

## Birding in the Era of Coronavirus, STAGE SEVEN, October 2020.

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Stage Seven. The Resurgence, October 2020. As across Europe, back comes the Coronavirus, a higher intensity than in spring and an upward trajectory, the numbers of cases rising to over a hundred a day by the end of September, rising suddenly mid-month to over 400, then 600 a day (the highest total in spring was less than 80). By the month's end, the country was looking at 1000 cases a day ...for a little country, that is quite a lot, the number of cases per 100,000 now sitting pretty much average for Europe. But to that backdrop, pitifully few measures are in place to slow the rise.

For me, gives ample reason to continue remote working and settle in at Labanoras for another few months. This however is not spring &ndash; rather than the daily delights of May and June, autumn in Labanoras is a game of diminishing returns, the land rapidly emptying as birds migrate out before winter sets in. Still, always a few bits and bobs to enliven the days. That said, some pretty good birds, including Pygmy Owl and lingering Nutcrackers, plus a nice range of late butterflies. 1-8 October. Warm Start.

Record high temperatures to start the month, 22 C and bright sun, but quite a lack of birds &ndash; did see my fourth Kingfisher of the autumn, an individual alternating between my forest pools and excavated pools, but otherwise fairly quiet, the highlights being a Nutcracker remaining in the hazel groves, six species of woodpecker active and one overhead Brambling being the first of the year on my land. Also migrating flocks of Long-tailed Tits still dragging through a few Chiffchaffs, the first Bullfinches of the autumn moving through and lingering thrushes of various species.

For all the lack of birds, still quite a few insects on the wing however &ndash; late butterflies including Pale Clouded Yellow, Small White, Peacock, Comma and Red Admiral), while dragonflies included plentiful Ruddy Darters, a few Black Darters, a couple of Migrant Hawkers and an occasional Siberian Winter Damselfly.

9-11 October. Brown Hairstreak, End of Season Punch.

Mid-October traditionally sees the final gasps of the butterfly season in Lithuania, a few hardy species occasionally managing to eke out an existence as late as the third week of the month. Never have I seen a butterfly on the wing beyond that. Pretty good tallies in these days though &ndash; a pleasant 22 C on the 9th bringing out no less than seven species - a bunch of Queen of Spain Fritillaries, a couple of Small Coppers, and a few Small Whites, plus singles of Brimstone, Comma, Red Admiral and Peacock. Even better, a big surprise on the 11th &ndash; fluttering past my cabin at Labanoras, one Brown Hairstreak! My first of the year, the first ever on my land and my latest ever for this species. And potentially my last butterfly of the year ... rain forecast for the next days, then it might all be over.

13-15 October. Pygmy Owl, Lingerin Butterflies.

Yay, Pygmy Owl on my land on the evening of the 13th, calling in exactly the same locality as a bird that wintered the previous winter ...hopefully this one will winter too, though small birds at the feeders may wish it not to stay! One late Crane also calling at night, and Grey-headed Woodpecker on the feeders.

And then, following a couple of days of exceptionally heavy rain, yet more butterflies - with a return to sun on the 15th and a moderately pleasant 14 C, still four species at Labanoras &ndash; four Small Tortoiseshells, three Peacocks, one Red Admiral and one Small Copper. Four species of dragonfly too.

17 October. Bird Rally.

A traditional late October meet, the cream (and not so cream) of the Lithuanian birding community gathering on the coast for a rare bit of social activity, and to zoom around the countryside in pursuit of birds that have mostly already departed to the south. In a good year, the birding can be spectacular, massive movements of passerines at dawn, early gatherings of seaducks of the Baltic, flocks of White-tailed Eagles on fish pools, scatterings of Rough-legged Buzzards and Hen Harriers on the plains. In 2020, with the day marked by bright sun and mild conditions, migration was near non-existent, bar heaps of Goldcrests, seabirds were totally lacking and species variety considerably lower than in previous years ...but not too bad all in all, I even managed two new species for my Lithuanian list!

So how it went...

Pre-dawn, a mere 5 C, one of the coldest morning so far of this mild autumn, completed the Covid requirement of a temperature check, then set off into the darkness. Kintai woodlands, a loud kee-wik and the tally started ... the first species of the day, one Tawny Owl calling nearby, another more distant. Slight lightness etching the sky, a call of a White-tailed Eagle was next, soon after followed by seeps of Goldcrests, an alarm of Blackbird and a few calls of Chaffinches and co.

Shifted south a half dozen kilometres to the migration hotspot that is Ventes Ragas, a site known renowned for impressive movements of birds on many a day. Today was not one of those days! As dawn broke, and flights of Cormorants winged round the point, the skies remained eerily quiet, a few Chaffinches and Bramblings winging over, a solitary Hawfinch, a few groups of Wood Pigeon, but nothing to set the pulses racing. Not much better in the bushes &ndash; heaps and heaps of Goldcrests, plenty of Robins, a couple of Black Redstarts, a Dunnock, but not much more ...didn't even get a Chiffchaff here! Offshore, some salvation &ndash; a big flock of ducks fortunately included Goldeneyes, Tufted Duck, Scaup and Great Crested Grebe, nice to see so early in the day. If I had looked harder, I may also have seen Smew and Pochard which were in there, but I failed to find all day!

Well, not much point remaining at Ventes Ragas too long, so headed up to the nearby Kintai fish pools, via a bunch of berry trees laden with additional species such as Fieldfare, Redwing and Mistle Thrush. Two fly-over Bewick's Swans, then got to the fish pools themselves &ndash; a half dozen White-tailed Eagles lounging about, a few Whooper Swans on one pool, plus Shoveler, Teal et al. Best area was at the rear of the area, two semi-drained pools that had a few waders &ndash; Dunlin and Lapwing in the main, but also a few Snipe, along with singles of Ruff, Ringed Plover and Grey Plover. Bit of luck with a fly-in Black-tailed Godwit, quite late for this part of the world. Even luckier as it stayed all of a minute or so when a White-tailed Eagle flushed everything and the bird seemed to depart southward. Also quite late, one Common Tern meandering around the pool. By now, still only 9.00 a.m., my species tally was just short of 70 species.

Returned to Kintai woodlands, time for forest birds &ndash; and bingo, my bird of the day, one corking Firecrest with a flock of Goldcrests ...not only a good bird for the day, but my first ever in Lithuania. At same spot, added Great Spotted Woodpecker, Marsh Tit and Treecreeper, further along Coal Tit and Crested Tit. Thought I heard Nutcracker, but too distant and not sure, never got onto my list this day! Drifted south, finally exiting the forest near Dreverna ...nice flock of Bearded Tits in reeds aside Kursu Lagoon, plenty of assorted geese inland (Greylag, Tundra, Taiga and White-fronted), plus odds and ends here and there ...Goldfinches, Linnets, etc.

Added Moorhen on the edge of Klaipeda, then opted for an excursion by ferry to the Neringa Peninsula ...idea was to notch up divers or seaducks on the Baltic Sea. Fat chance, picture postcard conditions, sea calm, weather nice and sunny. Saw a big zilch on the sea, except a Red Admiral butterfly flying way out to sea!!! Still pretty impressive movement of Goldcrests, dozens arriving on the exposed rocks of the seawall, even several landing on me, including one that landed on my scope while I was using it, hopping along, then jumping down onto my hand and snatching an insect sitting on the scope alongside! Thought I got lucky when I managed to scope a distant Rock Pipit on an adjacent rock jetty, a rare bird in Lithuania, but later found out that there was also a Purple Sandpiper at the same place, a truly rare bird in Lithuania! Gave up on the sea, but still had an hour to kill before my return ferry &ndash; headed for the woodland edge to seek out migrants, dreamed of a White's Thrush, got umpteen Goldcrests and Robins instead, plus singles of Blackcap and Chiffchaff. Still not in the league of White's Thrush, a species incidentally never recorded in Lithuania, I did however find a Bluethroat hopping about under one bush, not a bird I was expecting on this day.

Eventually, got back to Klaipeda and headed over to a small town park ...hardly the 'wild' bird of the day, I did successfully see a Wood Duck that had been previously been reported ...difficult to miss in reality, it was coming to breed with Mallards! Still, despite its hardly glowing credentials, it was a new species for me in Lithuania. So it was now 2.30 pm, the species tally was somewhere approaching 90 and it was now time to relocate to the far south, the Rusne area some 60 km distant. Added Kestrel on route, failed on Collared Dove, then proceeded to give the Rusne fish pools a quick check &ndash; lots of Mute Swans, Grey Herons and Great White Egrets, new ducks in the form of Gadwall, Pintail and Goosander and a couple of new waders too, one stationary Redshank, one Curlew flying over calling. Reed Buntings knocking about, no hoped for Penduline Tits and, in the surrounding area, no Rough-legged Buzzard, no Hen Harrier and no Great Grey Shrike.

Hmm, light beginning to fade, time for a last attempt at some woodland stuff, headed over to the wet deciduous forest at Zalgiris ...and had an excellent last hour, not only scoring Black Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Middle Spotted Woodpecker, but also an Eagle Owl, the deep haunting calls resonating out from the forest interior, magical.

Well past 6pm, time to head for the finish line, penalties if not back at the official end point by 7pm. Skirting some last meadows, still no raptors, no Crane, but did get a Kingfisher, the final new bird of the day. Five minutes before the deadline, we rolled in to the finish point. Thought I had amassed a nice round 100 species, but it turned out I had accidentally ticked the box for a species that I had not seen (Carrion Crow) ...oops, demoted, 99 species to end the day.

And was that enough to win the competition? Na, local knowledge won the day with 113 species, we came 5th. Nice day though.

20 October. Zero Butterfly Day.

Well, a bit of sunshine and not bad temperatures, could I eke out a last butterfly of the year ...nope, big fat zero. Had ideas the season was over.

## 22 October. Coronavirus Spike, Record Butterflies.

Pretty stark statistics on the news – while Lithuania managed to skip through the spring wave of Coronavirus relatively unscathed, things seem to rapidly unravelling this time round - a few days earlier the country notched up a record 170 cases, yesterday it jumped to 311, today 424 ...seems we're following the European model! Deaths on the rise too, schools set to close, local shutdowns in a dozen municipalities across the country. Rapid rise also in Vilnius city, no serious measures being taken by the authorities.

Up at Labanoras however, on a day that started warm and sunny and transformed to wild and windy, remarkably I saw two species of butterfly! And the species in question – one Red Admiral and one Small White – my latest records of both, beating the previous records by a single day in both cases. As for any butterfly, the latest I have ever seen any species on the wing in Lithuania was 24 October in 2017 (Small Copper and Queen of Spain Fritillary). Here's hoping for this year ...though the forecast is far from promising!

So, as schools close and I would guess Vilnius heads into some kind of shutdown in the coming period, a pretty grim forecast ahead ... it's not going to be as much fun staying on my land as in spring - nights will be long and dark, my cabin cold! And, with most birds already fled to southern lands, ornithological pickings might be scant! That said, Pygmy Owl, Nutcracker and Grey-headed Woodpecker today, plus my fifth Kingfisher of the autumn! 24-25 October. Latest Butterfly. Unexpected hours of sunshine on the afternoon of the 25th, zoomed across to the meadows to seek out butterflies ...took quite a bit of searching, but eventually found three on the wing, two remarkably fresh Queen of Spain Fritillaries and one Small Tortoiseshell. Yay, beating my previous best by one day, these were my latest ever butterflies on the wing in Lithuania. Equally late, also a Tree Pipit at Labanoras on the 24th, along with Nutcracker, Pygmy Owl et al.

Covid cases continue to rise, setting new records of 475 on the 24th and 603 on the 25th. Government lost power in national elections this weekend, maybe the new government will be a little more competent in the approach to Coronavirus. Current government has done next to nothing. 25-29 October. Exponential Rise in Covid Cases, Latest Ever Butterfly. In short succession, daily Covid cases rising fast – 400, 600, 770, 950. Blatantly clear Lithuania isn't dodging the bullet this time round, the cases per hundred thousand already on a par with Germany and further rapid growth expected in coming days. Vilnius has returned to quarantine, though restrictions still pretty mild. On the wildlife side of things, an extraordinarily mild autumn continues, temperatures up to 14 C, though sun fairly rare. Fortunately the sun did pop out for a few very pleasant hours on the 25th ...just long enough to produce my latest butterflies ever in Lithuania - two Queen of Spain Fritillaries and one Small Tortoiseshell. Also unusually late, one Tree Pipit at Labanoras. That said though, the mild weather is not highly conducive to good birding at present – my Labanoras feeding station is far quieter than it should be and bar plenty of Great Tits and good numbers of Jays, not much is visiting at all. Have begun my winter ringing however, and was mighty pleased to catch a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on the 28th, as well as a Middle Spotted Woodpecker that is spending its fifth winter at my feeders. Nearby White-backed Woodpecker and Grey-headed Woodpecker eye the feeders, roll on some colder weather. Pygmy Owl and Nutcracker still present. 31 October. Last Day Surprise. Last day of the month, one brief patch of sunshine, one Peacock ....almost the Holy Grail of a November butterfly!