

March 2007. Baltic Spring, butterflies and ice...

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February was cold, March wasn't! The difference, in fact, was little short of spectacular - in the space of just five days, the temperature rose a massive 40 degrees from the low of minus 32 at the end of February to a very respectable plus eight in the first days of March. And that set the scene for the whole month, very mild throughout and lots of migrants - no spectacular rares, but new species almost every day. Cranes, Bitterns, White Storks, Black Storks, they all returned during the month, along with incoming passerines, oodles of waterfowl and, as well as White-tailed Eagles, a few Rough-legged Buzzards and Hen Harriers. Plus, just to end the month, days and days of sun, temperatures rising and plenty of butterflies!

3 March, Poland.

Ah Poland, the legendary Bielowieza Forest, the timeless Biebreza marshes, bird sites to rival anything in Europe ...and what did I do? Cruise past them and go to IKEA in Warsaw! Feeling half dead from a bout of flu, the 17 hours I spent on the road and in Warsaw are probably best forgotten - crappy Polish roads, morning drizzle, even had to suffer the indignity of joining a queue waiting for McDonald's to open to get a morning coffee! Then there were the delights of IKEA itself - hmm, do I love wandering round furniture stores, cursing myself for being there and the chain's management for not bothering to invest in enough shopping trolleys!

But, Poland is Poland, famed for its birding, famed for its mind-blowing species lists ...so onto the birding! Erm, there wasn't any! Even if we'd had time, which we didn't, I was suffering a decided lack of energy and so the birding sites were simply passed! Rubbish time of year anyhow! So, to my incredible bird list ...two Cranes emerging out of the morning gloom did promise potential, a couple of roadside Great Grey Shrikes tried to keep the pretence alive, but as we neared Warsaw, there was no getting away from it, this was a naff day! Still, I did add my first Skylarks of the year, plus the first Starlings too!

4-18 March, all change in Lithuania.

Needing therapy after my day in Poland, I couldn't think a better way to recover my sanity than to trudge off to Baltoji Voke. With the temperatures well above freezing, the first patches of snow-free grass were beginning to appear and, with them, the first migrants - on the meadows, not only were there two Rough-legged Buzzards, but also two Cranes, about 35 Lapwings and a good sized flock of Starlings, spring was truly here! A kilometre away, still frozen and every bit an image of winter, Lake Papis was also showing its first hints of spring - sat in huddles on the ice, waiting the melt, the first Whooper and Mute Swans had arrived. Unfortunately for them, so too had the resident pair of White-tailed Eagles ...ice, eagles and swans don't always mix so well, one makes lunch for the other!

The next week saw more of the same - though Baltoji Voke remained mostly frozen, a tiny patch of ice-free water had appeared on Lake Papis and that was enough, Mallards flocked in, a few Goosanders and Goldeneye too, but even better were the first Smews of the year, a male and female. Alongside them, also making their first appearances of the year, Grey Herons, plus quite a few common migrants, including a Woodlark. Two Greylags appeared in flooded meadows and about 45 White-fronted Geese and 40 Bean Geese in skeins overhead. On the raptor front, along with several migrant Common Buzzards, three more White-tailed Eagles and a female Hen Harrier. Quite unexpected, I also bumped into three male Black Grouse feeding in the open in meadows.

By the 10 March, the difference was remarkable. Up on my land in Labanoras, whereas just days earlier it had been deep snow and barely a bird call anywhere, the scene was now grass and birds, birds everywhere! Horizon to horizon, singing Skylarks heralded a completely new atmosphere, the feeling enhanced somewhat by the gangs of Starlings also in, already squabbling over nestboxes. Cranes, yodelling their presence and strutting the meadows were back the next day and the first Grey Herons also back at the colony. Needless to say, with the mildness, overall activity at the feeders was on the decline, though Siskin numbers climbed to a healthy 40 or so, while Great, Middle and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers still visited, as did the Long-tailed Tits, last seen on the 17th. Calling nearby, the Grey-headed Woodpeckers signed off for the spring, deserting all feeders. Black Woodpeckers on the other hand, though still not at the feeders, began to put in rather more appearances, flying over and generally being a bit more showy. At the house, the feeders there also continued to attract plenty of Tree Sparrows, several Middle Spotted Woodpeckers too, but the highlight there came a few days later - a cracking flock of seven Hawfinches dropped in for a while!

Quite a good time for my Vilnius garden also - Middle Spotted Woodpeckers there too, plus a good flock of Siskins on the feeders and, seeming quite common these days, a female Hawfinch here too! On top of all the feeding action, the queues

began to build at the nestboxes - already Starlings had nabbed one box and got their eyes on a second, while further boxes had gone to Tree Sparrows and, still busy sussing them out, Great Tits and Blue Tits thinking about others.

Onward the spring marched - after some days on my land, Baltoji Voke was again calling, so off I went to see the latest developments. By the 12 March, almost all the snow had gone and a few meadows were flooded. Onto these, creating a right royal din, 160 Whooper Swans all seemed to have reason to quarrel with their neighbour, whooping and flapping and generally seeming to take pleasure in attempting to make as much noise as possible! They certainly succeeded in drowning out two nearby Cranes, themselves not exactly quiet either! Just two days later, as the ice finally began to show signs of breaking up, the rewards were immediate - flocks of Smew occupied the widening gaps in the ice, duck numbers in general climbed towards the thousand mark and new birds began to arrive every day - Wigeon, Pintail, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Teal, the list went on. Also swans and geese - joining the Whooper Swans, the first seven Bewick's Swans of the year arrived, plus increasing numbers of Mute Swans. Overhead, further skeins of Bean and White-fronted Geese passed over.

18-20 March, farewell to the ice.

The winter now a thing of the past, a visit to Baltoji Voke on the 18th saw the main lake totally ice-free! A quick tour round and it was much the same with the smaller pools too, almost all the ice had gone. For the White-tailed Eagles, the fish season was open, surely a relief to the long-suffering Mute Swans that can serve the role as potential alternative snack! The eagles though, being fairly lazy things, are rather fond of the ice - a far more convenient perching place than all those pine trees that require some flapping to get to! So, with one last patch of extensive ice, that is where they sat - the picture above being of an adult and two immatures. A second adult was nearby.

The disappearance of the ice was matched with a mass arrival of wildfowl - over 750 Wigeon, about 300 White-fronted and Bean Geese, double figures of Smew and a good selection of others, including the first Coots, more Bewick's Swans and increased numbers of Pochard and Tufted Ducks. A few Common Buzzards also seemed to be on the move, as was a male Hen Harrier, a rather smart bird. Passerines though remained very thin on the ground, very few had arrived back, but signs of things to come, the first White Wagtails paddled around the pools and, in the meadows, I encountered an impressive flock of thrushes, including no less than 36 Mistle Thrushes, one of the largest concentrations I have ever encountered.

21-30 March, the butterfly season opens! As temperatures soared to unseasonal highs of 14 C, even 17 C, something unusual began to stir in the Lithuanian countryside - butterflies, not just one or two, but dozens of them! In total contrast to the same date a year earlier, when still snow lay deep across the land, I saw no less than four Brimstones at Baltoji Voke on the 21st, a sight that certainly cheered me no end! Just three days later, there were heaps of them out and about - up on my land, Brimstones flitted about all over the place, plus quite a few Small Tortoiseshells and, rather special, a splendid Large Tortoiseshell that took a fancy to my house, sunning on its walls and letting me get my first butterfly pictures of the year. Next day, the bonanza continued ... with the weather so nice, I decided to venture into Ropejos Forest. It was hard to believe it really was still March - I was standing in a tee-shirt watching butterflies! As well as plenty of Brimstones and Small Tortoiseshells again, I also found another Large Tortoiseshell and a couple of extras - quite a few Commas and a single Peacock. An amazing selection for so early in the season! On the bird front, things also continued to improve. A day in my Labanoras garden on the 24th was just excellent - having told everybody it would be 'White Stork Day', I was particularly happy to look out my front door just at the right moment ...flying directly overhead was my first White Stork of the year! The second major event of the day, perhaps less grand to some, was the return my House Sparrows - rare in my gardens, I was very proud to have a pair breeding here the year before in a broken lamp high on a post ...and, after a winter that saw only a single record, there he was, the male back sitting on the lamp and chirping away. With the weather so nice, I also decided it was a perfect day to start the barbecue season - right disgusting food it turned out, but at least the birds made for good company ...two Cranes in a field adjacent and a Black Woodpecker flying across the lake. Not bad at Baltoji Voke either - spring migrants included the first Garganeys of the year, flocks of over 150 Whooper Swans and considerable passage of hundreds of White-fronted and Bean Geese overhead. Also saw two Black Storks flying over, up to 120 Goldeneye and a few Smew, the latter reaching almost 20. Also, whilst searching for butterflies in Ropejos forest, I had a few fortunate encounters - several parties of Crossbills, plus on one visit I found an absolutely massive female Goshawk sat on a branch screaming at me, whilst on the next I cursed myself for not having my camera as three Black Woodpeckers chased and called, then settled on an old pine just adjacent, followed moments later by the best and most prolonged views I have ever had of Hazel Grouse! For the latter, it was the male that I saw first, striding along a forest track in front of my car. I stopped and expected him to immediately disappear off into the vegetation, but he didn't! For twenty minutes, he quietly fed just metres in front of the car, joined half way through by the female, prompting a good bit of display ...two Hazel Grouse in full sun right in front of me and I stood there looking out of the sun roof with no camera!