

Birding in the Era of Coronavirus, STAGE THREE, May 2020.

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Stage Three. The Easing, May 2020. Peak season for some classic bird migration, the arrival of Red-backed Shrikes, Black Terns et al, plus usually a splendid month for butterflies, exotics such as Clouded Apollo and assorted skippers possible. On the Coronavirus front, a feeling amongst the public that the country somehow escaped relatively unscathed and that it is all over. At the month's beginning, the death tally sat at 45, new infections occurring at 10-15 per day. Government has announced a range of measures to ease the shutdown - most shops and some services have reopened, but the national quarantine stays in place.

1 May. Rise of the Butterflies. Despite the easing of restrictions due to come into force this week, few people have returned to work and I am quite content to extend my self isolation in Labanoras. And Labanoras continues to do its stuff - Water Rails squealing in the reeds, Savi's Warbler reeling, Cuckoo in full voice, first Common Whitethroat of the season and, bird of the day, a male Montague's Harrier, quartered the meadows. (Garganey, flood forest, photo from previous year) Other birds of note, 20 Wood Sandpipers, two Black-tailed Godwits and the Woodcock continuing its nightly performance, roding the edge of the flood forest. All seems set for a bumper breeding season among the waterfowl - not only Mallard, Teal and Goldeneye, but it seems that Whooper Swans are indeed breeding - albeit in an inaccessible area that I can't actually see very well. Garganey also still present, hopefully they will breed too. And in pleasant sunshine, not bad for butterflies too - new for the year, about 20 Green Hairstreaks, one Grizzled Skipper and one Large Tortoiseshell, with other butterflies seen being 35 Green-veined Whites, 10 Small Whites, 25 Orange Tips, 40 or so Brimstones, five Peacocks and three Commas. 2 May. Crake Not Out. Having not seen or heard on 1 May, I had thought my Little Crake was a one-day wonder. However, although somewhat less vocal than on its first day, sure enough it was still there today ... occupying exactly the same patch. Rain most of the day, Wood Sandpipers stable at 20, plus first Sedge Warbler, Garden Warbler and Hobby of the year. Bird of the day however was a humble Sand Martin, a single individual migrating north with a part of Swallows ... 2nd record for my land. Pretty impressive sight on the neighbouring lake late afternoon - no less than 26 Black-throated Divers gathered, many wailing at each other, most evocative. 3 May. One Becomes Two. Dawn vigil at the crake corner, Savi's Warbler in full reel, Marsh Harriers active at their nestsite, a pod of Cranes circling above, Garganey gliding through the reeds, big Moose crashing through the shallows. After rich full song on 30 April, my new little superstar seemed in somewhat subdued song ever since - and exactly that was what it was this morning, a half-hearted song by the Little Crake emanating from, or so I thought, a small island of bullrush and sedge just yonder. (Little Crake, flood forest, photo of individual in 2012) But as I sat they upon a log, two things slowly dawned upon me. The first, quite amazing for me, I realised I was now not listening to a single Little Crake, but two! Perhaps the reason for the subdued song of the last days, my Little Crake had nabbed himself a lady friend after just a single day of singing, lucky fellow. Much of the calling this day was contact calls between the pair. The second realisation was that the bird I had assumed was on a bullrush island was in fact in sedge just a few metres from my feet. And quiet perseverance then paid off, a beady eye and green eye peering out first, then a quick stroll across a gap in the vegetation, nice start to the day. Male and female Ruff at the wader pool a little later, just eight Wood Sandpipers now present, then a lazy day watching the skies. Top reward an Osprey early afternoon, followed ten minutes later by a Black Kite, nice stuff. 5 May. Delight in Yellow, New Species. Dawn in the forest and associated marsh, nice but not outstanding - Sedge Warblers in increased numbers, Whooper Swan near the presumed nest, Garganey in their now usual patch, silence from the Little Crakes this morning. Wander over to the meadows, thought I, perhaps a new wader or two on the seasonal pool. Well, waders seem to have taken a slight hiatus - shanks all long gone, no sign of the two Ruff from a couple of days earlier, but still a few Wood Sandpipers to count. So settle down I did with the scope, a slow scan from the right, one Wood Sandpiper, then three more, then ...giddy me, a stunning male Citrine Wagtail strutting his stuff at the water's edge! New species for my land, and very localised in Lithuania, this was a species I had optimistically been predicting for several springs now, and dead chuffed I was! Watched it prancing about for a while, then across the pool it flew to paddle around in a patch of boggy mud/emergent vegetation. Slung my mobile phone up against the telescope, got a bit of decidedly poor footage, then looked back at the bird ...and it was gone! And never did it return, 15-20 minutes it had been on the pool - short, but sweet. Completed the Wood Sandpiper count (12 present), then rounded off the morning with a Black Kite circling the meadows before drifting west. All most pleasing! 6 May.

Humongous rain overnight into morning, skipped my usual early walks. Cleared by midday, potted over to the seasonal pool, 18 Wood Sandpipers present, nothing else. In now warm and relatively bright skies, two Black Terns high overhead, lots of Rooks too.

Today however really belonged to the butterflies - despite the sun relatively weak most of the afternoon, many butterflies on the wing - dozens of Orange Tips, Green-veined Whites and Small Whites, a few Brimstones, one Peacock and, best of all, five new species for the year - one Swallowtail, one Map Butterfly, one Red Admiral, one Wood White and one Holly Blue. Completing the good insect day, first flights of dragonflies too - a dozen or so White-faced Darters and one Downy Emerald. Both these species should become super abundant in the next days.

On the Coronavirus front, government announced today an extension of the National Quarantine to the end of the month, but further eased restrictions - all shops now open, borders with other Baltic States to reopen mid-month, some sports facilities, etc, allowed to resume operations. From my perspective, perfect - gives me good reason to prolong my self isolation in Labanoras for another month, no issue with any folk expecting me to appear in person. Total cases in

Lithuania now 1428, deaths 49. 7 May. What a nice day!

All started with Wood Sandpipers at the 35 mark this morning, a considerable increase on the day before and a pretty good total, then things got even better with a female Merlin funnelling north, only the second time I've seen one on my land (previous one in March 2010).

In relative warmth and all-day sun, also a pleasing increase in butterflies and dragonflies this day, especially a rise in Wood Whites and both White-faced Darters and Downy Emeralds. Not seen the previous day, Camberwell Beauty, Small Tortoiseshell and Comma also flying this day.

And then a bit of pottering around, work stuff and building a stone path, etc. However, the day's highlight was still to come - as sun set across the flood forest, and a dozen Cranes filled the sky with sound, a loud clear call pierced the evening. Oh fantastic, a Spotted Crake in full song, yet another new species for my land! With Little Crake 20 metres along, Spotted Crake here and Bittern just yonder, this was bliss.

I have been going out at dusk and during darkness for the last few nights in the hope of one, though didn't really think I would actually be rewarded. Even saw it as it flew from one patch of reed to the next. What a nice day! 8 May. Pair of White-tailed Eagles displaying above my cabin just now, one Hobby in attendance. Black Woodpecker at adjacent ant hills earlier. Not much more on the bird front to report for today, but two Beavers this evening - one in the flood forest, one on my excavated pool. 9 May. Wrynecks, Swallowtail et al.

Mini arrival of Wrynecks this morning, two rival males singing at each other, one already with a partner. Their backdrop, in the floodforest, sound galore - Reed Warblers and Savi's Warbler in full voice, the pleasing addition of a Great Reed Warbler contributing a loud grating, Reed Buntings with merry little tunes. Managed to part read a ring on one of the Reed Buntings - he'd spent his winter holidays down in Slovakia!

Mixed day of butterflies, highlights a Swallowtail and my first Small Heath of the day, plus a few strolls over to the pool in the meadows - wader migration is clearly past its peak, only 12 Wood Sandpipers this day, half of which flew off high to the north late afternoon.

Evening was amazing - sat on my favourite log as light faded, Bittern and Crane serenading in their own particular ways, a newly arrived Thrush Nightingale notching up song, then both the Spotted Crake and Little Crake adding to the musical mix, the Spotted Crake in particular very loud! Savi's and Reed Warbler singing, the now regular pair of Garganey flying out from their favoured patch.

Completely dark by the time I returned to my cabin, the Spotted Crake call still ringing out into the night, something also upsetting the local White-tailed Eagles, their loud calls also breaking the night. Off yonder, a distant Grasshopper Warbler, a Whinchat also giving a nocturnal performance. Meanwhile, on the Coronavirus front, the government has suggested it will allow schools to reopen for the last two weeks of the school year (from 25 May or 1 June). Total loopy government sometimes - let the kids mix for two weeks, then watch as they then get shipped off to their grandparents for the rest of the summer ...great recipe for killing off some old folk. 10-11 May. Summer. Two days of perfect weather, temperatures reaching 24 C, a rarity this spring! And with it, two pairs of cracking adult White-tailed Eagles in display above my cabin on the 10th, a further arrival of Wrynecks on the 11th - adding to the two territorial birds already arrived, two more males singing, one hanging out not a million miles from the nestbox I made a couple of weeks back specially for this species, here's hoping..

Excellent range of butterflies on the two days too - a couple of Swallowtails, two Camberwell Beauties, several Green Hairstreaks and first Speckled Wood of the year among the many butterflies. Off my land, also another two new butterflies for the year - Queen of Spain Fritillary and Dingy Skipper. And aside these butterflies, loads of Downy Emeralds and White-faced Darters also on the wing this day. One Northern Damselfly, first of the season. 12 May Snow Shock!

A wild windy wet night out there, but still the Bittern boomed! Come the morning, it was cold in the cabin. Got up and looked out of the window ... 'oh ho, snow!' Not just a few flakes, but loads of the stuff - first time I have ever seen such in Lithuania in May, the world was turning white! And snow all morning it did, a layer of several centimetres eventually settling.

Morning walk was brief and cold, Bittern stubbornly continuing to boom, then into my cabin I went, adding a little extra to the bird feeders. Yellowhammers to the grain, Great and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers on the peanuts, a flock of Jays sent scattering by a fairly dramatic arrival of a female Goshawk through the snow. Failed to catch anything, off she went. One forlorn looking White Stork came to my cabin pool to hunt frogs, not sure any of them were out and about however.

Snow stopped early afternoon, out came the sun. A couple of hours later, perfect spring look again, fresh greens back in place, Wryneck singing, White-tailed Eagles and Marsh Harriers displaying again, freshly arrived Swifts hawking low over the forest pool with Swallows, my first Spotted Flycatcher of the year probably wondering why he had returned to a

land blighted by snow that morning. Spotted Crake and Little Crake both still in place.

Temperature barely reached 5 C, but felt warmer in sheltered spots, a few Green-veined Whites and Small Whites taking to the wing, Downy Emeralds too. Casualty of the snow, found a freshly dead Woodlark fledgling, I fear many more birds died in this highly unseasonal cold snap. 14 May. After the Nonsense Weather. After two days of totally nonsense weather, it still staggered to reach 8 C today, but at least it was sunny on occasion. But after a day when I barely left the cabin yesterday, not too bad today ...and four new bird species for the year - a flock of about 15 Crossbills over the cabin, then the arrival of both singing Icterine Warbler and Golden Oriole in the forest.

Top of the day however, arriving mid-morning to sit and sing atop my shrike piles, Mr Tardy himself, one splendid male Red-backed Shrike. Built these piles of branches two autumns ago with the specific purpose of attracting Red-backed Shrikes and most successful they have been, one pair breeding last year and now all looking set for this season. One very noisy Wryneck also atop one of the other piles all day long, plus Common Whitethroat and Yellowhammer ...popular indeed are these piles!

It would seem a pair of White-tailed Eagles is breeding in conifers just adjacent to my land this year, the pair one again performing aerial dances above my cabin mid-afternoon.

On the Coronavirus front, considerable inconsistencies and, to my way of thinking, illogical steps at present. Cases within the country remain low, generally around ten new cases a day, but seems to me a little haphazard the government's current strategy - opening the schools with just two weeks left of term, removing the mandatory use of masks outside, but still recommending their use, rushing to open stuff without any pauses to see if any increase in infections, financial gifts for pensioners. 16 May. Day of the Apollo.

Strong winds, precious little sun, frequent rain ...lovely weather for May!

And being the eternal optimist, despite heavy grey skies, decided to do a butterfly foray, doing some wildlife watching off my land for the first time for months - well, to cut a long story short, saw a grand total of three butterflies :) Fortunately, one of those three was the main butterfly I wanted to see on this day - a Clouded Apollo. Appearing in a brief sunny spell (literally ten minutes), this most classic of butterflies clambered up from the grass to sun himself and then to flutter weakly across the meadow, a gusty wind keeping him in the lee of trees. As for the other two butterflies, Small Heaths both.

At the next locality, a place I hoped for Chequered Skippers, not a single butterfly did I see - hardly surprising, it started to rain! Two Lesser Spotted Eagles, one Black Woodpecker, one Red Deer. Turned tails and head back to my land! 17 May. They Come in Pairs!

No lessening of the wind, a real gale buffeting the land! An hour or so after dawn, Red-backed Shrike hunkered well down in the shrike pile, Wryneck seemingly even deeper. Took a stroll into the forest, pleasantly sheltered and actually very nice in the early morning sunshine. Several Golden Orioles in song, a newly-arrived Spotted Flycatcher the third on territory this season (very welcome after a few poor years), all hunky dory.

Then I wandered through a semi-open patch of woodland, the bigger trees long ago removed by Beavers, the small hazel regrowth likewise chopped last autumn. Not far from here, the territories of my Spotted and Little Crakes, but no sound from them this morning, the wind quite strong across the reeds. And then, jeepers me, I flushed a Nightjar! I have long fancied a wandering Nightjar at dusk from nearby pine forests, but never really ranked it as a very high possibility. I certainly didn't expect to find one during the day, but here it was - a new species for my land, one male Nightjar! After flushing, he looped around, gave a guttural croaking, briefly landed, then flew again. Attracting the irritation of breeding Starlings, I thought he landed on a broad bough of an oak, but possibly he actually landed on the ground nearby. Either way, I did not see again, and not wanting to disturb him, withdraw with the idea of an evening return.

Wind and on-off rain all day, added my first Feral Pigeons of the year (flock scoped on a nearby ploughed field), then took another wander through the forest in the afternoon, armed this time with my camera ...maybe I'd see the Nightjar again, I thought.

Approached quietly the same area, just slowly walking along my main path. And up flew a Nightjar! But, jeepers me for the second time this day, it was a different bird! While the morning bird was a male, this was a female! I wait 15 years for my first, and then two arrive! And this lady did sit on a branch for a few moments, then relocated to another branch, then looping off between the chopped hazels.

So, one male, one female, could they breed? Not ideal habitat, but... 18 May. Nightjar Performance. Against all my expectations, refound the male Nightjar again this morning, roosting alongside the path in exactly the same place as the day before. Upon hearing, Little One was not impressed - she hadn't accompanied me on the walks yesterday and we had failed to see at dusk last night. And she was busy doing remote school stuff at this moment :)

Increase in Wood Sandpipers on the seasonal pool this day, 19 there in the afternoon, though ten of these departed high to the north early evening. Other stuff during the day, Black Woodpecker and the curious case of murder in the nestbox - losing out in a battle over ownership rights, a female Great Tit was killed by a Pied Flycatcher, the victor then

pulling out half the nest material to shower over the ground around the still warm Great Tit.

So evening came, a few showers threatening to blight events again, but a pleasant evening eventually ensuing - still, moderately clear skies, not cold. Little One had expectations! And she was not to be disappointed this time - as sun set and a Hobby spent a quarter hour hawking low over the marsh, weaving between skeletal trees, so I strained my ears for any sign of churring. But getting loud out there these evenings - on top of frogs of assorted type, Sedge and Savi's Warblers were singing, both the Little and Spotted Crake were calling, the Bittern booming and a couple of Thrush Nightingales notching up their melody. Didn't hear the Nightjar, but suddenly a "What's that?" from Little One ...and there it was, female Nightjar gliding overhead and out across the marsh, another loop back moments later. Woodcock roding too. And just as we were about to congratulate ourselves, suddenly the male appeared too, floating like a butterfly around Little One's head, that characteristic floppy flight interspersed by glides, white wing flashes a treat.

Successful evening :) 19 May. New Species Again!

Labanoras does it stuff again! Barely two days since the last new species, found another early morning today - a singing male Barred Warbler! All the sweeter that it was singing in an overgrown hedgeline that I planted a few years ago just adjacent to the shrike piles. Not much time to savour the bird however - singing as it worked along the hedge, it then flicked across to a more extensive area of regenerating birches and other shrubs. All of five minutes and I had lost it.

Seemed to be a bit of an arrival of Golden Orioles today, more in the forest, plus a male in the same hedgeline as the Barred Warbler, one more Red-backed Shrike too. Trying to steal the limelight from the Barred Warbler, also could hear a distant Hoopoe later in the morning - only my fourth record at this locality.

Sixth new species for my land during the National Quarantine period in Lithuania. 20-21 May. Back to Reality. After those exceptional days with Nightjars and Barred Warbler, all relatively quiet now on the Eastern Front - Nightjars it seems were indeed migrants, two days they stayed, and the Barred Warbler a five-minute wonder.

Totally junk weather continuing, never has there been such a bad May, but did get a sunny break yesterday and a righnice flush of butterflies, many new for the year for me - 13 species, including Weaver's and Queen of Spain Fritillaries, Small Coppers, Eastern Bath Whites, lots of Small Heaths, etc etc.

Rain, wind and cold now - no butterflies. But still, not so bad, from the comfort of my cabin, I can hear Wryneck and Golden Orioles calling and can see a White Stork plodding along the adjacent pool. 23-24 May. Here Comes the Sun. With May abnormally cold, even snow not so long ago, it's been a poor month for butterflies pretty much throughout. Even so, finally they have to appear - and in rare sunshine and temperatures hitting 19 C on the 23rd, I nipped off my land to check a few of my favourite haunts nor so far away. And good it was - even though numbers were not high (early season species in low numbers, typical late May species mostly late), the variety was good. I failed to find the two species I was looking for (Chequered Skipper and Northern Chequered Skipper), but did see a grand total of 19 species, a colony of about 20 Clouded Apollo topping the bill. Also good one False Heath Fritillary (only usually see one or two a year), three Short-tailed Blues and a late first generation Camberwell Beauty. Back on my land, a pair of Crested Tits, a not very frequent wanderer onto my plot. On the 24th, I more or less decided that, despite Lithuania rapidly moving back towards business as usual, I'm going to stretch the self-isolation for another month without big issue. And why not? I started the day in excellent style - after years of having Bitterns in my reedbed, booming day and night, finally I saw one this morning. Was near the track at the crake spot, I'd been standing there for about 15 minutes when suddenly it flew up from just close by and did a leasurely flight across the reeds. And that pleased me no end!

Otherwise, plenty of Swifts arrived today, plus a contingent of Common Rosefinches. Cloudy again though, no butterflies. Probably due to the mild winter, an exceptionally good year for these little fellows however. On the peak day, managed a rather impressive 48 crawling up the legs of me and Little One, but there are hundreds of them out there this year, get several every time we walk through long grass. 26-27 May. Final Stage of Spring. Height of the nesting season, virtually every nestbox I have put up is squawking with chicks begging to be fed (Great Tits, Blue Tits, Starlings) or have territorial Pied Flycatchers jealousy guarding them. Much breeding activity too by woodpeckers - seven species now actively breeding, their chicks even louder than the nestbox inhabitants. Elsewhere, calls of Golden Orioles and Common Rosefinches ring out. Nice spring days. Woodcock continues the nightly roding, frog chorus moving up several notches, Little Crakes remain, Spotted Crake silent or gone. Spring migration however is now nearing its end now, but still some nice birds appearing - just along from the bush with a Barred Warbler a week or so ago, one singing Marsh Warbler along a ditch this morning. Traditionally one of the last migrants to arrive, it is not rare that a pair breeds somewhere on my land. Also, after a gap of some days, two more Wood Sandpipers on the meadow pool.