



WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2011



Weekly Report of 25 June, 2011

The first day of summer at La Cassinazza was quiet and uneventful. The four White Stork chicks are growing increasingly strong. In addition, we saw quite a few recently-fledged Night Herons, confirmed the presence of at least three Red-backed Shrike territories, and saw signs of early fall migration with a small flock of Wood Sandpipers. Mallards are undergoing their post-breeding moult, and the vast majority of them are elsewhere; if those few that remain at La Cassinazza, many have shed their flight feathers and are unable to fly: awkward and bedraggled, they attempt to flee by paddling on the water. Other noteworthy sightings include three fly-over Honey Buzzards, 8 Teal – including both drakes and hens – and a Hoopoe seen a few days ago. There isn't much news on the insect front, either. Not many butterflies were about, although there were several Large Coppers, the second brood this year. Apart from the year's first Banded Darter, dragonfly news mostly regarded the very abundant Blue Featherleg. This slender and fragile-looking damselfly is La Cassinazza's commonest odonate, with thousand of individuals, which causes it to be often overlooked. Today's photo is dedicated to it.





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Weekly Report of 02 July, 2011

Today, for the first time since spring started, we did not hear the song of the Nightingale. This is a clear sign that it is well into the summer season, and many species have finished breeding. Practically the only song that can still be heard is that of the Marsh Warbler, which indeed is the latest of our migrants to come back from its winter quarters.

The southward migration of waders is still in the early stages, but it did bring us the season's first Greenshanks along with Common, Green, and Wood Sandpipers.



Spotted Flycatchers and Swallows have recently fledged young. Both species are breeding at La Cassinazza again, after several years' absence, much to the joy of all the human inhabitants. The Swallows now come back to the nest in the evening only, in order to roost. These same Swallows impressed us for their pugnaciousness when we saw them mobbing a Sparrowhawk.

We were astounded by the voracity of a Grey Heron, who swallowed an adult Moorhen whole, and with great ease: the heron weighs 1.5 kg, the Moorhen no less than 300 g: quite a mean feat, given the relative proportions!

We were bewildered by the aggressiveness of a hen Pheasant that attacked me, hissing like a snake and clucking. It only retreated if I went after it, but resumed pursuing me whenever I drew back. Perhaps she had chicks hidden in the tall grass, but I was unable to see them, which would prove that her threat display had worked.



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Weekly Report of 09 July, 2011

A scorching hot day was unfolding quite uneventfully, with few birds in evidence, and all common species at that.

Then, all of a sudden...is that a Gull-billed Tern? It was! La Cassinazza's already lengthy checklist thus grows by one, to 207. It is becoming increasingly difficult to add new species to the list, since all the ones we could reasonably expect have already been seen. The Gull-billed Tern, a relative of the Common Tern with a stouter, all-black bill, wasn't even on our radar screen.

Our customary early-morning check of the White Stork nest revealed full-grown chicks that are almost ready to fledge; the adults leave the nest for increasingly long periods. Today's photo was actually taken two weeks ago, when the adults were still spending much of their time near the nest to guard the chicks.

Butterfly diversity is ticking back up, and several of the smaller species have reappeared, many in good numbers: Short-tailed Blue (*Everes argiades*), Reverdin's Blue (*Plebejus argyrognomon*), and a pair of look-alike species, Southern Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus malvoides*) and Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus armoricanus*), a thorny identification challenge.



Weekly Report of 16 July, 2011

As is the norm for this time of year, resident and breeding birds have become practically invisible. There was only one newsworthy development, albeit an eagerly awaited one: Common Tern chicks have finally hatched. The delay may have been caused by the heavy thunderstorms during the first half of June, which probably destroyed the first brood and caused the terns to lay eggs for a second time.

With regards to migrants, the arrival of the first southbound Ruff was the only novelty.

On the other end, summer provides an endless bounty of insects. Devoting even a little of our time and attention to oft-ignored and poorly known families results in countless discoveries and fascinating species, even if they are often only a few millimetres long.



Limiting my report to butterflies, a group of insects everyone knows and appreciates, I'm glad to announce the discovery of a new species for La Cassinazza, the Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*). It was actually found last Saturday, but it took some time to indentify it correctly. During the week there was a good influx of Peacock Butterflies (*Inachis io*), the only large butterflies among a profusion of smaller species, most of them skippers and blues. Their small size does not prevent them from being very colourful, such as this Reverdin's Blue (*Plebejus argyrognomon*) I photographed from just a few inches away.

The only noteworthy dragonfly sighting was a single River Clubtail (*Gomphus flavipes*), a rare species that was seen last year at this time as well.



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Weekly Report of 23 July, 2011

As La Cassinazza's impoundments are drained, they expose mudflats that create new foraging habitat for waders. Today there were about 200 of them, mostly Wood Sandpipers, followed by Black-winged Stilt, Green Sandpiper, Lapwing; Ruff, Greenshank, a couple of Common Sandpipers, and finally two Common Redshank, the first of the year. I was told that for a couple of days this week the numbers were much higher, and some different species may have been present as well. Unfortunately I could not be there.

La Cassinazza's two resident Spoonbills have attracted a third individual. The juvenile White Storks have been able to fly for several days now, but the entire family still regularly gathers at the nest.

Turning to butterflies, there was a major emergence of the tiny Short-tailed Blue (*Everes argiades*), along with the year's first Clouded Yellows (*Colias croceus*). Dragonflies included the season's first Ruddy Darters (*Sympetrum sanguineum*).

Hares have always been common at La Cassinazza; four or five years ago we began seeing the first cottontails, a small, funny-looking introduced North American rabbit that has become widespread in Italy. European Rabbits only arrived a couple of years ago, and we have been seeing them with increasing frequency this summer.





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Weekly Report of 30 July, 2011

Today's most remarkable sighting was of a Green Snaketail (*Ophiogomphus cecilia*) a large, rare dragonfly clad in black, yellow, and bright green. The only previous record for La Cassinazza dates back to last year. Today's individual seemed newly emerged, and was found near a watercourse that appears to be well-suited to this species' needs: with some luck, it will become a regular part of La Cassinazza's fauna over the coming years.

Now that the impoundments have been drained and the waders are gone, the most evident birds were herons, great numbers of which crowded the rice fields of Cascina Darsena, including some generally uncommon species like Squacco and Purple Herons. Several juveniles of the latter species were about, a sign that a few pairs bred nearby, but like last year they did not let us find their nests.

Kestrels are equally careful in hiding their nests. They are present at La Cassinazza year-round, and are surely nesting in some of the taller poplar trees. For several years running they nested under the farmhouse roof, but ever since they decided to move away from the hustle-and-bustle, we have not been able to find their nest. At least they let us photograph them!





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Weekly Report of 06 August, 2011

Today, without a doubt, the most numerous and evident life form at La Cassinazza, and by far the most active, was the mosquito. Other insects, including butterflies, dragonflies, and others, seemed quite scarce, although they did exhibit some diversity, with 15 butterfly species and two new dragonflies for the year: the Blue Emperor (*Anax imperator*) and the Western Willow Spreadwing (*Lestes viridis*).

The first signs of songbird migration included an early Chiffchaff and a rare Bonelli's Warbler, the first fall record of this species.

From the strip of woodland where they breed every year, the Sparrowhawk juveniles have fledged; they are as noisy as their parents are silent and elusive.

The only remaining puddle attracted a smattering of waders: one each of Greenshank, Ruff, and Spotted Redshank (the first of the fall), several Lapwings and Black-winged Stilts, and a dozen Green Sandpipers.

Unlike many other migrant waders, which tend to make brief stop-overs and quickly leave, Green Sandpipers on their southward journey tend to linger and are present at La Cassinazza throughout the summer; indeed, we have been seeing them since mid-June. They were particularly easy to photograph today, as they don't have many places to feed.

Finally, a word about Spoonbills: while two birds are semi-permanent residents here, today they were joined by two new individuals.





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Weekly Report of 13 August, 2011

We are now well into fall migration: from now on, each week will bring new arrivals. Today they included Willow Warbler, Common Snipe, Sacred Ibis, and a flock of Teal. The numerous, restless Golden Orioles were also likely migrants as opposed to local breeders.

Cuckoos are gone and, now that the juveniles have finally fledged, so have most of the Common Terns: this year they lingered at least two weeks longer than they have in the past.

Hobbies, which had been almost invisible so far, have suddenly become noisy and conspicuous. They breed when many other species are already migrating, and with the young currently in the nest their instinct to protect them outweighs the need to refrain from attracting attention. They aggressively defend their nest, screaming and fearlessly attacking anyone (bird or man) that gets too close.

Once again, the day's most noteworthy event came from the endlessly diverse world of insects, with a new dragonfly for La Cassinazza: the Small Red-eyed Damselfly *Erythromma viridulum*, whose eye colour makes it unmistakable despite its tiny size. As I was watching it, it decided for some reason to land on the water surface. Its wings became glued to the water, and it was dragged by the current towards a lock and underneath a waterfall. So much for that. If this was an effort to colonize La Cassinazza, it undoubtedly failed.



Weekly Report of 20 August, 2011

With this torrid heat, so unseasonal for late August, I expected a complete lack of birds. How wrong I was!

The reedbed in particular was alive with mysterious rustling and half-glimpsed Water Rails and Marsh, Cetti's and Sedge Warblers. And lots more I could not see. It took me over an hour of persistence to pull out a Moustached Warbler towards evening.

Migrant Garden Warblers and Pied Flycatchers flitted through the hedgerows.



Although wader numbers were low (La Cassinazza's impoundments are still largely dry), diversity was high: Black-winged Stilts, Lapwing, Snipe, Green, Wood and Common Sandpiper, Ruff, Common and Spotted Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit and...a Turnstone! This is the first record for La Cassinazza: it becomes n° 208 on our checklist and is the second new species to be added in 2011.

There were few butterflies; the only one of note was a Large Chequered Skipper. Until 2008 this species had been regular at La Cassinazza, but since then we've only seen it once or twice a year.

I was thrilled to confirm the presence of the Small Red-eyed Damselfly; that first individual from last week was dispersing from the main colony, which I have now found, after a targeted search, in a pond that

provides the right habitat. It was all the more satisfying because this is an uncommon and local species, and the pond is an artificial one that was only created two years ago. Today's two new species, the bird and the damselfly, are in a close race for the photo of the day: the Turnstone wins because it is more topical; the damselflies will still be around next week.



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Weekly Report of 27 August, 2011

After a week of scorching sun and ungodly temperatures, today finally brought some relief in the form of cooler air.

Nevertheless, migration remained at a standstill. Pied Flycatchers were the only migrants in numbers, while Turtle Dove, Sedge Warbler, Yellow Wagtail, and Garden Warbler were much scarcer. Today's Common Swifts were certainly migrants, since our local breeders left six weeks ago.

I don't have much else to report: a few Little Grebes, only the second record for 2011, and two White Storks perching on their nest at dawn, only to fly off as soon as the sun rose.

A few dozen Teal, a handful of Garganey, and a scattering of waders accompanied the two Spoonbills in what little standing water is left at La Cassinazza. The impoundments will soon be flooded again, however, and as early as next week we hope to see higher numbers and better species variety.

With today's photo, I'm keeping last week's promise: I owed you an image of the diminutive Small Red-eyed Damselfly (*Erythromma viridulum*). Today, I found them in a second pond, different from the one I originally discovered them in. This is a sign that La Cassinazza's population is healthy and spreading.





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Weekly Report of 03 September, 2011

It didn't take long this morning to figure out what the day's most common migrants would be: Pied Flycatcher and Garden Warbler. Although the former was more numerous, the latter was much in evidence as well. That was about as far as it went concerning songbirds. Single individuals of Golden Oriole and Nightingale may well turn out to be the last of the year.

La Cassinazza's impoundments once again have water, which immediately attracted thousands of Mallards, from which picking out the dozens of Teal and handful of Garganey and Shoveler is no easy task. A Brazilian Teal also turned up in the throng. This exotic duck was also seen at La Cassinazza last year: they are evidently common in captivity and are talented escape artists.

Wader numbers increased, though not so much their variety: the few days that the impoundments have been flooded is not enough time for an extensive aquatic invertebrate fauna to develop, so the waders have little food. Nevertheless, 11 species were present, including a Golden Plover.

An Osprey was a good candidate for bird of the day, but it was in a hurry, and it did not stick around for more than a half hour.

Some of you may remember that back in early July we had found a Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea dydyma*), a new butterfly for La Cassinazza. I was not able to photograph it then, but I found it again a few weeks later, when I took today's photo.





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Weekly Report of 10 September, 2011

Today was a day of "firsts".

The first records of the year for Long-eared Owl (the last record at La Cassinazza was in 2008), Little Stint (again, the last record was in 2008), Dunlin, and Tree Pipit.

The fall's first Lesser Whitethroat.

The first major influx of Teal, with at least 400 birds.

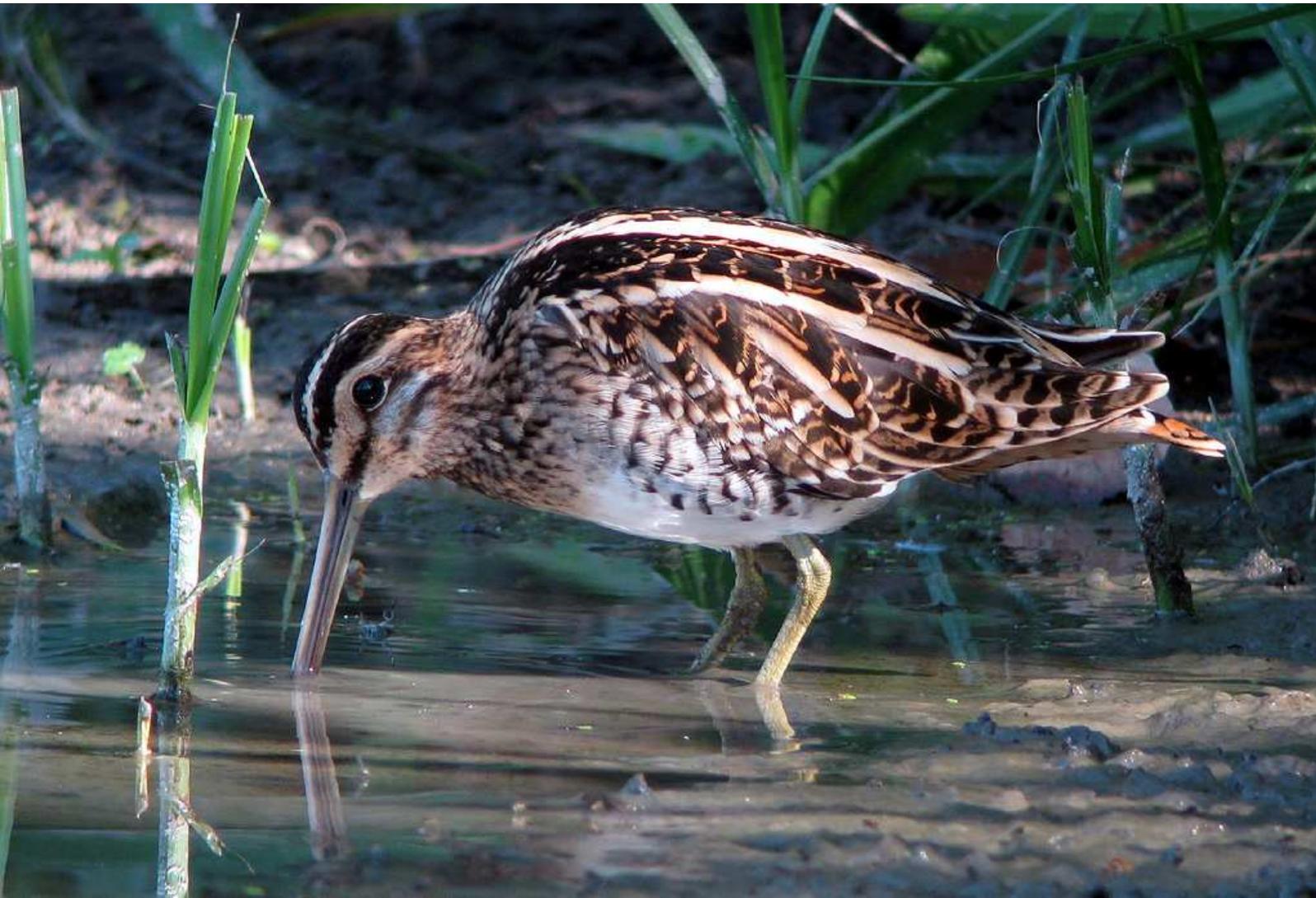
And finally, the first record for 2011 of a butterfly, the Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*).

Although all these records are interesting for posterity's sake, to be honest I was much more thrilled to watch a flock of migrating Common Buzzards catching a thermal.

Speaking of the allure of raptors, an Osprey with a large fish in its talons was also a highlight; I suspect it is the same individual lingering from last Saturday.

Hobbies darting over the impoundments in hot pursuit of dragonflies were a sight to behold.

Many Common Snipe arrived today; they will stay with us until the winter freeze sets in. I can't hide the fact that I'm particularly fond of them.





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Weekly Report of 17 September, 2011

This fall migration is bringing us many birds that are seldom seen at La Cassinazza.

Today we started with a Bluethroat on the edge of a rice field at Cascina Darsena: not exactly its typical habitat.

There was a good flow of migrating raptors, and a juvenile Goshawk decided the hunting opportunities provided by La Cassinazza were worth a brief stopover. Later, we saw a juvenile Montagu's Harrier – a species not recorded here since way back in 2004 - migrating overhead with a few Common Buzzards.

Jackdaws aren't truly migrants, but they are not an everyday occurrence here, either.

"Our" two White Storks, the pair that nested here, continue to use their nest as an overnight roost. Today they attracted the attention of three other White Storks, all adults. They foraged together for a while, then left as a group. I assumed that they had left for the season, but "our" pair evidently had second thoughts: they were back before nightfall.

Turning to waders, there was a sudden spike in Lapwing numbers, and there were quite a few Common Snipe as well.

The Spotted Redshanks, a handful of them, were more interesting. Both adults and juveniles are present, and their plumages are so different that one could think they were different species: the adults are uniformly silver and white, while the juveniles (such as the bird in the photo) are brownish and barred.

