

August 2007. On the move, storks and waders.

Contributed by Jos

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A month of farewells, birds were on the move - in days that remained hot and sunny, White Storks and Rollers lingered at Labanoras but it was all go at Baltoji Voke! As the first pools were drained, there were birds galore - amongst 20 wader species recorded, no less than five Broad-billed Sandpipers, plus Temminck's Stints, Little Stints, Curlew Sandpipers and totals of over a hundred Wood Sandpipers. Also Caspian Terns, flocks of over a hundred Great White Egrets and Black Storks, including one particularly impressive group of 23.

However, for all the birding highlights, the most satisfying news came from Kaunas - my White Stork orphans had successfully returned to the wild, both they and their companions were migrating.

1-5 August. Autumn commences

August equals migration! Autumn is here, birds are fleeing and that makes it time to reacquaint with the fish pools at Baltoji Voke! And what a start to the autumn season - two stonking Caspian Terns, almost 80 Great White Egrets, a good scattering of passage waders, including over 60 Wood Sandpipers, a few Curlew Sandpipers and a Little Stint, plus four Black Storks and about seven White-tailed Eagles. All hands on deck, the season is open!

On top of all that, a lingering suspicion was also finally confirmed - hawking one pool, in the company of several dozen Black Terns, there was a juvenile Whiskered Tern, a bird I had been waiting for! All summer, a pair had remained in the area, rarely seen during the incubation time, more frequently so later on, then I saw them carrying food ...they had to be breeding! And if they were breeding, it would probably constitute the first breeding record for eastern Lithuania! So, my eyes were peeled and today they were rewarded, the smart juvenile to complete the story!

For all the birds though, I was all too often distracted - still the butterflies and dragonflies are at their height. A cracking day today, not only did I bump into my first Common Darters (as opposed to Ruddy Darters which are more common here), but dozens of top class butterflies too - yet another Camberwell Beauty, one Swallowtail, a rather battered Purple Emperor and a whole stack of others.

Up at Labanoras, signs of autumn were appearing too - though Cranes continued to yodel across the meadows, their more common companions, the White Storks, had begun to depart! Whereas just days earlier, dozens could be seen on an average scan, now perhaps half had already gone. Passage birds all, a Tree Pipit also appeared in the garden, along with a female Pied Flycatcher and the second Common Redstart of the season. Joining this motley crew, the regular Hobby put in an appearance, as did a Wryneck, sunbathing on the roof of an outbuilding for about half an hour!

For one family of birds, however, the pulls of autumn had yet to lure them away - the Rollers continued to wander the area ...a single adult seen on the 4th and the whole family, including all three youngsters, watched feeding in a recently mowed meadow on the 5th.

8-10 August. Down goes the water, in come the waders!

If its autumn, then it must be start of the annual draining of the fish pools. Occurring between August and October, the fish harvests expose vast expanses of mud just as the peak of migration is hitting the area - it can be phenomenal! In a good year, the spectacle is mind-blowing ...counts of several hundred egrets and herons, plus thousands of waders, dozens of Black Storks and tens of thousands of wildfowl! On top of all that, White-tailed Eagles by the dozen, regular Ospreys and a good trickle of passerine migrants too! However, all too often this draining only occurs in latter parts of August, thus resulting in a frustrating lack of habitat earlier in the month.

Not so this year! In the previous week, I had noticed the water levels dropping, so I arrived at Baltoji Voke on the 8th with high expectations, hoping that there would be a very good showing of waders. I arrived to immediate success - a Bittern flew across the Papis Lake! I took it as a good omen and headed across to the fish pools. Super, two areas looked fantastic, so I settled to begin my search ...I had ideas of finding either a Marsh Sandpiper or Broad-billed Sandpiper, both scarce, but virtually annual birds on the patch. My luck continued with the finding of both an Oystercatcher and a Whimbrel, neither very frequent at this site, but then I started to scan another patch ...and there he was, a Broad-billed Sandpiper quietly shuffling about the back of one of the pools. A smile did develop at that point! Super birding to a backdrop of a blazing sun and temperatures hovering up around the 30 C mark, it really couldn't be much more pleasant!

A few hours more and I was done - 17 wader species under the belt, including no less than 84 Wood Sandpipers, two Temminck's Stints, several Little Stints, a Curlew Sandpiper and large numbers of Little Ringed Plovers. Four White-tailed Eagles also loafed, a Black Kite drifted over and two Caspian Terns (different birds to the previous week) headed off in pursuit.

Back in Vilnius, it had also been a special day in its own way - as I'd stepped into the garden, a Grey-headed Woodpecker called from the trees above my garden! Not only was it the first I'd encountered away from Labanoras for about a year, but it was also a garden tick, a rare event indeed for my Vilnius garden!

Two days later, water levels had risen at Baltoji Voke, never the best for attracting birds, but nevertheless it was a pleasing afternoon. Dunlins and Little Ringed Plovers had increased in number, Spotted Redshanks too, but all the three specials of the trip before had departed - no Broad-billed Sandpiper, no Oystercatcher and no Whimbrel! Still, the two Temminck's Stints were there, as was a Curlew Sandpiper.

11-12 August. Summer goodbyes at Labanoras

A full two months since they'd lost their chicks and my two White Storks still faithfully lingered on their nest both on the 11th and 12th, bill clapping and displaying, roosting overnight. Very few storks now remained in the area - one pair with their two chicks from a nest a hundred metres down, about a dozen assorted adults, but that was it, a fraction of the number present just two weeks earlier! Despite temperatures soaring to over 30 C, the birds were not being fooled - summer was effectively over and the birds knew it! Groups of Whinchats seemed to be moving through, but otherwise it really was a quiet weekend on the bird front. Quite fortunate really, I had a lot of work to do in the garden! Mild distraction came in the form of a couple of Spotted Flycatchers in the orchard and oodles of White Wagtails enjoying the new pond, joined by a Yellow Wagtail on a couple of occasions.

As for the Rollers, after one blank day, I had also assumed they'd decided it time to depart, but I was in for a little bit of luck ...early on the 12th, I was sat drinking coffee on the garden bench and I heard a distant call, it really did seem to be one of their contact calls. Off I went to investigate and, not more than two hundred metres away, I found the whole family - adults and three youngsters, all doing well. A moment to enjoy, it was almost certainly the last time I would see them this season!

For all the lack of bird action, however, there were certainly plenty of dragonflies to see! Both Southern and Brown Hawkers were in abundance and, after months of searching, I finally found a Common Darter on my land! About time too! Perhaps two or three individuals present, they were still heavily outnumbered by the numerous Ruddy Darters, now mature and a very deep scarlet red. Black Darters were also fairly common, plus several Yellow-winged Darters appeared on the wing, the first ones seen for some time. Butterflies, by contrast, were obvious by the absence!

15 August. Stork finale, the orphans take to the wing!

Ten weeks earlier, following the fateful activities of another White Stork, I had stood with four chicks in my hands, badly injured and near death. Two didn't make it, two struggled through. Under the expert care of LGGD (see links), the two survivors battled on, putting on weight and generally doing very well. As the weeks passed, and storms lashed the country, further orphans joined them and by early August my two had 42 buddies!

Forty-four young White Storks all waiting a return to the wild! The finale of a season of care, the birds were transferred to release pens and, after some days of acclimatisation, the pens opened to allow the birds to wander. Day by day, the quantities of food were slowly reduced and the storks slowly began to forage for themselves.

Then came the good news - by mid-month, over 30 had already departed to migrate, success! I took the opportunity to pay a visit, to see my birds off and feed them one time more. Totally fantastic event - I lay on my stomach for an hour as White Storks wandered around, cautiously venturing in to take the meat provided. One bold individual decided to get a little closer, then another ...as I lay there, I had to look up to see the storks looking down!

A few minutes later I happened to look over my shoulder ...and what did I see? The cheeky blighters had noticed where I had left some of the meat! On the table adjacent, stork heads were appearing over the rim! Most comical, first the eyes would appear, then a little stretch and the whole head would arch over and swipe a morsel. With a kilogram of food gone, off they wandered, some flying up to a nearby roof, some just plodding the lawns. I sat there for a while, remembering

back to the early days of June. Back then it had seemed near hopeless, now they were just days from the beginning of a flight to Africa. Happy storks, happy me.

18-26 August. The end of summer.

As the month moved towards its finality, the exodus of birds stepped up a gear. As early as the 18th, many of the Labanoras White Storks had gone, though fortunately not the pair in my garden. Up above, the mewing of Common Buzzards signalled the beginning of their migration and perhaps as many as 30 drifted south that afternoon, along with three Lesser Spotted Eagles and a Montagu's Harrier. Plus 13 White Storks, three Nutcrackers and a late Swift for good measure. Back over at the house, four Hobbies also appeared and a lingering Marsh Harrier added to the raptor tally.

Next day, after my first Hen Harrier of the autumn and yet another two Broad-billed Sandpipers and two Black Storks at Baltoji Voke, I happened to be in my garden just at the right time to see a flock of about 80 White Storks circling, gaining height on a thermal, before streaming off to the south. Always tinged with sadness, these dramatic flocks really spell the end of summer for me, the iconic symbol of the best of summer, their departure just reminds me that all too soon I'll be knee deep in snow again!

By the 25th, the White Storks in my garden at Labanoras had gone too, the nest stark and empty. The gloom that befell me was short-lived ...for on the wires opposite, two weeks after I had last seen them, one of my Rollers had reappeared! It was the female, hunting and returning to the grove where the nest had been - strange she should return, but she had done exactly the same the year before! A Lesser Spotted Eagle was also still present, as was a young White Stork from the farm up the road and the Cranes with their youngster.

However, surprise of the day was at the feeding station in the forest - just as I watching a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a cracking immature Red-breasted Flycatcher appeared, flitting back and fro just adjacent to the cabin. Never common in Lithuania, I rarely see more than one or two a year, so this was most welcome and gave very nice views.

Then, for my birdwatching venture in Lithuania before autumn officially kicked in, I returned to Baltoji Voke - a positive raptor fest awaited me! At least ten White-tailed Eagles lounged about, occasionally flapping from one pool to another, along with three Hobbies overhead, a female Montagu's Harrier and a few Marsh Harriers. And, high high in the sky, one hundred and ten little circling dots turned out to be a fantastic flock of White Storks, departing Lithuania, just as I would be the next day! And, also bidding me farewell, three rather nice Hoopoes, a late Cuckoo and many dozen Great White Egrets.