

Turn of the Seasons. August 2014

Contributed by Jos

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Summer out, autumn in, the traditional turn of the seasons in 2014 was marked by an exceptionally hot start (36 C) and pretty good weather throughout. With exodus of White Storks, a drift of raptors and a return of Nutcrackers to my hazel groves, the bird action was on par with the expected, though the appearance of Red-footed Falcon, Turtle Dove and Moorhen on my plot (the last two both first-ever recorded on my land) were particularly welcome. Also managed a short trip to the islands off Estonia, primarily a quest for mammals, Ringed Seal, Moose, Pine Marten and Raccoon Dog amongst the haul.

1-7 August. Summer Ending. Amazing temperatures hitting Lithuania - record-breaking highs of 36 C - but despite the blue skies and sizzling temperatures, the summer was clearly reaching its end - at Labanoras, not only many juvenile White Storks on the wing, but also activity resuming at the feeding stations and a gradual drift of southbound raptors, tallies including a White-tailed Eagle, a Montagu's Harrier and two Ospreys. Birthday Presents. 10 August. Happy Birthday my land, bought ten years ago on this day! And to celebrate, I was on site from 5.00 a.m., a cool mist rising off the flood forest, the meadows draped in dewy spider webs. Despite recent days hitting the incredible 36 C, there was a definite feel of autumn to the early hours of this day - first flocks of Fieldfares gathering, berry bushes chock-a-block with them, along with an impressive number of Golden Orioles (20+) and Hawfinches. Far better though, lots of squealing in the rushes ...clearly Water Rails, but as I waited to see one, a young MOORHEN came paddling into view! Not an abundant bird in Lithuania, I have eagerly awaited many a year for this species to occur on my land, it was neat indeed to get it my land's tenth anniversary! 164 species now recorded. Water Rails were new for my land this time last year, so very good to get them again too - at least four present today, one running between vegetated patches. Almost all the White Storks left this week - about 20 present last week, only three left in the morning. Mid-afternoon, high in the sky, a spiralling flock of 25 White Storks drifted south ...like a vacuum cleaner these southbound flocks sometimes suck up birds as they pass, and so one of the local birds took to the air, soared high and joined the drift south. Two birds left now! And so on signs of the end of summer - one Red-footed Falcon late afternoon (three previous records on my land, all on similar dates - 4th, 11th & 14th August), plus one Great Grey Shrike in the meadow and my first 'big woodpecker day' of the season - Black Woodpecker has returned, Middle Spotted back on feeders, Great Spot, White-backed and Lesser Spot nearby). Otherwise, top news is the breeding of Kestrel - till now, Kestrel has always been a scarce passage bird, chiefly in August. This year however, I was occasionally seeing birds in June and July and had a sneaky suspicion that they were perhaps breeding nearby ...a pair with three fledged young lingering these last days, nice. 16-19 August Huuimma, Estonia. A mini trip to search for Ringed Seal, details to follow. 21-23 August. Nutcrackers and Doves. A traditional appearance from mid-August, the first two Nutcrackers on the year appeared at Labanoras on the 21st, scoffing hazelnuts by the dozen! Interesting to watch - they would pluck six to eight hazelnuts without shelling them, swallow them into the gullet and then fly off looking like overloaded doodle bugs. From a chosen perch, often far from the hazel trees, they then regurgitate and break them open. Traditional August visitors these may have been, but just two days later, a wholly less expected visitor upon my land - flying in from the north and landing in a large birch tree, the star bird was a TURTLE DOVE, my first ever on my land (species number 165)! Getting quite rare in Lithuania these days, this bird was welcome indeed - the visit however was rather temporary, after dropping down to feed in my neighbour's recently cut corn field, the bird then zipped up and headed due south, gone! A notable absence of White Storks however - the couple of dozen present just a week or so earlier all migrated out, the empty fields and nests a rather sad sight. Fortunately, quite a few compensations - Nutcrackers again, still a family of Cranes, three lingering Red-backed Shrikes and one of the young Kestrels still in the area. 28-31 August. Month's End Royal Flush. What an excellent few days to finish off the month, I barely needed to leave my deckchair! With light southbound passage throughout, it was a bird fest for the lazy! Overhead, a slow drift of raptors marked the days, mostly Buzzards and an occasional Sparrowhawk, but also three Lesser Spotted Eagles, two White-tailed Eagles, two Marsh Harrier and a Hobby, plus a flight of six Cranes on the 31st and a remarkable fly-over flock of 43 Cormorants (to put into context, I'd only seen three singles so far in 2014 and the largest ever previous count was of nine birds flying over on 4th April 2011). Also one late White Stork. Also a lot of passerines moving - up to a dozen or so Whinchats per day, along with a little gathering of four Wheatears, five Tree Pipits and four Yellow Wagtails, the latter three all new species for the year. Also four Red-backed Shrikes, two Great Grey Shrikes, Nutcrackers still scoffing hazelnuts, two Black Woodpeckers in the wood, four Red-backed Shrikes still lingering and, late in the afternoon on the 31st, years of scanning hirundine flocks finally paid off - another new species for my land, at least two SAND MARTINS hawking with the Swallows (all feeding around a clump of birches). What an unexpectedly grand month August turned out to be, three firsts for my land! But for all the joy, the ominous signs of a winter not far away - not only had a Red Squirrel returned to my peanut feeders, but so too a White-backed Woodpecker and two Grey-headed Woodpeckers, joining the Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers already present!