

September 2007. Autumn dawning.

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After a fantastic few days in America, where warblers and waders were much in abundance, it was back to Lithuania and back to reality! Autumn was creeping in, birds were leaving. Though the land was now largely devoid of birds, there were still plenty of good birds to see at Baltoji Voke and other locations. Amongst the highlights of the first part of the month, one Red-necked Phalarope, two lingering Black Storks, a flock of over 200 Great White Egrets and a Corncrake sat out in the open. On top of this, at a traditional roost site, there was the fantastic spectacle of over 3500 Common Cranes dropping in to sleep, a visual and musical treat.

1-2 September. New York City.

The final parts of a trip begun in August, this really was a splendid way to get the autumn going. With a fantastic array of species, the delights ranged from Yellow-billed Cuckoo to Belted Kingfisher, Magnolia Warbler to Ovenbird and Piping Plover to Killdeer, the trip was a complete success and I suppose it will not be long before I am again over that way. A full report can be read [here](#).

4-12 September. Autumn in Lithuania!

So it was, I was back in Lithuania! One week away and what had changed? Temperature down a little and an appreciable drop in the number of general birds out and about. Popping up to my land, the White Storks and Cranes had long gone, the Whinchats and Red-backed Shrikes too! Even the House Sparrows, a summer breeder in my garden, had decided it time to move on! In fact, bar the many Jays on the wing, it was really a story of what was not there!

Struggling to find any news of real note, the highlights fell to a passage Kestrel (not a common bird on my land), several Nutcrackers (rather usual) and, potentially the best bird of the day, a Black Woodpecker. Potentially the best, as it seemed intent on coming to the feeders! One Middle Spotted Woodpecker was busying himself on the feeders when this brute of a giant woodpecker landed in the tree directly behind, nothing very unusual in that, but it gave super views, so I sat and watched. Then it turned and flew straight towards the feeder, I was sure it was going to touch down, but no, at the last moment, it seemed to see me and so veered away ! So close, yet so far! If he does finally take to the feeders, it will be the end of a ten year wait, certainly the best news of the year!

For all the lack of birds though, still a few butterflies and dragonflies continued to fly - Red Admirals particularly numerous and, amongst the dragonflies, Migrant Hawkers in their best numbers of the year so far. Ruddy and Black Darters also about, still fairly common.

Down at Baltoji Voke, it was a very different story, birds galore and a few goodies thrown in too. With most of the pools drained, the site was now at its best for migrating waders - Little Stints and Dunlins both numbering over 50, a good dozen or so Spotted Redshanks per vist and plenty of other species too. So, much to scan for the expected rewards ...and rewards there were, a couple of Knots (never common this far inland), a Sanderling, a few Curlew Sandpipers and, the cream of the bunch, coming hot on the heels of the one I saw a week earlier on the other side of the Atlantic, a splendid Red-necked Phalarope. Along with these, Great White Egrets finally started to appear in good numbers, reaching 203 on the 12th, and two Black Storks lingered right through to mid-month.

Add on the several thousand returning wildfowl, mostly Mallard, Teal and Wigeon, and you soon have the ingredients to attract raptors - White-tailed Eagles gathered in groups up to ten, mostly fattening themselves on the ever-available carp, but also seen on one occasion tucking into a duck. Plus the first Peregrine of the autumn appeared, causing much commotion, and so too did a Goshawk, sat on the ground near one pool eyeing the available menu.

However, for all these good birds, perhaps the star was a Corncrake - so rare do I get good views, it was both a surprise and very pleasing to find an obliging individual just standing on a track staring up at my car as I sat and stared back! Just adjacent, five Bearded Tits went ping-pong by!

And then it was time for my near-annual migration to Novaraistis, a peat bog surrounded by pine forests stretching off into the distance, a wild and spectacular place. Moreover though, it is also the location of an autumn roost of up to five or six thousand Cranes, one of the most amazing spectacles in the bird world. And so it was, with two friends, I arrived at 4.00 p.m. to await the first birds. And then we waited and waited! I always arrive far too early, nothing ever comes in before the sun is almost down, so we had two hours to sit and do nothing, but watch two adult White-tailed Eagles sat on dead trees, a Hobby hirling past and a young Marsh harrier quartering the marsh. Then it was 6.00 p.m. and still nothing, and then it was 7.00 p.m. and nothing! Hmm, they were late, maybe there would be no roost? Starlings, thousands of them, swarmed in the skies, they would be roosting, plus too White Wagtails and Swallows, but not a single Crane appeared. Then it got to 7.30, my friends began to give me looks, looks that said 'Why did we come here?' But, as I frantically scanned the distant horizons, I remained confident, soon I would spot a faint line across the sky, a far-off party of Cranes inward-bound. And then I did! From the south, just as the sun began to set, a group of about 20 came winging their way in over the trees, the show had started! Minutes later, the skies were alive, string after string of birds arrived, honking and yodelling as they tumbled down to join the assembled ranks on the marsh below. Most from the south, flocks were coming in 300 to 400 strong by 7.45, squadrons one after another. At one stage, almost filling the horizon, a massive line of birds appeared, perhaps more than 600, it was truly turning into a good evening. By 8.00, as it began to get ever darker and a tad cold, perhaps 3500 birds sat before us. More birds were still arriving, but we bade them goodnight and left, the calls ringing in our ears.

15-19 September. Ospreys and eagles.

By mid-September, the days of summer raptors are by rights over. A few Marsh Harriers tend to linger on, but for the others, they have mostly gone. However, all too often there is a final flurry, a movement of birds some days after the last have been seen. And so it was this year too - starting on the 15th, on an otherwise quiet day at Labanoras, the afternoon was brightened by the appearance of a Lesser Spotted Eagle low over the house. Very nice I thought, almost certainly the last I would see this year. How wrong I was - next day, at Baltoji Voke, I arrived to glance up and see raptors, several raptors! A quick scan revealed them all to be Common Buzzards, but moments later a Lesser Spotted Eagle also appeared, the whole flock slowly drifting south. Perhaps migration I thought, so I moved round to a better vantage point. Indeed it was migration - in the next two hours, I logged a total of five Lesser Spotted Eagles, over 40 Common Buzzards and two Ospreys! Not a bad total in all, especially given the additional assortment of adult and immature White-tailed Eagles as a backdrop and a late lone Black Stork, a youngster several days behind his fellow storks! One Peregrine also seen.

On the 19th, it was an excellent start to the day - I stepped out of my kitchen to see two Ospreys circling up above! Fantastic, a 'garden tick' for my Vilnius house, not very often that happens! Half an hour later, having driven down to Baltoji Voke, I was looking at another Osprey! This time an immature circling Lake Papis and giving very close views. All very nice, three Ospreys within an hour, but there was still one more to come! Driving on towards the fish pools, I looked up at a post and there was the distinctive shape of the fourth bird, another immature, but this time chomping on a fish it had obviously just caught. Wonderful morning, also seven White-tailed Eagles, two Marsh Harries and a few Common Buzzards.

22 September. A day in Hell!

Or Hel to more precise, a sandy peninsula jutting out into the Baltic Sea just north of Gdansk, northern Poland. However, with the journey taking almost all night, thanks to the appalling state of roads, the first spelling is perhaps more apt!

Anyhow, having left Vilnius at 6.00 p.m. to the backdrop of a singing Black Redstart, it was an appalling NINE hours later that Hel finally appeared. Boy, Polish roads are crap! So, 3.00 a.m. in Hel, no point trying to find a hotel, so instead I looked for a place to pull over and snooze the rest of the night away. Then they appeared, six little arses disappearing into the darkness! OO er, what a welcome to Hel! But the arses belonged to creatures rather impressive - Wild Boars, a mother and five youngsters, all rather more intent on rooting about on the road verge than paying attention to me. Some ten minutes or so later, off they trotted and, with that, off I went to a deserted little patch to try a rescue a little sleep.

Barely three hours later and it was dawn, so out from the car I spilled and the first thing I noticed was a strong southerly

wind. Now the Hel Peninsula is essentially a migration hotspot, it can be amazing for birds or it can be dead ...but that wind, whilst fine for bringing a warm sunny day, was totally lousy for birding at this spot - the winds would not have encouraged birds from southern Sweden to have made the hop across the Baltic! And so it was, a few flocks of Siskins and Fieldfares passing overhead, a Cuckoo in a bush, but very little to grab the headlines. On the sea itself, flocks of Little Gulls loitered, a few Sandwich Terns sat on the beach. Up at the tip of the spit, things were perhaps slightly better, a few Blackcaps and Spotted Flycatchers in amongst Goldcrests, but still hardly mindblowing.

In fact, very soon, I decided it was a total waste of time birding, so I went to another place and, other than some noisy school kids, saw absolutely nothing there! Hmm, it was now past midday and a change of strategy was in order - stuff the birding and go to the IKEA store in Gdansk! Good decision, sat in the IKEA carpark and 21 Cranes flew over!

After an afternoon wandering up and down the aisles, the decision was made - cut the losses and head for home, back to Lithuania! Eight hours more on the road and then it was 3.00 a.m. once again, almost home, but just time for one more mammal surprise - a Raccoon Dog crossing the road just before Vilnius. 1450 kilometres, two nights driving and birds hardly worth mentioning, a true voyage to Hell and back.

25-31 September. And so closes the month.

The big movements were beginning on the Lithuanian coast, one observer recording over 400,000 Chaffinches at a single locality during the space of a few hours on the 25th. At Baltoji Voke, however, things were far more modest - on the 26th, I was at Lake Papis hoping for birds overhead. And there were, just in flocks of tens and hundreds, not the thousands! Jays, White Wagtails, Starlings and Fieldfares were all moving to the south, along with the odd Sparrowhawk and, in the adjacent hedgerow, occasional mixed flock of Goldcrests and titmice, at this early stage of the season almost entirely Great Tits. For all the movement though it was, overall, a rather quiet day - Great White Egrets had fallen to about 90, wader numbers were down, the top being a dozen or so Spotted Redshanks and a Grey Plover, and the only raptors of note were the usual nine or ten White-tailed Eagles and a rather fine Hen Harrier that winged its way south. As the month drew to its end, not much changed - Grey Plovers rose to 13 at Baltoji Voke, Black Redstarts remained on patch, but otherwise a decided lull in action.