

November 2013. Feeder Stats.

Contributed by Jos

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Feeding, ringing and watching, a good late-autumn month at Labanoras. Plenty of birds caught for ringing, a full seven species of woodpecker populating my woodland and, highlight of the first week, a Rough-legged Buzzard pausing in the meadows for a while. Also Red Squirrel on the feeders an, rare in Lithuania, a Black Rat.

1 November. Stylish start to the month.

It is a good day indeed when you can sit upon your veranda and feast your eyes upon a medley of woodpeckers from large to small. Two Grey-headed Woodpeckers edging in to the feeders, three White-backed Woodpeckers too, plus bread and butter with the Great Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, then a bit of luck with the others - after a month of elusive behaviour, the male Three-toed Woodpecker amply compensated by choosing a dead alder a mere 30 metres distant to hammer away at for the best part of an hour!

For the final two in the collection, a short stroll was in order - first up, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker drumming on skeletal remains of a tree, then the deeper bashing of a Black Woodpecker, a singleton located low on an old birch. Glory day, seven species notched up. Out in the meadows, also another bird to liven the day up - a fairly rare species on my land, about four previously recorded, a fine Rough-legged Buzzard winging its way south, pausing a while to hover over rough grassland.

3-9 November. Action Plan Winter 2013/14.

Feeders large and small, several hundred kilograms of peanuts, sunflower and grain, what do you get in return? Flocks of birds filling the bushes and trees, critters of the night sneaking in. In previous winters however, exact numbers were hazy estimates - woodpecker totals probably pretty accurate, the more abundant species certainly occurring in 'the hundreds'.

So arrives 'Action Plan Winter 2013/14' - an attempt to ring all the birds at the Labanoras feeding station to better gauge numbers, age & sex ratios, winter movements and anything else of interest that it kicks up. Despite unusually mild conditions pushing right into late autumn, with resultant low activity at the feeders, already over a hundred birds have been caught by early November, the vast bulk as expected being Great Tits, with juicy extras including White-backed Woodpecker, Middle Spotted Woodpecker and several Jays.

So, to early analysis on the bird mix: partially migratory in the latitudes of Lithuania, Great Tits make for an interesting species - selective migration sees most females departing, also a disproportionate number of young birds. Even including October, a period when Great Tits were still moving, over 75% of all birds caught were males, mostly adult males. By early November, this figure had risen to 85%. Blue Tits, while present in far smaller numbers, show broadly the same pattern.

For other species, such as the more strictly resident Marsh Tits and Nuthatches, no bias in the age and sex profiles is observable, males and females equal for example on the Nuthatches and young dominating the Marsh Tits.

By the 9th, with a decided chill to the air, a real feel of autumn and pulses of rain dominating, any thoughts of a lingering Indian summer were long gone - bird numbers at the feeders were about 20% up, new arrivals including a small flock of Willow Tits and yet more Great Tits, 120 now caught for the season.

16-18 November. Ratty Comes to Visit, Chums Too.

First hints of snow, pools frozen over. A male Hen Harrier drifting over, Three-toed Woodpecker in alders adjacent to the feeding station, autumn at an end, winter commencing. This day however did not belong to the birds, but to mammals paying a visit, or to be precise to three particular mammals, all rodents! A little scurrying and a rustle from within my cabin. 'Huh? What's that?' thought I. A quick peek in a few discarded pipes and bird feeders and there was the answer ...a rather large rodent trapped inside, a rat no less! Hmm, I was not too sure that was good news, but taking a closer look, I was immediately impressed - this was no run-of-the-mill Brown Rat, but its far rarer cousin, the Black Rat. Smaller and more delicately built, Black Rat is an uncommon species in Lithuania, its distribution patchy at best. Out into the meadow I took the little chap, off he scampered, the 20th species of mammal to be recorded on my land, a mightily unexpected addition! With Ratty departed, back I wandered to my feeding station ...and low and behold, there sat another rodent happily chomping away. Tufted ears, big bushy tail, one very nice Red Squirrel hanging off a peanut feeder. This visitor is absolutely welcome - after a patient wait of nearly ten years, a pair of Red Squirrels finally discovered my feeders in autumn 2012, sporadically visiting over the following month or so. I have a suspicion that they fell foul of the local Pine Martens however, both vanishing mid-winter. And rodent number three? A rather more predictable candidate - for the last month or so, select birches have been vanishing over night, little chewed stumps left in the place. From the scene of the crime, a trampled walkway meandering back to a pool, little scraps of birch floating suspiciously in the shallows. Beavers at work! Onto this spot I had trained my trip cam to record the nocturnal happening ...and what did I capture? Yep, the little blighter in action! **BEAVER IN ACTION, CLICK HERE** 23 November. Station Statistics. So what does it take to keep a feeding station active through the snowy wastes of an eastern Baltic winter? Of the four feeding stations I maintain, the busiest is in my Vilnius garden, but the pride and joy is on my land at Labanoras. Let's take a look. By mid-winter, 15 feeders or more of various types should be in place ... standard peanut feeders (about ten) - popular with woodpeckers, tits, etc industrial-scale peanut feeders (3) - particular favourite of Grey-headed and White-backed Woodpeckers, as well as the general masses. Hold upward of 20 kg of food, enough to keep everything fed even if I am absent for a week or two. bird table - primarily used for sunflower seeds, popular with all, especially Jays. grain box - a new feeder, capacity about 50 kg. Built to dispense a mix of grain and sunflower seeds and situated in open country, the hope is to attract sparrows and finches, perhaps even Grey Partridge. feeder trough - primarily for Roe Deer, though will sprinkle with grain to attract additional species.

And to keep them filled, so far purchased, hopefully enough to last much of the winter:

- 200 kg peanuts
- 100 kg sunflower seeds
- 50 kg grain Plus, unknown quantities of apples, weekly chunks of fat (primarily for Pine Martens) and quantities of hay or sugar beet for the feeder trough.