

September 2011.

Contributed by Jos
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Kiddies across the country depressed as schools start, half the nation in a frenzy as the European Basketball Championships take place in the country, but for me September is rather more glorious - the start of the mass exodus of birds from the country, frequently a month for the occasional surprise. And pick of the surprises this year, a Red-breasted Flycatcher in my garden, a Broad-billed Sandpiper in the north-east and a flock of Glossy Ibis south of Vilnius, the latter truly a rare bird in Lithuania.

1-2 September. Garden Titbits.

A pleasant time to linger in my garden, a trickle of Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs through the bushes out back, the chip-chip of Crossbills overhead, plus a regular Middle Spotted Woodpecker on the feeder and, a tad on the late side, still Black Redstarts hopping about, youngsters of the pair that bred earlier in the summer. Best of the lot however, flitting out from an apple tree to land on a rope adjacent to a peanut feeder, one smart little Red-breasted Flycatcher, my fourth ever record for the garden. Top Notch. 3 September. Exploits in the North-East. With Baltoji Voke a mere shadow of its glories a decade back, I have largely given up on this former hotspot, so for a touch of wetland magic up to the north-east I went this day, calling in at the extensive Birvetos fishpools, a stone's throw from the Belarussian border. So close to the border in fact that almost the very first thing I saw today was an approaching 4x4, the inhabitants being border guides enquiring after my reasons for being there! White-tailed Eagles soaring, three or four, plus Marsh Harriers in good numbers, Great White Egrets rising and a smattering of ducks on various pools, with five Greylags also flying over and assorted flocks of Whooper Swans and other bits and bobs. High water levels largely dashed hopes for a wader fest, but fortunately one pool had a small quadrangle of fine habitat and there upon it a little huddle of waders ...and bingo, virtually the first bird I put my scope on was a right stonking Broad-billed Sandpiper, a splendid bird indeed. And to keep it company, a half dozen Little Stints, three Curlew Sandpipers, a few Dunlin and Ringed Plovers, one Spotted Redshank and a half score Ruff. All in all, a nice gathering. And then suddenly, off they went, alarming and spiralling into the sky, little dots vanishing in the general direction of Belarus! Drat, thinking for a moment that I'd flushed them, but nope, the culprit was coming in low and fast, an adult male Peregrine Falcon pushing all birds before it. A rare bird in Lithuania, I have almost certainly seen more Broad-billed Sandpipers in the country than Peregrines, so all was forgiven. Off he went, back to my car I wandered. A couple more hours here produced little more, so I then detoured across to Labanoras, stopping off at my land. A notable departure of birds - all the Whinchats and Red-backed Shrikes of the week before gone, so too the last Cranes and White Stork. Gloom, winter is on its way! And up above, a steady passage of birds - Swallows and Wood Pigeons heading south, gathering numbers of Jays on the wing, some 80 or so passing over in an hour. Also one Nutcracker. But for colour, the honours went to forest fungi, some impressive specimens on show just now. 4-8 September. Garden Duties. As per usual this year, renovation on the house is gobbling up much of my time, the glorious weather of these days not spend birding the wilds, but laying cobble stones in the back garden and tiling inside! What a waste of time! Fortunately, a few distractions to pass the days - as well as all the Nuthatches and usuals at the feeders, one Black Woodpecker in the pines, two very vocal Hobbies overhead on several occasions, plus increasing action at the feeders - the highlight a Willow Tit joining the resident Marsh Tits. Welcome returnees on the 8th, two Crested Tits churring in the garden, shortly thereafter taking up position on their favourite feeder, the one just centimetres from my kitchen window. Nice birds. 10 September. Sandhill Crane Roadshow. Canada July 2011 Estonia Sept 2011 The sharp-eyed might notice the lack of a Sandhill Crane in the second image, the reason being I didn't see the bird! After a whole bunch of them on their breeding grounds in Canada and the U.S., it was a little greedy to hope for another, but when a single bird was seen flying out of Finland and thereafter settling in Estonia, a little trip north seemed a mighty good idea. With a mere handful of sightings ever in Europe, this remarkable record almost certainly relates to an individual first seen on the Orkney Islands two years ago, thereafter tracked as it flew south through northern Scotland and later relocated in France. Back in those days, I had never seen Sandhill Crane, so I was most tempted to travel to Orkney. Fast forward two years, I had now seen several dozen Sandhill Cranes, so this trip north was more just for a day out. Monday evening the bird had departed Finland, Tuesday it was found in Estonia, Wednesday through to Friday it cavorted with a flock of about 50 Common Cranes, dawn on the Saturday I arrived. 12 Common Cranes present, no Sandhill Crane! Through the day, slowly the number of cranes increased, a total of thirty or so by early afternoon, with a flock of about 40 also migrating over. However, it was clear that the Sandhill Crane had departed, so rather than waste the whole day, a change of tactic, off to Tallinn I went, birding cancelled, cultural tour instigated. The most beautiful of the Baltic capitals,

the Old City of Tallinn almost compensated for the absence of the Sandhill Crane ...almost. Ah well, back to Vilnius - 1350 km on the clock, a handful of migrating Hen Harriers and a bunch of Common Cranes the only birds of any note. Southward this crane should go, next stop Latvia or Lithuania? Given the bird managed to overfly most of Scotland and all of England without being located, the chances of it being refound in the sparsely populated Baltics are unfortunately rather slim. Watch this space! 12 September. Ibis Pop In. Weather playing funny games throughout the day, an almost tropical sun bathing the country in the morning, a downpour of biblical proportion in the evening, flooding all and sundry! None too keen on becoming a bedraggled rat, it was fortunate indeed that I chose the morning to venture out for my wander through the agricultural areas south of the city. And what a good day it was - an amazing array of butterflies still on the wing, with no less than nine species noted, Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Eastern Bath Whites the pick of the bunch, both being species I am happy to encounter at any time of the year. Also both Small and Sooty Coppers, several Pale Clouded Yellows and, rather more expected, Red Admirals, Commas, Large Whites and Brimstones. Pretty good on the bird front too - three Lesser Spotted Eagles drifting about, a couple of migrant Kestrels, one Osprey and a couple of White-tailed Eagles ...and then a flock of bird soaring quite high, the initial assumption that they were Cormorants soon dispelled with a glance through the binoculars ...stone me, little curvy beaks stuck out one end, legs dangling the other - a flock of Glossy Ibis circling in the sky! High, with no apparent desire to land, the flock was almost 'thermallling', all the time slowly moving in a north-westerly direction. With only six previous records in Lithuania I believe, I expected no more as these birds disappeared behind a tree line, but no more than ten minutes later, another three birds were circling in the same area, basically following the track of the previous birds. Possibly these were part of the initial flock, somehow splitting off and doubling back, but in all likelihood, they were an additional birds, the total flock being eleven in all. Also of note, a very confiding Red-backed Shrike in a little bush, a solitary Great Grey Shrike that was less than confiding and assorted migrants in the forms of Black Redstart, Wheatear and Whinchat. 17 September. Labanoras. An eerie silence at the feeders, barely a bird stirring, the food sitting untouched. Six Nutcrackers dangerously close though, scoffing nuts in the hazel groves maturing in clearings created by beavers. Ten years and more I have tried to attract Nutcrackers to my feeders, ten years and more they have teased, regularly venturing near, even on occasion perching in the trees above the feeders. As per usual, I slunk out extra rations, a healthy dose of peanuts on the bird table, grain scattered around. I don't hold my breathe! Other welcome returnees in my forest, two Black Woodpeckers back on their winter territories and, yodelling most content, a male Grey-headed Woodpecker atop a dead tree just behind the feeding station. For new birds however, the honours went to humble corvids - largely thanks to a neighbouring farmer ploughing his fields, a flock of some 150 Rooks came tumbling down to scoff grubs in the furrows, the trees on my boundary a convenient resting point between sorties. Species number 108 for the year on my land. One hour later, the Rooks still revelling, in dropped two Jackdaws to join the party, species number 110! And that was that, I thought, turning to leave. An abrupt stop for a raptor passing over - one female Hen Harrier, my second record here this year, but an excellent bird no less. As harrier turned to a speck on the southern horizon, two more specks appeared from the north. Fluid flight, shape materialised, clearly falcons - I had a hope for Red-footed Falcons, small numbers in the country at present, but as they neared and started to hunt my meadows, the identity fell to Kestrels. Still, a good record - second in three weeks, but only the sixth record ever. 20 September. Butterflies Still Flying. It is not often that the end of September gets me any additions to my butterfly year lists, but in the warm sunshine today, a fluttering through the garden and down plops a tatty Speckled Wood, species number 59 for the year (respectable enough, but far lower than in the previous three years, largely due to being out of the country for the peak month of July). Elsewhere, in meadows south of the city, still a few Pale Clouded Yellows on the wing, a Queen of Spain Fritillary too, plus Red Admirals, Green-veined Whites and Brimstones. 24-30 September. Through the Mists. Mist-laden vales, early morning dew, the echoing of geese overhead, the march of the season, yet still an Indian summer persists across Lithuania, the warm rays burning away the morning dampness. At Labanoras, and over my Vilnius garden by night, skeins of geese southbound, several hundred at a time, White-fronted Geese in V formation, gurgling their way across the sky, Bean Geese too. And down below, mass movements amongst the passerines too - the first significant migrations of Skylarks, Great Tits and Chaffinches, flocks many score strong edging their way south. Good days up at Labanoras, a Woodlark caught up in the migration and, hot on the heels of the two Kestrels in the previous weeks, yet another two - only a couple of hours apart, my seventh and eighth records ever on my land. One female Hen Harrier too, plus a Marsh Harrier and, yodellers high in the sky, 32 Common Cranes soaring. Also, after a breeding season that failed to produce any in my flood forest, three Teal bobbed about with a posse of Mallard, a late addition to the year list, the 111th species for this little plot in 2011. Otherwise, it was all indicators towards the upcoming winter season - increasing numbers of birds at the feeders reminding me to stock up on my winter supplies, 200 kg of peanuts purchased this week, I am penniless again! Still, a male White-backed Woodpecker showed early interest at the Labanoras feeders, roll on the winter, all is set.