

April 2021. Hesitant Spring.

Contributed by Jos

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A total hotch-potch of weather, some snow, some days at 20 C. Generally slow migration, but excellent additions at Labanoras such as a Pallid Harrier, the arrival of Spotted Crakes, overflying Smew and the establishment of breeding Whooper Swans. Also increasing numbers of butterflies, including Camberwell Beauty and three species of tortoiseshells. Cold Start. 2-5 April.

Distinct cool start to the month, rain or snow alternating with sun, temperatures zero at night, only rising a few degrees by day. And as Easter came, so Covid cases continued to rise in the country, a fairly strict prohibition enforced on movement between municipalities. After a day in the capital and resultant needs to pass through police checkpoints, a clattering of bills to welcome me back to Labanoras - White Storks back atop their nests, always most welcome.

In coming days, as spring struggled forward, yet more life returned to Labanoras, a steady trickle of migrants arriving day by day - Dunnock, abundant Redwings and Fieldfares, flocks of Wood Pigeons. At the heart of my reserve, to a backdrop of bird song, yaffling Grey-headed Woodpeckers and drumming White-backed Woodpeckers, so Snipe and Green Sandpiper engaged in aerial display over open areas of the flood forest. Male and female Marsh Harrier were now present, so too two pairs of Cranes, the Bittern booming yonder and the first Goldeneyes back, a pair lingering not far from nestboxes.

White-fronted and Bean Geese flying over, plus one White-tailed Eagle, an early Lesser Spotted Eagle and three male Smew, only my second record from my land. Ten further Smew seen at a nearby lake. Hopefully a good omen for the season, a pair of Whooper Swans for signs for the second year of breeding in the marsh.

Breeding Whoopers. 7-10 April.

Weather still all over the place - a layer of snow on the 8th, moderate warmth at 12 C on the 10th! And with the cool prevailing conditions, migration pitifully slow - it did, however, include a singing Black Redstart on the 8th and a male Garganey on the 8-9th. Otherwise, plenty of incoming Redwings, but little else.

Top news of the season - after a pair of Whooper Swans lingered in 2020, and possibly attempted to breed, it seems the same pair is intent on breeding this year. Flanked by open marsh and reeds, they are now holding territory in an open part of the flood forest - difficult to see exactly what they are doing, but it appears they are nestbuilding. Fingers crossed, this will be a mighty welcome addition to the breeding avifauna.

Three Tortoises and Sunshine. 11 April.

Days after snow, now 22 C and unbroken sunshine! And butterflies, first of the day a splendid Large Tortoiseshell, soon followed by a couple of Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells and then several Small Tortoiseshells ...never a bad day with the full trio of tortoises. And as the day progressed, an excellent array of early season butterflies - in total, about 50 Brimstones, two Large Tortoiseshells, four Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells, 20 or so Small Tortoiseshells, four Commas and five Peacocks.

Spring Glories, Crakes, Rails et al. 16-19 April.

Spring certainly seems to be springing again. After a few days of relative chill, back to temperatures near 20C, many dozens of butterflies on the wing, including Camberwell Beauty, plus continuing arrivals of bird migrants, Tree Pipit and a pair of Black-tailed Godwits the main highlights.

And glorious evenings at Labanoras - could sit outside to a backdrop of Cranes in full yodel, a medley of birdsong and, off yonder, the calls of a White-tailed Eagle. Roding Woodcock overhead and then, if my ears hadn't deceived me, a rather familiar call echoing up through the semi-darkness from somewhere down on the marsh in the heart of the flood forest. Pottered down to investigate, and indeed it was, calling loud and clear, one Spotted Crake. Quite a mega bird for my land, I had only recorded this species for the first time in 2020, a singing bird that I presume went on to breed. And here, 17 April, arriving three weeks earlier than last year, my second. Checked out the marsh again the following night ...low and behold two Spotted Crakes calling! And for good measure, two Water Rails too, plus the resident Bittern booming. April Games. 22-26 April.

April plays its games. On the 22nd, Holly Blue butterflies emerging, Large Tortoiseshell on the wing, pleasant sun, 16 to 17 C. Next four days, snow showers, hail, rain, occasional sunshine, temperatures barely above freezing! Still, the inevitable march of spring continues ...a Cuckoo singing to the backdrop of falling snow on the 22nd, a flock of 45 Tree Pipits newly arrived on the 23rd, first Swallows on the 24th and an Osprey on the 26th. Also one Spotted Redshank on the meadow pool (6th record for my land, all others in 2020) and a male Ruff (5th record).

In addition, one Black Stork nearby, territorial White-tailed Eagles overhead (breeding adjacent for second year) and a passage Kestrel (fairly rare bird here, not annual, usually in August or September).

Covid cases remain high in Lithuania, managed to get a Pfizer vaccination, still plan to spend most of spring on my land. Wetland Comes of Age. 27 April.

Closed canopy flood forest when I acquired the land, steadily opened up by Beavers ever since, a bit of water management by myself, subsequently invaded by reeds and rush, the heart of my reserve is now an impressive wetland boasting species I could hardly have dreamt about. Cranes and Bitterns breeding, Marsh Harriers busy in aerial display above their nest site, Spotted Crakes and Water Rails calling at night. But now, in an area of rush and open water, the crowning glory ...a pair of Whooper Swans has decided to grace my land, currently incubating eggs. Dead pleased with this addition to my breeding avifauna, they showed interest in the site last year, then re-established the territory a few weeks back. Well concealed by vegetation, it is difficult to see the area, but on their nest atop a vegetation clump they now sit, proudly incubating. First Sedge Warblers also arrived, already attempting to drown out the adjacent chorus of woodland songsters, Teal, Mallard and Goldeneye also loaf, all should breed ...all in all, an excellent piece of wetland.

Temperatures set to rise in the coming days, should be further influxes of birds. Months End. Wryneck et al. 29-30 April. A year back, the arrival of Wrynecks in the open area around my cabin prompted me to put up a nestbox specially for them. In the end, though they bred nearby and spent much of the spring singing from the shrike piles, they didn't use this new des res. This year however, one splendid Wryneck has laid claim to the nestbox, sitting and singing directly adjacent to the box from the 29th. Very nice indeed, and my eighth woodpecker species of the year in my land.