

February 2012. Blast of the Arctic.

Contributed by Jos
Last Updated Sunday, 25 March 2012

Brrr, minus 30 C hits the country! Sparkling ice crystals dappling the snows, birds all puffed up like little tennis balls, two solid weeks of temperatures dipping to lows of minus 20 and minus 30C. And an absolute mega at the feeders - one smart Black Woodpecker, not a species that I ever expected hanging off a peanut feeder. Also, with a return of the super star Three-toed Woodpecker and a good range of others including Great Grey Shrike, it was certainly a good first half of the month.

1-2 February. Chilly Start to the Month. Minus 28 C in the garden, humongous numbers of birds flocking to the feeders, four Siskins amongst the hordes, one Middle Spotted Woodpecker at the basement window too. 4 February. Gobstopper!!! Black Woodpeckers never use feeders, everybody knows that!

Dreamt many a day about this holy grail of the woodpeckers dropping down onto a feeder, wishful thinking indeed. Experimented with different foods over the years, never tempted them in.

Strange tell-tale signs over the last couple of weeks however were beginning to make me wonder if the unimaginable had actually happened - one of the wintering Black Woodpeckers had been showing a decided interest in the area immediately around the cabin, one heavy-duty feeder had mysteriously become dented in at the bottom. Hmm, years of hammering by even White-backed Woodpeckers had failed to dent that, it would seem something with a hefty bill was in action.

And then today, crunching through the snow, the temperature touching a numbing minus 30 C, I topped up the feeders, then retired to my chair at the open door, gas fire on full blast. Many birds in and out, a Willow Tit new for the year, off yonder one or two of the three Black Woodpeckers that are wintering this year.

An hour in, temperatures still well below minus 20, in swooped a male Black Woodpecker. A tad nervous, flitting around from tree to tree, probably seeing me quite clearly, the bird seemed very intent on coming in. I froze and crouched a little, onto the feeder tree. Stone me, it really appeared he was going to come to feed, I couldn't believe it. A Great Tit upset affairs for a second by flying into the cabin straight over my head. Two loops on the room, out the door again. Wiggles around the trunk, sidles down to the feeder, I am astounded - a full-blown male Black Woodpecker on the feeder four metres in front of my nose!

Truly amazing! And there he stayed, near half an hour, back and fro onto the feeder, even down onto the bird table at one stage (a metre and a half from me!). Middle and Great Spotted Woodpeckers dwarfed by this splendid bird, the titmice mere specks in comparison. 5 February. No let up in the temperatures, about minus 28 C at dawn, not rising that much through the day. Crested Tits active in the garden, Middle Spotted Woodpecker at the basement window again. Needless to say, very little open water left now, the river in Vilnius freezing over, all lakes long since vanished under ice thick enough to drive on. Popped over to Electrenai for a quick gander at the warm water outflow at the power station - a brave Grey Heron lingering, one Moorhen ambling along with the remaining Mallard and Goosanders, but otherwise an almost total blank on the waterbird front. Still plenty of Fieldfares scoffing berries, rather photogenic ...provided fingers didn't freeze before getting the desired shots! 12-13 February. Better and Better. Absolute numbers at the feeders not shattering records, a number of usual species absent, but what a corking start to 2012 it has been. And, in temperatures still falling to a cool minus 22 C, this weekend's visit to my feeding station at Labanoras just about rounded it all off - a super day with all of the year's stars bunched together! After crunching through the meadows, a flock of about ten Goldfinches hanging of exposed seed heads, I arrived at the cabin to find a Great Grey Shrike lurking, clearly intent on preying on a hapless Great Tit that might take the wrong turning. I sat on my veranda, disgorging the contents of my pockets to root out my keys, but then soon got distracted - tap ... tap ... tap, the same quiet periodic tapping of a month back. Yep, I was pretty sure it was my friend from January - a short stroll across the frozen lake and there he was, one super stunning male Three-toed Woodpecker pecking away on rotting alders. Nice indeed.

Thereafter, retired to the warmth of the cabin, I settled and waited - I was hoping very much that the big black butch one would also return. And in no time at all, so he did - swooping straight into the tree containing his favourite feeder, the Black Woodpecker was back, clearly now a regular on the feeders. Chomped away a good half hour he did, dwarfing Middle Spots et al, even having a nibble of some fat I had taken. All glorious stuff. A wander around the swamp proved uneventful - not only could I not relocate the Three-toed Woodpecker, but I also drew a total blank on White-backed Woodpecker, a bird that has proved elusive for a couple of weeks now. Coffee finished, all birds at the feeders enjoyed, it was time to return to my car, a parting farewell coming in the form of a large flock of Mealy Redpolls, about 50 in all feeding in alders and birches. Also one Red Fox and one Roe Deer. Back in Vilnius next day, a couple of extras at my feeders there - three Greenfinches joining the Tree Sparrows at the sunflowers and a Fieldfare dropping in for apples. 18-26 February. Moderation of Temperatures. Quite a rise in temperatures for the end of the month, hovering at the minus 5 to minus 10 range, but bucketloads of snow to compensate. All ticked over nicely at both Labanoras and the Vilnius feeders - the Three-toed Woodpecker remained throughout, so too the nut-hanging Black Woodpecker. Added attractions included the arrival of a Coal Tit at the Labanoras feeders, my first for several years, and a Grey-headed Woodpecker in full yodel - woodpecker species number seven for the year.