

June 2012. Wash Out Season.

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Last Updated Monday, 25 June 2012

June, near non-stop rain from start to finish! All the same, as the traditional month of nesting activity, Quail, Corncrake, Red-backed Shrikes and Golden Orioles were all in place by the beginning of the month, with Bee-eaters too at their select locations. Surprise of the month however was a cracking Little Crake on my plot a Labanoras, a real mid-summer surprise. Also abundances of frogs and toads, plus a few Common Lizards and a corking Adder.

1-2 June. Battle of the Boxes. June, so started the official summer in Lithuania, so opened the heavens, absolutely bucketing it down with rain for two days! Needless to say, as water flowed by in torrents, I barely ventured beyond my terrace. Still, bits and bobs to pass the time - Icterine Warblers singing despite the weather, an occasional wolf-whistle of a Common Rosefinch, the rare treat of a roding Woodcock at dusk (third ever for garden). However, the drama of most interest was a near annual tussle for occupancy of a prime locality nestbox. Though a near dozen boxes are scattered around the garden, most filled by Pied Flycatchers or tits, a single box mounted on a electricity pole seems to be the des res of most appeal. Every single year, Starlings take the box early on, raising a brood to fledge the noisy youngsters towards the end of May. Virtually every year, more exotic nestbox inhabitants then moves in, pairs of fantastic Swifts. And no exception this year, except the Starlings were a little late to vacate, the Swifts clearly still intent to take the box, hurtling in a great speed, causing the juvenile Starlings to tuck back into the hole at their approach, the adults getting all agitated. And, just as the battle seemed to be reaching its climax, so fledged the Starlings, the family quickly departing the garden. All free for the Swifts ...no quite, a male Common Redstart immediately popped into the hole to have a little nosey around! 3-6 June. Summer of Sorts. The skies a decided hotch-potch of weathers, sun one moment, dirty great clouds the next, temperatures a depressing 9 C! For all that however, Labanoras was an overwhelming picture of summerness - from White Storks feeding young in the nest to a regular to and fro of small birds feeding nestlings in forest, meadow and bush, it is action everywhere. Also adding much noise and activity, great flocks of squawking Starlings bolstered by scrawny fledglings fresh from the nest. And down in the grass and on the water edges, frogs by the dozen, great swirls of tadpole masses in the pools too. With a wet-my-lips from Quail in the meadow, still a trickle of migrants coming in, the Quail probably my last regular breeder to arrive. Causing a coffee cup to go flying, a most fine Black Kite was also very welcome, a species that breeds some years, but irregular in others. Prey tangling in its talons, it seemed to be a fish, but couldn't be sure. Also noted a fly-over Cormorant and a fly-over Stock Dove, both expected birds. More generally good numbers of Golden Orioles, Icterine Warblers and Common Rosefinch all present this year, Whinchats seem to be quite the opposite. And so ticked by the next few days, generally varying from cool to cold, but a continuing buzz of action at nestboxes in the garden. Pied Flycatchers feeding young in the box by the kitchen window, Spotted Flycatchers under a roof, White Wagtails fledging their brood, the Swifts triumphant in the battle of the boxes. 9-10 June. A Splash of Colour. With a brief return of the sun and temperatures worthy of the season, so slipped Lithuania into the lazy days of summer. Butterflies increasing - my first Heath Fritillaries and Mazarine Blues of the season, plus more Swallowtails, a Short-tailed Blue, several Common Blues and quite a number of extremely early Pale Clouded Yellows. Amongst the birds, the best of the weekend's treats were at least ten European Bee-eaters, splashes of colour guaranteed to brighten any day. A recent coloniser, the birds now breed in at least four separate localities in central and eastern Lithuania, a most welcome addition to the country's avifauna. With skies full of their bubbling calls and roadside wires adorned by these characters, pleasant indeed it was to pass a few hours in their company. Serving as a backdrop to the main stars, a usual selection of more common birds engaged in the hectic activities of song, display and feeding young, Whinchats, Yellow Wagtails and Marsh Warblers in good numbers, White Storks podding along. Up at Labanoras, all settling into summer bliss - Red-backed Shrike breeding aside my 'shrike pile', Hobbies divebombing a passing Common Buzzard, Marsh Harriers quartering the meadows. In addition to butterflies mentioned above, one Common Lizard too - a fine individual sunbathing on my stone barbecue. 14 June. Weather Delays. By rights, all should be soaring on the butterfly front, the traditional peak of the year just two to three weeks away. So, with expectation off I went, a prowl of my favoured tracks south of the city. Sun and temperatures just perfect, but barely a butterfly to be found - the preceding cool wet weeks clearly leaving the season rather behind schedule. Covering my normal route of several hours in about 30 minutes, I zagzagged with barely a butterfly to slow me down, a few Mazarine Blues and Small Heaths here and there, Amanda's Blues on a damp patch, a Swallowtail drifting by, fresh Heath Fritillaries on woodland rides. Highlight of the trip, both on a small patch of meadow, my first Large Coppers and Large Chequered Skippers of the year, stunners both. 16-17 June. Mega Alert, Little Crake. The presence of Beavers on one's land is a mixed blessing - whilst I mourn the regular loss of fine specimens of birch and a general degradation of the woodland dying under high water levels, the resultant habitat is continually evolving into a mosaic of open water, encroaching reedbed and stands of skeletal boughs standing stark in the water. Over recent years, in territory that was dense deciduous forest when I bought the land, Garganey have floated by, Marsh Harriers regularly quarter and even Bittern has stopped to boom. The dead trees are a magnet to woodpeckers, eight species occurring, and recent colonisers have included Sedge Warblers (first recorded three years ago, four singing males this year). And this weekend, it was the treat of treats in this new habitat ...even if it did take me two days to understand what the bird was! All started on Saturday, a fine afternoon and evening in the meadows and wet woodland. In the meadow, an abundance of Whinchats and Skylarks feeding young, a pair of Grey Partridge strutting the edge of a track and, across the grasslands, at least three calling Corncrakes. Also Icterine Warblers and Common Rosefinches in shrubby areas, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker trailing fledglings and Red-backed Shrike still on territory. In the woodland, however, more intriguing things were about to play themselves out! Rounding a small finger of land that extrudes into the swamp zone, a gentle persistent call seemed to be emanating from a reed patch just yonder. Hmm, I could not swear it was not a frog, many of them in voice too, but most peculiar it was, my best

description of it hovering somewhere between an offbeat Moorhen and a purr! But whatever it was, it was not going to show, the thing remaining highly stationary in its patch of reed. Just as pondered what it could be, another bird caught my attention - a male Reed Bunting sporting a mouthful of food. A common bird in much of the country maybe, but I have only ever seen them on my land five times, one of them being earlier this spring when a male was present. Here however, it soon became evident that this bird was feeding young in a nest further in the swampy area. Very nice, a first breeding record, the transformation of forest to marshland continues! I retired for the day, still wondering about the mystery bird call, my best guess being the odd Moorhen theory, though still not entirely discounting odd frog either! Sunday morning, I woke in my cabin to rain beating down, drat! Mallard with chicks paddled past, four Cranes did a fly-over. An hour in, one coffee later, the rain lessened and I took a quick stroll back to the same spot. Not only was the bird still calling, but it had moved about 50 metres. Well, that excluded frog in my book, so if it was a bird, then it was going to be a new species for my land (neither Coot or Moorhen seen, nor any of the aquatic rails or crakes). The call seemed to be slowly working right, so I squatted and waited ...and waited. And then, some way to the right of where the bird had just been calling, a midget of a bird darted across a gap between reeds. Only got a brief look, but it seemed to be brownish with long legs and toes, a chick I thought, Water Rail now the best candidate. Expecting an adult to appear in the same gap, I waited further, but what was to appear was absolutely not what I was expecting! Not in the gap, but more-or-less where the 'chick' had disappeared to, a bird stepped up onto a semi-submerged tree trunk lying in the reeds. And blow me, it was not a chick of any description, but a stunning adult Little Crake! Along the trunk, he scampered, then plunged back into reeds, briefly venturing back into the open just beyond. Brilliant, though the bird breeds in Lithuania, it is both fairly rare and usually highly secretive, not a bird I had expectations to ever see on my land! As for the call, still weird - not the classic Little Crake song, I can only assume this continual purr is a contact call of some sort. Naturally, given the rain, I did not have my camera, so I wandered back to my cabin, a warm glow of contentment accompanying me. Another coffee and a period of gazing through the window, then all suddenly brightened up, the sun breaking through and the clouds dispersing. I returned with my camera and was delighted to find the bird not only still calling, but now in a very close patch of reed. With a bit of prediction, I settled at likely spot and began another wait. A few minutes later, there he was, one superb bird strutting down another semi-submerged trunk, click, click, click, some nice photographs, my new superstar now caught for prosperity. Nice day elsewhere too - Great, Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers all with young, plenty more on the breeding front, but nothing was going to eclipse my Little Crake. Clouds returned, rain began again, I departed. 23-24 June. Raptor Points. One week on, barely a pause in the rain throughout, and it was back to Labanoras. Two days in the meadows, forest and water edge, but if the mega Little Crake was still present, I can only assume he'd moved into the swamplands just yonder, an effective 'Bermuda Triangle' in there! Quite amazing, in total contrast to the forecast, the sun not only deigned to appear, but gave a pretty good performance all weekend - and with it, a most welcome showing of raptors. In addition to the usual Common Buzzards and Marsh Harriers criss-crossing, an Osprey flew north mid-afternoon on the 23rd, presumably the same bird doubling back at dusk. Also a pair of hawking Hobbies, a fly-over Sparrowhawk, a Lesser Spotted Eagle dropping in to roost in a dead tree in the flood forest and, a bird that has been very thin on the ground over the last couple of years, a male Honey Buzzard engaging in 'butterfly' display high above my meadows. Otherwise, fairly quiet - Corncrakes still calling, some fly-over Crossbills and still plenty of birds tending young in the nests and nestboxes.