

Spring Surprises. March 2014.

Contributed by Jos
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Weasels and Wolves, Capercaillie and Pygmy Owl, tasters of the first days of March! In a very early spring, plenty of birds on the move, butterflies too, including Large Tortoiseshell.

1-6 March. Days of Spring. Weasel in white on my land, Red Squirrel at my feeders, Beavers active, Raccoon Dogs out of migration, a good start to the month. With mild conditions pushing an early spring, a transformation in meadows and woods all around - after months of silence, Skylarks pouring in, bringing song a high, a scattering of other migrants too. In the flood forests of Labanoras, still decked in ice a foot thick, the constant echoing of drumming White-backed Woodpecker and chums now accompanied by a bonanza of song, Great Tits in the main, arriving Blackbirds joining in. Seemingly for his last performance before venturing north, my faithful wintering Three-toed Woodpecker joined the drumming on the 1st, departing the day after. 8-11 March. Red Letter Days. When spring comes to Baltic regions, days of excitement surely follow. With a switch in the winds and a rise in temperatures, so migrants appear, bumper days of birding across the land. Red Letter Day I (8 March) Over several days recently, the fresh tracks of Wolves have been enticing me into dark forests and clearings. Flushing Black Grouse on one attempt, spying White-tailed Eagles on another, seeing my first Woodlarks of the year on the next, three days I followed assorted Wolf tracks, several trails of lone animals, a pack of four to five animals and, on the 8th March, three animals moving together. A trip camera failed to capture the animals at night, and having traipsed several kilometres, I guessed my day was going to produce a blank ...and as for Wolves so it did, but stone me, strutting across a track right in front of me, one superb female Capercaillie in all its glory! Up she flew to nearby pine and sat there peering down. A rare and restricted range bird in Lithuania, I have only ever seen one on the country before, so this was a treat indeed. Red Letter Day II (9 March) A glorious sunny day at Labanoras, plus nine and a real feel of spring - Skylarks in song, yodelling Cranes newly-arrived in the meadows, a pair and a single, and a pair of White-tailed Eagles tumbling in display, calls echoing out over the forest.

And to this backdrop of spring, three mega birds for my land - two second-ever records, one third-ever record! In between skeins of migrating White-fronted Geese and a trickle of Lapwings moving north, record number one of note were three rather musical Whooper Swans flying west to east, no doubt circling looking for any lakes already free of ice. After pairs in 2004 and 2013, these were only the third ever for the land. No sooner had my celebration died down and a lone Greylag Goose also flew over, the second ever record of this species! And if that were not enough, I also flushed a superb male Hazel Grouse from a woodland edge, the bird flying up to sit in low spruce for a while - this was the second sight record for the land (seen tracks in snow on couple of occasions too). Rounding off a very nice day, one Red Squirrel still on feeders, both Black and Grey-headed Woodpecker both calling. Also, one strange Great Spotted Woodpecker, still retaining red on the crown into spring. Red Letter Day III (11 March) Spring moves up a gear. Another fantastic day at Labanoras, with butterflies on the wing and lots of bird action. Starting the butterfly season in true style, not only did I see my first Small Tortoiseshells and Brimstones of the year, but also at least four splendid Large Tortoiseshells flitting about, never a common butterfly. Very nice indeed.

Much of the day was actually spent renovating old nestboxes and putting up about 20 new boxes, also taking a chainsaw to fallen trees that blocked my paths, but for all the labour, plenty of compensation - the best of which were: (1) the flushing of two separate Woodcocks, a very good bird for my plot, and (2) a temporary abandonment of my duties due to a Pygmy Owl starting to call! Both these species are rare on my land - though Woodcock breeds in the general area, I have only seen three on my land previously, and all my previous records of Pygmy Owl have been birds at my winter feeding station, never a singing bird before.

Also Bean Geese migrating over, a singing Woodlark newly arrived, and seventh woodpecker species of the year - a drumming Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (they usually use my feeders in winter, but didn't this year, so good to see one reclaiming territory). 16-17 March. All Change! What a difference a few days makes! One moment basking in sunshine with butterflies fluttering and larks singing a'high, the next a blanket of snow again, the wind whipping up drifts and temperatures several degrees below zero! And the result at Labanoras, the surreal sight of Cranes dancing in the snow, a Great Grey Shrike huddling upon a perch top and a world returned to white, no butterflies anymore and just a single Skylark, wisely heading south! Still a dribble of incoming migrants with Chaffinches congregating around the feeding station and Bean Geese flying over, but overall its a picture of spring temporarily suspended. Another ten nestboxes put in the forest, some in areas of hazel in the hope of dormice ...and needed to re-site one of the boxes from the previous week - two days after hammering the box to a particularly mighty old oak, the tree fell in the storms that brought the snow! 22-27 March. Home Again, the Storks. One weekend, butterflies in warm sunshine; following weekend, carpet of snow; final weekend, sun and butterflies again! Topsy turvy! But with the change, a real spring push at Labanoras - a big influx of migrants, the woodland becoming alive with the song of incoming Robins, Wrens and assorted thrushes again. Skeins of White-fronted and Bean Geese overhead day after day, Grey Herons at the colony, first gulls of the year, plus one adult White-tailed Eagle mid-afternoon on the 22nd. Also incoming Hawfinches zipping over, a Reed Bunting in song, and arrivals such as White Wagtail and Redwing. Within a day or two, proud atop their nests, stately White Storks added to the selection, no less than 20 birds on day one, a grand sight to dispel any lingering thoughts of a winter passed! Also a ringtail Hen Harrier drifting through, five Mute Swans flying over and, most intriguing, a male Hazel Grouse seemingly holding territory (same location as 9th March). And rounding off the spring flush, with temperatures rising to a glorious 17 C on the 27th, the arrival of the semi-exotics - booming Bitterns and displaying Green Sandpipers,

ah nice! Also return of the spuggies ...strangely seasonal in this little quarter of the land, sparrows are strictly summer visitors to my plot, arriving almost simultaneously with the White Storks every year. And so it was this year too, storks bill clapping up on top, House and Tree Sparrows chattering away in the bases! Pretty good showing of early butterflies too, all in good numbers:

- Brimstone
- Small Tortoiseshell
- Large Tortoiseshell
- Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell
- Comma
- Peacock

29-30 March. Sunny Ends. And so ends the month, sun prevailing and at Labanoras, a continuing trickle of migrants - one Rough-legged Buzzard heading north, Snipe in display and yet more White Storks arriving on territory. Also Bittern still booming, a range of woodpeckers drumming or calling and the first Chiffchaffs of the year already in song. Also, a Brown Hare disturbed in the scrub and plenty of Large Tortoiseshells on the wing, one stunning Camberwell Beauty too.