

July 2007. Fledglings, butterflies and odonata.

Contributed by Jos

Last Updated Thursday, 02 August 2007

Despite the soggy start to the month, the odd sunny spot in amongst the showers, downpours and blustery squalls, did get the month off to a fine start. Leading the action, a Hobby near daily at the feeders, a pair of Nutcrackers and lots of young birds on the wing, including both Black Redstarts and Red-backed Shrikes in the garden. In addition, when the sun was shining, about 30 species of butterfly were seen in the first week, both in Ropejos Miskas and at Labanoras, plus several new species of dragonfly for the year, including Brown Hawkers and a Green-eyed Hawktail. As the month continued, the butterfly diversity remained high, including a Camberwell Beauty, but also the birding got generally better - a Red Kite featuring amongst the many raptors on show. By the month's end, with the flavour of the season being youngsters, the Rollers joined the action, successfully fledging three.

1 July. The rain starts!

Humph, a new month and what happens, it rains! Spent almost the whole of the first day of the month sitting in the house at Labanoras looking out the window wondering if it would stop ...well, it did, but only late in the afternoon. Still, a few birds got the month off to a nice start - a Hobby came hurtling through, low round the barn and direct through the feeding station, scattering Tree Sparrows in all directions, but hitting nothing. This Hobby seems to have cottoned on to the potential of the feeding station - almost daily now, it is coming in very low and fast, using the house or barn as cover, then swooping through at the feeders, success can't be far away! Hopefully it will not get the Hawfinches, a pair and juvenile newly arrived!

4-11 July. Dodging the showers, butterflies and summer delights

The 4th saw unbroken sunshine and temperatures high ...had to make the most of it, so zoomed off to Ropejos Miskas for my first stroll of the month along the forest tracks that tend to just drip in mouthwatering selections. I was not disappointed, butterflies were out en masse - not just 24 species, but oodles and oodles of individuals. Fritillaries were everywhere, at least 50 Silver-washed Fritillaries heading the cast, supported by a good dozen or so High Brown Fritillaries, plus a few Heath Fritillaries, several Dark Green Fritillaries, four Pallas's Fritillaries and at least one Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary too. So many that they were all over the place, often landing to lap up salts from my skin! Also notched up my best single day count of Silver-studded Blues, with at least 25 newly-emerged, some of them also landing on me! Moving on a half kilometre or so, a small meadow took the tally ever higher - amongst the more numerous ones, Pale Clouded Yellow, Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell and a few Scarce Coppers.

Then whilst photographing a Heath Fritillary, an almighty squaking started above my head! Up I looked and there it looked down - a pale beak, two gawky eyes and a voice like no tomorrow! A young Black Woodpecker was peering out of its nest!

By the 6th, the weather had turned most foul - heavy showers, gusting winds and general gloom. And this is how it stayed for the next days! However, like little miracles, the occasional hour or two of sun did pop out here and there and, by staying up at Labanoras, I was ready to exploit the best bits - amongst the more common Red Admirals and Silver-washed Fritillaries, both Yellow-legged and Large Tortoiseshells appeared, along with the first Short-tailed Blue of the season. Despite the rather poor conditions, dragonfly numbers also seemed to be increasing slightly - both Ruddy and Black Darters were beginning to appear in numbers, a few Brown Hawkers joined the lingering Emperor Dragonflies and, what was to be a new species for me, one particular dragonfly gave me a right run about! I first saw it briefly on the first day, realised it was something new, only to see it immediately disappear. Started to search, but then the heavens opened! Later, I again searched the same area to no avail. That evening I understood what it probably was, but needed a better look, so returned to the same little patch of meadow the next day and there, eventually, I finally tracked it down, a Green-eyed Hawktail, quite a stunning species.

On the bird front, a Hobby continued to buzz the feeders and, a new species for the garden, a juvenile Common Redstart took up temporary residence, a welcome addition to the more usual Black Redstarts that still feed their youngsters. From the kitchen window, my favoured spot to sit during the rain, the Red-backed Shrikes were now feeding fledged young,

the Rollers battled on regardless and a Black Kite looked rather soggy! Otherwise, the best birds of the weekend were both over in my forest - both the first for some time, and perhaps a hint at an approaching autumn (!), two Nutcrackers and a male Goshawk.

Roll on a bit of sunshine!

14-15 July. First flights, the Rollers have flown!

Red letter day! Not only endangered at a national level, but also instrumental in the purchase of the land in the first place, milestones in the life of my Rollers are effectively milestones in mine! And this weekend, the juveniles took their first flights - a few minutes stroll from my garden and in flew one of the Rollers and perched in a tree, it was the female ...good to see her, but then I glanced leftward and up a bit ...and there was one of the juveniles! Splendid, the second year in a row that I've managed to witness these first flights.

By next morning, the youngsters had not moved much, all less than a hundred metres from the nest, but the behaviour of the adults had changed - any passing raptor now got an immediate reaction, the Rollers up and mobbing them till they moved off. Black Kite, Buzzard and Marsh Harrier all got similar treatment! Mid-morning, flying insects must have been emerging - the parent Rollers were hawking high and giving fantastic views, swooping about before dropping into the dense canopies to feed the waiting youngsters, at least two greeting their return with grating calls.

Overhead, as they hawked, up above them two Black Kites circled and one White-tailed Eagle cruised through. Later an Osprey also appeared.

First flight day for the White Storks too - into a rather strong wind, one of the young storks was practice flapping, lifting himself ever higher from the nest, before dropping back to join its rather less adventurous sibling. Then, through design or mishap, the stork was off - its maiden flight, a clumsy affair indeed with the stork not too hot in the art of turning into the wind! Watching the young storklet trying to get back to the nest was rather entertaining - many an occasion, he simply overshot, miscalculated the angle or ended up on a watertower nearby (a much larger target for practice landing!). On one occasion, he almost knocked little brother (or sister) by coming in much too fast, but then eventually he somehow got back ...he didn't try again that day! One nest along, the two youngsters were not even contemplating flight - a couple of weeks younger, they still sit content and peep out at the great world they will soon inhabit!

Good weekend for insects too - amongst the many Red Admirals, Silver-washed and High Brown Fritillaries and a selection of others including Scarce Coppers and Map Butterflies, the undoubted highlights were two Swallowtails and a White Admiral. Dragonflies also got in on the act ...both Emperors and Lesser Emperors appeared in good numbers.

17-18 July. Top class action on the patch.

One Red Kite, one Camberwell Beauty, 28 other species of butterfly, plus a photogenic Adder ...it all adds up to an excellent couple of days! By tradition, butterflies aside, mid-July tends to be a rather quiet at Baltoji Voke, plenty of youngsters leaving the nest and a trickle of returning waders, but rarely any big surprises. Not so these last couple of days, the patch has been going through something of a mid-summer purple patch!

All started with a trip out to look for butterflies, itself very productive, but all too soon I was distracted by the loud mewing of some young raptors in the pines nearby ...a few minutes later, I was eye to eye with three young Honey Buzzards, not more than a dozen or so metres away and one even sat on the ground! A rare occasion that I get such good views on this rather elusive raptor.

And it was with raptors that I was to continue these excellent couple of days - four White-tailed Eagles, including a youngster, one Osprey, a female Montagu's Harrier and several Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards ...and then, sharing a thermal with the young White-tailed Eagle, the real surprise of the day. I initially assumed it was a Black Kite, a relatively common bird in these parts, but when I actually looked at it, it was much better, an adult Red Kite in rather heavy moult! A very scarce bird in Lithuania, with perhaps less than a half dozen pairs breeding, I usually see less than one per year, so a very nice sighting to round off the raptor tally!

Also saw one Black Stork dropping down into a damp field, no less than three Hoopoes, a Wryneck and, another surprise, the pair of Whiskered Terns continued to linger, hawking still with the many Black Terns. It is quite possible that they are

breeding in the tern colony.

For all the birding delights though, it was once again the butterflies that really stole the show - a fantastic array in Ropejos Miskas and the adjacent meadows. Actual numbers were slightly down on the previous week, but with 29 species, the variety was very good. Perhaps most numerous, after Meadow Browns and Green-veined Whites, were Silver-washed Fritillaries, many dozens of which busied themselves along the rides. High Brown Fritillaries were also common, with Pallas's, Heath and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillaries also occurring in lesser numbers. Then, to complete the family, came the first Weaver's Fritillaries of the year!

Amongst the many others, a few of the highlights included no less than five Swallowtails, a couple of Silver-studded Blues, numerous Red Admirals, two White Admirals, three Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells and a single Purple Emperor. And, saving the best till last, causing me to do an emergency stop, a right stunner - a fantastic Camberwell Beauty sat on the track! I jumped out of the car and managed a single photograph before it upped and flew off, unfortunately not to return.

And then, on top of all this, one further highlight - for the last year or so, I have been trying to get good photographs of some Adders that have a favoured sunning patch ...usually they slink away or just crouch in the grass, but this day one was most cooperative, even if it did cause a nervous moment or two. As I quietly moved in, I noticed a very nicely marked individual was sunbathing, so I changed down to a standard 50 mm lens and crept to within a half metre. It saw me and, instead of retreating, arched up and looked ready to strike.

For the photograph, I really needed to be yet closer, so I edged in and for every centimetre closer I got, he seemed ever more likely to strike! About 20cm from the snake, I decided it was close enough - as he peered down my camera lens, finally I got an angle where grass didn't obstruct the view, so took my pictures and then left him to it ...him in peace, me unbitten!

21-29 July. And so ends the month, birds on the wing

With the Labanoras Rollers fledged, I had expected them to drift off as in the previous year, but it was not the case - wandering widely over a couple of kilometres, they remained faithful to the general area right up until the month's end, frequently returning to the wires next to my house. Then off they would go again, the two adults, invariably trailing their three healthy youngsters, would criss-cross my land and adjacent territories, a gang of birds with top-notch character! Woe betide any raptor in their path ...the adults were having none of it, off in high speed pursuit till the offender was long gone!

It certainly is a good day when you can glance out of the window to see a flock of Rollers, but every time I grabbed my camera they thought it a highly amusing game to then fly off to another favoured area about a kilometre and a half away! The only time one of the youngsters decided to linger, of course, was when it was too dull and grey to get a reasonable photograph, hmph!

Despite the Roller's best efforts, as should be in late July, the raptor fest was at its best - plenty of young Marsh Harriers on the wing and plenty of others in a supporting cast. Be it from the house or up at the raptor viewpoint, the show was entertaining - one or two Black Kites at a time, a pair of Ospreys, several Lesser Spotted Eagles, one Montagu's Harrier, a few Common Buzzards, the list goes on. Rarely a moment without a raptor to watch, all good stuff. The raptor viewpoint was also the best spot to watch the Cranes, a pair and well-grown chick had adopted the meadow below and rarely ventured beyond, their musical yodels a warning to me to keep my distance, a bit tricky as they occupied my entrance route! Rather more friendly to closer approach, dozens of White Storks also wandered the meadows, the young of most nests now at the flying stage and actively experimenting, soaring to great heights, discovering the delights of following tractors and the perils of trying to land in a side wind!

The feeders, though still in their traditional summer lull, are beginning to become just a little more hectic - young Great

Tits and Tree Sparrows hog them as best they can, but Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers soon see them off, plus too a pair of Hawfinches that dropped in on a couple of occasions. Six Crossbills flying overhead constituted a rare species for the garden and, continuing to cause mild panic, a Hobby made yet more attacks at the feeding station!