

Rollers in Labanoras

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At a national level, Rollers were still fairly widespread in Lithuania in the mid-1990s, occurring in their best numbers in southern and eastern parts of the country, most notably in Dzukija and Aukstaitija. In those days, two to three pairs bred at Baltoji Voke, another near Marcinkonys and it was a bird I would see with some regularity. Then came the decline, the national population slumped, the birds at Baltoji Voke disappeared and the species became locally extinct across many parts of the country. The decline, possibly due to changes on the wintering grounds, left Rollers in Lithuania in a precarious situation, a mere scattering of pairs in pockets across the former range. In the current day, even in former strongholds of the Labanoras and Aukstaitija areas, the sighting of a Roller is a rare event. The population is quite probably down into the tens, almost certainly not much higher.

The Labanoras Story It was into this context that I began my search for land to purchase in 2004, a plot that I would turn into a nature reserve. With Rollers so scarce, they were not even featuring in my considerations, but, after a summer and a half of looking for the perfect spot, I found what I was seeking - 35 hectares of forest and meadowland, habitats rich in birds and full of potential. But such is the magnitude of an undertaking of that nature, I did need to think it overbut then a Roller flew over! Oh wow, that clinched it - off I went to the bank manager and the rest is history. If I could tempt Rollers in to breed, what a star to have on your land. 2005, a solo visitor

With memories of the bird from the August before, early spring saw me clambering around in various trees trying to attach nestboxes that I deemed just perfect for Rollers, I even optimistically termed them the Roller boxes in the expectation that soon one would be occupied! However, as spring arrived and May progressed, it did not seem the Rollers shared my enthusiasm for these latest designs in desirable residences. In fact, not only did they not adopt the boxes, but they did not even appear on my landthe optimism that had stemmed from a single sighting the year before began to seem a little misplaced! But then, on the 12th June, the world changed! I was sitting up on my raptor viewpoint and happened to glance around...and there, sat on the wires behind, what did I spot - a singing male Roller right near one of the boxes! Super stuff, a stunning bird that would immediately become the absolute star of my land, quite enough to make me forget the near bankruptcy that my land was causing! And there it stayed over the next couple of weeks, hunting the short meadows and singing regularly, either from the wires or three large birches some hundreds of metres away, another spot with a nestbox. He was a most distinctive bird, his upper mandible had obviously broken at some stage in the past, leaving him looking a little stubby in the beak department, a useful identifying characteristic for future seasons. He was a stunner, but unfortunately he was also a loner, no female was ever seen. After doing a bunk for a couple of weeks, he returned on 9th July for the remainder of the summer, spending most of his days on the wires near the raptor point, but periodically vanishing for several hours or even days. Though it seems he didn't find a partner, I cannot in hindsight rule out that my land was actually the extreme edge of his territory and that perhaps he was feeding here, whilst rearing a brood some way further. Either way, by August, he was gone. 2006, Roller magic Ever the optimist, I slung up another two Roller boxes and then began the wait. Would the male return? Would he find a female? My answer was to come with a bang - on the 10th June, I could only describe myself as on cloud nine - as I turned onto the little dirt track that marks the start of my land, I suddenly realised what I was looking at - not just a Roller, but a pair of Rollers! Brilliant, he had returned (the deformed bill identifying him) and he'd brought a wife from the outset! And with that, the male swooped down to catch a lizard and then presented it to his lady, brilliant, brilliant, brilliant ...the 2006 season started on a high! Over the next two weeks, the pair remained on site, frequently favouring an area adjacent to my land, but wandering widely and visiting nearly all parts of the land, often very near the nestboxes provided for them. By the 28th, the female had vanished and thereafter only appeared on rare occasion, then being fed by the male - all the signs pointed to incubation, she had to be sat in a hole somewhere, treasuring a clutch of eggs! But where? Not in any of the nestboxes! So passed another two weeks, he'd be sat up on wires, she'd be mostly unseen ...all too soon, if there were eggs, they would hatch and his easy-going days would be over! And then the day came, the 8th July, a landmark day - the Rollers were indeed breeding and they had hatched their young! Without doubt, truly the event of the year on my land, something I had been hoping for ever since seeing a Roller fly over two years earlier. Over the previous week, I had been getting a little worried as I hadn't seen her for quite a while and, though I still guessed she was in her nest somewhere unknown, doubts were beginning to creep in. The male would be at his favoured spot every day, but not a peep of his missus. Had the female disappeared and left him to a solo sojourn as in the previous year? So, on that day, as the sun scorched bird and me alike, I settled down to watch - up on the wires, down into the meadow, he was feeding well, a cracking bird. Then, a hopeful sign, off he flew purposefully towards a grove of mature trees with food. I tried to follow him, but lost him and all too soon he was back on the wires! This grove, supporting some beautiful old trees was where I had presumed the nest would be, so I sat it out … boy did that sun start to burn! Some 20 minutes later, he again flew into the grove, but again I lost him as he flew through the trees. Still no sign of the female though! By now, having been sat under that relentless sun for longer than I wished, I decided to leave it for another day ...but he just had to be feeding young!

Next day, the male was again in his favoured spot, but still no female. I started to watch, much the same as the day

before, he sat on the wires and kept dropping down to catch prey in the meadows. But then it was not the same as the day before, again he flew off towards the grove, but low and behold, when he returned, so too did the female! Excellent, she was still here, so she must have been incubating after all. The male dropped down and caught something big and juicy, which he promptly presented to his lady friend, who then promptly flew back to the grove with it. A few minutes later, she was back, another food gift and off she went again. So repeated this several times, she was feeding young! I changed position to get a better view into the grove and after quite a bit of effort managed to locate the tree that the Rollers were taking the food, or more to the point she was taking the food, he always gave her the food and she carted it in! I couldn't actually see the nest hole, but not wishing to risk disturbance, I left this task to another day. Quite chuffed indeed, off I went home. One week later, the pair were still taking food back to the nest site, but they'd actively hunt over a very wide area, frequently up near the raptor viewpoint, a clear kilometre from the nest site. Up there, always one of the male's favoured hunting spot, he'd catch something big, then wing it off towards the distant nest only to return some minutes later to catch something else. After a while, I decided to go over the Roller nesting area - using the car as a hide, I parked about a 100 metres distant, then watched as the adults came into to feed the youngsters. It didn't take long to spot the nesthole, about midway up a big birch, so I then settled back and enjoyed the comings and goings of the parent birds, still feeling quite amazed at their presence. The 6th August, the climax of the season! Due to an eerie absence of the birds around the nesting tree, I decided to take a wander and there, not a hundred metres away, I was to find my birds. First, an adult flew by and then, just a few moments later, a youngster launched itself out of a tree and flew a hesitant figure of eight before settling into another tree down the slope. A great moment in a great year! The Rollers had fledged! How many young I was never sure - they all sat hiding in the trees! Next day, I saw them one more time, crossing fields to the south and onward somewhere to learn the tricks of adolescence. And with that, I never saw them again ...except a single sighting three weeks later on the 27th. I was just preparing to go home, I drove up the drive ...and then I stopped. There on the wires was my female Roller! Brilliant, a fitting finale to the year. 2007, more magic. They arrived earlier, bred successfully and stayed longer, what a perfect year! All kicked off on the 20th May ...mister and missus arrived together, the male being the same individual as in previous years. Then the next month saw things ticking along very nicely indeed, a brief spell of courtship feeding, then the female disappeared into the nest hole to begin her incubation. The nest site was the same as in the previous year. The first half of June saw little activity - with the female rarely seen and the male frequently off feeding, it was almost possible to forget the Rollers were there! Indeed, with the male changing his favoured feeding location every few days, it was on occasion difficult to find him. All that changed on the 23rd June ...the young hatched and from that day on, the Rollers were back and fro like little clockwork yo yos! Peer out the kitchen window for a few minutes and almost certainly one of the birds would fly over, a very nice period for watching them. And so continued the action for the next three weeks, the adults regularly in and out, feeding going well. Then, on the 15th July, the pattern changed, the Rollers were more static, hanging around the nest tree longer and feeding closer, something had changed - I skirted around the area and, as I tried to get an angle where I could see something, one of the Rollers flew in and perched in a tree. It was the female, always good to see, but then I glanced leftward and up a bit ...and there was a scrawny brown youngster! The juveniles had taken their first flights! Splendid, the second year in a row that I'd managed to witness this event, another red letter day in the life of Labanoras! As to how many youngsters, I could not ascertain, they all sat in the depths of large trees, but even on that first day, there had to be at least two.

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, now clearly three in all, all of which would greet the adults' return with grating calls.

With the young 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! And the raptors were still fair game - woe betide anything hook-beaked in their path ...the adults would be off in high speed pursuit till the offender was long gone!

As the season edged towards its end, the Roller family were still on site on the 5th August, the pair and three young feeding in recently mown meadows. With the young more experienced and presumably less vulnerable, the adults dislike of raptors seemed to have once again subsided, neither bird even casting an eye as regular Marsh Harriers drifted over.

