

October 2011.

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October, the traditional month of bird departure from Lithuania, flocks streaming south in their thousands. In 2011 however, mild weather early to mid-month slowed the movements to mere trickles, but still some nice titbits - good numbers of Brambling, a vagrant Kittiwake, the first incoming Smew amongst the spoils. Also, other delights on offer included Beech Martin, an impressive showing of various fungi and a variety of woodpeckers in and around my feeders, Black Woodpecker particularly confiding.

1-7 October. Fungal Flora. Despite a mild beginning, an effective brake to mass migration, the month should be one of mass movements and birds a'plenty. In the early days however, the lingering warmth and autumnal dampness offered the perfect cocktail for mushrooms and toadstools, my Labanoras forest full of varied forms and colours. On the bird front, a total of three Black Woodpeckers appeared in the swamp forest with a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker also present on the 7th, a welcome sight - this former common bird on my feeders rather thin on the ground over the last two years. Also heaps more birds at the feeders themselves and a Nutcracker continuing to gorge itself in the hazel grove. A little further afield, numerous migrant Whooper Swans at Salcininkai, passage Dunlins and flocks of Great White Egrets too, plus Grey Plovers, Little Gull and White-tailed Eagle.

8-9 October. Yoyo-ing Across the Lands. All to little avail, two days clocking up near 1800 km! Left home at 4 a.m. for the drive to Ventes Ragas, Lithuania's premier location for visible migration. With the weather on the change, and night temperatures dropping to a chilly 4 C, bird movements were moving up a degree - the ringing station at Ventes Ragas had caught 10,000 birds in the previous three days alone, the lion's share Great Tits and Robins. On my arrival however, fog - the quickest, most surefire way, to bring migration to a grinding halt! In the morning gloom, the Heligolands towering into the murky sky, the bushes dripping, little was on the move. Shivering a tad, round I trudged, Robins by the dozen and score, thrushes and Goldcrests abundant too, but otherwise precious little to boast about - occasional Blackcaps, a few patrolling Sparrowhawks, and that was about that. I however was not here for the migration, I had an appointment at 10 a.m. I duly arrived at the port of Minge, the event was to be a boat cruise on the Kursiu Marios lagoon, an expansive area of brackish waters separated from the Baltic Sea by the Curonian spit. Fringed by wide reedbeds and harbouring sand islands, all seemed set for birds galore. And so it would have been ...had it not been pea soup foggy!!! We could have been anywhere from mid-Atlantic to bobbing about on some inland village pond, we saw next to nothing, barely a bird and rarely even a landmark! I was supposed to be the official bird guide for the morning, but with a grand total of four or five species emerging from the fog, it was not a job that overtaxed me! Most memorable birds of a rather non-event turned out to be Great Tits, migrants lost in the fog, several clustered on mid-channel buoys, quite out of setting. And with that, so I turned south, five hundred kilometres and more, then I was in Warsaw. Next morning, plastered my fingerprints on a little card, filled in my application form, handed over rather many euros - not a new form of birding, but arranging a visa for my next exploits in lands afar. If all goes to plan, I should depart the Baltic region again by the year's end. Watch this space.

15 October. Lithuanian Bird Rally. One week on, back to Ventes Ragas and the coast, this week's event being the grand autumn bird rally of Lithuania, a now traditional event to close the birding season in the Baltics. With a distinct chilling to the air and the fog of the previous week long dispersed, there I was standing in the dark at Ventes Ragas, a half hour before dawn, nineteen other teams gathered around, but Boris Belchev and my other team mates again late for the kick-off (tut tut, Boris, second rally in a row!). The whistle went, teams scampered off into the pre-dawn, up ambled Boris, a UK birder and one Lithuanian lass, my team was now assembled. A bit of a shiver, then off we shuffled too, adopting a prime position at the tip of Ventes Ragas peninsula to begin our marathon day. If all went to plan, we should manage to scrape a hundred species or so together by the day's end, the total required to have any possibility to finish in the top ranks of the rally. Blackbirds and Robins alarming in the pre-dawn gloom, a Mallard quacking off yonder, the appetisers to start things off. All too soon, streaks of light were beginning to illuminate the horizon, tree lines materialised, then the first hazy shapes of birds in flight. Thrushes diving into cover, early bird Cormorants winging their way over. As dawn truly broke, so the passage of birds overhead began - not classic conditions, the flocks mere hundred rather than thousands, but nevertheless, southbound, everything was going, flights of Brambling and Chaffinch, wayward Skylarks, abundant Siskins and Starling. Through the bushes, Robins and Goldcrest by the bucketload, titmice and Treecreepers too. On the prowl, two or three Sparrowhawks lingered to pick off the migrants as they passed, also overhead Wood Pigeons, Stock Doves and, late for the season, a little posse of Swallows, a bird I have never before recorded on the autumn rally. A little paddle through cold waters, more so for Boris without wellies, added precious little in the way of birds, but a right cute Beech Martin was the bee's knees indeed. An hour or so along, with the migration failing to produce any real surprises, bar a flock of fly-by Barnacle Geese, and we decided it was perhaps time to move on - it was already looking that 2011 was not going to be a record year, the goal of 100 species already looking a little fanciful! Next stop, Kintai fish pools. White-tailed Eagles adorning twisted stumps, a half dozen per pool, plus a dancing cluster of Great White Egrets, a pod of yodelling Bewick's Swans and assorted ducks and singleton geese zigzagging through the skies - first Greylags, then both Bean and White-fronted Goose, all few in number but precious extra ticks for the list. Hundreds of Golden Plovers and Lapwing present, but other waders more remarkable by their absence - a few Dunlin, a good record of Knot, but otherwise next to squilch! Having already notched up Black Redstart, perhaps the best bird of the morning so far was a Common Redstart, a very late record for this neck of the woods. Onward, a woodland stop added a couple of Crested Tits, a Black Woodpecker, plus odds and sods such as Jay, Coal Tit and Nuthatch, and then it was a quick tootle north to the coast at Palanga. A perfectly calm sea was to greet us, barely a wave to stir the vista. Continuing mild weather had left the sea largely void of the rafts of seaduck that later come to inhabit this stretch, but concentrating on the horizon, soon the species began to roll in - Long-tailed Ducks zooming by, flocks of Common Scoter a'plenty, a few Velvet Scoter in their midst. Also both

Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, a handful of Red-breasted Mergansers, two or three Little Gulls and, not a common bird in Lithuania at all, an immature Kittiwake loafing on the waters. It was now early afternoon. Back to the car, a quick tally of the totals put us in the mid 80s, the goal of 100 species now looked quite feasible - our next stop would be the Rusne fishpools, some 70 km or so further south, the make or break of our attempt. And make it they did, one pool in particular proving most productive with a whole array of species lined up for our enjoyment, stately Smews, humble Gadwall, several Shoveler and assorted added extras. Throw in roadside Rough-legged Buzzard and Common Redshank plus a pair of Common Terns that may well have been in Russia, and our count had magically risen to just below 100. Still we had not seen several common species - Marsh and Willow Tit still eluding us, so too Long-tailed Tit, several of the less common woodpeckers and, surprisingly, Whooper Swan. Spent the dying hour of the rally in the forests between Rusne and Silute, finally scraping together a Marsh Tit and one Middle Spotted Woodpecker. We had reached 99 species and the total was now refusing to budge! Up and down various trails we went, nothing to add. Half an hour till the finishing time, decided to return to Kintai, our last hope being Whooper Swan. Got back to the pools, did a scan and there paddled a Greenshank, yippee species number 100. And with that we swung back into the hotel drive almost content to call it a day. Decided on a last minute quick tour of the back pools, Mute Swan, Mute Swan, Mute Swan, sleeping swan. 'Hmm, that is no Mute' thought I. And so it wasn't, five minutes before the official close of play, species number 101, Whooper Swan. Participants gathered, results trickled in. At the 9 p.m. hour, all was becoming clear - overall a very low scoring year, but our 101 took us to victory, a grand third place, first and second logging 104 and 102 species respectively.