



WEEKLY REPORT AUTUMN 2011



Weekly Report of 24 September, 2011

Once again, we saw a good number of interesting species, starting with a Wheatear and several Whinchats, and continuing with Serin, Common Redstart, Tree Pipit, Grey Wagtail, Sand Martin, and an unseasonal Cuckoo. Sedge and Reed Warblers were particularly numerous, and we also recorded the season's first Robins. The flipside is that summer species are leaving: for the first time since spring, we did not see any Swallows or Turtle Doves, and only one Hobby remains.

It is getting late for butterflies as well, and today's list would have been considerably shorter had I not found a south-facing hedgerow full of *Aster squamatus* flowers, crowded with dozens of butterflies of at least 6-7 species, especially *Lycaenidae*. Many individuals were battered and worn, but quite a few others were recently-emerged, pristine specimens: this month's warm temperatures allowed for one last generation to emerge.

At first glance, Night Herons seem to have disappeared, but in fact several still remain. They have become strictly nocturnal and spend the day roosting in thick cover. Squacco Heron numbers are also rapidly dropping: those few individuals that are still lingering at La Cassinazza are invariably juveniles, the adults having left earlier.





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Weekly Report of 01 October, 2011

Within the space of a week, we saw a clear turnover in the local avifauna, which acquired a distinct winter flavour. The new arrivals – Goldcrest, Wren, Water Pipit, Song Thrush, Great Bittern, and a wave of Robins and Chiffchaffs – seemed out of place in the stifling days of a summer that never seems to end. Another typical bird of winter, the Common Snipe, is increasing in numbers. The birds are right on schedule, in spite of the crazy weather.

The unseasonal heat also means that butterflies and dragonflies are still on the wing in good numbers: today we found 10 species of the former and 8 of the latter.

Purple Herons, on the other hand, have left. The first of the year arrived in early April, and today is the first time since then that we have not seen any.

Reed and Sedge Warblers, typical September migrants, are still fairly numerous. While the former is strictly associated with reedbeds, the latter can also be found in hedgerows and bushes, or *Aster squamatus* flower beds. Although this is an exotic, New World species, birds and insects seem quite fond of it, and it undoubtedly livens up the landscape with its pretty blossoms during a period when there are very few other late-blooming flowers.





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Weekly Report of 08 October, 2011

For the first time since the end of summer, temperatures plummeted today. A cold north-east wind was blowing, but the sun was shining, too: deep blue skies, crystal-clear air, and unlimited visibility.

As the weather grew more fall-like, so did the birdlife: today we saw our first Meadow Pipits, Reed Buntings, Stock Dove, and Wigeon of the season. There was a veritable fall of Chiffchaffs, the commonest migrant today: they were flitting around and calling from every hedgerow and bush.

Along with several thousand Mallards and hundreds of Teal, other waterbirds of note included at least twenty Shovelers, a nice flock of Spotted Redshanks, and three Dunlin.

A kettle of 11 Common Buzzards circling in the sky were obviously migrants. Once again, La Cassinazza is hosting a large Cattle Egret roost; we counted at least 300 early in the morning. Over the course of the day, they spread out in the countryside looking for feeding opportunities, typically by following tractors and threshing machines in the fields. In past times, they generally followed grazing cattle, which have become a rarity these days. La Cassinazza is just about the only place locally where they can still be seen associated with horses, walking in their footsteps or hitching a ride on their backs.





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Weekly Report of 15 October, 2011

It was evident from the outset this morning that today would have seen a major push of migrants, not necessarily in terms of species diversity, but certainly in terms of sheer numbers.

Flocks of Water Pipits constantly flushed from the rice stubble, as did Reed Buntings from every patch of reeds; the small clouds in the sky were actually flocks of Woodpigeons. Chiffchaffs and Robins were the most abundant of all.

There were at least 700 Teal, a record for October. They seem on their way to match and perhaps exceed the record-high numbers of last winter.

New arrivals this week included Penduline Tit, Skylark, and Dunnock. Otherwise, species composition was quite similar to last week's.

It has now gotten quite a bit colder, but numerous butterflies were still on the wing in the afternoon sun; until a couple of days ago, they were enjoying almost summer-like temperatures. Once again, they were attracted by *Aster* flowers, which are blooming profusely in every meadow this fall. I had fun photographing them, as it was probably my last opportunity to do so before the long winter break.



Weekly Report of 22 October, 2011

Today, I received a special welcome for the 600th weekly survey at La Cassinazza (almost 12 years of continuous monitoring). As soon as I stepped out of the car and looked around, three Spoonbills flew straight at me, while a recently-arrived Peregrine screamed above my head, claiming its new territory. I did not even need binoculars to realize which species would account for the lion's share of migrants today, my ears were enough: Skylark, Penduline Tit, Reed Bunting, Chiffchaff, and Wren, some in their dozens, others in their hundreds. Amidst all the hustle and bustle, I almost didn't notice the first Black Redstart of the season.

The sorghum and sunflower fields are becoming irresistible for seed-eating birds: Reed Buntings, Chaffinches, Goldfinches, and a few Greenfinches and Serins. The Reed Buntings prefer the sorghum; as I approached them they flushed one-by-one, each one on its own. Goldfinches and Chaffinches, on the other hand, flush from the sunflowers in flocks and take shelter in the tops of the poplar trees.



Although early-morning temperatures are now winter-like, the warmth of the sun still allows a few insects to be on the wing, mostly the hardiest species. Among dragonflies, these include the sturdy Migrant Hawker and Common Darter, which only seems frail. Four butterfly species were seen today; Clouded Yellow was the most numerous one, Red Admiral the most colourful, while the monochrome Cabbage White was still nectaring at flowers.



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Weekly Report of 29 October, 2011

The rain, plenty of it, finally arrived this week. Leaves are falling off the trees and mushrooms are popping up. Even the fog, so typical of our landscape in autumn, has arrived, and it greatly hindered our survey.

Fortunately, there was no need to actively look for songbirds: all I had to do was stand near a bush and they immediately materialized out of the fog, flitting around and going about their business. All the common species must have been present in good numbers, and new arrivals included Siskin, Hawfinch, and Redwing.

Trying to spot waterbirds or flying raptors was another matter altogether. All in all, the ducks and waders seem to be the same as last week, and the only break in the fog gave me a wonderful surprise: a Jack Snipe, a very difficult species to see, crouching motionless and mimetically.

For weeks, a mixed flock of Ruff and Spotted Redshank has been present at La Cassinazza (although they were invisible in today's fog). While it is easy to assume that they have been the same birds all along, it is much harder to prove it, but since Ruff are very variable in terms of size and plumage, many individuals can be recognized. Our flock has a particularly distinctive bird, with an injured right foot. This bird has been present at La Cassinazza since August, when I photographed it. All the birds in this flock can fly perfectly, and nothing prevents them for migrating. Such a long stopover means La Cassinazza is not just merely a brief refueling stop on their way south. Rather, it provides them with everything they need: food, shelter, and protection. We'll see if they try to spend the winter here.





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Weekly Report of 05 November, 2011

The relentless strong winds and torrential rains, quite unusual for here, made it impossible to watch birds.

Even my unshakable optimism packed it in after eight hours in the rain, and therefore today's checklist is very incomplete.

Water levels are too high and all the waders are gone: I did not see a single Snipe or Lapwing. The ducks, on the other hand, are quite at home in the flooded fields.

A couple of weeks ago, the two Spoonbills that spent the summer at La Cassinazza attracted a third individual. It was impossible to take photos today, and so I'm sending a photo of the two original birds, which I took when the weather was more favourable.

All this rain interrupted a lengthy drought, during which mushrooms were quite scarce. It is now late in the season and the temperatures are cold; nevertheless, *Pleurotus ostreatus* are appearing on rotting trunks.





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Weekly Report of 12 November, 2011

As soon as the sun was over the horizon, we heard the calls of a flock of Cranes that had spent the night in a field adjacent to Cascina Darsena. In the space of ten minutes, they were ready to go and took off southwards.

The autumn's colours were particularly bright in the crisp morning light. With the heavy rains now behind us, the situation at La Cassinazza is back to normal, and the birdlife is once again varied and plentiful.

Lapwings are back, with a flock of several hundred containing a few Ruff as well, while the Spotted Redshanks seem to be gone for good. Mallards are as abundant as ever, with a handful of early Gadwalls and Wigeons in their midst; Shoveler numbers, on the other hand, are lower, as the October migrants are gone and the wintering birds have not yet arrived.

Teal numbers are particularly impressive: they have increased substantially over the last two winters. They are everywhere, scattered amidst the Mallards and always very skittish, flying away at the slightest disturbance in a hail of water droplets.



This makes it difficult to provide an accurate estimate, although there are probably about a thousand or so.

Thrush numbers remain quite low, but the first Fieldfares of the winter have arrived. Seed-eating passerines are crowding the seed crop fields in great numbers. Along with the commoner species, we saw a few Serins and Linnets.

Weekly Report of 19 November, 2011

Fog and cold: today marked a drastic change from last week. We had to wait until the late afternoon to have some visibility, and practically all of our sightings came then. Before we could not see anything, only listen. It is no surprise then that our birdwatching efforts were less than satisfactory. I can only report the arrival of the winter's first Bramblings, and the return of the Marsh Harriers to their evening roost. They start circling above the reedbed about an hour before sunset, then they leave, come back, settled down for a bit, and take off again. It is hard to tell whether we are watching the same birds all the time, or whether more individuals are involved. I saw at least six birds together in the air, and I am almost sure there was a seventh bird as well.

In the long hours we spent enshrouded by fog, unable to see very far, we were forced to look right under our noses and notice those small marvels of nature that often escape our attention. One example is the small, diaphanous mushrooms, only a few millimeters in length, depicted in today's photo. Their scientific name is *Mycena hiemalis* and they have very specific habitat requirements: they only grow on the dripping-wet moss that covers the trunks of willows, elms, and beech trees.





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Weekly Report of 26 November, 2011

For the first time this season, night-time temperatures dropped to near freezing, and moisture condensed into a thin web of frost. Still, it was not enough to drive off the fog, which only granted us a two-hour window in the afternoon to carry out our survey.

Hundreds of Lapwings emerged out of the fog, almost three times as many as there were last week, along with dozens of Snipe, which seemed to have almost disappeared in the last fortnight. Wigeons were in the double figures, quite a good count locally.

The first cold snap of the season caused an exodus of Little and Cattle Egrets, which headed south en masse, leaving only a few stragglers behind.

On the other hand, and in spite of the cold, the Spoonbills continue undaunted their sojourn at La Cassinazza: they remained well into December each of the last three years, leaving only once the impoundments froze. I did not expect Spoonbills to tolerate the cold so well, especially given their specialized feeding method, which consists of sweeping the water and mud with their bills to catch small prey. What on earth can they find at this time of year? It must not be easy, as testified by the fact that they spent practically all of their time foraging. Once again, this week's photo goes out to them.





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Weekly Report of 03 December, 2011

Once again, all the clichés about the climate of the Po Plain proved true: humid, foggy, gloomy, and depressing. And I won't even mention visibility. Not that there was much to see anyway.

There certainly were, like always, several thousand Mallards and several hundred Teal and Lapwings, but then again, they are always around. And given the fog, it was difficult to see them well.

Only a couple of moments left lasting memories: a Peregrine chasing after the Lapwings, and a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker that allowed itself to be admired up-close and at leisure.

The high humidity led to the appearance of many mushrooms of numerous species, none of which I know.

On such an unremarkable day, during which photography was impossible, it is only fitting to send a portrait of a Mallard, a species so common at La Cassinazza it is almost trite. Of course, the photo was taken on a more suitable occasion.





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Weekly Report of 10 December, 2011

The Lapwing flock captured our full attention today: with well over a thousand birds, it has increased significantly from last week. The Lapwings are quite skittish and often flush for no apparent reason. They call constantly; at dusk, as they were about to go to roost, their voices made for an evocative aural backdrop.

The most surprising count, albeit not as impressive, was of a flock of over 120 Sacred Ibis tallied at dusk a few evenings ago; in the past we had never seen more than thirty or so.

Great Bittern and Woodcock were also seen this week, but not today.

Everything else was business as usual, including the Spoonbills, a Peregrine Falcon, at least 4 Marsh Harriers roosting in the reedbed, and the small flock of Ruff. If the winter continues to be mild, they will surely be able to overwinter, as they have done several times in past years.

Hen Harriers like open areas, and now that La Cassinazza's woodlots and hedgerows are more mature, we see them less often. They prefer the wide-open expanses of ploughed fields. Perhaps this is the reason we had not yet seen one this season. During the first hour of daylight, a single ray of sun lit up a flying Hen Harrier, for a photograph as delicate as a watercolour sketch.





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Weekly Report of 17 December, 2011

Today we enjoyed a radiant winter day, with crystal-clear views of the Alps to our north and the Apennines to our south.

The lower temperatures have caused a slight drop in numbers, but as regards the birdlife, once again, everything was well within the norm, as it was a week ago. There were two exceptions however, two species that are quite uncommon here and that we were very glad to see.

The first was a White-fronted Goose, only the third record for La Cassinazza, and the second for 2011.

The second was a Moustached Warbler, a species that appeared here for the first time exactly two years ago, but which has been seen or heard several times since, always in winter. Given its elusive habits and the difficulty of seeing it in the dense reedbeds it favours, it may well be a regular wintering species here, albeit one that we are only rarely able to detect.



Now that it has gotten cold (and it will get colder over the next few days), I am curious to see how the birds will fare, especially those species that generally leave for the winter, but are still with us this week: the three Spoonbills, the small Ruff flock, and the Little Egrets.

Reed Buntings, on the other hand, are regular wintering birds; most arrive during the month of November. Every year, La Cassinazza greets them with fields planted with seed crops and left unharvested for granivorous birds. This year the Reed Buntings are commoner than ever, a real invasion: they have cleaned out all of the sunflower and sorghum seeds, and even those of the weeds growing between the crops. In with them are many Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, Tree Sparrows, and a few Linnets. For some reason, the Woodpigeons are disdaining the seed crop this year.

One last thing: today we finally saw a few Stock Doves in the Woodpigeon flocks.