

Big cats, white owls, sunny tropics. December 2014.

Contributed by Jos
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European Lynx, Snowy Owl and a bunch of goodies at the Labanoras feeders, White-backed and Grey-headed Woodpeckers amongst them, not a bad way to begin December! And from there, off to Thailand for near on a month of birding travels.

European Lynx to Snowy Owl. 1-6 December. a. European Lynx. In the lands of eastern Lithuania, now in the grips of winter, 't'was a nice morning at my Labanoras feeding station, a white frosting touching the bare birches a treat, a cool minus 12 C firming up the ice to allow me to wander at will over frozen pools. Packs of birds at and around my feeders, six species of woodpecker to boot, but as I walked from the back of my cabin, Jays were squawking a hundred metres or so distant. Not the usual ribbing of a family squabble, but sustained calls and alarms of a whole gang of them. Hmm, thought I, perhaps an owl, but even for this the general racket seemed a little excessive. Maybe a Goshawk? To be honest, it sounded as though a Jay had got stuck in some netting or something. Taking a short walk in their direction, soon the birds were visible, most high in a birch, a few a little lower down. With the trees bare of leaves, no obvious owl or raptor was visible, and nor did there seem to be a focussed centre for their attention, the birds sitting high and just squawking. Another step or two closer ... then a movement from the ground below the tree, a quick dash of an animal and a jump over fallen stumps, a medium-sized, fairly dark mammal, barely a glimpse of it as it departed ... European Lynx!!! By the lay of the ground, these birches were on a slight ridge and the animal vanished into the forest and hidden ground beyond, and that was it, no chance of finding again. Jays fell silent, soon they dispersed, action for the day was over. Lynx is rare in Lithuania, perhaps only 50-60 animals in the country, so I was truly honoured to host this splendid animal on my land. I presume just a wandering animal, but wouldn't it be cool if my bird feeding station were to encourage it to linger? It is interesting that it was the Jays that effectively found the bird for me ... very much akin to the situation with the Iberian Lynx in Spain ... watch the Magpies, they will find the animals. b. Snowy Owl. After a week of dull overcast days and temperatures drifting back up towards the zero point, action at my feeding station continued apace. As the weekend approached, 'back to Labanoras', I was supposing, another day ringing at the feeders, perhaps rather optimistically, a little tracking of a long-gone Lynx I fancied. All that changed however with news that filtered out late on the Friday ... a mere 120 km or so west, a rather stunning Snowy Owl had been found, not only the first in Lithuania for nigh on two decades, but also only the 9th ever for the country! Full marks for the local farmer - on the snow-swept fields that abutted his home, this impressive bird had set up home for two weeks now, so the guy had the foresight to phone the bird out. So it was, as the chill of the week before was replaced by an even less pleasant mix of freezing fog and spits of drizzle, the great and good of the Lithuanian birding scene gathered at dawn, coffee cups at the ready, scopes pointed to fields just yonder. And there the bird was, huddled in a slight dip at a field's edge, one superb Snowy Owl. Grand indeed, a little snowman perched on a hummock, piercing yellow eyes glaring as the head swivelled and occasionally tipped from side to side. To the musical backdrop of a quartet of pigs being slaughtered in the neighbouring farmstead (!), the bird was quite magical ... mostly content to just sit and watch the world or take an occasional canter across the grass, peering down with intent at presumed voles or mice, it flew just twice while I was there, both times mere metres. By midday, with coffee long-finished and a cold dampness penetrating, I decided to depart ... Lithuanian twitching successfully completed. To contrast with the UK birding scene, a bird of such rarity, the first for twenty years, would surely attract a crowd of a thousand and more. And how many on that Saturday morning? Erm, hardly a clatter of mass ranked tripods to distract from the squealing pigs heading to slaughter, the grand total amounted to a mere dozen! Thailand. 12 December - 4 January. An excellent three-and-a-half weeks of travel, connecting with Spoon-billed Sandpipers and Leopards in the south, numerous exotics such as Giant Nuthatches and Red-faced Liocichla in the north and a healthy dose of added extras on the coast, Lesser Frigatebirds and Brown-winged Kingfishers amongst them. For full details, see trip report (following shortly)