

January 2012. A Corking New Year!

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What with Wolves, Siberian Crane and numerous other goodies in Iran, then Three-toed Woodpecker and Tengmalm's Owl recorded from my Lithuanian land and garden respectively, 2012 certainly started on a high! As the month progressed, and temperatures in Lithuania began a slide to minus 20 and below, all action of note revolved around me feeding stations, the bountiful attractions including White-backed Woodpecker, Crested Tit and hunting Great Grey Shrike.

1-8 January. Iran, the last leg. The final chapter of an excellent trip to this stunning country, the beginning of January saw me high in the snowy peaks of the Albroz Mountains, enjoying Lammergeier and Golden Eagles, Eversmann's Redstarts and wheeling flocks of Alpine Chough, plus an encounter with Wolves on the high snow, most magical. I also ventured down into the Caspian lowlands for a very special meeting with the world's last known Siberian Crane of the western population, before an excursion eastward to the frozen plateau of the north-east, an unexpected abundance of species to round my trip off, Pine Buntings, Saker Falcon and Crimson-winged Finches just the icing on the cake. Full details of this fantastic trip available soon. 13-16 January. Feeder Highs, Labanoras and Garden. On return to Lithuania, it is a near tradition for me to semi-hibernate for a few days, generally missing the excellent birding of a trip just completed. Not so this time, a blinding start to birding in the snows of Lithuania, the treats turning up right on my doorstep, literally. Up at Labanoras, having already bumped into Black Woodpecker and an assortment of the regulars, a strange tap tap tap caught my attention - I was not even sure it was not a rhythmic cracking of a frozen trunk in the gentle breeze. Off in pursuit of the elusive sound - tap, a couple of seconds, another single tap, seconds more, again a single tap ...closer and closer, then there it was, one glorious male Three-toed Woodpecker! What a corker, and what a good record - my second ever on my land and only my third ever in Lithuania, a very good start to my 2012 in Lithuania. And just to confirm all was well, a Red Fox trotted by, a White-backed Woodpecker also joined the party, thereby shoving off a Middle Spotted Woodpecker at the feeders. And so to Vilnius, the feeders busy with Tree Sparrows and buddies, two Crested Tits in near constant attendance, all ticking over nicely. On the 16th, I returned home late at night, stepping from my car into the crunch of snow, temperatures well below freezing. Pooooop pooooop pooooop pooooop, a voice echoing from the pines ...stone me, a Tengmalm's Owl! Not only the first ever from my garden, but also a species I have never recorded at Labanoras either. Yep, a good start to 2012! 20-22 January. Winter Birding. No sign of either of the superstars from the week previous, the Tengmalm's Owl and the Three-toed Woodpecker, but with snow near constant and a virtual blizzard at Labanoras, it was certainly winter birding in true Lithuanian fashion! With the country finally falling under the grip of winter, and the land's lakes turning to ice, it was time for me to pay a visit to the outflow channel at Electrenai power station. A constant churn of warm water from the generators guaranteeing ice-free conditions all winter, this is one of the premier inland locations in mid-winter - ducks and swans on the water, regular thrush flocks on the berry-laden bushes and always a chance of something out of the usual, the likes of which have included wintering Bitterns and, more famously, Lithuania's first ever Pygmy Cormorant two winters back. Nothing rare on this visit, but pleasant indeed. On arrival, large Fieldfare flocks scoffing berries, plus a handful of Hawfinch dotted about and, a winter scarcity, two Starlings too. Though this latter bird occasionally winters on the coast, inland records are far less abundant. One Black Woodpecker in the hedge as well, a strange location! On the water, plenty of birds to occupy a couple of hours - several hundred Goosanders, a similar number of Goldeneye, plus at least seven dapper Smew bobbing the waters with them. Also 28 Whooper Swans, a possee of Tufted Ducks and even greater numbers of Coot. As for the rest of the weekend, one day was spent in the garden, an unseasonal Blackbird about the most notable of the bunch there, then a return to Labanoras. A right hoolie of a wind blowing, whipping the snow into drifts and blocking access by car. Plenty of action at the feeders, the male White-backed Woodpecker the star as usual, but nearby Common Redpolls were also nice, as too the Middle Spotted Woodpeckers in and out with regularity. I did attempt to locate the Three-toed Woodpecker of the week before - no joy, but a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker provided some compensation - the sixth species of woodpecker at this locality in a week! 28-29 January. Plunging Temperatures. A land carpeted in snow, sparkling blue skies, temperatures now dropping to below minus 20 C at night, set to fall to minus 30 within a week. Net result, oodles of birds at the feeders - nothing out of the usual, but a pleasure to soak up the atmosphere, gangs of woodpeckers flocking in (two Black Woodpeckers, six Great Spotted Woodpeckers and three Middle Spotted Woodpeckers simultaneously at Labanoras), plus the garden favourites, Crested Tits in constant activity, Nuthatches and Tree Sparrows abuzz at the sunflowers.