeckers adding their touch of class. A short wait later however and the first of the true stars popped in, the regular male White-backed Woodpecker, hogging a favourite feeder and extrac ting peanuts to jam into a nook on a neighbouring stump to add at leisure. Several times he returned, each time to the same feeder, ten or fifteen minutes of feeding then off again. And somewhere along here, my rather more elusive guest paid a brief visit, a female Grey-headed Woodpecker - not on the feeders today, but instead checking out my owl box, perching on its roof then entrance hole to peer around. New bird for one of our group, icing on the cake. With feet beginning to freeze a little, it was time for a wander across the swamp forest, Black Woodpecker on the radar. Near guaranteed on my land, it took little time to locate a male bashing away at a decaying alder, red crown flaring. Some way distant, a second bird was knocking, didn't bother to try to find. Instead, back to the cars we went, I needed to return to Vilnius. Gingerly turned the car around, pointed the others a few good spots on a map, then tootled off across the snow, Vilnius-bound. An hour later I happened to look at my phone, 'hmm, two missed calls from a UK number!'. And then the phone went again, our intrepid trio had not quite exited my land as planned, instead sinking their car through the snow crust and getting well and truly stuck! Oops, ah well nothing I could do, I was 80 km south at this stage. An hour and a half I understand it took, manfrotto monopods doubling as a pick axe, old roofing as a shovel and grip for the car. Can't imagine it was too pleasant in the sub-zero, but full marks - the Baltic hat trick achieved with full marks, crash in Estonia, police in Latvia and stuck in Lithuania. Next day they returned to Britain, kind of think they will

remember the Baltic! 27 February. Hints of Spring in the Big Freeze. In a milder year, early Skylarks and cranes might be on the cards. Not so this year, still sub-zero and the land bedecked in sparkling snow! Despite temperatures of minus 17 C however, it would seem spring is slowly creeping in - Great Tits in song here and there, plus my Labanoras White-backed Woodpeckers now paired up, the two of them coming to the feeders together, a pleasing development.

Also pleasing, it would seem my Pygmy Owl is still about - tell-tale alarms and frantic mobbing by the woodpeckers and co, the bird appeared to be lurking just right of my feeders ...search as I might, I could not actually see the bird though, I suppose just sitting quietly. Other odds and ends, two Willow Tits at the feeders, the Black Woodpecker still in the swamp forest. Another week or so, the winter will die ...roll on, all change.