

February 2007. A mega bevy of peckers!

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Plunging temperatures, snow and bucketloads of birds at the feeders, all the classic ingredients of a fantastic winter month in Lithuania. Temperatures hit minus 20 early in the month and a chilling minus 32 later on - a surefire way to get bird numbers up! A mid-month census across the four feeding sites suggested almost 1250 birds present, but for sheer wow, little could beat the stunning male White-backed Woodpecker present throughout. Alongside this star, some of the month's other highlights included Grey-headed Woodpeckers increasing to four, Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers doing likewise and the northern Long-tailed Tits reaching nine. Black Woodpeckers and a Goshawk also put in appearances and, no less impressive, Tree Sparrows finally decided the feeders in the new garden were worthy places to dine, even dragging in a House Sparrow on one occasion. Away from the feeders, I did very little birding elsewhere in the country - most of it is frozen and birdless - but I couldn't go without a short mention of the Steller's Eiders in Palanga, Smews in Klaipeda and White-tailed Eagles in Kaunas, all the result of a short trip westward.

1-3 February, six woodpecker day!

New month, new weather - as the temperatures began to fall and the snow pile up, there was a certain anticipation in the air - as the greens of the land were covered, birds would soon be flocking onto the feeders in ever greater numbers. Vilnius got the action going with a massive hike in the numbers of ground feeders ...reaching record numbers and creating a right little squabble of birds under the bird table, a minimum of 40 Yellowhammers joined the flurry of action, topped off by some 110 Tree Sparrows and 45 Greenfinches, all rather healthy numbers. A lone Hawfinch paid no heed to the crowds, he just ploughed his way in wherever he chose - big beak makes for good place in the pecking order! Two more Hawfinches were seen during the month - both in the city centre!

Good though the garden was, I was itching to get back up to the land and forest feeders - would the White-backed Woodpecker still be about, would it let me get a photo? So, finally the Saturday arrived and off I was, up to my land. More or less a blizzard all day and snow up to half a metre, but I got to the house no problem and was immediately left feeling dead chuffed - at long last, Tree Sparrows had discovered the feeders, and not just one or two, but a whole noisy gaggle of about 45!!! Right little characters, I couldn't understand why they would roost in the stork nest down the garden, yet turn their noses up at my feeders! Not any more though, now they grace this feeding station too. Scattered a little extra grain to keep them happy and crumbled a few fatballs and immediately a Blackbird popped down too, a not-so-common bird in mid-winter Lithuania.

So, into the house and time for coffee & sat and looked out the window, still Marsh and Willow Tits to watch as they flitted in and out, also plenty of Nuthatches, but I was more gazing across to my forest off yonder - in there is my main feeding station and I was hoping that White-backed Woodpecker of the week before might still be about. So, after not too many minutes, I jumped into the car and went sliding off through the snow & came to a sinking stop! Snow was way too deep and the car was well and truly stuck, ho hum, not again - fourth time that week! Looked up and there was a Great Grey Shrike! Abandoned the car and trudged the kilometre instead, lugging a new sack of peanuts with me - darn knackerer it is walking through knee-deep snow with a half ton of peanuts weighing you down! Got there, clambered into the cabin, hadn't even closed the door and I glanced round to see a sight that just left me amazed - on feeders already, six Long-tailed Tits, two Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers & the White-backed Woodpecker!!! Sat there and watched, gently pulling the door in closed - soon it got better, both Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers dropped in, so too did the pair of Grey-headed Woodpeckers. It was shaping up to be a classic day, another one that makes you realise their ain't much wrong with the world. Woodpeckers were more or less present all the time, perhaps as many as six or seven Great Spotted in total, along with four Middle Spotted, three Lesser Spotted, the White-backed and the two Grey-headed!

And if that little lot wasn't staggering enough, a Black Woodpecker appeared too, swooping over and dropping into tree cover & six species of woodpecker without as much as needing to turn your head!

9-11 February, census time

Coldest nights of the winter so far, night temperatures dipping to about minus 22 ...the perfect weather to attempt a weekend count of birds at the feeders. Not so easy when birds are flitting each and every way, a dozen here and a

dozen there, not to forget all the comings and goings across the day. Settled on a compromise, Great and Blue Tits would be gauged by estimates calculated by both observations and ringing results, ground feeders and others by largest single flocks observed and woodpeckers by direct observations of maximums of males and females, brighter individuals and plumage differences. Counted the Vilnius garden on the Saturday, a fairly straightforward affair with only the Great and Blue Tits creating a headache, then quickly popped into the balcony feeders in the city, before heading up to the land to do my best at the garden and forest sites there!

Arrived at the garden to find no less than three Foxes prancing about in the meadows opposite, quite a wonderful sight against the sparkling snow. At the house, enjoying a customary coffee, soon I was enjoying the delights beyond the window - joining the newly established Tree Sparrow flock, not only had five Greenfinch dropped in, but the wintering Blackbird was still about, as was the lone Rook, a real star in these parts in winter. On top of those, I was rather chuffed with the arrival of a new male Grey-headed Woodpecker, this one by the house! Did a few counts, then parked the car in a snow drift half way across my meadow before tramping the remainder of the way to the forest cabin. Got the heaters going, then settled down to complete the weekend census - the usual pair of Grey-headed Woodpeckers were still present, so the garden bird was not a case of shifting preferences ...totally brilliant, three of these stunners were now on show. And, very nice too, the White-backed Woodpecker was still present and correct, as were the northern Long-tailed Tits. All in all, a good collection just at present.

And as for the counts from the four locations, a grand total of 1243 birds were logged! No less than 30 species in all, including a minimum of 33 woodpeckers (three Grey-headed, one Black, one White-backed, at least sixteen Great Spotted, nine Middle Spotted Woodpecker and three Lesser Spotted!). With Great and Blue Tits estimated at 705 and 125 each and Tree Sparrow at 173, it is not so difficult to imagine where the almost 300 kg of bird food and 120 fatballs had vanished to during the winter till then! Plenty of other goodies too - a single Crested Tit in Vilnius, Marsh and Willow Tits at all sites bar the Vilnius city site, a lone Rook in Labanoras and, significant as they don't usually winter in Lithuania, single Blackbirds in both gardens and four Chaffinches in Vilnius!

Bird action continued apace over the next days, with increasing numbers arriving at all sites, including several Siskins in Vilnius and a massive female Goshawk near the forest feeders in Labanoras. Trumping them all though, the delights of a busy urban roundabout produced the next attraction - at the height of the evening rush hour, just as I was entering one of the busiest roundabouts in the city, further blighted by major roadworks and enhanced no less by snow, I happened to spot a flock of birds dropping out of the sky into bushes strategically placed between dumper trucks! It was Waxwings and not just one or two, but a whole flock of about 80 ! Did a quick change of lanes and swung back for another loop of the roundabout, very nice birds indeed, makes city driving so much more pleasing!

15-19 February, the birds pay back!

In the building my reserve, the stocking of the feeding stations and just about everything else related, there is one thing for certain ...the birds are one long economic drain! Not complaining mind, the pleasure they give sure outweighs the semi-poverty they inflict, but it was rather nice to see them actually paying their way for once! For the first time, the land was to see a bird group visiting, a party of six - the little revenue raised at least covering the food bill for quite a while!

More than the feeders though, this group had their sights on the wider delights of a winter Lithuania - Steller's Eider, White-tailed Eagle and other such nice nuggets. All was planned out - they arrived at a slightly anti-social 10 p.m. on the Thursday and off we went, a drive through the chilly night to a hotel at our first port of call, the sea coast at Palanga. Next day dawned cool and crisp - perhaps freezing might be a better description, it was about minus 12, but the sun was out and birds were waiting to be seen! Down to the coast we wandered, out across the ice-encrusted shoreline and to the first viewpoint ...Long-tailed Ducks, rafts of Goldeneye and Goosander, a few Red-throated Divers and Great Crested Grebes, but no sign of any Steller's Eiders. No panic, there was plenty of time and more and more birds were flying in all the time - some Mute Swans flew over, some Common Scoters appeared on the sea, then I happened to glance up - wow, incoming Steller's Eiders! In brilliant sun, a male and female came zooming past, just a few metres in front of us and giving good views to all! As various toes and fingers of various persons began to freeze, we retreated to the town, pumped life back into our veins with hot coffee, then headed off to another spot just down the coast. A flock of 32 Steller's Eiders were seen here that day, but not by us! Still, good close rafts of seaduck gave plenty of opportunities for some nice birding, then we decided to visit the main port city of the coast - Klaipeda. Not so much a cultural trip, but for the birding in the harbour mouth - a short ferry journey later and we were strolling along the river, big chunks of ice bobbing past and a backdrop of industrial cranes, port buildings and the city centre. One of the first birds was a young White-tailed Eagle flying directly overhead, very good to see, but not unexpected - many winter in the ice-free harbour area! Soon we were there, at the sea again and a favoured wintering spot for large concentrations of birds. Where the river joined the sea, we sat and scanned the amassed flotillas of Goosanders, several hundred strong, and amongst their numbers, several Red-breasted Mergansers too, plus at least six very fine Smew too, five of which males! Also added three Common Eiders here, plus a selection of other birds and cold-looking Cormorants!

With at least a dozen Foxes and several Roe Deer en route, we then crossed the entire breadth of the country for a couple of days in the Labanoras area, home to my feeding stations and pine forests that extend scores of kilometres in all directions. The choice of hotel was good, not only was it rather quaint in itself, but Waxwings had also deemed it a place most desirable, an obliging flock of seven settling in the bushes near the front entrance! Nice birds indeed, but my guests had come to see the woodpeckers, so to the feeders we went.

Crisp blue skies, temperatures at about minus 16 and feeders fully stocked - all was set for some good spotting! We had barely arrived when it was time to stop again ...some very showy and very stunning Bullfinches were flitting alongside the track, feeding on seedheads and barely paying attention to us just nearby. Moments later and we were savouring the woodpeckers too - with numbers slightly up on the previous week, they did us proud. Other than a no-show on the part of the White-backed Woodpecker, everything went like clockwork - plenty of Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers in and out, no less than four Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (two males and two females) and, with pairs at both the forest and garden sites, the Grey-headed Woodpecker had also increased to four! The forest site continued to boost the stunning northern Long-tailed Tits, while both Marsh and Willow Tits entertained at both locations.

One classic moment occurred as we sat enjoying coffee - outside, all squabbling over a prime location feeder, the male and female Grey-headed Woodpecker appeared together, five Great Spotted Woodpeckers chased each other about and a Middle Spotted Woodpecker flitted in and then decided it all too hectic and returned a little later. A Great Grey Shrike then flew behind the feeder, my solitary Rook wandered nearby and my prize wintering Blackbird made a start on the apples I've been chucking out (after a certain Irish chap decided frozen apples were not so tasty). One Fieldfare also appeared, none too common in winter, and the ever-present Jays swooped in to add character! But star of the day, for me if not them, joining the recently established Tree Sparrow flock, a female House Sparrow. And, not to be forgotten, Foxes were wandering about - four in the meadows this time.

And then came the last day - with a midday departure, there was just time to squeeze in one last adventure. Not so very far from the airport, we stopped off at a hydro-electric power station - being the only guaranteed ice-free waters in the whole country, this offers superb birding in the winter months and we were not to be disappointed - literally hundreds upon hundreds of Goldeneye, a fair few Tufted Duck and Coot, but the highlight, and seen within minutes of arriving, were the White-tailed Eagles! With at least 12 wintering at present, soon we were watching one immature on a rock mid-river, an adult in a tree behind, another flying down the river and yet another just a bit further down! A classic birding moment and to top it off, a final farewell bird for a trip, a lone Bean Goose paddled about, joining the ranks of Mute Swans and Mallard!

22-26 February, ending the month on a high!

A couple of mild days came to an abrupt halt when the forecasts began to predict things were really going down! We were headed for a weekend below minus 30 ...birds were stuffing themselves with food like there was no tomorrow, but still the Vilnius garden attracted up to four Chaffinches (normally a summer visitor), plus the two Crested Tits and, a nice surprise one day, I got home to find a Sparrowhawk sitting on my kitchen step, a unfortunate victim in its talons!

As the temperatures plunged, frequent visitor Paul Hackett flew in for another little trip - particularly well-timed, he arrived just in time for minus 31 on the land! Left him to his own devices for one day in my Vilnius garden, then we headed for the trusty feeders at Labanoras. Arrived at the house, defrosted a little over coffee and peered out the window - the usual Middle Spotted Woodpeckers to get things going - then took a trudge across the snows to the forest feeding station. Arrived and bam, male Grey-headed Woodpecker already on the feeders and then, suddenly, a very distinctive call - in flew a Black Woodpecker to perch in a tree just opposite the cabin. Middle and Great Spotted Woodpeckers soon followed, a great start and we hadn't even got in the cabin yet! Thanks to Mr H, my cabin is now equipped a new super addition - a made-to-measure photographic screen that surrounds the veranda and gives a chance to almost sit in amongst the birds. Bit chilly sitting in a breezy hide at minus 30, so rigged up the gas heating and there we were, almost as snug as bugs in a rug, albeit a frozen rug! No sooner had we settled and in came the northern Long-tailed Tits, a real treat for Mr H and still very nice for me too. A new addition to the feeders, two Siskins had also taken up residence, the male near enough hogging the feeders all day. By late afternoon, by which time the Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and all the others had been in and out many a time, I decided to leave Paul and head back to the house ...or to be more exact, to extract the car from the snow where I had left it after getting stuck! After having to execute a three-point turn in the middle of my meadow, up to my axles in snow, I got back to the house and sat more-or-less on top of my gas heater. Mr H was still over in the forest - there was a bird I knew he wanted to see and, though there had been no sign for over a week, I did have the feeling it had not gone, so it was no big surprise when, two hours later, as I again sipped coffee and peered through the window, I spotted a frozen-looking Mr H approaching through the snow. Cold perhaps, but certainly looking happy too - through the window, I could see, his mouth was uttering the silent words 'White-backed Woodpecker'!

Classic stuff, another six woodpecker day at the feeders, makes the cold almost disappear! Unfortunately there was slight dampener - a 'what if it was' bird! Mr H was behind the photographic screen, I inside the cabin watching through the windowssuddenly alarms and panic, low and fast, a small brown bird, dumpy and short-tailed flew straight through

the feeding station, scattering all the small birds, then off behind the cabin. It had to be a Pygmy Owl, simply nothing else possible, but if it was, it certainly did not return!

So finished the first day ...and then came Sunday, much warmer at only minus 16, but still blue skies and plenty of birds. The White-backed Woodpecker was so very cooperative - throughout the day, it kept popping in, each time spending a good ten minutes or so on the feeders, all very nice indeed. To finish off the weekend, we spent the late afternoon in the house at the usual window - the Tree Sparrow flock had increased to 65, a couple of Greenfinches in too, but the stars were the second pair of Grey-headed Woodpeckers, first the male was sneaky enough to creep in without us seeing until he was ready to leave, then the female arrived to spend at least half an hour stuffing herself on one feeder, breaking off every now and again to chase off either a Great or Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Homeward bound, the Great Grey Shrike, which had until then been elusive, suddenly appeared in midair chasing some small passerine - a mini dogfight later and the two birds went their separate ways, the passerine to live another day and the shrike to sit on the wires to give us a view.