

December 2012. Winter Wonderland.

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A month in Africa and another in India, separated and followed by poor weather in Lithuania and a relative lack of activity, my monthly diary had fallen by the wayside. With the start of December and the onset of snow and the sub-zero, time to get the reports up and running again!

And what a month, seven species of woodpeckers on my land, Red Squirrels at both my Vilnius and Labanoras feeding stations, an unseasonal Lesser Whitethroat in Vilnius, an bird showing features of the eastern halimodemdri race and, to top it off, excellent video of a Pine Martin attending my feeders!

1 December. A Grand Haul T'was a Blue Moon over Lithuania this day, super birds both in my Vilnius garden and at Labanoras. A few flurries of snow overnight, temperatures dipping to below zero, my plan for the day was to visit my feeders at Labanoras. Beforehand however, plenty of time to enjoy the buzz of action in my garden - all the usuals in good numbers, Crested Tits still gracing the feeders, but then a surprise! Feeding on half rotten apples still hanging from an old apple tree, a Lesser Whitethroat! A common summer visitor, but most remarkable to find one in winter, I would suppose there are few if any previous records in Lithuania. And not just a standard Lesser Whitethroat, but one that showed features of the eastern halimodemdri race, a vagrant to Europe - the bird was a degree paler than the usual summer birds here, the back significantly so, more or less a pale sandy shade. Add a Red Squirrel scampering up the pines beyond and I thought I was having a very good day. At Labanoras, it was about to get a lot better! Nine Waxwings in orchards on arrival, but the Blue Moon event was the notch-up of a full seven species of woodpeckers, something I can only achieve in the very best of winters on my land! Kicking off the action, two White-backed Woodpeckers, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker and a couple of Great Spotted Woodpeckers on the feeders. Also of note, a Willow Tit joining the Marsh Tits and, the highlight of my autumn/winter so far, two gorgeous Red Squirrels that have adopted my feeders (finally ending a ten-year wait!). A Black Woodpecker was hammering away on an alder stump out in the swamp zone and a male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was quietly tapping away some 50 metres to the left. Five species down, all the regulars in the bag. One week earlier, a mega star from the previous winter had returned to reclaim his territory - a superb male Three-toed Woodpecker. Highly localised in Lithuania, the only records on my land so far consisted of singles from February to March 2009 and another from January to March 2012. Lingerin in exactly the same patch of trees - and indeed sometimes exactly the same individual tree - this bird may well be the bird returning from the previous winter. Most welcome he is! The sixth species of the day. And then a low yodel and in swooped number seven, a female Grey-headed Woodpecker. Common on the feeders some winters, elusive other years, she was just the icing on the cake, what a splendid collection to start the month. 2 December. Doorway Delights. The early days of December would not be high on my list of recommended times to visit Lithuania, the weather often dire, the country usually fairly devoid of birds - summer and autumn birds gone, the crisp snows and occasional winter specials yet to arrive. However, with a bevy of woodpecker dripping off every other branch around my feeders in Labanoras the day before, surely I could find at least a few of them to keep Mark Hows happy for the day, a visiting birder usually resident in the woodpecker-starved nation of ye olde Great Britain. So off we went, departing Vilnius pre-dawn, temperatures just below freezing. Arrived at Labanoras with the light still poor. Great Spotted Woodpeckers on the feeders, Willow Tits numbering three. I proposed a quick walk before settling in the cabin, a wander to some choice areas - this turned out to be quite a good move, White-backed Woodpecker found quite quickly, relatively brief views also of the Three-toed Woodpecker from the day before and a distant Black Woodpecker. Not a bad start. Back at the cabin however, after an initial half hour of relative calm, during which the highlight was a Black Woodpecker dropping onto a tree just outside the door, things were about to go ballistic! In a manic 45 minutes, a male White-backed Woodpecker kicked off the action flopping down onto the nearest feeder, almost immediately followed by another, this time a female. Battles with a bolshy Great Spotted Woodpecker then began, repeated chases back and fro, other Great Spots arriving, then a third White-backed Woodpecker, another female! Ooo, nice. A Middle Spotted Woodpecker flitted in, then almost immediately out. The status quo at this point: centre feeder, White-backed Woodpecker; left feeder, White-backed Woodpecker. Out back, one or two Great Spots on trunks, the third White-backed on a distant tree. Things were getting a bit crazy now, in from the right, amongst umpteen Great Tits, Nuthatches and assorted Marsh and Willow Tits, one male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker! Straight onto one of the trees with a feeder he went, the little fella was almost nose to nose with one of the feeding White-backed Woodpeckers! Commotion just beyond, a woodpecker swooping to momentarily displace the White-backed Woodpecker. Stone me, it was the Three-toed Woodpecker arriving, almost never have I seen this species in this part of the forest! From the open door of my cabin, a truly remarkable collection of birds gathering in front! And then it got one better - plonking itself on a trunk directly above a feeder, then edging its way down, a Grey-headed Woodpecker - not the female seen the day before, but a newly arrived male. And so continued the woodpecker frenzy for another half an hour, Middle Spotted Woodpeckers putting in only brief appearances, but the rest truly doing the business, White-backs almost constantly present, the Three-toed staying for about 20 minutes. And to top the lot, in hopped my pride and joy, one of the recently arrived Red Squirrels! Doorway delights! Getting all seven woodpecker species is a rare event indeed, to get all seven without even stepping out from the cabin door is a treat I honestly did not expect for my visitor from the UK, a good day indeed. For desserts, after a bunch of Roe Deer prancing across my meadows, we then happened upon a flock of about

150 Waxwings in a nearby town, before driving off into Middle Lithuania to shiver as cold winds buffeted our back while watching a herd of about 50 European Bison grazing in fields adjacent to forest. A long drive north produced almost zilch else, one Great Grey Shrike, one Rough-legged Buzzard and a sunset marked by more Waxwings. Night adventures flopped, a long drive through forests producing only a Brown Hare. 3-6 December. Come Downeth the Snow, In Cometh the Red. Flurries day after day, Lithuania slowly transforming into its winter coat, a frost dipping to minus ten by the week's end. No real birding, but a tale of amazing coincidence. Ten years and more I have waited for Red Squirrels to discover my feeders and then, like London buses, they all come at once! Literally a week after they adopted my feeders at Labanoras, and a single has started to visit my Vilnius garden too! Currently plucking apples from a tree, I have moved peanut feeders in his direction, most cool indeed it would be to have them at both localities throughout the winter! Other things of note, a lone Starling also scoffing apples (a rare bird in winter here), a bunch of Fieldfares and a few Greenfinches arriving at the sunflower feeders. 7-9 December. More White Stuff, More Woodpeckers. Winter truly arrived, minus 11 C on my land, a good layer of snow carpeting all. And with the snow, absolute bonkers on the feeders, numbers climbing ever higher. Three-toed Woodpecker not seen this week, but stacks of action at the feeders, Great Spotted Woodpeckers especially up in numbers on the week before. Estimated numbers of woodpeckers present at the feeding station:

- Black Woodpecker - 2
- Grey-headed Woodpecker - one male, one female
- White-backed Woodpecker - one male, two females
- Great Spotted Woodpecker - minimum of 12
- Middle Spotted Woodpecker - minimum of 3
- Lesser Spotted Woodpecker - one male, one female

In subsequent days, a Smew noted on waters near Vilnius, a lingering Blackbird in the Vilnius garden and the usual Crested Tits et at the garden feeders. Red squirrels elusive at both feeders! 13-17 December. Blizzards & Critters of the Night. More snow, near blizzard conditions, a mean wind whipping up drifts to block roads and tracks. Minus 25 on the forecast for the next week! Up at Labanoras, slamming and bouncing my car into drifts as I ploughed across meadows to reach my feeders, I truly hoped not to get stuck, the thought of digging with a cold wind blasting down my neck not very appealing! With an overseas trip imminent, this was almost certainly my last visit for a while ...up went the mega feeders, colossal things that hold enough kilograms of nuts to tide over the coming weeks, then a last chance to savour the rewards - an amazing four White-backed Woodpeckers now present, plus the Grey-headed Woodpeckers still and plenty of other bits and bobs. A lot of creaking trees in the gusting wind, the lakes also now totally frozen, but a search for my Three-toed Woodpecker proved fruitless, it does appear he has departed. Lots of animal tracks criss-crossing - Elk, Roe Deer, Wild Boar, Red Fox - but little tell-tale signs at my feeders were suggesting another critter was also paying a visit at night! Hunks of fat had been pulled down, torn from their hangings ... perhaps a Red Fox, but if my suspicions were correct, the fella was rather more special. I had left a night cam overlooking a strategically placed bait ... ***** CLICK HERE FOR THE VIDEO *** NIGHT RAIDER** Jays and a Raven also captured at the fat, plus passing Wild Boar and Roe Deers. Nice. Meanwhile, back in Vilnius, yet more unseasonal visitors popping into the garden - after the earlier Lesser Whitethroat and Starling, the latest addition was a Song Thrush, a bird I have never encountered mid-winter before! Also a good flock of Fieldfares scoffing apples and two Blackbirds. Rather more dramatic, though less pleasant for an unfortunate Nuthatch, was the appearance of a male Sparrowhawk buzzing the garden for several days, hurtling in to catch a Nuthatch one day, hawk and prey landing on the snow right outside my window, feathers floating across the gleaming white for the next 20 minutes as hawk proceeded to pluck and eat the bird! 19-31 December. Fuerteventura & Tenerife. Skipping the onset of even colder conditions in Lithuania, the last weeks of 2012 were spent on the Canary Islands, a trip succeeding in seeing all ten endemics and plenty of other nice birds too. Full report available [HERE](#).