

August 2012. A Summer Ending.

Contributed by Jos

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After three weeks exploring the wilds of South Africa, August saw me back in Lithuania, plodding the familiar grounds. With a distinct feel of an autumn in the making, some good days to welcome me back to the country, highlights of which were a Red-footed Falcon and mini-influx of Nutcrackers at Labanoras, plus a wealth of late butterflies, including Idas Blue, Queen of Spain Fritillary and Large Tortoiseshell, and a good passage of raptors, the highlights being Osprey, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Honey Buzzard and Common Kestrel.

1-3 August. Butterfly Tail-Ends. With the peak of the Lithuanian butterfly season falling in mid-July, my foreign exploits yet again deprived me of the rich picking available in those days. However, with warm sunny days still dominating, my return at the beginning of August offered hope of mopping up the rag tags of the bounties. Off I went, trips to the meadows, sand tops and forest glades south of Vilnius. An excellent selection in all, 35 species a respectable total for August. Starting in rank meadows, White Storks stalking adjacent, small flocks trailing tractors, I began the butterfly quest. Scarce Coppers and Small Heaths still common, a good showing of Queen of Spain Fritillaries, soon I was bumping into species I thought I had missed this year, not least a couple of Dark Green Fritillaries and a Large Grizzled Skipper. Also Pale Clouded Yellows, Commas and generation two Map Butterflies. On my favoured route through adjacent pine forest, though largely quiet, the glades produced both Pallas's Fritillary and High Brown Fritillary, two more that I supposed I had missed this year. A couple of days later, a change of habitats saw me on sandy soils, a habitat that holds a few very select species - after a stunning Camberwell Beauty gliding through ancient pines, I arrived at an area of open heath. Here, after much searching, with single examples of each, I finally found the butterflies I was seeking, Spotted Fritillary, Niobe Fritillary and Dusky Meadow Brown. Also good numbers of Greyling still on the wing, a couple of Rock Graylings and an amazing concentration of blues. Hundreds strong, they were all the studded blues, a confusing group of several very similar species. As would be expected, the vast majority proved to be Silver-studded Blues, exquisite specimens, but in their midst, at least a few Idas Blue and a Reverdin's Blue, good butterflies both. 4-11 August. Labanoras, Shades of Autumn and Secrets of the Night. Though warmth and sun still prevail, the overwhelming feeling is of an autumn in fast approaching, gone are the bulk of the breeding passerines, gone are many of the White Storks. Three visits between the 4th and 11th, autumn treats on all - a lingering Golden Oriole on the 4th, a scatter of Red-backed Shrikes throughout and, arguably the birds of the week, a mini-influx of Nutcrackers, at least a dozen flocking into to the hazel groves, the bushes positively choc'a'bloc with them tapping away to crack nuts open, a few youngsters noisily begging from adults. Whilst a fairly regular bird on my land from late August, this arrival of Nutcrackers, resulting in a tap tap tap echoing from all quarters to muffle even the woodpeckers, was most welcome. Good raptor watching over the days - in addition to regular Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards and occasional Hobbies, observations of the sky picked up a male Goshawk on two occasions, one Black Kite, a Honey Buzzard (only my second of the season) and better still, my first Montagu's Harrier of the year, a female quartering. Better still however, only the second ever on my land and an uncommon passage migrant in the country, one superb Red-footed Falcon on the 4th, a juvenile looking most dapper. One week later, and occupying exactly the same spot, a female Common Kestrel took up residence, another bird rare in this area. All records of these two small falcons on my land have occurred in autumn, the previous Red-footed Falcon being on 14 August 2004 and the five previous Kestrels occurring on dates between 20 August and 18 September. Away from birds, it was time for new games on my land, a recent purchase of a night cam is going to unlock the secrets of the night ...positioning the camera at a likely spot, perhaps a trail or woodland opening, the camera automatically captures images of anything that wanders in front, infra-red at night, colour by day. And so it was, I left the camera with some excitement, strapped to a tree overlooking a patch of boggy ground, trampled by various tracks and trails. Result, one week later, yippee, success - two adult Wild Boars with a youngster had strolled by, the grainy night shots capturing them a treat. Whilst most of the images consisted of backs and tails due to the blighters rooting about right underneath the camera, one or two were certainly good enough for my first attempt. Other news, one Large Tortoiseshell was the best of dwindling numbers of butterflies. 15-18 August. Drift Migrants. An ever-quietening land, Labanoras now virtually devoid of most of the summer migrants. Good time for land maintenance - paths cleared and work to repair my cabin completed, a new roof replacing the remains of the previous that had been smashed by a falling tree. Plenty of minor distractions to disrupt the work - Nutcrackers still throughout the woodland, a Black Woodpecker back in the swamp forest and, rather unusual, a passage flock of Whinchats in the meadow, about 20 roving through. It was to the skies however that the best action was to be found. On the 18th August, the lightest of winds and a warm sun combined to produce perfect conditions for the first appreciable movements of the 'big wings' - a gentle drift southward of storks and raptors. Wheeling high, first six White Storks, then an hour or so later another 21, a farewell offering I suppose. Also a trickle of Common Buzzards, one Honey Buzzard, two Lesser Spotted Eagles, a female Montagu's Harrier and an Osprey, southbound all. Six Common Cranes also overhead, a Hobby hurtling through and one Marsh Harrier hunting the meadow. Also bumped into another passage migrant, a fine adult Caspian Tern - not in my land unfortunately, but near Vilnius. 25 August. Night Cam Goes Live! Amazing video of night critters on my land - packs of Wild Boar feasting on apples, Raccoon Dogs in and out, a Badger strolling by ...my first ever attempt at taking video and certainly my first ever attempt at trying to edit video, I have to say I am mightily impressed with the result, not least for the unexpected show that the mammals put on! *** CLICK HERE FOR VIDEO FILM *** Aside the mammal feast, one unexpected bird sighting for my Labanoras plot, three Great White Egrets flying over, only my second record here. Nutcrackers still active in the woodland, various woodpeckers on and around the feeders. 27 August. Season's End. Night Cam back in place, all the previous offerings of apples scoffed, a new sackful unloaded. Hopefully more video within a week. With a warm sun in place, a summer finale in the skies - 80 White Storks swirling on thermals, a splendid sight as they drifted ever south. Adjacent, pointers to a

productive winter season ahead, already heaps and heaps of birds on the feeders and, most unusual for late August, already a male Grey-headed Woodpecker putting in an appearance, along with two Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and the usual characters. Nutcrackers continue to entertain and, my only one of the year, a Wheatear was a most welcome addition to the day's activities, a male flitting up to post tops aside the track.