

October 2013.

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Top news, one Parrot Crossbill at Labanoras and the return of Three-toed Woodpecker to my Labanoras plot, faithfully back for his third winter on the trot, super. Add to that a few days in western Ireland and Great Britain, Choughs, Storm Petrels and Yellow-browed Warbler amongst the modest returns, and October trickled by in fine fettle.

2 October. He's Back! Jeepers, the super star has returned - a rare and elusive bird in Lithuania, a single Three-toed Woodpecker wintered in my flood forest in the winters of 2011/12 and 2012/13, faithfully favouring a choice patch of alders. Little did I expect him to return for a third winter, but here he was, back on a traditional tree, gently tapping away as if he had never been away. 'T'was the icing on the cake to a very fine day for a visiting birder from the UK - 'maybe we could see a White-backed Woodpecker?' had been his request, an optimistic post scriptum adding that a Three-toed Woodpecker would be nice too! Arriving on the land mid-afternoon, I had little doubt that we would find the White-backed Woodpeckers, a couple of pairs now resident, but I did not even consider a Three-toed faintly possible. Plenty of action at the feeders, oodles of Great Tits and Nuthatches, but not a single woodpecker in sight. Time for a walk I suggested, pointing to an area favoured by the White-backs. A deep dark area of swampland, evocative East Europe at its best. A Middle-spotted Woodpecker called, several Fly Agarics were sprouting through the leaf layer. And then a bird on a old birch, one fine male White-backed Woodpecker hammering away ...one happy birder from the UK. And that would have been it for the day had I not suggested a return to my feeders - a very brief Grey-headed Woodpecker and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker both seen offered incentive, but even I was staggered to suddenly be feasting my eyes on the yellow cap and striking body pattern of a Three-toed Woodpecker! As he vanished, I had a pretty good idea where he might be lurking - if he was indeed the same bird returning, his favoured patch of woodland was not too far away. And that was exactly where he was ...tapping away on a tree much used in past winters, super. The finale of the day, one male Three-toed Woodpecker and one male White-backed Woodpecker in the same binocular view, a second White-backed Woodpecker just adjacent and both Great Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers in close proximity too.

3-6 October. County Cork, Ireland. Come October, on the headlands and isles of western Britain and Ireland, the alluring prospect of wayward migrants from America bring many a birder to search the valleys and sheltered patches of vegetation. In former years, the Isles of Scilly were my favoured haunt, classic days including such delights as Northern Parula, Bobolink and both Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoos. Now resident in Eastern Europe, thoughts of finding an American passerine are mere pipe dream, so with that in mind I decided upon a short break to western Ireland, the famed localities such as Cape Clear and Dursey Island synonymous with past mouthwatering rarities. Indeed, already this year, Dursey Island had produced a Wilson's Warbler (2nd ever for Europe) and a Grey-cheeked Thrush. Alas, on this weekend, a calm befell southern Ireland - whilst the weather was simply outstanding and the landscapes stunning, migration was effectively non-existent, even to the extent that common European migrants were thin on the ground! Still, 't'was a pleasant mini-break with Gannets plunging into blue oceans, Choughs tumbling across picturesque clifftops and one or two nice species along the way.

Day One. Fresh in from the USA, a Grey-cheeked Thrush had been found on Dursey Island the day before, so arriving in Cork during the night, dawn saw me waking on the headland opposite this rocky outcrop. Ravens rising on the breeze, Gannets offshore, my first Choughs of the trip chowing overhead, a nice start. The only route onto Dursey is upon a rather rickety cable-car, but in the hour or so I had before its departure, I had time to explore. One Turtle Dove in a hedge, several bright Wheatears ...and, surprise of the morning, a Storm Petrel sitting in the grass! Seemed in good health, but perhaps a little dazed, the bird had almost certainly collided with a fence during the night. After a quick examination, the bird was placed at the base of a stone wall, the nooks and crannies offering the creature a safe haven to sit and recover. After fluttering around a while, he settled in a nook and later had gone ...hopefully back to the wilds of the ocean and not to the gullet of a passing gull! 9.00 a.m., over to the island. Next up, a five kilometre march to the far side of the island. And then I was there, a scenic bay with the remnants of a village scattered on the windswept slope. Northern Wheatears were in fair abundance, quite a few Chough too, but this was the locality that the Grey-cheeked Thrush had been found the day before. One quick glance and it was clear the odds were slim that this bird (a) would still be here and (b) I would be able to locate it if it were. The track it had been feeding upon was basically devoid of cover, as indeed was the whole landscape, any self-respecting thrush would surely have moved to a better location overnight. And indeed it had - a prolonged search produced a Blackbird or two, plus a few other migrants, but certainly nothing originating in the USA. Mid-afternoon, I took the cable-car back to the mainland. A couple of kilometres up the coast, target number two of the trip also proved surprisingly difficult - in a tiny patch of sycamores, barely three trees in all, a Western Bonelli's Warbler had been lurking for a couple of days. But boy, was it tricky to see - you'd imagine in such limited cover, it would be simple to see everything, but associating with a half dozen Chiffchaffs and Willow Warblers, it was a good half hour before the blighter finally dazzled! Still, a very nice bird, and in fact the only rarity I was to see this weekend! With that over, I motored back towards Mizen Head, ready for day two.

Day Two. Weather truly played ball, a day soaking up warm sunshine whilst wandering around in a tee-shirt. Unfortunately, that rather splendid weather also effectively stuffed the birding, barely a migrant to add a rustle to leaf layers or a movement to foliage. In a long day of exploring picturesque coves and headlands, peering into vegetated gullies and clumps of trees, the bird of the day fell to a lone Red-backed Shrike adorning a bramble patch. Nice enough indeed, but a bird that also breeds on my patch back home! That aside, the total tally of migrants probably amounted to a dozen or so Chiffchaffs, a fair scattering of Wheatears and a Swallow or two. Even perusal of the local gulls failed to notch up anything over and above the usual mix of Herring Gulls and chums! Day Three. Pretty much a repeat of day two, minus the glorious weather - with a mini influx of thrushes, an early start on Mizen Head offered a glimmer of hope that a few extra birds might be lurking in the depths ...but a prevailing fog certainly didn't help in the search! After a couple of hours

of not a lot, I gave up on the headland and headed for the estuaries that litter the southern coast from Mizen Head to Cork - stacks of waders and plenty of Little Egrets to pass the day. Lots of scanning produced a nice little haul, albeit of the usual common species such as Golden Plovers and Black-tailed Godwits, but Ireland was to defeat me this time, no species of any special note to celebrate the weekend. Come evening, it was back to Cork to return the car. Early morning next day, I was aboard my flight back to Lithuania, weekend over. 12-14 October. Up the Nets With a feeding station choc'a'bloc with visitors from dawn till dusk throughout the winter, the dynamics of the spectacle at Labanoras remain a slight mystery - estimates of past winters put the number of visiting woodpeckers at about 20-25 individuals of up to seven species, the breakdown of the several hundred Great Tits suggests an overwhelming presence of adult males, the females having migrated out. For a more detailed look at the numbers and patterns however, winter 2013/14 will see me conducting a ringing programme throughout the season. How will it span out? How many White-backed Woodpeckers are really visiting? What are the dynamics of those roving flocks of passerines? How will the ratios shift during the winter? And so it was, on a misty morning with autumn leaves tumbling through the sky, I placed my first mistnets to begin the operation. A pretty good start, soon the Great Tits piling in, a portion of the Nuthatches too. By the sessions' end, a total of about 60 birds already sported their shiny new rings, the bulk as expected being Great Tits, but the first woodpeckers also amongst the haul - one Middle Spotted Woodpecker and, a juicy bird indeed, a splendid female White-backed Woodpecker. 19-21 October. To Old Blighty. In need of R&R, a taste of the old homeland and a possibility of a few birds on birding patches of years long gone by, I decided to spend a few days back in Great Britain to celebrate late October. Big news on the bird front in the UK was the arrival of a Semipalmated Plover on the south coast - fourth ever for Britain, this was a fairly mega find. As a visual spectacle however, the bird is rather underwhelming - basically a grade II Ringed Plover! So underwhelming it was in fact that, having seen dozens and dozens in the US just months ago, I decided to opt for a little tour of Norfolk and then central Britain instead! Still, Semipalmated Plover is still a stonker of a bird for the UK, so one of my pictures from the US to honour the find... So to the actual birds I saw... not a great deal is the exact answer! A quiet day in North Norfolk was pleasant with Yellow-browed Warbler and Red-necked Grebes amongst the odds and ends seen, whilst the next couple of days were essentially non-birding, wandering the collections at Slimbridge and then tourist sites in London. 24 October. Back to Labanoras. Eeeks, the autumn seems nearly over in inland Lithuania - few leaves left on the trees, few migrants left filtering through. Three Mistle Thrushes and a dribble of Long-tailed Tits perhaps the most notable of migrants on my plot, the feeders also strangely quiet. Continued the ringing, catching another dozen Great Tits and a pair of Nuthatches. 27 October. Red Letter Day Mark III By rights the end of October should be darn chilly, the migrants virtually all gone from my inland location and the feeders beginning to move up a few gears. But basking sunshine at a respectable 16 C today, what an unusual day it turned out to be today - not only a few juicy visitors to my feeders and even a couple of butterflies (a Comma and Small Tortoiseshell - perhaps my latest ever on the wing here), but one new species for my land,

Little groups of snowy-headed Long-tailed Tits moving through, a male Hen Harrier drifting over my meadows, one Great Grey Shrike hunting kestrel-style, I would have been well chuffed even without the star billing - but star billing was indeed the bird, a lone PARROT CROSSBILL making a most unexpected appearance ... I'd had a couple of small flocks of Common Crossbills over earlier in the week, but sure didn't even imagine a Parrot Crossbill might drop by!

Over at the feeders, by contrast, all was strangely quiet - ringing continued, but the haul basically amounted to a mere trickle of Great Tits. Rather juicier were the birds that skillfully avoided the honour of being caught for ringing! Top of the bunch, two Grey-headed Woodpeckers occasionally on the peanuts, supporting stars White-backed, Middle Spotted and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Also present, Lesser Spotted and Black Woodpeckers adjacent.