

March 2011. Spring Grinding In.

Contributed by Jos

Last Updated Monday, 28 March 2011

And so starts spring ...very slowly! Sub-zero temperatures throughout the month, snow lingering right through. Highlights of the month, a territorial Pygmy Owl in song, a Camberwell Beauty still slumbering in hibernation and, on a mini-break to Spain, multiple delights including Iberian Lynx, Great and Little Bustards and Great Spotted Cuckoo. No migrants of note till the final week, the doors then opening, flocks of Smew, Cranes and assorted others then trickling in.

5-6 March. Is it spring? Despite thinning a tad, no end to the snow, three and half months on the ground now! Still, temperatures did creep above freezing today, albeit briefly. The day did however see the beginning of the butterfly season - way too early for them to be on the wing, but was shifting stuff in my basement when I found a hibernating butterfly - a Camberwell Beauty no less, certainly the first time one of these has been in my house! And to end the day, a little foray onto woods - on the mammal front, one Red Deer trotting across a track and a Red Fox darting into cover. Signs of spring in the evening chill though, a fortunate pause at just the right spot yielding a Pygmy Owl hooting away to its heart's content. Twenty minutes of squinting into trees trying to locate the bird, then out he popped, landing on a branch directly overhead, very nice indeed. Despite a chill wind and temperatures remaining firmly below zero, hints of spring also at Labanoras the next day - as well as occasional bird song, the first drumming of the season shattering the otherwise silent swamp forest. A loud ricochet, it only took moments to locate the culprit, my White-backed Woodpecker proclaiming his territory most proudly. All the other regulars still in attendance, Black Woodpecker in his usual spot, all the others on the feeders. 11-14 March. Spanish Weekend. With Iberian Lynx, Natterjacks and Stripeless Tree Frog amongst the honours, this quick tour of central Spain turned out to be most successful, other highlights including both Great and Little Bustards, both sandgrouses and several corking Great Spotted Cuckoos. [CLICK HERE](#) for more photographs and full trip report. 20-22 March. Lithuania Re-emerging. Four months of near total snow cover finally over, up at Labanoras patches of grass emerging on south-facing slopes, sure sign the winter is finally over. And with the grass, yay, back come the first spring migrants, a trickle of Skylarks passing over, snatches of song, cheery chirrups as they go. All too soon, the floodgates will open...In the meantime, still action at the feeders, Middle Spotted Woodpeckers now paired up, several Great Spots too, plus Willow Tit, Treecreeper and, off yonder, the regular Black Woodpecker. Rather entertaining, one Bank Vole also visited the feeders today, nipping in and out to chomp on grain, regularly darting down bolt holes in the snow when spooked. Also one Red Fox and two Roe Deer. 24-26 March. Cold, Cold Spring. Starlings were already back in Vilnius, ones and twos here and there, but it wasn't till the 24th that I really encountered any numbers of migrants. Then bam, a relatively sunny on the local patch, a slice of open water between the ice and the goodies rolled in - near a thousand assorted dabbling ducks, Mallard, Wigeon and Teal, a single Pintail too. Beyond them, flocks of Goldeneye and Goosander, a dribble of Pochard and Tufted Ducks too. Most resplendant though, my first Smew of the year, smart males tucked up against the ice, busy in display to females nearby. And in meadows adjacent, a bunch of Whooper Swans, a pair of Cranes and a number of Lapwings ...ah, at last, spring on the way. And then it began to snow, the land returning to a white by the day's end! All hunky dory again by the 26th, night temperatures down to minus eight, but snow on the decline, vast expanses of meadow now appearing. A visit to Electrenai, its waters warmed by the power station, revealed a nice patch of open water ...absolutely brimming with birds, a nice sight. All in their hundreds, Goldeneye, Coot, Tufted Duck and Pochard. Grey Herons and Cormorants in their dozens, my first four Great White Egrets of the season and, spooking the lot, a young White-tailed Eagle. Most pleasing for the eye however, were the black nuns, a splendid 53 Smew covorting in the sun, glorious. Still a chill wind though, very few passerine migrants on the move - the odd Skylark and Chaffinch and that was about that. Roll on true spring! 27 March. Garden & Stuff. The struggle to imagine spring continued, a deep frost overnight, most lakes still in the grip of ice. Still, much action at the feeders - not only the resident winterfolk, Crested Tits et al in Vilnius, but so too many incoming returnees ...heaps of additional Blue and Great Tits, Siskins galore and the first Chaffinches at the feeders. Even better news up at Labanoras - as well as Blackbirds and Wood Pigeons newly arrived, the return of Cranes, a pair trumpeting loudly in the meadow, most welcome. Overhead, 80 Bean Geese winging north, my first of the year.