



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2009 - 2011



### Weekly Report of 26 December, 2010

Rain fell incessantly throughout the week. Today, so that we could enjoy the full spectrum of precipitation, it was mixed with snow.



The number of waterfowl fluctuates from week to week, but the species remain essentially the same. This week, Gadwall were the exception: despite carefully looking for them, we could not find a single one; it's a shame, because until two weeks ago they were a source of pride for La Cassinazza.

The two Spoonbills were also missing: did they manage to head to warmer climes, or did the cold snap have the best of them?

Now that the ice has melted, about one hundred Lapwings are back, along with a single Ruff: it looks like this species is set to winter here once again.

All the Redwings, Fieldfare, and a flock of Starling crowded a meadow flooded by the rain. It is likely that the water caused an emergence of earthworms.

The Goldcrest and the Wren vie for the smallest species award. They both need reams of energy just to stay warm, and are insectivorous. It baffles me how they can find food – and enough of it – in the dead of winter.



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2009 - 2011



### Weekly Report for 31 December, 2010

As the last day of the year dawned, La Cassinazza was shrouded in thick fog; it fortunately lifted later.

The star of the day was undoubtedly La Cassinazza's second-ever Great Grey Shrike. It was found thanks to a series of fortuitous events, and met with great enthusiasm.

Also of great interest were a Goshawk hunting Feral Pigeons at Cascina Darsena, and as many as six encounters with Great Bitterns, some of which allowed themselves to be watched at leisure, certainly an unusual occurrence for this species.

Last but not least, a pair of Stonechats were only the second (and last) record of this species in 2010.

Ice-bound waters have caused waterbird numbers – particularly Teal – to drop a bit, but Wigeons, Gadwalls, Lapwings (with a single wintering Ruff among them), and Common Snipe remain numerous, while a few Water Pipits are also around.

The day's list, quite lengthy as usual, also includes Hen Harrier, Redwing, Fieldfare, three woodpecker species, Hawfinch, and Penduline Tits. The latter were soaking up the sun's rays atop the bare branches of a sapling.

Now that the vegetation is bare, Roe Deer are easier to spot, but they are always very quick to run away.

We wish everyone a Happy New Year.





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### Weekly Report for 9 January, 2011

At this point in the winter season, we can no longer expect great changes: in January the contingents of wintering birds are stable and new arrivals unlikely. The numbers of waterfowl and Lapwings fluctuate from day to day, according to their movements and to hunting pressure in surrounding areas, but by and large they seem to have held steady, including the single Ruff, which can now truly be said to be wintering.

Drizzle and fog made it difficult to find small passerines in the reedbed and hedgerows today.



The only evident change was one for the worse: the hundreds of Fieldfares that have been around since November disappeared gradually over the last few weeks, and only a few birds are now present; the Redwings are gone, too. The reason for their disappearance is very clear: they have eaten almost all of the local hawthorn berries, their favourite food. Now that the hawthorn bushes are bereft of berries, they are empty of bird as well.

Hawthorn berries are a very important resource for many other birds besides thrushes and the Blue Tit in the photo, which dates back to a couple of weeks ago.



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### Weekly Report for 16 January, 2011

Today was supposed to be dedicated to the annual waterbird census, which takes place throughout Italy and Europe, and elsewhere in the world as well. Like in much of northern Italy, this effort was made vain by the persistent fog that has been plaguing us for a week, and is forecast to continue for several more days. As today's checklist shows, we recorded almost all of our regularly occurring species, but in numbers that do not reflect the real totals. We hope to have better luck next Saturday.

The highlight of the day was the excitement caused by a truly unusual guest: a flock of five White-fronted Geese (in spite of their Italian name, which roughly translates into Lombardy Goose, they are actually quite rare in this region) sighted early in the morning when visibility was relatively good; later on, they were swallowed up by the fog. There is only one previous record at La Cassinazza, in March 2004.

We also saw two Great Bitterns, and our songbird list was fairly complete.

Temperatures have been relatively mild over the last few weeks, and the first Hazelnut saplings are already in flower, at least one week ahead of schedule.

On a day devoted to counting waterbirds, it is only fitting that the photo of the day is dedicated to the most numerous and ubiquitous of all our ducks: the Mallard. At La Cassinazza, it is present every day of the year, bar none. The photo, of course, was not taken today.





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### Weekly Report for 22 January, 2011

Today's clear, sunny weather made it possible to complete the waterbird census that was hindered by last week's fog. The most remarkable result concerns the total count of Teal, about one thousand. It is almost certainly the largest concentration in Lombardy, perhaps one-third of the regional total.

Although there weren't very many of them, it may well be that the Pintail and Wigeon were the only ones in all of Lombardy.

At the other extreme, 40 Coots are an unremarkable count for such a common species, but this is only the second year they are wintering at La Cassinazza.

The presence of two Ruff, a Little Egret, and a small flock of Sacred Ibis underscores the fact that this winter was never very harsh. The same can be said of the new grass that is already turning the meadows green.

Even the tropical Brazilian Teal managed to survive the winter unscathed so far.

Today's outing features the usual suite of wintering species; I will only mention Great Bittern, Peregrine Falcon, Hawfinch, and countless Great Tits and Blue Tits.

Today's photo can only be dedicated to Teal.





## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2009 - 2011



### Weekly Report for 29 January, 2011

If our weekly reports had titles, this week's could have been "A quiet mid-winter day in the countryside". Temperatures dropped once again to their seasonal average, freezing many of the local water bodies, and the overcast sky kept the day chilly and quiet.

La Cassinazza's many regular wintering species were much in evidence, including Blackbirds, Goldcrests, tits, Wrens, Chiffchaffs, Long-tailed Tits, Reed Buntings, and a single Cetti's Warblers, a species that had been ubiquitous before the harsh winter of 2009. Perhaps due to the frozen reedbed, neither Great Bitterns nor Penduline Tits were seen.

We'll have to wait until the beginning of spring migration, at the end of February, to start seeing new species and increased activity. Teal remain very numerous, and today they had their biggest fan in tow: a Peregrine Falcon.

Today's photo is dedicated to the beauty of common species: the refined elegance of a Blackbird feasting on red berries.





## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2009 - 2011



### Weekly Report for 05 February, 2011

We only saw a few species on this late winter day. Perhaps they were exasperated by the persistent fog, or maybe they were already on their way to their breeding sites; in any event, many wintering birds seem to have left La Cassinazza already. And so, on what may have been the first sunny day of the year – albeit shrouded in fog and brine in the early morning – few birds were around to celebrate the clear blue sky. Among those that remained, however, the pep of spring was definitely in the air. Woodpeckers are in full song, and among them the Green Woodpecker is truly abundant and ubiquitous: the volume and frequency of their laughter makes them a lively, sonorous presence. Barberries and Pussy Willows are beginning to flower, joining the Hazels. Teal numbers, which had been high throughout the winter, dropped considerably, as did the Mallards. Fieldfares and Redwings disappeared as well, while only a few scattered Goldcrests remain out of the dozens that flitted through the bushes in the last few weeks. These are all timid and subtle signs of the explosion of spring just around the corner.





## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2009 - 2011



### Weekly Report for 12 February, 2011

During the early morning hours a thin layer of ground fog hid low branches, but tree tops could be seen clearly. The sun soon warmed up the air to spring-like temperatures. I am talking about the weather because there really wasn't much to talk about today in terms of wildlife.

Only Blue Tits, Great Tits, and Long-tailed Tits were common; it took hard work to find a Wren, Robin, or small Goldcrest flock. The wintering birds have left us and nothing new has arrived; we'll have to wait a couple more weeks for some improved activity.

Even the waterbirds provided poor pickings, apart from the hundreds of Lapwings and almost as many Black-headed Gulls, which we scanned for rarities to no avail.

Finally, in the afternoon a Spoonbill flew in from the south. It went to sleep as soon as it landed, appearing exhausted after a long flight. This year it returned much earlier than usual.

This is a good occasion to celebrate an old friend, so to speak. The Moorhen in the photo was ringed during an undergraduate thesis project in 2002. She was already adult back then, meaning she was born no later than 2001 and is now at least 10 years old. I don't know how long Moorhens live (perhaps no one does), but this one has reached a venerable age. She never left La Cassinazza: I find her at the same exact spot every week, in summer with many chicks in tow. She is undoubtedly a successful individual, healthy and strong, but also shrewd and lucky. Long may she live.



**Weekly Report for 19 February, 2011**



Signs of spring:

A Magpie entering the nest.

Coots proclaiming their territory. The songs of many birds; even the Siskins, so silent during winter, are now lustily singing.

Butterflies: old and battered specimens of Peacock Butterfly (*Vanessa io*), which survived the winter, were flying alongside freshly emerged Brimstones (*Gonepteryx rhamni*), the year's first butterflies.

The small blue flowers of *Veronica persica*. Even the lizards were basking in the sun.

Signs of migration:

Newly-arrived Redwings and Green Sandpipers, a small flight of Common Buzzards, increasing numbers of Common Snipe, and lots of Reed Buntings.

Today's Stonechat and Carrion Crow are infrequent species at La Cassinazza, and the three wary Shelducks that immediately flew away are real rarities, but the Moustached Warbler singing deep within the reedbed was truly exceptional.

At this time of year, Reed Buntings are acquiring their spring plumage, which features a jet-black head and bib. So far, they're halfway there.



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### Weekly Report for 26 February, 2011

Although the climate has turned decidedly wintry in the last few days, with early morning temperatures below zero, migration continues.



This week, it brought us Meadow Pipits and Skylarks, along with a Eurasian Curlew, a Serin – ubiquitous in urban areas, and yet rare in the countryside – and several Linnets. The last three species are quite rare at La Cassinazza. Incredibly, last week's Moustached Warbler was still singing in the reedbed. Could this elusive species have spent the entire winter deep within the reeds, only to give itself up now that it has started singing?

Plants are flowering right on schedule: this week, it was the White Poplar and the European Cornel's turn.

Major – albeit belated – news comes from the insect world. For the last two years, Elisa Cardarelli has been studying the ground beetles of La Cassinazza: the beetles are captured in the summer, and the painstaking task of identifying the specimens is carried out in winter. Not only has Elisa identified almost one hundred different species – an unexpectedly high number – but last year's material included a truly special species: a sun beetle called *Amara littorea*, the first Italian record of a species that is rare everywhere in its European range.

It is springtime for Cormorants, too. The adults are now in breeding plumage, with yellow facial skin and a white nape and leg feathering.



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2009 - 2011



### Weekly Report for 05 March, 2011

Here in the Po Plain, in winter, when the forecast calls for clear skies, we often end up with fog: just like this morning. The fog eventually lifted, only to be quickly replaced by overcast skies.

Nevertheless, today's outing featured an excellent variety of species, starting pre-dawn with a calling Tawny Owl.

The great number of Siskins was evident as soon as the sun rose: hundreds crowded the tops of alder trees, their favourite plant. We expected this influx, since over the last several days we had seen them in the middle of the city of Milan.

Waterfowl highlights included an influx of Pintail (34 individuals, almost a record count for La Cassinazza) and good numbers of Shoveler.

The White Stork is back on the artificial nest on top of the tall mast at Cascina Darsena, and we saw our first, lone Swallow: as the Italian proverb says, one Swallow does not make a spring, and in this particular individual's case, the arrival may prove a little too premature.

The rarity of the day was a Mistle Thrush, for a clean sweep of the thrushes.

The list of species that have started to sing continues to grow. This week we added the Water Rails that were making a ruckus in the reedbed in the evening, and the Woodpigeons, which are also engaged in display flights, at the height of which they beat the tips of the wings together with a loud double clap.

For the last three years, a pair of Yellow-legged Gull has held a territory at La Cassinazza's lake. They arrive in January and stay through the summer. They have attempted to breed, but so far without success. In spite of this, they are back once again this year. I am sure they are the same pair.

Such site fidelity in the face of misfortune surely deserves a photograph.





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### Weekly Report for 12 March, 2011

Our very first sighting this morning turned out to be the most spectacular of the day: a male Sparrowhawk was engaged in a roller-coaster nuptial flight, rapidly gaining altitude only to nose-dive at breakneck speed. It is getting ready to breed.

Several species were seen for the first time this year: a Black-winged Stilt, a Garganey, two Black-tailed Godwits, a Spotted Crake, and a Blackcap. They replaced others that may already have left, or simply remained hidden today. Variety remained high.

There was a good influx of Ruff (about 60) and Water Rails, which were easy to see for once. Snipe and Green Sandpipers were also much in evidence.

White poplars are in full flower and many birds are flocking to them to feed, especially Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chaffinches, Bramblings, and Siskins.

Willows are also getting ready to flower: Pussy Willows (*Salix caprea*) have already done so, and the others soon will follow. Over the coming weeks they will paint the landscape yellow, and their highly nutritious pollen will be a key resource for migratory passerines, especially insect-eaters. Such a plentiful banquet has convinced the Siskins to abandon their beloved alders, to which they had been inextricably tied all winter. Although the tall poplar treetops are out of photographic range, the lower branches of the willows provide wonderful opportunities for great images.





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**Weekly Report for 19 March, 2011**

We recorded a surprising variety of species this week. In fact, we set the all-time record one-day species total for La Cassinazza. To be honest, it wasn't easy digging them all out. All of the regular species for this period were accounted for, along with many others that are far more uncommon: Osprey, Moustached Warbler (singing from the reedbed for a month now: if it continues, it will raise legitimate suspicions of a breeding attempt!), three Mistle Thrushes (the third consecutive week this species is recorded), Spotted Crake (for the second week running), Golden Plover, Firecrest, and Grey Wagtail.

Bramblings and Skylarks were clearly migrating, with large flocks of the former, and smaller flocks of the latter.

Other migrants we recorded for the first time this year included Night Heron, Wood Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, House Martin, Little Grebe, Pochard, and Willow Warbler.

Garganeys seem quite late this year: the first only arrived last week, and we have only seen a handful so far.

These first mild days of spring brought out frogs and lizards in force, and at least two new species of butterfly for the year: the Small White (*Pieris rapae*) and the Comma Butterfly (*Polignona c-album*).

Many more willows are in flower than last week, and they attract many birds: even the Penduline Tits leave the safety of the reedbed to feast on them. Currently, Blue Tits are the most assiduous presence in the willow stands, along with our photographer...

