



WEEKLY REPORT AUTUMN 2012



Weekly Report of 29 September, 2012

Autumn must have been in a hurry to get here, and today the weather was dreary, with constant rain.

In spite of these conditions – hardly the most propitious for birdwatching – we had the impression that a fair number of migrants were about. Species composition and numbers closely mirrored last Saturday's, with regards to both passerines (with Pied Flycatcher, Garden Warbler, and Common Redstart still present) and waterbirds - ducks (almost exclusively Mallards and Teal) and waders, with triple-digit counts of Snipe and Lapwing. The only noteworthy sightings were the fall's first Goldcrest and several newly-arrived Spoonbills.

As is typical of the fall, especially after a spell of rain, mushrooms are back. The most abundant belong to the genera *Lactarius*, *Agaricus*, *Leccinum*, *Russula*; specific identification is best left to specialists. Some, however, are distinctive and easy to identify: the rather common Grisette (*Amanita vaginata*), and the scarce but beautiful Vittadini's *Lepidetta* (*Amanita vittadini*) and *Leucoagaricus bresadolae*.

Weather conditions made photography all but impossible: today's photo was actually taken earlier in September. The Sedge Warbler is one of the month's most typical migrants, and a few individuals should still be present. Within a week or so, we expect them to leave.



Weekly Report of 06 October, 2012

It was surprising to note how the avian landscape changed so drastically from one week to the next, taking on a decidedly wintery flavour. This morning Robins were singing everywhere, flocks of Siskins were flitting through the treetops, and the high-pitched calls of Goldcrests rang out alongside the voices of the season's first Reed Buntings and Dunnocks. The sunflower fields were crowded with hundreds of Chaffinches, accompanied by a handful each of Greenfinches and Linnets. Several Stock Doves played hide and seek in the large Woodpigeon flocks.

Good numbers of migrants were still around, including Sedge Warbler, Tree Pipit, several Marsh Harriers, a couple of Honey Buzzards, and a Goshawk. Common Snipe were particularly in evidence: we counted about 250, and given this species elusive behaviour, many more must have remained out of sight. The bulk of the waterbirds comprised Mallards, in their usual thousands, about 700 Teal, and 200 Lapwings.

La Cassinazza's meadows are covered in *Erigeron* and *Aster* flowers, attracting countless domestic honey bees *Apis mellifera*, busily gathering the year's last pollen, which will last them through the winter.

Many butterflies – a total of 13 species – emerged in the warm afternoon sun.

The most showy was undoubtedly the Peacock (*Inachis Io*), which was photographed extensively. Since I have already sent several photos of this species to illustrate past autumn reports, this week I am choosing a photo of the much smaller Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*), with its understated pattern and peculiar 'tails' protruding from the hindwings.





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Weekly Report of 13 October, 2012

Today was a classic, grey autumn day, complete with morning fog.

Migrant birds tend to come in waves, one species at a time; before it was light enough to see, it was clear that today was the Chiffchaff's turn, with birds calling from every bush. Indeed, we kept seeing them all day long.

Moorhen numbers suddenly surged into the hundreds, but they were not true migrants: more simply, all the local rice fields have now been drained in advance of the harvest, and the Moorhens have all moved to La Cassinazza's wetlands.

New autumn arrivals included Water Pipit, Skylark, Penduline Tit, and Brambling, and among waterfowl, the first Gadwall and Pintail. Meanwhile, a few lingering Sedge and Reed Warblers haunt the reedbed.

Cattle Egrets and Sacred Ibis are gathering in large flocks (over 200 of the former, and about 30 of the latter) before spending the night at La Cassinazza. Finally, we had all-too-brief sightings of two uncommon species: Mistle Thrush and Red Kite.

Bird photography was impossible in today's dim light, and there are few insects around anymore, so I had to settle for a photo of one of the many mushrooms that have emerged at La Cassinazza lately: a very young Grisette (*Amanita vaginata*), a species that has been rather abundant these past few weeks.





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Weekly Report of 20 October, 2012

Today was a wonderful day, and I'm not just talking about the weather.

A great number and variety of birds were at La Cassinazza.

Once again, the most abundant species this week was the Chiffchaff, which makes up the bulk of migrants at this time of year. Next in order of abundance were Robins and Chaffinches, the latter joined by a sizeable contingent of Bramblings. Blue Tits also increased, albeit not as much as expected. Indeed, a major influx of Blue Tits from the forests of northern Europe is underway: two weeks ago their numbers peaked in Scandinavia, and a few days ago they crossed the Alps, ready to invade the Po Plain next.

There were many new arrivals this week: Black Redstart, Hawfinch, Meadow Pipit, and Great Bittern. We are also starting to see numerous Marsh Harriers, as is the case here every winter.

Our old friend the Great White Egret has been back with us for the last week. It was ringed as a chick in Hungary, and since 2005 it has spent every winter at La Cassinazza, where it is easily found in its favourite roosting spots.

The photo of the day could only be of a Chiffchaff, the most abundant migrant of late fall, as it peeks out of a bush in response to an imitation of its call.





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Weekly Report of 27 October, 2012

After several days of fog, today the rain came. After all, around these parts in late fall these are pretty much the only two options; we'll have precious few sunny days over the coming weeks. Despite the rain, it was a lively day, with good numbers of passerines and waterfowl.

It was immediately evident that the expected invasion of Blue Tits materialized this week: flocks of them, often dozens strong, flitted through the bushes. Blue Tits are tiny birds, but they are full of character, with their colorful, blue and yellow plumage and pugnacious attitude. They fully deserve the photo of the day, which was taken last Saturday, when it was sunny.

The supporting cast included numerous Chaffinches, Bramblings, Goldcrests, Reed Buntings, Song Thrushes, Siskins, and Penduline Tits. Skylarks were numerous as well, and indeed the last ten days of October marks the peak of their fall migrations.

Mallard and Teal numbers remain high, as is usual for this time of year: about 5-6,000 of the former and 5-600 of the latter. Smaller numbers of other species were hidden in their ranks, including ten or so Gadwall.

The Peregrine, a winter guest at La Cassinazza, has already arrived and was quite conspicuous today, as it tried to carry off a prey item so large it made flying difficult.





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Weekly Report of 03 November, 2012

The influx of Blue Tits has crested, with most individuals likely to the south of us. Nevertheless, quite a number of individuals have settled in at La Cassinazza. They were followed by another wave, of Bramblings this time, which could be found in their thousands in the sunflower fields. It seems that 2012 was a fantastic year for the birds that breed in the boreal forests of Russia: in addition to Blue Tits and Bramblings, Coal Tits and Goldcrests are also much commoner than usual.

The only other new arrival this week was that of 30 Gadwall. Not many in absolute terms, but a good count locally, especially so early in the season.

Now that we are back on standard time, and at the end of fall, the days end early, and today we were able to check several nightly roosts. On the main lake, the island where herons used to roost eroded away over a year ago; now the Cattle Egrets and Little Egrets seem to have formed a new, albeit smaller, roost on the small island near the lake's northern shore. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of Chaffinches and Reed Buntings are roosting in the reedbed: they literally fall out of the sky and quickly settle among the reeds. Several Marsh Harriers are also roosting there, but it is hard to tell how many there are: there isn't a sufficiently elevated vantage point from which to count them, and the taller plants at the reedbed's margins hide everything that goes on within. We are not sure whether the harriers immediately drop down into the reed or merely fly low over them, only to fly out of sight and then reappear after fifteen minutes or so. Even if the latter scenario were true, there are at least seven different individuals.





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Weekly Report of 10 November, 2012

Talking about the weather can get boring, and I don't mean to be whiny, but how can I not complain about today's incessant, often heavy rain and gloomy dusk, without a single moment of decent light? Under these conditions visibility is poor, binoculars are wet or fogged, and the birds tend to stay in heavy cover. Nothing could be worse for birdwatching, and indeed, today's list is inevitably partial and incomplete.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that the Wrens arrived, in a single, sudden wave: there were none last Saturday, but lots today. This is the way it's been this fall for many species: instead of trickling in gradually, they showed up en masse all at once.

Goldcrests, which together with Wrens are the smallest birds in Italy, were quite numerous today.

Completing the list of tiny birds, a Vinous-throated Parrotbill continues to be present at La Cassinazza. This established exotic arrived at La Cassinazza for the first time in late August; I think it is still the same individual.

This Goldcrest picture was taken a couple of weeks ago: today, under the driving rain, they looked wet and scruffy.





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Weekly Report of 17 November, 2012

Today made up for last Saturday's bad luck. There were no particularly uncommon species, but all regular winter birds were present in excellent numbers.

Most in evidence were the waterfowl, with what may have been a seasonal record of 8,000 Mallards and 800 Teal, and Woodpigeons, with at least 5,000 individuals.

All songbirds were abundant, particularly Brambling, Chaffinch, Blue Tit, Goldcrest, Goldfinch, and Siskin.

In lower numbers, but much admired, were Penduline Tits, always easily drawn to an observer, and Coal Tits, which are becoming a regular presence this winter. This is a rather rare phenomenon here, its last occurrence coming way back in 2000-01.

New arrivals this week were Fieldfare and Redwing.

A Great Bittern was present and accounted for and a Tawny Owl was heard for several nights this past week, a welcome return.

On the other hand, Little and Cattle Egrets are almost entirely gone; the few lingering individuals can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

At least nine Marsh Harriers were at their evening roost, but considering the difficult task of counting them, there could have been quite a few more.

Today's photo reflects the muffled atmosphere, the dusk-like half-light, the haze and humidity: a Roe Deer eyes us warily from the dense grass.





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Weekly Report of 24 November, 2012

In the space of one week, the trees dropped most of their leaves. The autumn has been rather mild so far, but the time had come for the leaves to fall, and they did so quickly.

Our sightings this week confirmed our impression that this year's early winter stands out for the generous numbers of wintering birds, and that the Mallards recovered from last year's population crash, when their numbers were less than half what we were used to. Fortunately, they are doing much better this year.

There were only two new species for the season. Hen Harriers appeared and disappeared out of the early morning fog as they quartered above the farmland, while the reedbed rang out with the calls of Penduline Tits, who occasionally peeked out from behind the wall of reeds, only to disappear immediately thereafter.

Among the throngs of waterbirds, the two adult Spoonbills that are lingering long past the departure of the juveniles stood out even with the naked eye, as did a large flock of Sacred Ibis, which should not be well equipped to handle winter at our latitudes. In spite of the general abundance of birds, thrushes are still lacking: there are few Song Thrushes, Redwings are almost completely absent, and we saw only a handful of Fieldfares. Nevertheless, we did manage a photo of the latter.





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Weekly Report of 01 December, 2012

Of all the birds we had not yet seen at La Cassinazza, perhaps our most wanted was the Bullfinch. We've often talked about it in hopeful tones. Today our wish came true thanks to a pair of these lovely finches, which did their best to attract our attention with their calls.

This was not the only ray of light in an otherwise dull, grey day that ended in a downpour. At the last light of dusk a flock of 21 Cranes flew in from the east and circled low over La Cassinazza for about 15 minutes before choosing the right spot to drop down and settle in for the night. This was the first record for this species in 2012.

Over in the sunflower fields, about 500 Bramblings and an equal number of Chaffinches and Goldfinches were thrown into a wild panic by a passing Sparrowhawk.

An identical scene was replayed soon thereafter, when a Peregrine flushed all the Lapwings and Teal.

Other records of note included nearly 50 Gadwall, an unusually high count for here, and two Dunlins, which are quite unusual in winter.

Our last surprise came once it was dark, and a great number of unknown moths took to the air, indifferent to the cold and the chilly December rain, a truly unseasonal sight. The photo of the day is not the usual portrait of a species, but rather a winter landscape/lightscape.





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Weekly Report of 08 December, 2012

The month of December came in like a lion, with temperatures plummeting below zero and the winter's first snowfall.

Hare tracks were everywhere in the fresh snow, testifying to a healthy population density and intense nocturnal activity, despite the fact that we did not see a single one during the day.

The freeze meant that ducks were concentrated in the remaining open water, which helped us realize just how many Teal there were: over 1,000 individuals, a true record. They may have already been as numerous in the last few weeks, but since they were scattered over a larger area, a precise count was difficult to obtain. On the other hand, the freeze also forced most of the hundreds of Lapwings that were around until last week to flee. About twenty Sacred Ibis remained at La Cassinazza, but a few of them look like they are definitely suffering the cold.

The sunflower crops are the only easy source of food and host a formidable flock of Bramblings, together with Chaffinches, Goldfinches, and Greenfinches. Water Pipits were walking on the frozen rice fields and dozens of Fieldfares and Redwings were busily feeding in the hawthorn bushes.

A Great Bittern and a Woodcock put in brief appearances, but each were seen by a single observer only. The Robin in today's photo, which looks as if it is standing in a freezer, perfectly summarizes today's atmosphere.





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Weekly Report of 15 December, 2012

Although yesterday's snowfall was copious, it turned into drizzle before daybreak, which immediately began to melt the snow on the ground.

Several flooded meadows were kept free of snow by the presence of running water, and they hosted large numbers of Water Pipits and Skylarks, together with smaller numbers of Meadow Pipits and White Wagtails, a Grey Wagtail, a small Lapwing flock, and two Ruff.

Visibility was quite poor, making it difficult to accurately count waterfowl. In fact, life is tough for them these days: although the water in the impoundments is not frozen, the snow that has fallen on top of it has turned it into a thick icy sludge: the ducks can walk on it, but they can't swim in it either.

The heavy snow forced many passerines to flee: although all the expected species were present today, their numbers took a hit. Finches are the only exception, as they remain abundant in the sunflower fields.

In fact, as we watched the swirling flocks of finches and buntings feeding on the sunflower seed at day's end, we made the sighting that brightened up a dull day: a flock of five Corn Buntings, yet another new species for La Cassinazza, the 211th. That this species had never been seen here before is inexplicable, and it casts some doubt on our birdwatching skills!

For once, I will accept the challenge posed by a landscape photograph: this cold, foggy, and evanescent image, taken at noon, sums up today perfectly.

