

June 2011. Butterfly Season in Swing.

Contributed by Jos
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A fairly quiet month, largely due to commitments keeping me from the great outside. Nevertheless, still some notable highlights - some excellent butterflies ranging from Poplar Admirals and Purple Emperors to Swallowtails and Black Hairstreaks, plus an excellent array of breeding birds, including good numbers of Corncrakes and a pair of Wrynecks in one of my nestboxes and a good bunch of mammals too - including Wild Boar on my land and both Elk and White-bellied Hedgehog near Ignalina.

1-2 June. Sun & Butterflies. And glorious is the weather, touching 30 C and a blazing sun. Perfect to get the butterflies out and about, the first day or two of the month seeing further species new on the wing - a Red Admiral on the 1st, Sooty Coppers and Common Blues on the 2nd, plus still more Heath Fritillaries, the season now gathering pace. On the bird front, Serins singing in the garden, more in the city centre. 3-5 June. Summer Settling. Burning sun continues, yet more butterflies appearing on the wing - Mazarine Blue and Swallowtail at Labanoras, plus Northern Chequered Skippers in both Labanoras and my Vilnius garden. Spring arrivals amongst the birds slowing now, only a few late arrivers - Spotted Flycatchers on old snags, Garden Warblers singing from the depths.

Nice all the same - all at Labanoras, Wrynecks now on eggs in the veranda nestbox, Red-backed Shrikes seemingly nesting in the shrike pile and Golden Orioles warbling all over the shop, plus Icterine Warblers and Common Rosefinch in no shortage. Also a good showing by woodpeckers - Middle Spot back on the feeders and both Grey-headed and Black in the swamp forest, not so often I see them in summer.

White Storks by the house with three bouncy babs now, right ugly little blighters. A day out on the 5th produced less than expected - tried a habitat good for butterflies later on, but today almost devoid of them. Top sighting of the day, one Tawny Pipit. Temperature topped 30 C, nice. 9 June. Garden Highs. Renovations continue at the Vilnius house. Underfloor heating now in place, tiling in the soon-to-be bathroom underway, the sand mountain in the garden finally ready to be levelled. All getting a tad boring now, but light appears at the end of the tunnel! For today however, the cool basement was my abode, a haven from the unrelenting sun, but a poor place overall to see the local wildlife - still managed Crested Tit in the garden though, plus a Common Rosefinch in the pines and a distinct chacking of a Red-backed Shrike somewhere near. 10-11 June. Bird Marathon, 24-hour Birding. The hunt was on, 8 p.m. Friday to 8 p.m. Saturday, 24 hours to track down as many species as possible. To my advantage, excellent weather, excellent time of year and a most able of teammates, the Bulgarian birder Boris Belchev. To my distinct disadvantage, the marathon was to take place in the extreme north-east of Lithuania, lands that I had mostly never previously ventured to. Beginning at some nondescript village in a scenic setting just south of Visaginas, the permitted territory of our marathon would extend from the imposing nuclear power plant just south of the Latvian border to the rich Birveta fish pools further south on the Belarussian border. 8 p.m. came and went, my teammate travelling from middle Lithuania had yet to arrive, Black Terns hawked a nearby pool, White Storks sat atop a nest, Spotted Flycatchers flicked out from an orchard adjacent. In rolled Boris, off we went - ticking like a clock, all too soon the count was soaring - Whinchats, Red-backed Shrike, Marsh Harrier, Common Rosefinch, all common birds of the Lithuanian countryside. Twenty or thirty species on, then came our first bonus of the trip - not a bird, but a young Elk sauntering across a small marsh, nice indeed - albeit a non-contributor to the bird race! Minutes later, a kilometre or so further along the road, another stop and another bonus - a singing Barred Warbler, never a bird you can guarantee on any given day. Lesser Whitethroat singing nearby, so too Marsh Warbler and a variety of commoner brethren. With dusk approaching, an Eastern Hedgehog trundling along a verge and rasping Corncrakes calling all around, it was time to try and find a forest clearing to notch up the crepuscular species. Here the lack of local knowledge let us down a tad - in the limited time we had, the forest clearings we encountered were far from ideal, all rather moist affairs. In a nocturnal adventure that more resembled a cross-country offroad rally, we failed to find Nightjar, managed only a single Woodcock, albeit a nice close fly-by, and neither saw nor heard any owls (only a Tawny Owl pre-dusk). Singing all over the place, Grasshopper Warblers provided some compensation, completing the Locastella trio - River Warblers already heard, plus a single Savi's Warbler. Roe Deer, Red Deer, one fleeting Raccoon Dog, mammals added to the night's tally. By 1.00 a.m., with little hope of adding much of note, we made our way to Birveta, a few short hours of kip in the car to follow. Slept to the backdrop of croaking frogs and grating acrocephalus warblers. 5.00 a.m., it was already light, we had overslept! A hazy mist sat over the fish pools adjacent, Whooper Swans honked in the soft light, a White-tailed Eagle sat on a dyke, another lumbering into flight. Pods of duck lazied in the shallows, silhouettes of waders offered promise for later. Right on the track, directly in front of the car, out stepped a Corncrake, cracking views and a most pleasing way to start the day. A few pools along, at spot known for Bluethroats and Citrine Wagtails, we cranked our ears and tried to tune in to the local highlight. A right racket in the wetlands on this morning! High decibel Common Rosefinches, jarring Great Reed Warblers and a right cacophony of Whooper Swans descending for a morning party. Corncrakes two'a'penny as subtle backdrop, Cuckoo and Blackcap singing behind and Black-tailed Godwits in high alarm as another White-tailed Eagle appeared over the pool. Not a pip or squeak of Bluethroat though. Citrine Wagtail was rather easier - a local pair had fledged young recently, the adults constantly back and fro with food, views very good. As mist began to clear, so followed further exploration of the pools. All in all, we spent rather much time here, but birding was very good - despite not connecting with a Terek's Sandpiper that had been found, numerous birds were added ...some of the better ones, a Little Gull, a variety of waders from Little Stint to Spotted

Redshank, a pair of nesting White-winged Black Terns and, undoubted highlight for Boris, three rather splendid Black Grouse sat out in the middle of a recently ploughed field! Somewhere along here, I managed to get some pollen or something in my eye, the result an gradually worsening eye throughout the day, swelling and looking much like Boris had given me a good punch!!! He hadn't, I assure all. Anyhow, on we went, desperately short of petrol, first stop was Ignalina town some 40 km to the west. Amazed we actually got there before gonking out, but added Lesser Spotted Eagle en route, plus other odds and sods. With petrol topped up and bellies full thanks to a local supermarket, onward with the bird marathon. Next stop, mature pine forests and heathland clearings. Two stunning Poplar Admirals sunning on a track, a reasonably uncommon butterfly, then a string of birds that we had hoped to encounter - more or less in order of sighting, Wood Warbler, Tree Pipit, Crested Tit and Woodlark. Also Siskins and a few other common species. My eye was now a right pain, vision slightly blurry. It was now early afternoon, and to be honest, we pretty much wasted the rest of the day by driving north to Lake Druksiai. In the shadow of Visaginas nuclear power station, this large lake straddling the border with Belarus really failed to live up to expectations, Golden Orioles nearby, singing Icterine Warblers, a Northern Wheatear on rubble just behind the power station, these were the best birds seen, I think we did not find the best areas.

A quick tally up of our species total revealed we had seen about 110 species since kick-off, not bad, but had the marathon been around Vilnius, I am sure local knowledge could have seen us up nearer 130 or 140 species already. With my eye giving grief, we then wasted a little more time by venturing into Visaginas town, a small but amazingly uninteresting place, basically a quadrat of Soviet-style blocks constructed solely to give home to the lucky folk who got to work in the nuclear power plant just up the road. Added zero extra species there, and only dribs and drabs thereafter - a Wren, a Marsh Tit, a pair of Linnets, one fly-over Honey Buzzard, and that was about it. With a heavy thunderstorm looming and my eye near closed, I regret to say I abandoned ship at 4 p.m., quitting the bird race to seek sanctuary for my eye in Vilnius. Sorry Boris. Still, was not so bad, despite finishing several hours early, we managed a total of 119 species, a total that took us to third place amongst the teams competing. Had we completed the full 24 hours, I have little doubt that our position would have remained pretty much the same - both blessed with local knowledge, the top two teams clocked up impressive totals of over 140 species each, totals that we would not have matched. Congratulations to the winning teams. 12 June. Labanoras. A lazy day on my land at Labanoras, White Storks plodding about, several Marsh Warblers now on territory, plus singing Quail and Corncrake taking the year's species total to over 100 on this little plot of land. Also Sedge Warblers increasing in number in the forest, the areas opened by Beavers now vegetated by reed and in essence a shallow lake, a habitat very much in transition. Top sighting of the day however, was not bird, but mammal. After five years of stumbling over their holes in the meadows, bumping my car into hollows where they had wallowed, finally I got to see the critters in the flesh - two Wild Boar crashing off through the undergrowth, dumpy individuals half-grown I would say. excellent. 18-20 June. Heatwave Hiccup. Three weeks and more of top temperatures and sun, out I went today in search of butterflies ...and so ended the sunshine! Fortunately, the rains had the good grace to postpone their arrival till mid-afternoon, giving me a good few hours of warm sun to enjoy the treats of my favourite butterfly route, a sunny track through alternating pine forest and open ride. And very good it was too, a nice variety of species now appearing on the wing, the height of the butterfly season just a half month away. With some Heath Fritillaries already looking a tad tatty, it was fortunate that others of the tribe were present to distract attention - Silver-washed Fritillaries and High Brown Fritillaries for the first time this season, so too a Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. Random stops along the route added, in addition to the above fritillaries, quite a number of species - amongst the best, a Purple Emperor, a nice male Purple-shot Copper and the first Pearly Heaths and Large Skippers of the season. And then I arrived at the creme de la creme of my patch - a little quadrat of meadow surrounded by pine forest and always a buzz of action in the summer. In a couple of short weeks, it will be choc'a'bloc with butterflies, the number and variety unparralleled in the local area. Even today though, it was very nice indeed - a heavy bank of grey cloud was edging in from the south, but still butterflies were active, Silver-studded Blues and Amanda's Blues talking salts from the track, a couple of gaudy Large Coppers flaunting their vivid colours, two most elegant Black-veined Whites on cornflowers and a mix of other species to keep me happy for an hour or so. My first Chestnut Heaths of the year, followed by early Ringlets and Meadow Browns, and then started the rain. Two days later the rain finally stopped! And with it, a splendid array of butterflies in and around my Vilnius garden - a Purple Emperor busying itself around the garage, another just down the lane, and better still two Black Hairstreaks, a White Admiral and both Red Admiral and Comma, not a bad haul for a stop on the commute to the city! 24-28 June. Nests, Babs and Squawkers. And boy are they noisy, Great Spotted Woodpeckers trailing scrawny youngsters, shuffling up and down the feeders in both my Vilnius garden and Labanoras. At the second of these sites however, they had to play second fiddle, some rather more exotic cousins were also playing the baby card - on or around the peanut feeders, Middle Spot and White-backed Woodpeckers screaming the odds at wayward youngsters! Especially nice the latter of these, quite a while since I had seen my White-backs, breeding I assume in the depths of the swamp forest. Other news updates, an estimated four pairs of Wrynecks on territory this year on Labanoras plot and, back in my Vilnius garden, the Wrynecks that were calling earlier in the season also seem to be breeding just over the hedge somewhere, the first time I have had them breeding anywhere near this garden. Icterine Warblers also in good numbers in both Vilnius and Labanoras, so too Red-backed Shrikes - a second pair on my land and one just down the lane from my Vilnius garden. Other odds and sods, a Honey Buzzard cruising through the skies over my raptor viewpoint, Crested Tits still visiting the Vilnius garden and a Middle Spot also popping into the feeders there.