

May 2007. Lithuania, migrants and nestboxes!

Contributed by Jos

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Unseasonally cool and wet, the first half of the month did nevertheless see a continuing trickle of migrants arriving. Golden Orioles, Red-backed Shrikes and Thrush Nightingales all appeared, along with Montagu's Harriers and Hobbies, plus a variety of waterbirds, including White-winged Black Terns. On top of this, the Mediterranean Gulls continued their stay at Baltoji Voke and reasonable numbers of Little Gulls began to move through. Best birding though was up at Labanoras, where not only did I chance upon a Bee-eater, but my nestboxes were almost over-flowing - very good numbers of Pied Flycatchers, high Starling occupancies, a Wryneck at one box and two Tawny Owls near fledging.

1-10 May, migrants and mammals!

You'd be forgiven for not realising this was spring, frosts still chilled the nights, days rarely saw temperatures very impressive. The result was predictable - migrants few, dates late! In the garden and up on the land, female Pied Flycatchers finally arrived in, joining the males who had sung alone for a good week and more, but otherwise there was little movement to report until about the 4th.

At Baltoji Voke, in what was their latest arrival date in ten years, marsh terns finally appeared on mass on the 4th - all hawking Papis Lake, about 120 Black Terns, 15 or so White-winged Black Terns, plus approximately 30 Little Gulls. All very nice, especially with the backdrop being the Mediterranean Gull, still continuing its breeding attempt, the second ever for Lithuania. Also, good numbers of incoming waders - flocks of up to 30 Ruff strutted their stuff, about a dozen Spotted Redshanks appeared and a scatter of other waders included Common Sandpipers, Black-tailed Godwits and Little Ringed Plovers. Had hoped to photograph Citrine Wagtail, but I couldn't even find one ...despite one being seen the day before!

Up in Labanoras, I felt I had been sent to the gulag! All very nice to have new trees, but it ain't half hard work planting them! Over 100 willows and various other plants went in, but unfortunately I still have another 200 waiting their turn to knacker in my back! That said, it is a very nice place to be engaged in hard labour - White Storks gazed down from their nest at my endeavours, Cranes sounded the sirens that I could use to signal coffee time and various raptors offered welcome punctuation to my work. All from the garden, two Montagu's Harriers drifted over, one Marsh Harrier, a Black Kite and, hurtling through scattering the Swallows, my first Hobby of the year! The garden actually did very well this weekend - in addition to the raptors and regular Hawfinches, I also notched up four 'garden ticks' ... a River Warbler and several Thrush Nightingales singing, one Golden Oriole and, on the lake below, a pair of Great Crested Grebes! Birds aside, it was also a rather good weekend for mammals too - a couple of Foxes were usual, a Brown Hare too, but best of the lot I spotted a Beaver from the garden bench! Scanning for Black-throated Divers, which I have never seen here, I spotted something swimming ...straight across the lake and then up onto the bank, a Beaver in the middle of the afternoon. Had a chew on the birch branch, then eventually disappeared ...a new 'mammal tick' for the garden too!

Had to cheat here, the Brown Hare is on my land, the Fox from my garden, but both pictures are from last year, was not so active with my camera in these days!

12-13 May, Labanoras Bonanza

T'was absolutely chucking it down, rain so heavy that I almost decided to stay at home, but ...groan ...there was still all those trees to plant, 200 still left from last week and a further 25 bought in the last days! So out I went, drove through rain that was flooding all and sundry and then arrived in my Labanoras garden to grey and gloom. The White Storks dripped up upon their nest and soon so did I - sloshed about and slowly began to make headway, the trees all ended up in their holes ...but not a bird of note seen.

Then, late afternoon, suddenly the clouds parted and blue skies almost stretched from horizon to horizon! And out came the birds - what I had assumed would be a day to forget suddenly turned into a real amazing affair. The usual garden visitors got the action going - one Marsh Harrier winged it over, the Swallows in and out from their nests in the barn and roof, a female Black Redstart having a nosey about where I'd been planting trees, then the first mega of the day! This little garden, only purchased a little over a half year ago, is now brimming with nestboxes - Tree Sparrows have adopted two, with further pairs in the stork nest and a broken lamp (sharing it with House Sparrows), a Pied Flycatcher arrived today to try and steal one from Great Tits, Starlings feed young in no less than five boxes, but the mega was the one I had really hoped for! Near the end of planting one group of trees, a sudden piping call got me moving - there was a

Wryneck in the orchard! Round I went and there he was, singing right by one of the new nestboxes ...simply fantastic! And even better, a second bird was calling back, perhaps a 100 metres beyond my garden!

That would have been enough to leave me a happy person, but more was to come - first a late skein of White-fronted Geese flew over, then (while I again planted trees) I suddenly heard a most distinctive call and it quickly got me back on my feet again! It took about a half second to realise what it was, up very high, a BEE-EATER was flying over!!!!!! Now I know there were jokes that this would happen when I bought two bee hives a month back, but there are less than ten records of Bee-eater in Lithuania, so this was one real stunning addition to the garden list!

By now, it was almost warm, so I decided to wander over to my land - just as I arrived, I heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker calling, a regular winter bird, but not one I often see in summer, so I set out to try and find it. One hundred metres on and I found a Black Woodpecker instead! Not in the forest where I usually see them, but in the meadow feeding on ant hills ...I am sure they must do this frequently, but it is the first time I have actually seen them doing so. Intent on his activity, he paid little attention to me and I even managed to get a few pictures. Up in the forest, a second Black Woodpecker was calling, the pair were nesting again.

So, all in all, considering I had almost not ventured out, a pretty stunning day!

Next day was something rare - dawn till dusk unbroken sunshine and pleasantly warm with it! After days of tree planting, it had to be a day to enjoy the land, to wander and savour the birds. And did things get off to a good start? They certainly did - choosing scrub and piles of branches each side of the garden, a stunning male Red-backed Shrike had arrived, the vanguard of more to come. But he was a beauty, pristine plumage and singing, fairly approachable too. It confirmed my decision to spend the day birding! Thrush Nightingales were singing all over the place, Whinchats and Whitethroats had dropped in overnight, with many dozens of both, whilst over on the land, a Golden Oriole was singing away in the forest and at least two pairs of Yellow Wagtails were holding territory in the meadows. Swooping in over the pools I had excavated just two years earlier, a Hobby seemed intent on dragonflies, a few now on the wing and, also on the raptor front, no less than three Marsh Harriers quartered, a couple of Sparrowhawks drifted through and a Buzzard went sailing over dangling a mouse from its beak!

But this day was to be for my first nestbox check of the season - close on 200 to do in total, the focus this time was just the Starling boxes. Very impressive rates of occupancy ...virtually all boxes, those in the forest and those on poles out in the meadows, held chicks a few days old. In all, including the land and garden, 23 out of 26 boxes were occupied, a number slightly up on the previous year. Didn't check their boxes, but it also seemed Pied Flycatchers were well up on previous seasons.

My next sighting landed me in a right pickle! What do mobile phones, car alarm control fobs and electronic keys have in common? All will be revealed! Hearing again the Grey-headed Woodpecker, I ambled along my forest path and crossed the small footbridge, a point at which I have a super view of my owl box, a box I know to be occupied by Tawny Owls for the second year. I glanced up and, wow, look at that, two large fluffy jobs squashed in the entrance - the juveniles were taking a look at the world! Well, they were right little impressive things, so I thought it had to be worth a picture or two. One minor problem, I had positioned the box on an island and a slight expanse of water separated me from the owls, an expanse of water made much deeper by rather over-keen Beavers!!! I paddled out a little, then splosh, straight up to my waist! Jeepers, was that water cold! Still, I waded on, two owlets watched on, highly amused no doubt. Then a horrible thought dawned upon me - with the water up to my waist, guess what was under water! Oh no, a soggy concoction of banknotes of various currencies, equally soggy car documents and all the electronics! Well, too late now, so on I waded, half expecting the two fluff buckets to fall back in their nestbox with laughter, but no they didn't. In water lapping high, I got the photographs I desired, two real nice Tawny Owls gazing down. By no means abundant in eastern Lithuania, these really are the stars of my nestbox scheme, so I guess the water was a reasonable price to pay.

Back on dry land, as I dripped water everywhere, so came a realisation of the costs of my escapade! My mobile phone was defunct and, back at the car, I discovered the little gadget to turn off the car alarm had also paid the price ...with the alarm on, my land resounded to sirens everytime I opened the door and, worse still, the engine was immobilised! Oh stuff it, one last point, it was not my car, I had borrowed it for the day!!! For once I was not alone on my land, so I left them by the car and I trudged a kilometre or so back to my house where a second phone waited and I could phone to receive an ear-bending from the car's owner. I am a chicken, so sent a text message 'Please bring second alarm thing, car stuck'. Not a highly amused response from the other end, perhaps due to the thoughts of a 160 km round trip ahead of them. Then an absolute negative as my car, their only possible means of transport, was behind a locked gate, the electronic keys to which were also in my pocket! Meanwhile, over at the car things were going from eventful to even more so! I had left instructions to keep trying to turn off the alarm and, if it worked, to bring the car to the house.

An hour on and I noticed the car seemed to have moved. Hmm, interesting I thought, if it had started, why hadn't they driven back? So I plodded back and the sight to greet me was the one I had feared - the car had started, but then they had then driven back along the track straight into the beaver hole that I had crashed into a week before! The car was well

and truly stuck. Being a true coward, I sent another text message to the car owner 'Engine has started, all is okay'. I failed to mention it was now down a Beaver hole! Well, so passed another hour, digging, propping and lifting, then a delicate driving operation and I was out, off on the happy journey home. Back home, I could not get in, the electronic gate key had also died!

Hmm, not entirely the picture merits the cost!

(PS as the owner of the car might well read this, I do apologise sincerely, please don't kill me for the Beaver hole bit, no dents I promise!)

16-19 May, terns, terns terns!

Few things are so impressive as a flock of White-winged Black Terns, but when they number over a thousand, they really are quite special! Taking a day of leisure on the 16th, I finally stumbled across the small pools at Pagariai, a birding spot I had yet to visit ...but, fantastic, what a nice sight it was that greeted me - about 320 White-winged Black Terns hawking the shallow waters, a couple of Garganey for good measure and a Corncrake calling. Well, if this place could hold so many terns, there had to be a major movement under way, so what would be at Baltoji Voke itself! Got there and was not disappointed. Light rain on occasion, the cool conditions were pushing birds onto the pools - at least 600 Swifts, a thousand or so Swallows and House Martins, a reasonable number of Sand Martins too, the pools were brimming with birds ...but, for the sheer wow factor, the terns took the days - at least another 900 White-winged Black Terns were there, a virtual cloud of them blitzing the waters. Poor light for photographs, but impressive enough to keep me there for a good few hours. Hadn't been there long and I heard a grating call amongst them - oh err, Whiskered Terns with them, a rather rare bird in these parts. I quickly scanned and there they were, two hawking not far out. Plus 25 or so Black Terns to round up the collection. I set about to get a few pictures nevertheless, then noticed there were not two Whiskered Terns, but eight! One Little Gull too. Birds everywhere! In addition to all the terns, it was also a special day in another respect - for the last two or three years, Greylag Geese have lingered through the spring and summerit was only a question of time until a pair bred. That time has come! Representing a new species to the breeding avifauna of the area, one pair of Greylag Geese now has two newly-hatched goslings in tow! Whooper Swans also showing continued increase - the tally this season is seven nests already found!

With all the waterborne excitement, it would have been easy to forget the bushes, but there too, birds were on the move - several Red-backed Shrikes, a couple of Golden Orioles, a Spotted Flycatcher, the first Common Rosefinches in, plus a singing Wryneck.

And just as they had arrived, so too had they departed ...almost! Three days on and the massive influx of White-winged Black Terns had moved on through, leaving 'just' 80 or so to hawk the pools. Still, though 80 are pretty impressive in themselves, soon I was mesmerized by something else - the grating calls of Whiskered Terns! Three days earlier I had seen eight, a number that is higher than I have ever seen at this site before, but this time they were all over the place! Some courting, some hawking high in the fine weather, a minimum of 16 on this single pool alone, with another at a nearby lake, almost certainly the highest ever total for Baltoji Voke! Quite magical to watch them and so passed most of the day, trying to get a few reasonable photographs. Quite a special day in other respects too - a day for babies, with the first three broods of Goldeneyes on the water and the first of the Whooper Swans, plus another record count for the locality ...three days after finding the first ever breeding pair, I now bumped into a flock of 13 Greylag Geese, a very good size flock for an inland locality.

However, for all the birds, the day was really for the butterflies - top species of the day was Camberwell Beauty! Sunning in the middle of the track, it almost became an ex-Camberwell Beauty, but fortunately for it, I saw it at the last moment and, taking my car for a little detour through some scrub, I managed to miss ploughing it down! Jumped out to get a photograph, but no sooner had I taken a single shot and a second appeared and the two of them went sailing off high into the sky! With the sun blazing and temperatures up, there were plenty of other butterflies on the wing too. As well as Brimstones and Map Butterflies, I also found my first Small Copper of the year, followed moments later by the first Sooty Copper of the year.

20 May, garden specials, welcome home!

The 20th of May had already become a good day within minutes of stumbling out of bed - a Common Rosefinch was singing outside, yet another new species for this garden. Some moments later, it got even better - wandering into the garden, I sat on the bench and scanned the lake below. And the reward? A bit of the tern action from days earlier had turned up on my doorstep! Not only were 20 or so Black Terns zig-zagging across the reeds, but about ten stunning White-winged Black Terns were there too, the early morning sun catching their striking plumage a treat. Also, one Bittern booming! Three new species for the garden list and I had not even had my morning coffee!

What with Pied Flycatchers singing in the apple trees, a Wryneck in the birch and Black Redstarts on the fence post,

what a pleasant way to start the day. Temperatures soared through the day, yet more trees got planted, then I deemed it time to take a stroll. Soon bumped into a splendid Red-backed Shrike, then onward I went to the woods. I had intended to spend an hour or so in there, but soon discovered the most abundant lifeform in there was mosquito, no doubt appreciated by the many warblers, including newly arrived Icterine Warblers, but I had no wish to become an extended lunch, so I returned to the meadows. Looking resplendent in yellow, the dandelions made the meadows truly dazzling, all the more so with the first Swallowtail of the year fluttering through, a fantastic butterfly. Also several Red Admirals and a Peacock.

However, if the day had been good up til then, it was about to get a whole lot better - almost back at the cottage, a couple of familiar shapes appeared on the wiresthey were back! A quick scan with the binoculars and I recognised the male, the old faithfuls were home, my pair of Rollers, safely back for another season, wonderful. Now, coffee in the kitchen really becomes a true pleasure with such stunners to watch outside! The World is a very fine place sometimes.

And for one last treat, whilst planting the last of my trees in the late afternoon, a Corncrake started to call, common enough on my land, but the first from my garden ...the 20th May, a classic day's birding in the garden!

24 May, summer rolls in

Back at Baltoji Voke, all the marsh terns had departed - not a Whiskered or White-winged Black Tern to be found anywhere. In fact, no doubt helped by the temperatures sitting at 30 C, Baltoji Voke now basks in the 'lazy' feeling of summer, most of the migration is over and many birds are more concerned with breeding - just a few days after Whooper Swans began to bring their cygnets onto the pools, so too do the first Mute Swans now, seven cygnets trawling along behind the parents. Still, migration not completely over - in compensation for the lack of terns, four Red-necked Phalaropes popped in, males and females twirling together. Also the first Barred Warbler, a male singing and, after a poor showing this spring, finally a displaying Lesser Spotted Eagle. One adult White-tailed Eagle too, but otherwise the remaining stars were not avian. On the butterfly front, a Swallowtail headed the cast, while Red Admirals and Small Heaths also put in an appearance.

As my day neared its end, I popped over to a favoured snake spot - as the sun climbs, a couple of fat Adders often come out to bask ...though they always slink off well before my camera gets anywhere near them. Today, I went in quiet - a beady eye kept a stern watch on me, but one snake, unfortunately a little hidden by grass, finally let me sneak in ...hoping he would not strike, I eventually got him down to about 20 cm or so, very nice animal!

25-27 May, a death wish

An Elk coming through your windscreen at 110 km/hour would not have the prettiest consequences, more than likely it would be terminal for all concerned! And those were the thoughts going through my mind when, travelling at dusk towards my land, a massive female Elk appeared right in front of me, just standing there looking most mighty! For a split second, there was an element of marvel as I watched this impressive beast towering above the car. This was rapidly replaced by an enormous 'oh dear this could be bad!'. Sending the cat (until then sleeping on the back seat) and most of the car contents sideways, I swerved as good as I could and hoped the Elk, still just standing there, would move the opposite way. Fortunately it did!. As I passed within metres, she began to move ...by now I was on the wrong side of the road, but from the corner of my eye I saw her turning! Phew, I thought, that was a little close!

And so had begun the weekend! And, right little gits, my bees finished it by having a mass stinging party on Sunday! I think I learnt two things - first, it was not so wise to tend the hives in a tee-shirt and unprotected and second not to work after thunder, a time I read later they are particularly angry! So, there I was, holding frames of thousands of bees, when they all began a real loud kind of buzzing, hmm I thought, not so happy. Then one stung me, then the next, then a free for all! Not wishing to sling half their hive into the air, I somehow tolerated it long enough to put all back together, then departed to nurse my wounds, trailing a cloud of bees! One swollen arm was my reward!

Anyhow, between these events, it was a cracking weekend for birds - much of the action centred on the garden, not only did a Wryneck continue to sing on and off, but a second became very vocal just nearby ...so, over early morning coffee, I sat on the garden bench and scanned and there they were, another pair of Wrynecks - the male sitting singing and the female with head poking out of a nestbox! It seems to be a good year for them, yet another continued to sing over in the forest. As for the garden bench, there can be few better places in the country to sit - not only are there River Warblers and Thrush Nightingales singing to the left and right, but a Red-backed Shrike has adopted a pile of branches nearby and, on the lake below, there are constant Black and White-winged Black Terns hawking, both breeding I assume. Add to this, male and female Marsh Harriers and, on one occasion, a Black Kite and this little bench soon becomes a very desirable spot! Elsewhere, the Rollers are doing well, the female has disappeared into the nesting hole several times now and both continue to show well. A sudden and violent thunderstorm saw then sitting very bedraggled on wires ...but with me sitting

directly below, that was just fine for photographs! However, the best (or most frustrating) moment of madness had to be up at my raptor viewpoint - in the space of two or three minutes, one Crane flew over, two Black Storks circled on a thermal, one Lesser Spotted Eagle cruised low overhead and a Grey Heron flapped overcamera was clicking like crazy, then I noticed the settings were all wrong and all was almost white!

However, as a sign of things to come, the best of the weekend went to insects - early Pale Clouded Yellows and Painted Ladies, a Swallowtail and a few other headed the butterflies, whilst my first ever Red-eyed Damselflies gave me the prod to seriously attempt an inventory of dragonflies this year. Soon added Northern Damselflies (by the hundred), three Beautiful Damselflies, several Broad-bodied Chasers and Four-spotted Chaser and several still awaiting my identification. Think I will need to take a holiday up there, dozens and dozens of them, rather hard to identify!