



WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 23 June, 2012

According to the calendar, this was our first summer survey; on cue, the first fall migrant appeared, a Greenshank heading south towards its wintering quarters. Here at La Cassinazza, it shared the impoundments with the young Black-winged Stilts that hatched just last week.

We found a Little Ringed Plover nest, thus confirming this species as a breeder at La Cassinazza, and we suspect that Little Grebe is breeding here as well, since it tends to be found always at the same spot, at the margins of a dense reedbed.

Although it may not be breeding, a Honey Buzzard is definitely spending the summer here. We have seen it regularly over the last few weeks: a subterranean wasp's nest that's been dug up is ample evidence of its passage.

Of the 23 species of butterfly seen today, the most noteworthy are the Queen of Spain Fritillary (*Issoria lathonia*, first record since 2009), White-letter Hairstreak (*Satyrrium w-album*, a rare and local species first seen at La Cassinazza last year), Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus morpheus*, which is becoming increasingly rare), and Eastern Bath White (*Pontia edusa*, uncommon until last year, but now much more regular). The choice for the photo of the day fell between the colourful and spectacular Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*) and the understated, elegant Eastern Bath White: for me, the latter wins hands down.



Weekly Report of 30 June, 2012

Stifling, oppressive heat has settled over La Cassinazza; fortunately, the local horseflies, very much at home in this weather, kept me active all day. Butterflies were the stars of the show, with 26 species, first and foremost the rare Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*), but also including several Queen-of-Spain Fritillaries (*Issoria lathonia*) and Spotted Fritillaries (*Melitaea didima*); the latter was recorded for the first time at La Cassinazza only last year. A total of 32 butterfly species have been seen in June of this year.

In addition to the diurnal butterflies, a flash of colour suddenly exploded in a dense, shady tangle: it was a large moth, the Red Underwing (*Catocala nupta*). It is practically invisible when perched on a trunk with its wings closed, but at the least disturbance it flies off, revealing its red, white, and black hindwings.

Among birds, a few fall migrants have already arrived: several Teal, two Greenshank, and the first Wood Sandpiper. An egret stole the limelight, however, with a slaty-grey plumage totally unlike that of the expected Little Egret. The experts to whom we sent the photographs should be able to tell us whether it is a Western Reef Egret (a species that lives along the shores of the Red Sea and occasionally reaches southern Europe), a hybrid, an aberrantly-plumaged Little Egret, or who knows what else.



Once again, I am choosing a longhorn beetle over the butterflies for the photo of the day:

Brachyleptura cordigera is named after the black heart pattern that decorates its red wings.



WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 06 July, 2012

Fall migration has definitely started, and this week brought us the season's first Ruff and Spotted Redshank, along with a couple dozen Wood Sandpipers and several Greenshanks, Green Sandpipers, Teal, and Garganey.

We also saw newly-fledged Little Grebes, Purple Heron, Red-backed Shrike, and Kestrel: we suspected all those species of breeding at La Cassinazza, and now that the young are out of the nest, our suspicions have been confirmed.

Once again, butterflies took centre stage. Their numbers and variety were not particularly noteworthy, but the presence of a new species for La Cassinazza was: the Knapweed Fritillary *Melitaea phoebe*, of which we saw numerous individuals, evidence of a healthy local population. It brings the list of species seen at La Cassinazza to 40, a nice round number. Knapweed is the common name for plants in the genus *Centaurea*, and indeed today's individuals were seen exclusively at flowers of the Short-fringed Knapweed (*Centaurea nigrescens*), where we photographed this individual.





WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 14 July, 2012

Like every summer, La Cassinazza's impoundments are being drained, and the resulting mudflats attract large numbers of waders: the commonest are Wood Sandpipers (well over a hundred), followed by Lapwings, Green Sandpipers, Greenshanks, Little Ringed Plovers, and Ruff. Little Egrets crowd the remaining pools to catch the fish trapped within. Apart from those unusual species that have become routine here (Spoonbill, Honey Buzzard, White Stork), the only bird news of interest concerns the return of the Cetti's Warbler after the February frost that wiped out local populations.

Among dragonflies, Brilliant Emeralds (*Somatochlora metallica*) and Small Redeyes (*Erythromma viridulum*) were abundant.

Most of all, this summer is proving to be very rich in butterflies: among the many species we saw today were the three fritillaires that recently colonized La Cassinazza : the Queen-of-Spain (*Issoria lathonia*), Spotted (*Melitaea didyma*), and Knapweed (*Melitaea phoebe*) Fritillaries.

Once again we found a new species for La Cassinazza: the Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*), a tiny - 1.5 cm - blue that looks much like its many relatives. Its natural history has some bizarre aspects: its larvae grow on plants in the genus *Geranium* and live in symbiosis with ants, which care for them and defend them from predators. It kindly allowed itself to be photographed.



Weekly Report of 21 July, 2012

A nice flock of ten Spoonbills was at the centre of attention today. At first, when I saw just two adults and two juveniles, I thought I'd found proof that the pair that has been hanging around La Cassinazza the last few months had nested at the Villarasca heronry, only 2 km away. It turns out there were actually 4 juveniles and 6 adults, one of which was sporting a colour ring, and they are more likely to come from the colony that nests near Comacchio, over 200 km away. The Night Herons, which have completed their breeding cycle, spend the day dozing in the bushes, and it is easy to sneak up on them as they roost on low branches; the inexperienced juveniles in particular are easily approached and fly off at the last minute. The same thing happens with juvenile Little Bitterns, but the adults are never caught unaware.

There remains a great variety of butterflies, but their numbers have dropped significantly: the flight period for many species has ended. Their absence has been partly compensated by the emergence of a new generation of Comma Butterfly (*Poligonya c-album*) and Large Skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*). A memorable variety of species has been seen in 2012: so far, 36 of the 41 ever recorded at La Cassinazza.

Today's photo is once again a butterfly, the Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*).



The sharp-eyed among you might want to compare it to the image of the Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea phoebe*) I sent two weeks ago and look for the subtle differences in their intricate wing patterns. The endlessly varied world of insects also brought the year's first Western Willow Spreadwing (*Lestes viridis*), a damselfly; a new lady bug for La Cassinazza, the Variegated Lady Beetle (*Hippodamia variegata*), and a new grasshopper as well, which I have been unable to identify (so far). I will keep looking for it.



WEEKLY REPORT
SUMMER 2012





WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 21 July, 2012

It's official: a pair of Spoonbills really did nest at the Villarasca herony. This morning, two adults showed up with four dependent juveniles in tow, loudly begging to be fed. One of the adults is a familiar presence: we have been seeing it regularly at La Cassinazza over the last several years, including this one, although it had never caused us to suspect breeding in the past. They cannot have gone too far to nest, and those who reported Spoonbills flying towards the herony with nesting material must have been right. In addition to these local breeders, we sometimes see Spoonbills from the only breeding colony in northern Italy, such as a ringed individual that has been here since late June at least.

There could only be one subject for today's photo: the adult Spoonbill followed by a petulant juvenile, which is to be weaned immediately, it seems: the adult captured a fish and promptly ate it, without even thinking of giving it to its hungry offspring. The image is neither technically nor aesthetically successful, but it documents a rare event in our region.

The only other record of interest this week concerns a dragonfly, the River Clubtail (*Gomphus flavipes*), a species of European conservation concern that is also one of the Po Plain's rarest odonates; as if that weren't enough, it is also highly elusive. We have seen it regularly at La Cassinazza over the last three years, always in late July, and it may have found suitable breeding habitat.





WEEKLY REPORT
SUMMER 2012





WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 04 August, 2012

The first Saturday in August also marked the start of fall passerine migration: Yellow Wagtail, Willow Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Garden Warbler, and Pied Flycatcher all put in their first appearances of the season; the Garden Warbler in particular was quite earlier than usual. Other species have left us, since they are already heading for their winter quarters: for the first time this summer we did not see a Cuckoo, while Common Swifts have been missing for two weeks now.

The Spoonbill family – 2 adults and 5 lively youngsters – seems to have settled in nicely at La Cassinazza. It is not exceptional for this species to lay 5 eggs, but it is quite unusual for all five chicks to fledge.

The population of grasshoppers in the meadows has well and truly exploded: some are dominated by *Aiolopus thalassinus*, others by *Calliptamus italicus*, and others still *Ruspolia nitidula*. *Oedipoda caerulescens* prefers the bare dirt on unpaved roads.

The green colour of the vegetation is interrupted by the yellow of the sunflower fields: they are in full flower right now and are one of the outstanding features of the landscape. Sunflowers at La Cassinazza have their own special significance: they are not a cash crop, but a way to help seed-eating birds. They will not be harvested, thereby attracting huge winter flocks of



Wood pigeons, Reed Buntings, Chaffinches, Goldfinches, Greenfinches, and much more. Bumblebees – in today's photo, the Buff-tailed Bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) – play a fundamental role in the greater scheme of things: as bulky, heavy, and almost clumsy as they are, they are nevertheless the most important of all pollinating insects, and most agricultural crops depend on them for pollination. Sunflowers included.



WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 11 August, 2012

We have not had any significant rainfall for quite some time now, and the local plant life is beginning to show signs of distress. The leaves on some poplar trees have turned precociously yellow, and the sunflower plants are wilting, their flowering heads bent downwards.

In spite of the fact that most impoundments are drained, waterfowl numbers at La Cassinazza are increasing: hundreds of Mallards have arrived, along with dozens of Teal and Garganey.

Newly-arrived fall migrants this week include Common Whitethroat, Common Redstart, and Sand Martin.

Juvenile Sparrowhawks fledged this week, right on schedule for mid-August. The nest is always in the same small woodlot, in a quiet corner of La Cassinazza. So far, the Sparrowhawk family had been quiet and unobtrusive, but now their harsh calls and the youngsters' maiden flights seem designed to attract our attention.

The variety of butterflies continues to be of interest, with at least 20 species observed on every outing during the last two months. Today we found the Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*), an unpredictable species that is not seen every year.

The Cattle Egret, depicted in today's photos, is a near-constant presence at La Cassinazza, with the exception of the harshest days of winter. This very adaptable species thrives in farmland; at La Cassinazza, a few individuals regularly follow cattle and horses. After breeding, starting around this time of year, numerous individuals congregate at a crowded nocturnal roost.





WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 18 August, 2012

The lack of rain in recent weeks seems to have turned into a veritable drought. The ground is dusty, the grass is yellow, and the vegetation remains green only in proximity of ponds and ditches. There are precious few flowering plants to provide nectar, and butterflies crowd around alfalfa blossoms, which can withstand the dry spell better than most. The Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*) and the Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*) were among today's most colourful and conspicuous butterflies, but they were outnumbered by the dull and insignificant Large Skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*) and Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvestris*). Other species were present in lower numbers, the most impressive of which was the Queen-of-Spain Fritillary (*Issoria lathonia*), depicted in today's photo. Its characteristic silver spots on the underwing are responsible for its Italian name, the "small mother of pearl".

As I walked through the tall grass in search of butterflies I flushed a Quail, which flew only as I was about to step on it. I would never have seen it otherwise. No other birds of note were seen: the waterbirds were much like last week, while songbirds seemingly disappeared.





WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 25 August, 2012

The heat and drought lasted another week, but the weather forecast calls for a drastic change within the next 24 hours. Migrants are moving in numbers ahead of the storm front, and the bushes and trees at La Cassinazza were crawling with birds today. Almost any movement turned into a Pied Flycatcher: there were hundreds of them, and their calls could be heard everywhere. Garden Warbler, Willow Warbler, Wood Warbler, and other commoner migrants were also around, while Long-tailed Tits were positively abundant.

Now that the impoundments are flooded once again, the waterbirds are back with a vengeance, both waterfowl (about 2,500 Mallards, 400 Teal, and 40 Garganey) and waders, among which was a Marsh Sandpiper, a species that had not been seen at La Cassinazza for over three years.

There was also a new bird species for La Cassinazza, and although it was a real surprise, I'm not sure I should rejoice. This is the Vinous-throated Parrotbill (*Paradoxornis webbianus*), a non-native species whose natural range is continental Asia. The Ashy-throated Parrotbill was introduced to Italy accidentally in the 1990s and colonized the reedbeds surrounding Lake Varese, where it has thrived for the last 20 years, and has now been officially added to the list of Italian birds. It has hardly ever been recorded away from the Lake Varese area, however, and is generally thought to have difficulty overcoming ecological barriers. Perhaps we just don't know enough about its ecology.

The Hobby is one of the latest local species to nest and fledge young. We are only beginning to see them now, as they relentlessly hunt the huge numbers of dragonflies – almost all Scarlet Chasers (*Crocothemis erythraea*) – that have emerged in recent days.



Weekly Report of 01 September, 2012

It rained heavily during the night and in the morning, and temperatures plummeted by at least 15 degrees compared to last week. Apart from the change in weather, this morning's most notable feature was the lack of butterflies: for the first time in three months, the flash of their colourful wings was nowhere to be seen.

The bad weather was also responsible for raising water levels, which forced most of the waders to go elsewhere.

The Spoonbill family is beginning to go their separate ways: for the first time, the juveniles were not trailing their parents everywhere and were foraging on their own; they are becoming fully independent. Only when it was time to roost did the family join together again.



The sunflower crops, heavy with seed in spite of the summer drought, are attracting the first Woodpigeon flocks of the season.

The reedbed still hosts the exotic bird discovered last week, the Vinous-throated Parrotbill (*Paradoxornis webbianus*). It appears to be a lone individual, which must be rather disagreeable for such a gregarious species. Speaking of exotics, a drake Chiloe Wigeon was also present, but it was an obvious escape.

The two most interesting sightings were a Little Crake and a Bonelli's Warbler, the latter being the first for 2012.

The mating season of Roe Deer is about to end, and within a month at most, the bucks will begin to lose their antlers, which they will no longer need to fight over females. For the time being, however, they remain well-endowed.



WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 08 September, 2012

Millions of hairy caterpillars have suddenly appeared on La Cassinazza's vegetation, and they are methodically defoliating their host plants: they are larvae of the Fall Webworm (*Hyphantria cunea*), a moth. Not only are they present in stupendous numbers, they also have an astonishing ability to feed on any type of plant, from large trees – poplars, willows, elms, and alders – to grasses and even the tough leaves of *Cyperaceae*. When the wind is not rustling the leaves and there are no other noises, one can clearly hear the sound of their jaws at work. Thanks to their long, urticating bristles, birds avoid them and they do not seem to have any predators.

Speaking of birds, the waders are back, with dozens of Lapwings and Snipe, smaller flocks of Spotted Redshanks, Ruff, and Wood Sandpipers, and scattered individuals of several other species, including 3 Little Stints, always a rarity here.

The resident Spoonbill flock attracted two more birds, presumably passage migrants.

Starlings have begun to use the reedbed as their evening roost; their numbers are limited so far, but they will increase over the coming weeks.

Songbird migrants included Garden Warbler, Sedge Warbler, and Pied Flycatcher. The latter in particular has been the most conspicuous of our migrants for the past month.





WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 15 September, 2012

Bird migration brought us a new wave of songbirds – Tree Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Gray Wagtail, Common Redstart, Lesser Whitethroat, Chiffchaff, and Robin – in addition to those that have already arrived and the last lingering summer species, making for excellent diversity.

Waterbirds were just as varied. Teal numbers doubled, and today's count of 600 was the highest of 2012. Ten species of wader were present, including a nice flock of almost 20 Spotted Redshank, a Little Stint, and two Dunlin. Herons were everywhere: several hundred Cattle Egrets, at least one hundred Little Egrets, and dozens of Great White Egrets, which even outnumbered the Grey Herons. White Storks and Spoonbills are no longer remarkable here, but Black Storks certainly are: three flushed from one of the impoundments, and unfortunately flew off, not to be seen again.

We saw seven raptor species, of which Osprey, Marsh Harrier, and Honey Buzzard, were certainly migrants. Honey Buzzards have been a regular presence at La Cassinazza this summer, recorded on every survey since late May.

Among dragonflies, the late-flying Migrant Hawker (*Aeshna mixta*) and Common Darter (*Sympetrum striolatum*) put in their first appearance of the year. We recorded a new butterfly species for La Cassinazza, the Great Banded Greyling (*Brintesia circe*). This large species (over 6 cm) likes woodlands in warm climates and is quite common in central and southern Italy, but much less so in the Po Plain. It might be a one-off appearance, or the beginning of a colonization effort: we'll find out in the coming years.





WEEKLY REPORT
SUMMER 2012





WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2012



Weekly Report of 22 September, 2012

The last day of astronomical summer brought several species more typical of fall and winter: Stock Dove, Peregrine, Song Thrush, Wren, and Coal Tit. The latter is particularly interesting, since it is a species we do not see every year; instead, it stages periodical irruptions, at irregular intervals, whenever it has had a particularly successful breeding season. The last true irruption here took place in winter 2000-01, but many hints suggest that a similar phenomenon is underway this year as well.

The hunting season opened a week ago, and Mallards quickly figured out that La Cassinza was a safe haven: their numbers suddenly rose to an estimated 5,000 this week. Teal numbers remained steady and much higher than usual.

This week was also enlivened by a rarity – a Bluethroat – but this immature female was so drab that it was not much of a thrill.

The choice of this week's photo was rather controversial. Indeed, the Reeves' Pheasant is not a wild species, or even an escape from captivity. They are raised in parks and gardens solely due to the beauty of their plumage. On the strength of this, the pheasant earned the photo of the day.

