

April 2012. Crane dance, finch fest.

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Cold start to the month, hot end. Highlights of the first half included flocks of obliging Hawfinches and Bramblings in the garden and an excellent mini trip to Sweden, the rewards being 20,000 Cranes at Hornborga and in the forests to the north, Hawk, Pygmy and Great Grey Owls. With temperatures reaching 28 C late in the month, the expected glut of birds included a flock of 1400 Little Gulls, a couple of Marsh Sandpipers, two inland Avocets, a Citrine Wagtail and plenty of common migrants.

1 April. Snow and Ice ...is this April Fool?

A fresh dusting of snow, temperatures ranging from minus 3 to plus 2, welcome to April! Ample reward however - four cracking Hawfinches again at the bedroom window.

Later, in blue skies, but bitter winds, I ventured up to Labanoras. With the cold northerlies, precious little in the way of new migrants, a couple of Mistle Thrushes in the meadows, the resident Cranes too, but the day's saving grace came late in the afternoon - drifting north, my first White Storks of the year, a pair.

2 April. Garden Bonanza.

Finch Fantastic!

Yet more snow, but what an amazing result in the garden. All just metres from the bedroom window, from humble beginnings, the finch flock is now reaching humongous proportions - TEN Hawfinches, about 120 Siskins, 30 or so newly arrived Chaffinches, a similar number of Greenfinches and, new in on this day, two most splendid Bramblings, a male and female.

This buzz of colour and bickerings, a snowy backdrop and all the usual Tree Sparrows as added flavour, quite a sight indeed. Also, a small arrival of thrushes and, even better, a Woodlark singing from near the pines at the back, first ever

for the garden.

5-8 April. Hornborga & Owls.

A mini break into the wilds of Sweden, an absolutely cracking trip not only savouring the delights of 20,000 Common Cranes on the lakeshore at Hornborga, but also venturing into the forestlands a little further north to notch up specials such as Capercaillie, Rough-legged Buzzard and a superb trio of owls - Pygmy Owl, Northern Hawk Owl and, the ghost of the north, Great Grey Owl.

For photographs and full details of this trip [CLICK HERE](#).

9-14 April. Labanoras Arrivals.

The final death throws of a winter, snow on the 8th, ice lingering till about the 10th. In its place, temperatures climbing to a most pleasant 17 C, flowers in forest and meadow, various species of frog and toad, plus butterflies in the form of Brimstone and Small Tortoiseshell.

Plus too, bird arrivals on all fronts - Black Storks on two occasions, White Storks reoccupying nests in the garden and neighbouring plots, plus a good array of other incoming migrants - Marsh Harrier, Teal and Green Sandpiper amongst the best, flocks of Redwings, Dunnock, Chiffchaff and White Wagtail amongst the rest. Perhaps bird sightings of the week, however, were three pairs of House Sparrows in the garden stork nest (my best total ever) and a Reed Bunting - a rare bird on my land (5th record), this was a male alternating between the forest feeders and open land near my excavated pools.

15-19 April. Foreign Interlopers.

Still getting a buzz from my garden visitors - top treats including the Hawfinch flock rising to at least eleven, a splendid male Brambling in near full summer plumage, a Black Redstart singing from roof tops and Crested Tits still at the feeders. Also, a welcome wanderer, one Marsh Harrier flying over.

Cool mixed weather, a bit of a hotch-potch that seems to be holding migrants back. Still however two foreign guests reside in the garden - both sporting rings, the first is a Croatian Blue Tit and the second a Czech Siskin. The Siskin record very much follows an expected pattern, ringed near Prague a year earlier during the winter, now heading north for the summer. The Blue Tit is more puzzling though - arriving in December, it seems strange that a Croatian-ringed bird would move over 1000 km north to spend the winter!

20 April. The Second Tranche.

Not a financial bailout, but slice of the migrant pie! With temperatures finally touching the 20 C mark, so opened the

floodgates and in they poured, the second wave of migrants, the inter-continentals. And where better place to meet them than the Nemunas Delta, an expanse of low-lying flood meadows and one of Lithuania's most bird rich locations.

Northern Wheatear, both Common and Black Redstarts, Lesser Whitethroat and Willow Warblers, newly-arrived migrants all, the day's wanders began at Ventės Ragas. Not buzzing with birds, but pleasant enough for starters - Hawfinches in flocks, a single Wood Warbler, plenty of Blackcaps, heaps of Robins and Dunnocks. An hour or two and a good few species under the belt. One very unexpected Beaver too, a lost-looking individual swimming out into the lagoon from the headland at Ventės Ragas!

For me however, the day's attractions really lay a few kilometres to the south-east - aside fields under water in the delta proper, still thousands and thousands of geese at this most traditional of staging posts. Always an impressive sight and sound, White-fronted Geese filled the air with their harmonious honking, the spectacle all the more enjoyable for the presence of upward of 300 Barnacle Geese, a number I rarely see in Lithuania. Also a scatter of Greylags and, last remnants of the flocks already departed, a few Bean Geese. Paddlers and grazers, also countless hordes of ducks present, Wigeon, Pintail, Shoveler, Teal, Gadwall and Mallard at the fore, but also my first Garganey of the year and a few Shelduck too. Also waders including Ruff and Wood Sandpiper, a good showing of White-tailed Eagles and my first Lesser Spotted Eagle of the day.

Most of the morning passed in this location, attempts to locate a couple of Red-breasted Geese proved futile, but plenty more migrants - my first in Lithuania this year, Yellow Wagtails, Swallows and Whinchat, also umpteen White Storks upon their farmstead nests, Cranes yodelling past and good numbers of early generation butterflies, Brimstones and Small Tortoiseshells in particular. A brief tour of Rusne island, not very productive, then off to meadows north of Kintai I went, a most impressive sight awaiting - not only yet more geese and rafts of dabbling ducks, but immense clouds of Little Gulls, wafts of them arriving to bolster the already high numbers present. Hawking and floating, drifting from one set of flood pools to another, an absolute minimum of 1400 were present, glorious indeed. Amongst them, a few early Black Terns dancing too, plus more Garganey and, causing a little commotion, my second Lesser Spotted Eagle of the day.

A sunny track aside produced my non-avian highlight of the day - two perfect Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells, a butterfly I do not see every year, so most welcome. Also more Small Tortoiseshells and Brimstones. Also one Weasel here, plus several Roe Deer.

And the last bird sighting of the day, one Caspian Tern hawking the waters off Ventė.

21 April. More Migrants. A weekend of warm sunshine and its migrant action all round. Pied Flycatchers busy at the nestboxes in the Vilnius garden, a Wood Warbler in the pines and, up at Labanoras, treats non-stop - a nice vocal Wryneck to start things off, singing near the feeders before moving across the meadows to settle in some isolated birches off yonder. Other newly arrived birds included two pairs of Goldeneye around their nestboxes, Pied Flycatchers and Willow Warblers in the forest, plus a carbon copy of last year's first sighting, a Hobby perched in dead trees above the swamp zone. Also two White-backed Woodpeckers trying to outdrum each other, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker rather less noisy.

A raptor watch hoping to find Lesser Spotted Eagle or Osprey failed to locate either, but added a Snipe to the year list and, best of the lot, ten fly-over Bewick's Swans, the 151st species of bird recorded on my land. Twenty minutes later, two Mute Swans also flew over, plus the resident Cranes.

26-28 April. Butterfly Season and Top Class Birds. Glorious temperatures, the land bathing in sun and highs of 28 C. And with it, a classy start to the year's main butterfly season - a Camberwell Beauty in the garden, another at Baltoji Vokė, two Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells also at Baltoji Vokė and, at a variety of localities, good numbers of Orange Tips, Map Butterflies, Holly Blues, Small Tortoiseshells, Brimstones and Peacocks. Good stuff. Good birding too - a visit to Baltoji Vokė on the 28th reaping the rewards of the season - not only a splendid male Citrine Wagtail and a pair of Marsh Sandpipers, but absolute oodles of waders too, a semi-drained pool attracting several hundred birds. Top billing went to the gaudy Ruffs, males in resplendent dress, perhaps 400 in all, but no less impressive about 140 Spotted Redshanks (a very high total), one Temminck's Stint and, rarity of the day, a pair of Avocets, only my second ever at this inland locality. Greenshanks, Wood Sandpipers, Black-tailed Godwits, Snipe and Lapwings also present. In addition, a scattering of Black Terns and Little Gulls, my first White-winged Black Terns of the year, a number of Whinchats and other common migrants and, as mentioned above, very nice butterflies. To cap it off, a high-flying Hobby appeared over my garden later in the day. Perfect.