

Birding in the Era of Coronavirus, STAGE ONE, March 2020.

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Last Updated Friday, 03 July 2020

STAGE ONE - RISE OF THE VIRUS IN LITHUANIA. The early stages of the infection in Lithuania saw first restrictions on day-to-day life. It seemed Lithuania was following the path of other nations in Europe, perhaps three weeks behind, but heading for bad times nevertheless. As cases appeared, at least there was a silver lining to the month of March - it is the beginning of the spring migration season, birds arriving back in the country in growing numbers, plus early season butterflies taking to the wing.

14-15 March. Contemplating New Life. Five new cases of Coronavirus, total now 12 - low by European standards, but Lithuania announces closure of borders, foreigners banned from entry, citizens and residents forbidden to leave the country. Feeling somewhat appropriate, a cold northerly wind whipped the country creating a winter we never had. On my land, Whooper Swans in a snowstorm, White-fronted Geese going over, incoming migrants battling on, Starlings, Lapwings and Wood Pigeons in the main, but also early White Wagtails. Skylarks singing, all's well on the land. Fearing an Italian style lockdown, and a resultant loss of work and reason to stay in the city, I was putting plans in place - to abandon the comfort of city life and its associated hot showers, WiFi and electricity. I was well aware that weeks or months confined to home in a city potentially engulfed by a virus would drive me bonkers, better I trade comfort for sanity and take my chances on my land. So, an introduction to Jos's Quarantine Centre! Otherwise known as my simple cabins on my land: Annex 1 - the Meadow Cabin. Completed just in time!

First photo - early construction, September 2019

Second photo - nearly finished, March 2020 Mod cons, not many: gas heater, gas ring, battery-powered lights, newly installed bed, no electricity. Stunning views over expanses of meadows, Pygmy Owl roosting in nestbox above, yodelling Cranes a guaranteed alarm call. Annex 2 - the Forest Cabin. Rather nice, though a roof needing a little repair and occasional visits by mice. Mod cons, even less: gas heater, bed, also no electricity. Overlooks my feeding station, home to White-backed Woodpeckers et al, regular Black Woodpeckers just yonder, occasional visits by Red Squirrels, Badger sett 10 metres to the left. Where to live during a Coronavirus lockdown? City or Sticks? And just in case anyone is questioning my sanity for trading a fairly luxurious city flat for self-built cabins that lack just about every creature comfort, let's take a look at the criteria that swung my decision:

View from residences: a. Vilnius. Flat one block from Gedimino Prospectus, the mainstreet in the centre. Looks nicer on a sunny day, looks much nicer in spring and summer! Nice view for potentially several months?

b. Labanoras. 35 hectares of prime wildlife habitat, all my private property and thus not subject to lockdown and safe from Coronavirus. Amazing flood forest, regenerating scrub, traditional meadows. A pretty relaxing place in an otherwise stressful situation?

Birding highlights: a. Vilnius. Tree Sparrows and regular Great Tits at a balcony feeder, occasional Marsh Tits and a Nuthatch. Come spring, Black Redstarts on rooftops, Swifts in the eaves, perhaps Pied Flycatchers in the trees.

b. Labanoras. With a mix of habitats, from flood forest to flower meadows, coupled with a location between major lake systems, my 35 hectares have proved exceptionally productive over the years, a grand total of 180 species. Amongst the highlights, Cranes, both White and Black Storks, Pygmy Owl, breeding Grey Herons, Great White Egrets and Bitterns, regular Corncrakes, occasional Little Crakes, plus eight species of woodpecker and 17 species of raptors, including White-tailed and Lesser Spotted Eagles.

Trial Run So it was, my first nights in the cabin - and darn cold it was, a frosty minus five greeting me on the 15th. Still, unbroken sunshine, plus cronks of newly arrived Grey Herons heading back to the colony just off my land, plus the first Goldeneyes back on territory, more White-fronted and Bean Geese migrating over, one White-tailed Eagle hanging about. On the mammal front, six Roe Deer and a Fox ambling across the meadow. Most heartwarming though, my first butterfly of the year in Lithuania - despite temperatures of just 3 C, one brave Brimstone on the wing!

16 March. City Days. Six new cases of Coronavirus in the country, general feeling of unease in the country, government of Poland blocking the return of Lithuanians at their borders. Lithuania introduces a **NATIONWIDE QUARANTINE** - all bars, restaurants, entertainment and non-food shops to close, companies to organise distance working, restrictions on public transport. No full lockdown as yet.

17-20 March. Scramble. Back in the city, total chaos in most companies, all trying to scramble towards some solution to the new reality. 51 new cases of Coronavirus, the highest daily rates yet, total now 69. With a certain amount of irony, I was impressed to find the post office open to enable me to collect my new book about what I can see on the trip I can't

go on - planned trip to southern Spain on 28 March now nothing more than a fantasy. Municipality vehicles touring the city broadcasting messages in Lithuanian and English to get off the streets, little doubt a lockdown is not far away. On the positive side, although I do lose quite a chunk of my work, a pleasing amount has most online, I will survive. Nice quite quiet streets too, cheap petrol and, in increasing temperatures, two more Brimstones this day on a rough patch of land behind a now deserted shopping centre.

21-22 March. Bitterns and Eagles. Virus taking hold in the country, a sharp rise in the number of cases – from 25 on the 17th, the number had already jumped to 69 by the end of the 20th, then rocketed to 129 this weekend. First domestic transmissions confirmed in recent days, plus several doctors and nurses infected, first death in the country - a lady that seems to have contracted the disease while in hospital. Contagion occurring within the Lithuanian military. A crisp morning on the 21st at Labanoras, a deep booming echoing out from reeds, Bittern back from winter retreat! Always heartwarming to hear this beautiful sound, I never fail to feel honoured indeed to have them breeding on my land. So too the return of Great White Egrets, three settling on a floodpool in the afternoon - a newly colonising species in Lithuania, six pairs joined the Grey Heron colony last year, hoping for similar this season. Chilly northerly winds curtailed significant bird migration across the weekend, but driblets and drabs did arrive, first Chaffinches et al, plus a very nice pair of Woodlarks, these immediately locating themselves in a nice patch of habitat and settling in with their spiralling display flight - has bred before, hopefully will this year. And then, just to top off the weekend, three superb adult White-tailed Eagles in display above my cabin. The next days are critical in a Lithuanian context - the clear spread of domestic Coronavirus cases, especially centering around a hospital in Ukmerge and involving both medical staff and patients, may prompt the government to order a full lockdown. I guess the tally of cases this week will tell the tale of how this crisis is going to unfold in this country. 25 March. The Move.

Coronavirus cases rising by 30 or 40 a day, then 65 today. A total of 274 confirmed cases now. Three more deaths this day, two again associated with an outbreak in Ukmerge hospital. Large numbers of Lithuanians returning from higher risk countries, a pretty shambolic state of affairs. Many returnees floating quarantine requirements, then a relatively poor response by the government - after the horse had bolted, the government opened compulsory quarantine centres & then promptly put two persons per room and allowed movement within the centre. Good one, perfect virus factory!

From my side, I decided it was time to leave Vilnius and move semi-permanently to Labanoras - if no lockdown, I will continue to pop back to the city every few days. Minus 5 C, a distinct crunch to the grass when I arrived in Labanoras late at night, one very vocal Tawny Owl welcoming me.

A cold night, but a beautiful morning on the 25th - Cranes calling on a frost-etched landscape, Buzzards mewing in the still morning air. As sun brought warmth, I took a wander to meadow pools - yet more signs of spring with the arrival of incoming migrants, two pairs of Teal and one Green Sandpiper the best of the day, a return of Black-headed Gulls too, plus several Linnets.

Not a bad day, and with temperatures set to rise in the next day or two, more good things to come.

Photo: Tawny Owls in my nestbox a few years back, hopefully last night's songster will be back in the box this season. Office Life. 26 March.

Day at the office, shut down style. And what a great day it was, temperatures soaring to a balmy 12 C, bringing out the first several Siberian Winter Damselflies of the spring, so too a Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell and four Brimstones, wonderful all. Displaying Woodlarks and Green Sandpipers, booming Bittern, Great White Egrets and Grey Herons to the colony and, late afternoon, the return of the first White Stork ...not bad for a day at the office :) Quite a pleasant office.

Coronavirus tally continues to climb, 299 cases in the country now, several cases in the military. Lithuanian government does a U-turn on the quarantine centres - after effectively creating virus factories the day, now allows the quarantined persons to go home. Dimwits!

Office Life Mk II. 27 March.

Big Buzzard day, a pretty constant trickle of them drifting north in warm sunny conditions. Big tick day too - no less than 48 of the little creepy crawlies crawling up my legs on an afternoon stroll! So there it was for the day, working much of the time, occasional pleasant distractions such as a pair of vocal Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, the early returnee White Stork plodding around, my first Common Snipe of the season.

Back in the real world, a fifth person in Lithuania died from Covid-19, tally of infected persons jumped by 59 to 358. Government pondered locking down Ukmerge town, decided against it for now.

28 March. Springtime Highs!

Well it isn't set to last, but an impressive 17 C this day, glorious sun from morning till evening! Rare indeed is it that I can wear a tee-shirt in March in Lithuania.

So ignoring the continuing rise in C-19 cases across the country, this was a day to celebrate - after a few nice birds in the frosty early hours (Snipe and Green Sandpiper in aerial displays, White Storks bill clapping on a nest, Bitterns and Cranes highly vocal), this day truly marked the grand opening of the butterfly season! A short stroll from my cabin, one super fresh Small Tortoiseshell kicked things off, then a corker of a Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell added considerable spice.

By midday, with the temperature at that pleasing 17 C, it was butterflies galore. Brimstones most abundant, but also several Commas, a Peacock, two more Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells and, piece de la resistance, three very smart Camberwell Beauties. A predictable species in the very early spring, but never a bad day with a Beauty patrolling a forest edge!

Unfortunately not on my land, but rather on a stroll through some neighbouring open pine forest. I also bumped into a male Capercallie - only the fourth I have seen in Lithuania.

So there we go, spring done and dusted - forecast is snow in the next days!

29 March. Down, Up and New.

Well, at least the forecasts were right - yesterday's 17 C and sun crashed to 2 C and snow, Coronavirus cases rose from 345 a couple of days back to 460 today, seven dead.

Up in my little haven, a little sparkle to cheer the day! Upon a seasonal flood pool, mingling with a bunch of Teal and Mallard, a new species for my land - a dandy pair of Pintail. Species number 180 for my land. And just to make it even nicer, a backdrop of one pair of Whooper Swans and one pair of Wigeon (6th record for my land). Woodlarks still on territory, a second pair appearing at another patch of good habitat, plus a trickle of incoming migrants, Redwings et al.

Apart from that, a day of home improvements - avian and mine. Several new nestboxes for the birds, a verandah on the cabin for me. And real mod cons, converted a bee hive to house a generator that I bought some days back - power to charge my laptop, almost civilised now :)

For STAGE TWO, STEADY AS IT GOES, an ongoing account of incoming spring birds and the continuing situation with Coronavirus as we moved into April, [CLICK HERE](#).

