

A garden development, the early days...

Contributed by Jos
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Way back in the early days of the year 2000, I had occasion to sit and ponder, a new dream was taking shape! Around me, as the temperatures nudged the minus 20 mark, throngs of birds cut into the winter silence, filling the branches of the frozen garden, a plot carved from snow-laden forests and heavy from a haw frost over a centimetre thick. Such bird numbers were all the more remarkable given the almost blanket exodus of species that occurs every autumn - fleeing the approaching onset of the cold, Lithuania says goodbye to all its starlings, robins, larks and thrushes, not to forget virtually all its finches and buntings, many of its titmice, a slice of its woodpeckers and even many of the corvids. In short, all those ingredients of a successful British garden scene are totally absent - all 'our' birds are sitting there on 'your' bird table!

So it was into this cold, desolate landscape that my dream had evolved - a packed out feeding station, boasting the greatest selection of winter birds in the Baltics! First stage had been to find a garden. Fortunately, a traditional part of Lithuania, a hankering back to embedded rural roots, are the 'summer gardens' - small plots of land that are lovingly fussed over for the duration of the short summer, though come the winter rarely visited. For a feeding station, they are perfect - and my chosen gave a little brick house to keep myself warm (more or less), a dozen or so old fruit trees to hang the assorted feeders (mostly imported, a touch of handicraft to create a few more) and plentiful forest all around to provide the birds (especially, I hoped, various woodpeckers).

Thus, under October skies, the project had started. With skeins of geese and waves of passerines streaming south, the first feeders went into place ...immediately birds arrived, Marsh Tits, Great Tits, a Brambling and lingering Chaffinches. Within a week, up to 100 birds were already visiting and, by late November, the tally had risen to over 400 hungry visitors a day! The garden's bread and butter, and on occasion so abundant that they seemed like leaves to the trees, were Great Tits, Blue Tits and, still fortunately common in Lithuania, Tree Sparrows. With a constant rabble of birds at the feeders, it was time to find out just how many were actually enjoying the hand-outs - easiest option was to start a ringing program, so up went the mist nets and, after many an hour in the garden, I had caught over 500 birds, most (as in gardens everywhere) being Great and Blue Tits! Common birds maybe, but interesting nonetheless - a reflection on the migratory nature of the birds in these northern parts, over 80% of the 316 Great Tits caught that winter were males with the lion's share being adults, a pattern also shared by the 86 Blue Tits caught - most females and young head to the warmth of latitudes further south! It also appeared that Blue Tits were the more mobile of the two species during the deep winter period, for whilst the bulk of Great Tits flooded in during November, Blue Tits arrived in ever-increasing numbers as the winter progressed. Thus, whereas Great Tits outnumbered their smaller cousins by over forty to one in November, this had reduced to just three to one by the end of the winter!

Plenty of good birds arrived that first winter - in addition to the resident Marsh Tits, the flocks also brought in a couple of Coal Tits and, one of the garden highlights, two Crested Tits visiting daily (though, in those days, they strictly refused to use the feeders, preferring instead to forage underneath). And what more that first winter, so many years back? A lone Fieldfare had visited early on prompting a ready supply of apples to be added to the feeding station menu, a ploy rewarded by occasional further Fieldfares throughout the winter, two Blackbirds over Christmas (a scarce wintering bird here) and, the top birds of the winter, a fantastic flock of up to 60 Waxwings for five weeks from mid-November! Though Waxwings are fairly common passage birds in Lithuania, with smaller numbers in mid-winter too, it was certainly a big plus to get them in the garden!

So, back to that day pondering my new dream - temperatures at minus 20, a crisp blue sky and there I sat, admiring the flocks in front of me. A Crested Tit was flitting amongst the Tree Sparrows, the birds had been a bit jumpy due to the attention of an earlier Sparrowhawk, but then my eyes caught sight of something else - there, nonchalantly enjoying the feeders was a male Hawfinch! My dream had come to fruition ...birds by the dozen in a land and season where there are 'no' birds!

As for the woodpeckers? Well, I waited the whole winter and not even the slightest hint of interest! Despite them flying over and one even roosting in a nearby nestbox, Lithuanian woodpeckers did not seem to be impressed by the latest in high-class avian cuisine that year!

But that was just the start - as the years passed, Great Spotted Woodpeckers did indeed find the garden, Middle Spotted too, both regulars on the feeders. Now, many years later, the garden still goes from strength to strength, Tree Sparrow flocks have risen to 120 and more, up to twelve nestboxes are occupied each year with species from Pied Flycatcher and Common Redstart to Starling and Swift. Overhead bonuses have included White Storks and Lesser Spotted Eagles, a Greenish Warbler has sung and both Quail and Grey Partridge have dropped in. Still I marvel, still I wonder what will be next.