

November 2007. Waxwing Roadshow!

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November is the one month of the year in Lithuania that it would be better to hibernate through - the weather borders on diabolical, the country lives in a perpetual grey and the birding slumps into a pit of nothingness. Summer birds have gone, the winter specials few and far between ...roll on the snows and the real winter!

Appropriately enough, really summing up the birding, the month begins with the 'Day of the Dead', a day when, by rights, all good Lithuanians visit the graves of ancestors and those dearly departed. For the resident Brit abroad, however, there are no such obligations, for me it just means a couple of extra days of holiday and the chance to hope for some spark to get month going. So it was, the first three days of November were spent in my Labanoras garden - sleet, sideways rain, wind, more wind and then some snow! And just a little bit of sun too! But there were birds ...I had barely arrived before my first treat was before me, a flock of about 15 Waxwings, almost certainly the same ones as had been present the week before, tucking into apples in my front garden. It was then into the house to get the woodburner going and turn the house into something rather snug. The Waxwings didn't linger, but a Black Woodpecker flew over the next day to provide some compensation. After many hours peering through the windows, the wind dropped enough to allow me to do some ringing - added another 25 birds to the season's totals, almost all being Great Tits and Tree Sparrows. A flock of about 45 Goldfinches, feeding on thistle heads left specially, also spent a while in the garden, as did Bullfinches and the regular Middle Spotted Woodpecker, but the star of the weekend was a female Grey-headed Woodpecker - a few weeks after the male returned to the forest feeders, here was the first back in the garden too. Twice she came in, twice very near the feeders, but both times more interested in damaging my pear tree than enjoying the free food hand-outs!

Then the weather turned really disgusting - wet snow and cold northerly winds. Packed up the bird ringing, before either a bird or I risked freezing to death, then headed back for Vilnius! And there, confined to the city for a day as my car gave me grief, yet more Waxwings ...a flock of about 20 flying over!!!

More and more, in they came, Waxwings by the dozen, flocks and flocks of them. With the winter beginning to set in and the country seeing its first carpeting of snow, I ventured down to Baltoji Voke. A night of minus 6 had seen to it that Lake Papis was mostly frozen, but as I clambered out of the car into a crisp blue morning, almost immediately I was amongst Waxwings. That quiet, but distinctive tinkle of a call grabbed my attention and, as I turned to see, down they descended - in a swoosh of wings, a flock of about 140 hurtled past me on both sides, some passing merely centimetres from my head to settle in berry bushes just adjacent. And there they sat, stuffing their faces with berries for the next hour or so, right little show offs in the sun, but all quite fantastic. Truly stunning birds no matter how often you see them. Eventually I peeled off my attention and peered out onto the lake - and there, out in the middle in a last little patch of water yet to freeze, birds, lots of birds. Perhaps, 400 White-fronted and Bean Geese, about 2000 Mallards and a gaggle of about 40 Bewick's Swans, all trying to out perform the nearby Whooper Swans in the musical stakes! No White-tailed Eagle this day, but you could just feel he was nearby, watching all this potential food.

Then onward, over to the fish pools. Predictably, they were all frozen, pool after pool of desolate ice, birdless and quiet ...bar four huddled Grey Plovers on one sandbank and, on the single ice-free pool, a quite super collection of birds. Now Baltoji Voke is over 300 km from the sea, so sea ducks are a rare thing indeed, but the first week of November is the best time to keep an eye open. And there they were - no less than three species! One Red-breasted Merganser in with about 60 Goosanders, two Scaups and, star of the day, a single Velvet Scoter, only the second I have seen at this locality.

Next day, with a few hours to spare, I popped back to have another quick look around - you can never have enough Waxwings I say. And the 140 of the day before were clearly not enough ...the flock had mushroomed onto a flock of 275, quite splendid! So 275 Waxwings to enjoy, and their platter of the day was grapes and apples, the flock swarming down onto a chosen bush, stripping it bare in a matter of minutes, before hopping over into another garden to do likewise! At one moment, a Sparrowhawk appeared in their midst, sending the entire flock high into the sky, but otherwise the only distraction of the afternoon was on the lake behind - a White-tailed Eagle was harrying the geese, sending them also into the sky!

10-14 November. In comes the cold.

Sometimes staying home has an appeal! As snow continued to fall and the mercury began its slide to a promised minus eight or below by midweek, a good portion of my weekend was spent in the warmth of my Labanoras house - chucking logs on the fire and watching the winter world develop outside. Early signs of the increased cold to come were visible overhead - in addition to the odd Common Buzzard heading to the south, a cracking Rough-legged Buzzard also went flying over, a very pale bird and not in the least bit interested in veering from its southward track. More Waxwings too, a

flock of 24 appearing on berry bushes just down from the house, before then deciding the apples in my orchard were worthy of a chomp too. In true Waxwing style, they spent most of the day just hanging about, far more cooperative than the female Grey-headed Woodpecker that also popped, a quick tootle around the orchard and off she went, not to return! Otherwise, the weekend was one of a quick wander over to the forest feeders and a little more ringing in the garden. Numbers were up at all feeders, but as yet not a single Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, very late adopting the feeders this year! However, in compensation, as well as the usual Middle Spotted Woodpeckers, I caught a Great Spotted Woodpecker, but not one of the usual tyoes dressed in bold blacks and whites, but with a distinctive 'staining'. These sometimes turn up at my feeders each winter, but as to the cause of the miscolouring I do not really know, I had supposed they might have been of a darker eastern race, but there exists a possibility that the discolouring is perhaps due to contact with tree trunks - strange looking birds in any case!

Meanwhile, as the temperatures began their downward spiral, it would only be a matter of days before the local patch would be frozen over for the winter. So, with a half day to spare, I thought it my duty to force myself out into the field to have one last look at Baltoji Voke before the season came to its end. Rather pleasing, some of the ice had actually broken up, there was a lot more free water than the week before and, with it, still plenty of birds. Becoming something of an everyday bird just now, the first species I encountered on arrival was Waxwing! Rather mobile, covering much ground to seek out remaining berry bushes, a total of about 70 were on show ..and, in amongst their midst, a Starling! Now for the UK birder, a Starling hardly ranks a mention, but it is getting late for them out here - winter birds are a rarity! Next over to the lake - with grey geese lingering late this year and a good assortment of dabbling ducks too, I thought it a good day to do a full count of the birds remaining. Totals were pleasing - 140 Bean Geese, 125 White-fronted Geese and no less than 305 Mute Swans, all very respectable numbers for the time of year. Lingering Whooper and Bewick's Swans too! And to the ducks, Mallard led the pack, logging in at 790, but Goosander numbers were also slightly higher than average, a total of 74 scattered across the lake. On top of these, a handful of Wigeon paddled about, a few dozen Teal too, plus Gadwalls and Goldeneyes, both in single figures. Out in the middle, a lone Scaup spent much of the time asleep, probably wishing he was somewhere else!

Leaving the lake, naturally the fish pools deserved a visit too - mostly frozen, they still have the potential to turn up the odd surprise. Not so today, but a stunning male Hen Harrier and three White-tailed Eagles made the visit more than worthwhile, as did a Black Woodpecker and a Nutcracker, both of which had the decency to fly over calling!

17-25 November. Waxwing Roadshow, onward.

In a month that has featured little else, I thought the Waxwing sightings were beginning to peter out. With nearly all the apples gone in the garden, I thought that would be it with Waxwings in the garden for this year. And so it seemed it would be - not a single one on the 17th, nor on the morning of the 18th either, but then in came a little flock. Seven Waxwings tucking into the remaining apples, very nice too. Two hours later and more, a flock of 21!

Now Waxwings are all very nice, but for rarity value, the weekend's highlight was altogether more humble - any finch in Lithuania in winter is somewhat moderately uncommon, so what a sight it was to have a large mixed flock flitting back and fro all weekend - with the feeders pulling in about 20 Greenfinches, and weedheads attracting upward of 60 Goldfinches and a couple of Bullfinches, it was a bonus to have their company. And scanning them, there I found my mini rarity - not the bunch of Mealy Redpolls also present, but a female Chaffinch! Gripping stuff, huh? A real Chaffinch! Certainly the rarest bird of the weekend, I normally only get one or two per winter, the other many millions having had the intelligence to fly south. Against that wee Chaffinch, the return of the male Grey-headed Woodpecker (a week after the female's reappearance) was barely worth mentioning.

And as the days ticked on and the weather hovered round the zero mark, yet more Waxwings did I bump into! First five flying over my Vilnius garden (plenty of berries still there) and then an impressive 180 at Baltoji Voke. Or at least they would have been impressive had it not been grey and gloomy, a freezing fog hugging the land. Peering through the gloom, still birds remained too on Papis Lake - now very late, a mixed flock of 70 Bean and White-fronted Geese kept a wary eye upwards, so too did about 150 Mallards, a single Smew and approximately 255 Mute Swans. And the wary eye was for a hunting raptor - up above them and seeming intent on taking one of them, a White-tailed Eagle harried and pushed them, easy pickings will come soon ...the lake is shrinking ever more to encroaching ice!

By the 24th, Waxwing numbers in the Labanoras garden had taken a tumble - a mere four remained, eeking out a meal from the last tree still with apples. As they began to disperse though, in came a couple of my 'old faithfuls' - over on the forest feeders, two male Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers appeared on the feeders. A good month later than in previous winters, they'd either been taking advantage of the mild conditions so far or had been sneaking in unseen for a while ...I suspect the latter, the Grey-headed Woodpeckers are also erratic in their appearances. Otherwise, all ticking over nicely, the feeders are gradually getting busier and busier and the ringing total in the garden has reached 185 (since 1st October). One oddity - amongst the many Tree Sparrows, one unusual bird sporting the latest fashion in beak designs, an almost fearsome looking hook!

28-30 November. Dead month dying, a tourist drops in.

Any self-repecting overland tourist wandering from Bristol to Indonesia has little option other than to spend a couple of days suffering my local patch and land. So it was, Larry Wheatland and friend arrived in Vilnius in the middle of the night on the 28th. Having my phone permanently on silent meant that I was fortunately able to miss several calls, thus getting him into the spirit of early winter birding out here - ie. cold! So, having finally rounded him up, off we headed through the driving snow and drove the 70 km up to my land. Arr, into a winter land of snow ...and a cold house (I had not been there for a couple of days). So, being the good host, I gave them the biggest room with the proper bed, whilst I kipped down in the other room - which incidently had a fine fire going. I slept snug as a bug, they half froze.

Then morning came - outside snow and birds, many birds, the feeders were heaving. Tree Sparrows by the dozen, Great Tits by the bucketload and the first Middle Spot Woodpecker too. Having resuscitated them with coffee, I then got them out into the garden - five Waxwings landed on cue, a Sparrowhawk shot through. Two kilometres away, at the forest feeders, the woodpecker feast got going - first up, female Lesser Spotted, then Great Spotted, then an assortment of Middle Spotted Woodpeckers too. Nuthatches and Marsh Tits as well, and all the regulars. Another Sparrowhawk appeared, a big female, plus a flock of northern Long-tailed Tits.

By now I guessed they should be cold again (or still cold), so thought I'd be kind by allowing a retreat back to the house - and there we stayed, not leaving the house, but peering out the windows - two more Waxwings arrived, this time sitting on the stork nest, then a young White-tailed Eagle lumbered its way across the sky, just before a Great Grey Shrike made a close pass at the feeders. Walking out to watch the eagle fly over, another 19 Waxwings flew over!

Bah, enough of this, there had to be something of more interest - and there was, not only had four Yellowhammers joined the Tree Sparrows at the feeders, and eight Mealy Redpolls ended up in the orchard, but ...top bird of the day ...a male House Sparrow suddenly appeared in the midst of the commoner folks! A class bird, though they breed in a broken lamp in the garden, they rank almost as a mega at my feeders during the winter - I saw only a single all last winter! I wonder why the Bristol-based birders were not so excited? Bah humbug, no gratitude! Seven more common ol' Waxwings flew over!

And 70 more Waxwings in my other garden the next day. And eight more on the way to the local patch! And at the local patch, lots of ice, along with four White-tailed Eagles sitting about, a few odds and ends amongst the dwindling numbers of wildfowl present, the best being two Scaup and two Bewick's Swans, the latter which managed to sneak past without Larry noticing. One Goshawk too, but flying so far away it might have been in Australia!