

November 2011. A touch of Ice.

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The transit of autumn to winter, woodpecker season in full swing, seaduck, sawbills and winter swans on the move. November, the traditional month of 'winding down', opened to no less than five species of woodpecker on or around the feeding stations, plus flocks of Velvet Scoter, Smew and Bewick's Swans on inland waters. Also an Eagle Owl to liven things up and White-backed Woodpeckers with the Middle Spots on the feeders. A mid-month Ruddy Duck was pretty phenomenal, a new species for the country, also both Black-throated and Red-throated Divers on the move and, first of the winter, a Waxwing in my Vilnius garden.

1-2 November. Last Flings of Autumn. A mildness lingers on, barely a frost to hint at winter, precious little to remind of snows soon to come. On the waters beneath Kaunas, bobbing around on the turbulent swirls of current, vast gatherings of waterfowl, key amongst them Goldeneye in their hundreds and Tufted Ducks at near half a thousand. So too cormorants in good numbers, perhaps 180, and a pod of 18 Bewick's Swans, two of which carried collars and radio transmitters, one a bird originally caught at Slimbridge in the UK and the other a Dutch bird. Also Pintail, Wigeon and, in separate flocks on the reservoir itself, a total of eleven Velvet Scoters, good birds for inland waters. Meanwhile, 120 km to the north-east, my Labanoras feeders continue their return to bumper activity - Middle and Great Spotted Woodpeckers regular on the nuts, a female White-backed Woodpecker a brief visitor and the pair of Black Woodpeckers in the adjacent swamp forest. Nuthatches in high abundance, plus all the usual Jays, Great Tits et al. Also Roe Deer in the meadows, plenty of signs of Wild Boar and Elk. Back in Vilnius, Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Crested Tit remain on the garden feeders. 5-6 November. Ice, Eagle Owls and Beavers First signs of Winter. A weekend of little surprises, the first to find Lake Papis half frozen! And with it, most of the birds had been shoved off - the relatively small numbers of Mallard all huddled onto remaining ice-free water. It seemed virtually everything had departed for warmer climes, but no, they had merely done a one kilometre hop over to the nearby fish pools, the water there still basically ice-free. Eighteen White-tailed Eagles fairly impressive, so too the lingering flocks of wildfowl - Mallard in totals around 1200 heading the list, notable others including Goosander at over 80 and Mute Swan 215. Also six Smew, a dozen Great White Egrets, approximately 20 Grey Herons and late Redshanks and 30 or so Lapwings. Passerines almost absent now, two last Starlings aside the pools, a few Mealy Redpolls, and that was just about that. The next bunch of surprises all came on my land at Labanoras, the most pleasant of which was an Eagle Owl calling from the swamp forest late afternoon, a couple of deep hooo hooo revealing its presence. Quite a remarkable record, possibly the same bird as seen way back in the icy days of February. Also pleasing, yet more activity on the feeders, the corkers of the day being the return of both male and female White-backed Woodpeckers to the peanuts, hopefully now settled for the winter. Adjacent, Black Woodpeckers continue to hammer the smithereens out of rotting alders, while Middle Spotted Woodpecker also sidled up. Rather less welcome, the return of Beavers to the flood forest, eager teeth now rapidly chomping through the hazel groves. Hmm, hopefully ice will soon put a lid on their activities!!! 11-12 November. In Roll the Chills, one Ruddy Surprise! Much in keeping with November, temperatures continued their tumble, daytimes now barely scrapping zero. Much in keeping with November, the main bird focus was the annual early winter movement of northern waterbirds. Not much in keeping with November was the appearance of a female RUDDY DUCK, a species never recorded in Lithuania to date. Up until that moment the day had been pleasurable, but less than remarkable - four Black-throated Divers, one Red-throated Diver the highlights, a good bunch of Whooper and Bewick's Swans as backers. Also good numbers of Goosander and Tufted Ducks, a scatter of other birds too. And then, on a quiet backwater that I almost chose to overlook, there sat the little star - in loose association with a couple of Goldeneye, one small dumpy duck quietly diving close to the reeds. What a quaint little dumpy duck it was, stiff tail and snob nose, a Ruddy Duck in all her glory. An endangered bird in Europe these days, the species now classified as an unwelcome introduction from the United States, the previously thriving populations of Britain and the low countries are subject to extermination in the belief that they pose a threat to the native White-headed Duck of Iberia and Asia Minor. Whatever the politics of conservation, this smart duck is still one cute critter, and to one dull November day it sure brought a dash of brightness. Pretty sure the powers that be in Lithuania would take weeks to replicate a DEFRA style attack on this little ducky, but just to be safe ...location, withheld. Float happy, Ruddy Duck. Meanwhile, elsewhere during these days, Crested Tits reached a grand total of three at the Vilnius garden feeders, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker appeared near the feeders in Labanoras and Black Woodpeckers continued their destruction of stumps in the swamp forest. 18-20 November. Snow and Waxwing. With the last vestiges of autumn cast aside, harbingers of an approaching winter descended upon the garden in Vilnius - a light dusting of snow on the 18th, then the sweet trills of a Waxwing on the 20th, a singleton atop a tree. Though annual in the garden, never do Waxwings fail to leave a little flutter in the heart when they appear, this latest addition adding a most tuneful melody to the backdrop of churring Crested Tits and chirping Nuthatches, a wonderful veranda choral society! Spoiling the party somewhat, sudden alarms and a scattering of the Tree Sparrows, in swooped a Sparrowhawk. Off went the Waxwing. 25-30 November. Nothing much else happened during the month, warm and mild conditions prevailed, a usual run of birds at the feeders and that was about that!