

Going Double. January-February 2014

Contributed by Jos
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After a day in Miami, 2014 truly kicked off in the traditional style of deep-winter Lithuania, temperatures falling to minus 23 C. Top birding in the period centred around my feeding stations, top glory going to the double-billing of TWO Three-toed Woodpeckers, and to the birds attracted to the River Nemunas in Kaunas, virtually the only water to remain ice-free in the country. Amongst the haul at this location, an immature Glaucous Gull, a couple of Barnacle Geese and flocks of up to 8000 Goldeneyes and over 30 Smew.

1 January. Everglades, USA. The tail end of a successful trip to Florida, I had a mere dozen or so hours to enjoy in the USA before boarding a flight back to Lithuania. So it was, my 2014 began... up and out by the unearthly hour of 4.00 a.m., keen to find some elusive mammal or perhaps an owl to kick the year off. As it was, a Wilson's Snipe took the honours, a singleton bobbing in the car lights as it fed aside a small roadside pool. Before getting totally lost on random farm tracks, I then veered a little to the north, ensuring a dawn arrival at Castellow Hammock Preserve. A fairly small area of protected tropical hardwood in an otherwise residential area, this locality was simply excellent. Before it was even light enough to begin proper birding, as I strolled around the lawn in front of the visitor centre, Grey Catbirds and Northern Mockingbirds were emerging from the bushes, American Robins pouncing out onto the lawn and a Blue Jay into a tree. Up came the sun, out came even more birds. A rainbow of colours in a single low tree, a most impressive warbler flock was certainly nice for the 1st January - amongst Palm Warblers and Yellow-rumped Warblers, a positive feast for the eyes with two superb Northern Parula, two stunning Black-throated Green Warblers, one Prairie Warbler and a smart Black-and-White Warbler. Also Blue-Grey Gnatcatchers with them and, in the next tree along, two Loggerhead Shrikes. As the warbler flock eventually began to dissipate, I relocated myself all of a hundred metres or so to the a series of large flowering shrubs. With a considerable warmth already in the rising sun, I had high hopes amongst these blooms. Zip, zip, a little flock of a bird zooming by, a brief hover, then radical change of direction and the dot hurtled away to a perch high up. Super, this was exactly what I was looking for ...hummingbirds! Not terribly abundant in winter, this locality has a good reputation for harbouring a few most years, the blossoms a magnet. And so I settled down and waited, and soon there was another, and another. Then another. Oh ho ho, almost a dozen by the end! Four months earlier I was watching Rufous Hummingbirds in southern Alaska on their summering grounds, here I was now watching their in their winter home, neat. And just for good measure, one Ruby-throated Hummingbirds too. Also walked the woodland trail, but saw very little, so decided to return via a residential crawl to the hotel for coffee, Monk Parakeet, Common Myna and White-winged Dove amongst birds decorating gardens. Sadly, my trip to Florida was now reaching its end. Still time however for one last outing - chucked all the bags in the boot and, finishing where it had all started, returned to the Everglades for a few hours. Alligators sunning, Red-shouldered Hawks atop bushes, a Northern Harrier quartering, all familiar birds now, but a most relaxing and enjoyable way to end the trip. On the Anhinga Trail, as well as the assorted herons and egrets, added one very nice American Purple Gallinule and gazed up at the kettles of Turkey Vultures rising on the thermals. Ah boo hoo, it was now early afternoon and time to head for Miami. Did sneak in a last detour, incorporating the edge of Biscayne National Park onto my route, adding a few Brown Pelicans atop posts. More impressive however was the adjacent rubbish tip - this was simply mind boggling, above the immense mound of trash rising a couple of hundred metres was an even more immense cloud of birds, not just gulls, but also thousands and thousands of Turkey Vultures! Wow moment indeed. And then it really was time up, I zigzagged through south Miami, saw a couple of feral Muscovy Ducks on a pool and arrived at Miami International in good time for my flight. American Airlines to Atlanta, British Airways to London, another British Airways to Warsaw, one long drive back to Lithuania, trip over. **FULL TRIP REPORT *** CLICK HERE ****** 3-12 January. The Mildness. Lithuania in winter is supposed to be picture-postcard white stuff, blankets of snow sparkling under blue skies, ice crystals floating in the air. Bah, not so to start 2014, the reality a cold drab two weeks of grey skies, temperatures hovering a few degrees above zero and frequent rain blighting the period. Yuk! Still, whilst the conditions were never going to set my feeders alive, White-backed Woodpeckers remained on the peanuts throughout, my loyal Three-toed Woodpecker stayed on territory in the alder swamp and, most welcome, a Red Squirrel frequented the feeders. Roll on the cold weather, thought I. 13-25 January. Going Double. A White-tailed Eagle battling through a snowstorm over my Labanoras plot, a mixed flock of Yellowhammers, Greenfinches and Common Redpolls flocking to the feeders, yay the winter had arrived at last! Nothing dramatic to begin with, a modest layer of snow and temperatures just a degree or two in the minuses, but within a week, it was cold, cold, cold. Minus 17 C, then minus 20 C, a few days later minus 23 C in my Vilnius garden. And, with the plunge, what a transformation at the feeders - in Vilnius, two Hawfinches and flocks of over 100 Tree Sparrows (and the long-staying House Sparrow, the latter a rare bird in my garden!), while at Labanoras an explosion of action amongst the visitors. Hordes of Hooded Crows and Jays using the 'grain box', Great Tits climbing over the 200 mark and a right bevy of woodpeckers at the feeders - Grey-headed, White-backed, Great Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers all present daily. Across the swamplands however, now an exquisite arena of sparkling ice with even the snow frozen into delicate sculptures, yet greater rewards were awaiting my discovery. Amongst a gentle musical tinkle of a myriad of ice flakes tumbling, a delicate tapping upon a decaying alder took me to one of the specialities of my plot, a wintering Three-toed Woodpecker. Rare in Lithuania, what I assume to be the same bird has now spent three successive winters on my land, something I truly honour. On this day though, I was in for a surprise - upon the tree, showing in all its glory under a dazzling sun, my Three-toed Woodpecker quietly tapped away, the yellow crown a treat in the sunshine. Two metres above however, stone me, a second Three-toed Woodpecker! Wow, my land had just gone double! In hindsight, a week earlier I'd had a slight inkling that I might be seeing double when I encountered 'the' Three-toed Woodpecker first at one end of my flood forest, then shortly after at the other. Perhaps a fast-paced relocation, but I did wonder if a second bird

was actually involved. One more big surprise on the 'ice fields' too. Upon the ice, usual indeed is to see the tracks of various animals - Red Foxes zigzagging about, Roe Deers wandering through, occasionally an Elk too, maybe Brown Hare. But on this day, a strange set of tracks was to catch my attention - clearly pounding at some moments, strolling at others, the rather large five-toed tracks were not were of the regulars. The owner? An Otter ! Never have I recorded this species on my land before, so a Red Letter Day indeed. You did have to pity the critter though - with the nearest open water many kilometres away, this aquatic mammal certainly had a trek ahead!!! Away from Labanoras, with the land gripped by ice, there is really only one inland destination worthy of a visit - the urban stretches of River Nemunas through the city of Kaunas. Here, on waters kept open by the hydroelectric plant upstream, the picture is truly impressive - massive icebergs piling up, mists rising over icy waters and birds by the thousands. Visiting several times in January, highlights included a splendid first-winter Glaucous Gull (not a common species in Lithuania), a pair of Barnacle Geese, a Canada Goose, a White-fronted Goose and a Bewick's Swan (none common in winter) ...plus a Common Sandpiper that was clearly on a suicide mission to attempt to winter in Lithuania! Perhaps even more impressive however were the sheer numbers of other birds. In a country where winter waterbirds by their very nature are generally absent, this part of the river was positively bubbling - Goosanders in their hundreds, Goldeneyes in flocks numbering maybe 8000 (!) and Smew reaching a very respectable 32. Also a few dozen Whooper Swans, numerous Mute Swans and countless Mallards, along with a number of hardy Wigeon, Pintails and assorted others. Flushing the lot, White-tailed Eagles are most smart, to a backdrop of industrial factory units and chimneys. 1-10 February. Cold Continues. Short, sharp and sweet, the winter of 2013-14. Barely had it kicked off in January and it came to a crunching end in mid-February. The first ten days of the month however saw a continuation of the birding from late February, bunches of Smew on the river at Kaunas, a second Canada Goose also present, along with both Bewick's and Whooper Swans and a fair selection of gulls, the lingering Glaucous Gull mostly elusive though. Also, much as the month before, my feeders at Labanoras continued to pull in the birds, woodpeckers et al, but better still, lurking under the cover of darkness, some rather special visitors sneaking in to feast upon chunks of fat hanging in prime locations - caught on night cams, not only a regular Pine Marten and the first Raccoon Dog of the year, but my third ever record of a Polecat - an impressive little beastie scrambling up a tree to chew of the hanging fat! 14-27 February. Spring Doth Come! Many a year, the middle of February sees temperatures plunging to minus 25 and below, blankets of snow cover all and thoughts of spring a mere fantasies of things far in the future. Not so in 2014 ...in one of the earliest breaks in the weather since I arrived in Lithuania, temperature soared from mid-month, climbing above zero on a daily basis from the 14th, hitting almost unheard of highs of plus six on the 23rd! And with the rising temperatures, a crash in the number of birds at my Labanoras feeders, an influx of Siskins at my Vilnius feeders and the first movements of spring birds across the country. Cranes, Lapwings and Starlings seen elsewhere, but upon my land a first Skylark on the 17th (my earliest ever record) and a positive influx from the 22nd, regular small flocks passing over almost continuously. Also fly-over Goosanders, a Great Grey Shrike atop a birch and even a Common Frog making a very brave appearance! Truly hints of spring. With the decline in numbers of birds at my Labanoras feeders, so too the ringing slowed. Time for a check of total numbers at the feeding station over the winter season - 347 birds caught since October, virtually all resident for the entire period, numbers as below. Additionally, two Black Woodpeckers present, one Three-toed Woodpecker (still present to the end of February, with a second bird on 18 January) and additional Grey-headed, White-backed and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers that successfully eluded capture and ringing! Also regular flocks of Siskin and Redpolls that tended to stick to alders and birches and a lone record of Blackbird. Ringing Totals, October 2013-February 2014.

- White-backed Woodpecker - 2
- Great Spotted Woodpecker - 8
- Middle Spotted Woodpecker - 1
- Grey-headed Woodpecker - 1
- Great Tit - 218
- Blue Tit - 41
- Marsh Tit - 14
- Willow Tit - 4
- Long-tailed Tit - 12
- Nuthatch - 6
- Treecreeper - 1
- Jay - 9
- Common Redpoll - 15
- Siskin - 1
- Goldfinch - 1
- Greenfinch - 9
- Bullfinch - 2
- Yellowhammer - 4 As migrants return, particularly those Great and Blue Tits which exodus the country (mainly the young birds and females), I'd expect a secondary surge at the feeders, maybe total numbers will reach 450?