

October 2007. Mega-birding, rallies and rares.

Contributed by Jos
Last Updated Monday, 29 October 2007

As the country emptied of birds and the lands fell silent, October saw a change in strategy - tramping the local patch began to play second fiddle to the feeding stations - time to start building them up, increasing the numbers of feeders at each site and to start a ringing program at Labanoras to investigate winter movements. Rewards included Hawfinches, Middle Spotted Woodpeckers and the return of Grey-headed Woodpeckers. However, for sheer wow factor, it was the third weekend of the month that towered above everything - first, a Bonaparte's Gull (a new species for the country) and then a mad dash around the coastal districts in the annual Lithuanian Bird Rally, a race that saw me grabbing second place, a single species behind the winners.

1-5 October. Bedtime birds.

In preparation for the winter coming, my birds at Labanoras deserved another bird table. So a day and half I spent building and the result was a rather fine affair topped with a felt-tiled roof - better than that on my house it was commented! Anyhow, to the positioning. From my house, out of one window are all my main feeders, but there exists a second window in the same room looking into an orchard, the perfect spot for the latest addition. Plus, on top on that, it means I can now lie in bed and peer out at the new arrivals!

Up went the table and in came the birds - within a minute or two Great Tits were checking it out, but it was a Marsh Tit that scored first by actually dropping down to feed. Soon it was a free-for-all scrum - the Tree Sparrows descended and it was birds galore! Jays popped in and out, one Middle Spotted Woodpecker decided the feeders hanging down were just the biz and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker also appeared in the trees behind. Off to the right, a Black Redstart, a late summer visitor, lingered a while. I could see the need for a new list - a bed list! No sooner had this been started and the first surprise turned up - a young Hawfinch! Brilliant, barely an hour up and the new table had recorded its first biggie! And there it stayed much of the morning, chomping through sunflower seeds and none too worried by an observer on a bed just a metre or so away! And then another appeared, an adult male Hawfinch!!! Ah, the new table had been christened in style!

6-7 October. The ringing starts.

With feeding stations at two locations at Labanoras, a kilometre and a half apart, it has long been my interest to see if there is any interchange of birds between the two sites, whether amongst the smaller passerines or amongst the numerous woodpeckers that frequent both. It is my opinion that there is no movement, that the two feeding stations each have their own catchment areas - site one drawing birds from within the forest it is situated and site two from gardens and lakeside woodland adjacent.

Surveys in the previous winter suggested that numbers at the two localities totalled in excess 260 and 235 birds respectively, but these numbers were far from accurate and I could not with total certainty exclude the possibility that there was some overlap, that birds were crossing the kilometre of open country separating the two. So, to this winter - a full ringing programme will be implemented, not only allowing a better understanding of total numbers, but also providing conclusive evidence as to any movements. As well as direct recapture assessment, birds caught in the garden will be given a ring on the left leg, whilst those in the forest on the right, thereby allowing quick visual checking also.

And so it started - the first weekend of ringing, all in the garden. Despite actual numbers at the feeders still being

comparatively low and conditions being a tad windy, a grand total of 59 birds of 11 species were caught. Predictably, the bulk were Great Tits and Tree Sparrows, but also amongst their ranks, no less than three Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, a couple of Jays and two wandering Treecreepers and a Goldcrest. Not bad for starters.

As yet, none of the 'speciality' woodpeckers have appeared at the feeders - Grey-headed and Lesser Spotted are overdue! Meanwhile, overhead, occasional Nutcrackers put in an appearance and 26 Cranes flew south, surely the last of the year.

11-17 October. Chill breezes.

Awaking to a morning of crisp skies, a quick peep at the thermometer revealed the sad truth - the night had dipped to about minus four degrees, hints of winter were creeping in! I shuffled out into the garden and up above the first gaggles of geese echoed their wintery cries, a flock of about thirty White-fronted Geese were winging it south. With birds passing over my house, there had to be more at Baltoji Voke, so off I went. Thirty minutes later, I was at there and out before me, scattered across various pools, sat assembled ranks of wildfowl - just under 2000 Mallard, 860 Wigeon and close on 500 Teal, they too knew winter was on its way. Amongst their numbers, also an impressive 45 Gadwalls, probably the highest number I have ever seen there, plus an assortment of other ducks, including Shovelers, Pintails, Goosanders and Goldeneyes. Then, from a pool further along, as a White-tailed Eagle passed low overhead, up rose a cloud of geese, a far from musical cacophony to welcome the eagle's presence. As they resettled, I swung round to enjoy my first flocks of the season - a total of 385 Bean Geese and about 25 White-fronted Geese in with them. Ah the rewards of a winter to come, some last birding moments to savour!

By afternoon, the day had warmed to a respectable 12 C and with it some last remnants of summer emerged - several Ruddy Darters, a few Small Tortoiseshells and a couple of Red Admirals. Their backdrop, 74 Great White Egrets, a huddle of waders, mostly Dunlins and birds heading south, waves of Starlings, occasional larks and the odd finch or two.

And then came cold northerlies and the first flurries of snow ...the 13th of October and already snow, arrrgh!!! Only a dusting, but it was enough to get me shivering as I popped out to fill the feeders up on my land. With the feeders full, it was then time to retreat to the comfort of my little ol' house and cozy cabin off yonder in the forest and wait the results - activity had moved up a notch or two, a lot more Great Tits, an extra Great Spotted Woodpecker or two, plus the arrival of one of the winter stars - a male Grey-headed Woodpecker at the forest feeders, a little late this year. However, the real pull of the week was the return of a Hawfinch to the new bird table. My main photographic lens is in care, so I took a couple of photos from the living room using an old dodgy lens, but the results were pleasing enough. Hopefully the Hawfinch, a very obliging bird, will have the decency to hang on another week or so til the return of my main lens. Also two very welcome late Black Redstarts in the garden, one immature that had been around for a week or so and one stunning adult male.

18 October. Mega Day, Big Time Hits the Patch ...BONAPARTE'S GULL!

It didn't have the makings of a good day, the skies were grey and a dampness hung in the air. In fact, I really didn't fancy a trip to Baltoji Voke and almost opted for a day at home ...but I was to be away for the weekend, so I thought I really should get a quick peep in before my departure! On arrival, the first port of call was Lake Papis and there was my first reward of the day, a Slavonian Grebe at the far side of the lake. Not a major rarity by any means, but I only see a few per autumn, so it was a good start I thought. Also encountered my first Rough-legged Buzzard of the autumn and a late Marsh Harrier.

At the fish pools, Great White Egrets still lingered in good numbers, a total of about 86 scattered about, but otherwise all seemed fairly quiet - passerine movement was next to non-existent, wader numbers were propped up only by a good showing of Dunlins and there was not much to note amongst the ducks. On one pool I had seen eight Bearded Tits the day before, so I decided to head over there, but first I thought it prudent to check a semi-drained pool nearby. Large assortment of gulls present - mostly large gulls, but a few Common and Black-headed Gulls too, nothing unusual in that. A quick scan and almost immediately a slightly smaller gull dabbling in the shallows grabbed my attention, a Black-headed Gull type, but not quite right! Hmm, more or less Black-headed head pattern, but look at that bill ...daintier, shorter, all black. Memories began to race back to a species I had seen before, a vagrant to Europe but one I had seen on a couple of occasions in Britain. First thought was that it couldn't be, it had to be a runt Black-headed, so time to get more serious - two normal Black-headed Gulls also swam nearby, so I swung round to them and back again. The bird certainly was smaller, but not hugely so, the bill was distinctive, but what of other features? The eye spot, not perfect rounded, formed a slight crescent, but appeared more prominent than on the accompanying gulls. Back colour was perhaps a tad darker, but the birds were not alongside each other and, to be honest, the light was so dull, the difference was basically negligible. Then all the gulls flew, thanks to a low-flying White-tailed Eagle ...and bam, some clinching features - upperwing was essentially like that of an adult Black-headed Gull (white leading edge), but the underwing had

a distinctive difference - no darkening on the under primaries, thus giving a very pale appearance to the entire underwing, relieved by only prominent black rear edge. There had to be little doubt now - I was looking at a BONAPARTE'S GULL, an adult winter bird. For a while I lost the bird, but as they resettled I could see it again - at the far side of the pool, again with the Black-headed Gulls, but not very close to them. Now though the bird was on the mud bank, allowing one last feature to be seen, the legs - fairly colourless flesh affairs, light even in the gloom. I compared with the Black-headed Gulls nearby - in the poor light, their legs appeared just dark, the red not really discernable at that range. By now I was confident with the identification, this was no runt Black-headed Gull, but a real McCoy, a Bonaparte's Gull!

All it needs now is to battle its way through the rarities commission, the bird will then become the first record for Lithuania. Interestingly, I found out a couple of days later that there was also a record of a Bonaparte's Gull in south-east Sweden in the late summer ...there has to exist the possibility that the two records relate to the same bird, two in the Baltic region would really be something exceptional!

19-20 October. Rally Days.

Bird rallying, Lithuanian style! In the social stakes of the local birding calendar, it is the big day ...or actually the only day! On this date, as the birds flee the country every year, a motley crew assemble, two or three teams down from Finland, a dozen and more from Lithuania and, proudly classified amongst the Lithuanian teams, me! Adding an extra sparkle this year, Belarussia and Russia were also represented ...a grand total of 22 teams, or there about!

Of course, late October isn't a great time to be looking for huge numbers of species - most would have flown away south in the weeks before! However, that's exactly what we had to do - in a dawn to dusk race, the hunt was on to try and see as many species as possible, all without leaving the coastal strip. Success depended on finding those last lurking Skylarks, White Wagtails and Robins, getting all the lingering waterbirds, hoping for a bit of luck on seabirds and scrambling to find the rather elusive woodland residents!

Now, I have done this bird race two times before and come third on both occasions, so with new team mate in tow, we decided to do a bit of homework, maybe it would just ensure a podium finish the next day! White-tailed Eagles by the dozen, or to be exact a stunning flock of 35 birds, plus upward of ninety Great White Egrets, 20 odd Barnacle Geese and many others, some classy birds that we were almost certain to relocate the next day. However, our real trump card was the finding of woodpeckers - never easy on a bird race, we not only found a nice bit of woodland with Great and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, but another area with two very obliging Black Woodpeckers! With those safely tucked in our pocket, we ventured to the Ventame hotel, base for the race and location to register, enjoy an evening of fun and prepare for the next day!

And then dawned the day of the race - cool, calm and dark. We scraped the ice from the windscreens, then, as the clock struck 7.00 a.m., off we all shot, the race was on! No big surprise, everybody went straight to Ventes Ragas, five minutes down the road and the country's premier migration spot. Of course, it was still dark and, as previous years, we stood wondering why we hadn't bothered having a coffee before setting out! Slowly, a bit of light crept across the bushes and an occasional shape went zooming over. Might as well start the count - species one Blackbird, soon followed by Fieldfares and Redwings overhead! Then scored the first good bird of the day, a Kingfisher zooming out from reeds and calling as it disappeared into the darkness.

As dawn dawned as it were, movements began in earnest - flocks of thrushes and finches were streaming over, hundreds of them. Quickly notched up Siskins and Bullfinches. Next up, just as I said we should see Hawfinch, a small flock flew over on cue! Normally I would expect a bit more in the way of other passerines here, but migration was actually not very active and we struggled to find much more than one Chiffchaff, a few Robins and a handful of Goldcrestsand some very nice Waxwings, one flock of seven and then a single!

By now, a degree of warmth was sneaking into the air and the clock was ticking towards 9.00 a.m., we had to move on. After a quick pause back at the hotel to collect Scaup and other diving ducks on the lagoon, next up was the Kintai fish pools - lots of species here! Waders galore ...thousands of Lapwing and Golden Plover, dozens of Snipe and Spotted Redshanks and lesser numbers of many others to knock up the tally ever upwards. Barely a spare minute to savour the White-tailed Eagles sitting about almost everywhere, sometimes two, sometimes four, sometimes a dozen in a row, but for the rally, they were just a tick in the book, surely no justice in the world - such a bird should certainly be worth bonus points! Ticked off all the important duck species here too and, with the arrival of Bewick's Swans (not present the day before), got another all important species.

In previous years, I had messed up my itinerary and lost valuable time (and species) by trying to squeeze in Rusne fish pools before heading north to the day's control point (all teams have to be in Palanga, about 90 km north, at some stage between 12.00 and 1.00 p.m.)! Not so this year, from Kintai we swooped north to a farm where a Black Redstart sat on the roof, then to the first of our stake outs - the Black Woodpecker site. Some nervous moments as the woodland

remained totally silent before finally the Black Woodpecker played ball and allowed us to continue our way, after one quick pause for Marsh Tits. A very quick stop at Sakuciai produced four more hoped-for species - White-fronted, Bean, Greylag and Barnacle Geese, plus a Goshawk spooking them all, then it was a quick dash all the way to Palanga.

Got to Palanga for midday and our species total was now somewhere in the region of the high-seventies - not bad, but we needed more. Signed in at the control point, then headed out onto the pier - ten possible species here, perhaps more if lucky. As seawatches go, it was rather naff, but we got a few badly needed birds - Red-throated Diver (one), Razorbill (one), Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Merganser and Velvet Scoter and one surprise, a Sandwich Tern. One hour watching and we didn't raise the total by ten, that was not good, nor was our failure to find Crested Tits in nearby pine forest, nor our failure to find Nuthatch! I now rated our chances of coming in the top three as moderate at best ...we needed some luck at Rusne, our last main place to visit. The drive from Palanga to Rusne took an hour and our total changed by just two, roadside Kestrels and Rough-legged Buzzards responsible for that. Couldn't find any blobs to call Grey Partridge nor raptors to call Hen or Marsh Harriers. However, we did have our last trump card to play - another woodpecker woodland ...the day before Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers had been easy here, but try as we might, not a sign of one this day, but there was a Middle Spotted Woodpecker instead, an unexpected bonus!!! Over at the nearby fish pools, a few more crucial birds fell - Smew, Little Grebe and a couple of duck species missed earlier. Recounting our species total, I found we were on 97, a brilliant total and equalling my best in previous years! Then it went to 98 with Bearded Tits!!! I felt we had to try to get over one hundred and there were three or four potential woodland birds still in the offing - Nuthatch, Willow Tit (we had seen loads the day before) and the still missing Lesser Spotted Woodpecker for starters. So it was back to the 'woodpecker' woodland!

By now was near 4.00 p.m. and we only had an hour to mop up any last birds - parked and set out on foot, make or break time. Almost immediately encountered a Treecreeper, species 99, but we needed to walk almost half an hour before one of our targets had the decency to appear - logging in at species 100 was a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker! Time was up, we had to leave, the finish line was 20 km away and we were late - so in true rally style, we hurtled back across gravel roads and kicked dirt up in our wake, we'd return on the final dong and be not more than a few seconds late. Then I shouted 'stop' - I'd seen one potential last 'tick' flit over....as the car skipped to a halt, I dived out and indeed it was, a new species - in amongst a few a mixed flock, several Willow Tits in the roadside bushes, So, back to the car and a last spurt of speed to carry us home and at precisely 6.00 p.m., the official closing time, we crossed the line.

Our tally was 101 species, four higher than I had achieved in past years and very respectable in this part of the world at this time of the year ...but was it enough?

A quite amusing evening followed, with the results slowly emerging via a 'results game' organised by the organisers of the whole rally. By 8.00 p.m. it was clear, two of the Finnish teams, myself and one other Lithuanian team were in contention for top place ...then the final result was announced - fourth place team had seen 97 species, so I'd made the podium! Then the third place team was announced - with 99 species, a team of Lithuanians and then it was our turn, we'd taken second place, a result I was totally happy with ...but those Finns pipped me to the post again, just a single species ahead!

A great day all round ..and, if by chance, they are reading, many thanks to L.O.D. et al for the organising and the getting of all the sponsorship, etc - all teams had free accommodation and expenses covered, ensuring budget was not a barrier to entrance.