



WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2012



Weekly Report of 24 December, 2011

For the first time this winter, snow and ice shook up La Cassinazza's birdlife. This wasn't a big deal for the waterfowl, which moved from their favourite impoundments to those with more open water: there are still over two thousand Mallards and several hundred Teal, with a few Wigeons, a handful of Gadwalls, and a hen Pintail; we did not see any Shovelers today. The Common Snipe have left, as have the last few Little Egrets and it seems that the Spoonbills that have been lingering at La Cassinazza for several months are now gone as well – it was about time! Over the course of two weeks, Lapwing numbers dropped from over 1,000 to ten or so. At least one Ruff remains, as do the two White Storks, which seem to lack a migratory instinct.

Passerine numbers were also quite a bit lower. The absence of Chiffchaffs was particularly glaring, but the Reed Buntings almost disappeared as well. These two species had been the stars of the autumn due to their abundance.

Last week's rarity, the White-fronted Goose, decided to stay, and it seems to feel quite at home in of our flock of feral Greylag Geese.



We have recently started seeing a Great White Heron with a metal ring on its left leg. During the last hour of sunshine I was able to photograph it and read part of its ring number5748. He's back! This is our old friend who was born and ringed in Hungary in 2005, and who has spent most of the subsequent winters at La Cassinazza; last year was the only time we did not see it. He has now returned to his traditional territory, which includes the main house and its human inhabitants, towards which he is far more tolerant than usual for a heron. We have grown quite fond of him: welcome back dear friend, we are happy you've managed to survive one more year and all its hazards.

Merry Christmas, everyone!



WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2012



Weekly Report of 31 December, 2011

More ice and cold weather have depopulated Cassinazza of its birds. Except for the ducks, which have turned into ice skaters, very few birds remain and the birdwatching has entered its most meagre part of the year with the number of species being seen also declining, even when compared to just a couple of weeks ago.

A few meadows, kept flooded using slightly warmer water from the drainage ditches play host to a handful of Lapwings, the single Ruff, many White Wagtails and our introduced Greylags, still accompanied by the White-fronted goose.

By the afternoon the sun had pushed back the ice and the ducks were able to swim once again, but it would seem that there were pretty well only Mallard and Teal although a Spoonbill has reappeared, having obviously not strayed very far.

The autumn that has just ended has been mild, the grass has remained green and has been able to continue to grow, and no snow has fallen. The Roe Deer are therefore doing fine, well-fed and with a dense coat. At this time of year, males are also lacking their antlers which were dropped in November. With the bushes bare and the grass short, in winter it becomes increasingly easy to see them and they also seem to have become a little more cooperative towards the photographer.

Today sees the end of 2011, a year full of observations and species, 158 bird, 34 butterfly and 32 dragonfly species; all-time maximums for all three groups.

Best wishes for a happy 2012.





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Weekly Report of 07 January, 2012

The weather was out-of-the-ordinary today, with clear skies and the air bright and crisp. On the other hand it was a day of decidedly ordinary observations, with all the species and the numbers seen last week being confirmed. But it certainly cannot be said to have been boring given that today's list includes Bittern, White-fronted Goose and Spoonbill and perhaps even the 5 Greylag Geese were genuine migrants, given their behaviour and the fact that they never mixed with our introduced geese.

But one has to admit that this winter is proving to be really stingy for birdwatchers with many of the usual wintering species being completely absent (Hawfinch, Brambling, Fieldfare, Redwing and Peregrine) or are very scarce and hard to find (Goldcrest, Siskin, Grey Wagtail, Hen Harrier and Bittern).

This having been said, the Penduline Tit is always numerous and easy to see. Is all you have to do is wait at the edge of the reedbed and within a few minutes a band of Penduline Tits will arrive, often so close that you can hear the crackling of dry reed stems which they break open with their beaks to extract hibernating insect larvae. And you can also manage to photograph them too.





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Weekly Report of 14 January, 2012

One of the unmissable rituals of every start of the year is the wintering waterfowl count, the International Waterbird Census. Equally inevitable, on the day scheduled for the census, is fog; a tradition observed this year as well. Today it was thicker than ever and did not lift, even for a moment. One has to feel sorry for the volunteer counters who have come to Cassinazza to help with the count for nothing, the group went its separate ways at lunchtime. Thanks for coming.

We will try again next Saturday.

So for now, no numbers for the different species present. Much of what was identified was done only by ear, using their calls. Not that we entirely missed out on valuable observations. Looming out of the fog were two Hen Harriers, the Bittern, the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, and the two White Storks, which, at this point, take on the status of a full wintering species. Finally, judging from what one can hear when they take flight from the top of the poplars (always out of sight), it would now seem that a good number of Woodpigeons have arrived. In the end, one way or another, we counted 52 species: not bad for a day in zero visibility.

Nor was it possible to get any photographs on the day, so I've turned to a landscape photograph, the first after so many pictures of animals, taken on the clear morning of last Saturday a few minutes before sunrise, with the ducks seemingly uncertain between ice and water.





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Weekly Report of 21 January, 2012

The weather today has now given back what it had denied us on Saturday and we managed to complete the winter waterfowl census. Mallard and Teal were laboriously and accurately counted, providing two confirmations. The good news is that the estimates that I usually make by eye on less formal occasions are quite accurate. The bad news, however, is that the number of ducks has fallen this winter when compared to all previous years and only the number of Teal is unchanged and Mallard numbers have halved. In short, here are the totals: 2,700 Mallard, 400 Teal, 11 Wigeon, 4 Gadwall, 1 Shoveler, 1 Pintail, 6 Greylag Goose, 1 White-fronted Goose, 11 Lapwing, 10 Snipe, 1 Spoonbill, 2 White Stork, 2 Sacred Ibis and 40 Coot. The evening roosts yielded 50 Cormorants, 12 Great White Herons and 5 Little Egrets. Among the birds present but not counted, were Moorhen and Water Rail. Only the Bittern was absent today, but one was observed no later than the day before yesterday and in recent days 3 Woodcock were located during a night survey of the local Brown Hares.

Before all of this, we were witness to the rare spectacle of a huge female Goshawk which caught a Mallard and proceeded to pluck it and eat it on the ground in full view. Straight away a Buzzard arrived, approaching within a metre, but prudently waiting until the Goshawk had finished feeding before starting on the leftovers. Following a strict pecking order, last of all a Marsh Harrier got rid of the remaining scraps.

The Marsh Harrier is never missing at Cassinazza. In other winters we have played host to many of them but this winter just a single bird is present and this is an unusual head-on shot of it.





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Weekly Report of 28 January, 2012

Today was a day with a climate more worthy of Britain than that of a Mediterranean country - drizzle mixed with snow, cold and damp. Probably the birds were feeling the cold and were inactive as well because even in the few miserly days that this winter has given us they were pretty much invisible. Not even a Chiffchaff was seen today and from morning 'til evening we managed to see just two Robins and three Goldcrests flitting from bush to bush. In the absence of its preferred prey even the Sparrowhawk deserted us.

Luckily the White-fronted Goose is still with us among the Greylag Geese on the lake, where cormorants are already beginning the first courtship displays of the year and where the pair of Yellow-legged Gulls have made their reappearance.



Neither the Bittern nor the Hen Harrier are rare species in the rich environment, of Cassinazza but they did repay the absence of the more common species. This year, the thrushes represent a great absence. On this grey day just a single Song Thrush accompanied the common, yet always beautiful, Blackbirds. In the reeds one can always hear the Penduline Tits and, with just five minutes patience the visitor can see them close up. From just a few metres away you can appreciate the careful job that evolution has done on its delicate plumage over the centuries, 'painting' it not only using the colours of the reeds themselves but also its highlights and shadows, as this photograph clearly shows. Were it not for their habit of constantly calling to each other, chattering, and moving as a flock, they would be very difficult to detect.



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Weekly Report of 04 February, 2012

The Siberian climate, which we had wind of last week has arrived, bringing us cold and snow. Fortunately, the birds are well-equipped to resist the cold as long as it does not rain. Dealing with a wet plumage at temperatures that do not allow one to dry oneself, especially at temperatures below zero is a difficult undertaking, making it hard to survive. This explains why, last week, nothing was moving, while on Saturday, despite being greeted in the morning with a temperature of minus 12°C, amidst the vegetation the usual liveliness of Cassinazza had returned. Two species that are usually seen infrequently at Cassinazza were encountered in unusual numbers, there being several small flocks of Linnets, sometimes together with Chaffinches and Goldfinches, and sometimes on their own. There were also three Dunnocks and, with the small birds back, even the Sparrowhawk had reappeared.

With the cold the main danger is now that of ice. In addition to not being able to drink, a problem shared by all, the species that hunt their prey in water can have a tough time. This is certainly the case for the Bittern which we found today at the edge of the reeds. Years ago, after a long freeze, one was found having starved to death, which shocked even the most technical and experienced of the naturalists who witnessed it. We hope that this one enjoys better luck.

Unfortunately I could not produce a good photograph in time, illustrating the cold we have been experiencing over the last few days so here is one taken some time ago.





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Weekly Report of 11 February, 2012

Everything is covered in snow. For small, granivorous birds, finding the seeds they depend on is increasingly difficult. The vast, unharvested sunflower field at Cascina Darsena is quite likely the only food source for miles around. Finches were concentrated there in unfathomable numbers: tens of thousands of wings are constantly whirring, calling to mind scenes from documentaries on the tropics. When a Sparrowhawk or Hen Harrier dives in, everything explodes in a giant cloud of shrapnel dispersing frenetically. Chaffinches are the most numerous species, followed by Reed Bunting, Goldfinch, Greenfinch, and Tree Sparrow; Brambling and Linnet are much scarcer.

I expected the frigid weather to have pushed a few interesting species south of the Alps, especially raptors. Sure enough, Common Buzzards were much more numerous than usual, and a Peregrine re-appeared. But I was not prepared to find a Booted Eagle; while they are occasionally seen on migration here, they are supposed to be in Africa at this time of year.

Last week, Violetta explained how aquatic birds have trouble surviving once the water freezes. Today we witnessed this first hand. Great Bitterns are forced out into the open and are easier to see; they are weaker and thus more approachable. One evidently very hungry individual captured a Common Moorhen: after a ten-second struggle, the moorhen hung limply from the bittern's bill. The bittern flew off, carrying its prey into the reedbed. It was hard to see in the dense vegetation, but I suspect that after ten minutes or so, the bittern gave up on swallowing its oversize prey.

One small impoundment remains ice-free, and all the ducks are concentrated there. When disturbed, the Teal fly away, but they soon come back to the same spot: they have nowhere else to go.



Weekly Report of 18 February, 2012

Now that the extreme weather is over, the exceptional and temporary concentrations of birds have gone, leaving us with a muddy, almost lifeless thaw, at a time during which, in years past, the first spring migrants were already with us.

Only a few hundred ducks – Mallards and Teal – enlivened La Cassinazza's landscape. Other than that, it was difficult enough finding a scattering of Goldcrests and Siskins.

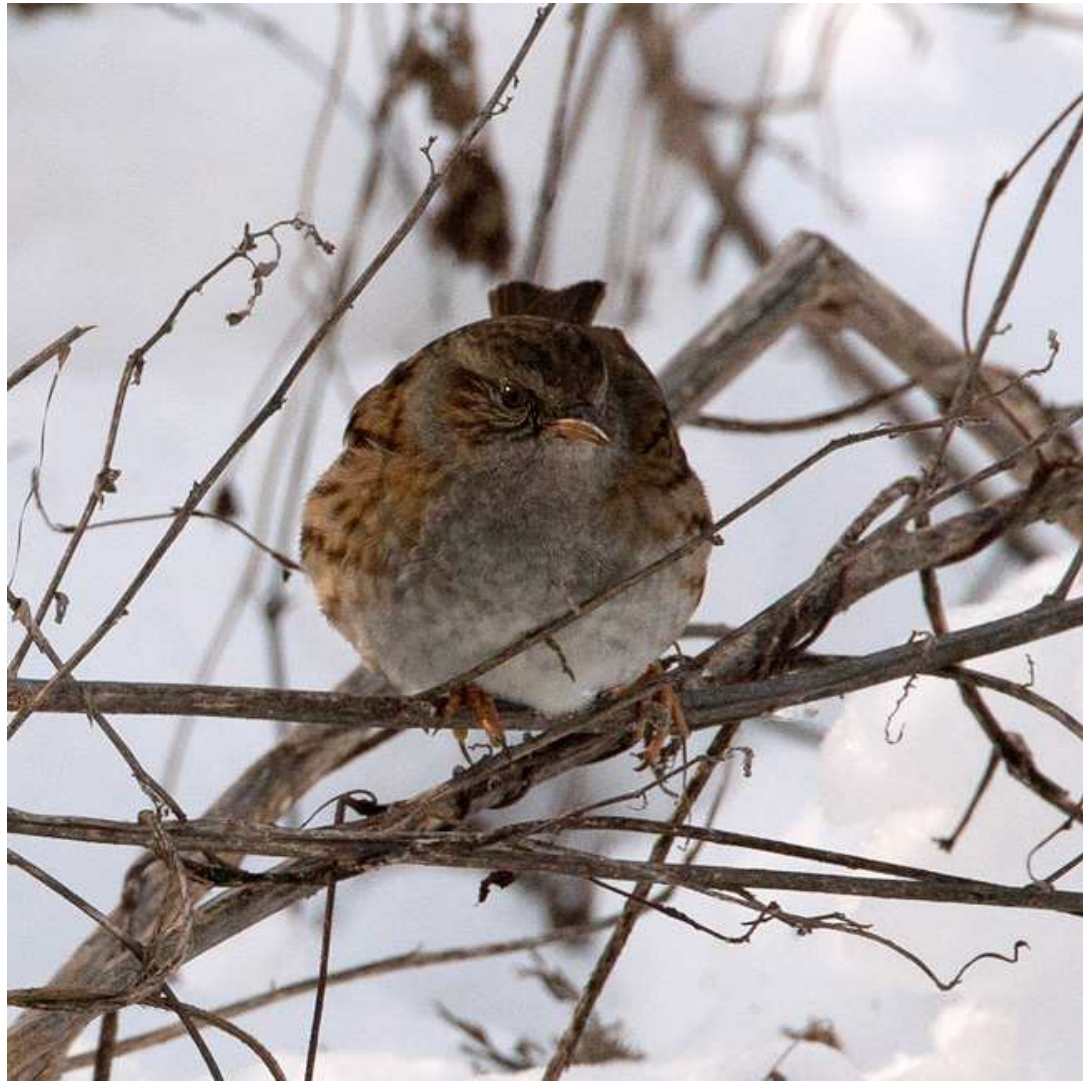
Inevitably, we have had to resign ourselves to the fact that the Cetti's Warblers, which were slowly trying to re-colonize La Cassinazza after being wiped out by the freeze of January 2009, are gone once again.

Only one species increased as a result of the bad weather: Coots, which generally leave La Cassinazza in winter, instead found a small area of open water, no more than a few hundred square meters, which now hosts the local area's entire wintering population.

Only one sign foreshadowed the imminent (at least according to the calendar) spring migration: a great many Skylarks, most of which were only heard as they flew overhead. The three Ruff we say may have been wintering birds, but they were equally likely to be early spring migrants.

Although the Dunnock is a common wintering species, its elusive habits make it difficult to observe. In the last few weeks, perhaps because the very cold

temperatures are particularly disruptive for this insect-eating species, it has tended to come out in the open more. We have finally been able to photograph it, and this is the first image of a Dunnock to be added to our archive.





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Weekly Report of 25 February, 2012

What a difference a week makes! We went from icy conditions to mild spring temperatures, warm enough for lizards and butterflies to make an appearance. Among the latter were numerous Brimstones (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) and a handful of Peacock Butterflies (*Inachis Io*); the most numerous however was a moth, the Orange Underwing (*Archiearis parthenias*), which flies for a brief period from late February to mid-March and is only active during the day. If anything, they are too active: despite our repeated attempts, we once again failed to photograph them this year.

Hazelnut trees are finally in flower, four weeks later than normal; alders will soon follow.



From an ornithological point of view, February's severe cold snap left a void that has not yet been filled by new migrant arrivals. Truth be told, as soon as the polar interlude ended, all the species that were wintering at La Cassinazza came back: the Lapwings, the two Spoonbills, and all the waterfowl, including a handful of Wigeons, Shovelers, and Gadwalls.

The only real spring migrants of the day were a flock of just over forty Ruff and a single Spotted Redshank.

The day's final comment: "next week will be better" is a pithy summary of the right attitude for a birdwatcher .

Magpies are resident at La Cassinazza and always numerous, but they are intelligent, very wary, and rarely photographed.



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Weekly Report of 03 March, 2012

Nature is scrambling to make up for the time lost during the February cold snap: in one week, alders, elms, willows, poplars, and cornels have all begun to flower. Butterflies are flying, the bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) queens are hard at work establishing new colonies, and the first wildflowers are dotting the meadows. Unfortunately, the director of this scenography forgot to add migratory birds.

Blue and Penduline Tits are feasting on the willow and poplar buds. The latter leave their reedbed haunts for the tops of the trees in order to exploit this new food source.

To be honest, species variety is not much lower than normal for this time of year (we did see 60 species today), but their numbers are disappointing: the arrival of a single Little Ringed Plover, two Green Sandpipers, two Fieldfares, and a Night Heron (the earliest ever record for this species) are not enough to liven up these early days of spring. All other resident or wintering species are in minimal numbers, except for Great White Egrets, which are crowding around a drying pond, where fishing must be easy and plentiful.

The only note of interest was a migratory passage of Common Buzzards: several groups – up to 10 individuals together – overflowed La Cassinazza around mid-day. The appearance of two Jackdaws was an unexpected bonus.

Hen Harriers are a typical wintering species: they arrive in October and usually stay until April; this year, La Cassinazza is hosting this single individual, a juvenile born last year, which we saw again today.





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Weekly Report of 10 March, 2012

Although temperatures dropped again after the warm spell of the last two weeks, the ornithological spring is advancing apace.

The many newly arrived migrants testify to this: the first Black-winged Stilt, the first Black-tailed Godwits, a nice flock of Garganeys – almost all drakes – and several Blackcaps, already in song. Waterfowl arrivals included a pair of Pochards and a few more Pintails, completing the sweep of dabbling ducks.

Other migrants included Meadow Pipits, numerous Linnets, one of which started singing, and three Crag Martins, a very rare sighting at La Cassinazza. Equally rare was a sighting of Booted Eagle, no doubt the same individual seen a month ago.

As spring advances, signs of breeding are increasingly evident: Mallard pairs are looking for potential nesting sites in the ditches, Coots are territorial and litigious, while Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chaffinches, and all three woodpeckers are in full song. Numerous Lapwing pairs have begun their interminable territorial disputes in the ploughed fields, targeting each other and any passing crow. Our two White Storks are taking nesting material to last year's nest.

It is the mating season for Hares as well: in the rice stubble, the males fight with each other and tirelessly pursue the reluctant females. At this time of year, they throw caution to the wind and become much more visible.





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Weekly Report of 17 March, 2012

According to the calendar, the week that just ended was the last of winter. The willows are in full flower and blackthorns are beginning to blossom, but the true herald of spring was the return of the Barn Swallows. There were not the only species to make their first appearance this year: Wood Sandpiper, Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, and Spotted Crake were all new arrivals.

On the other hand, many of our wintering species were absent.

Although they weren't the year's first, other new arrivals included a flock of at least 50 Ruff, a similar number of Cattle Egrets, a handful each of Little Ringed Plovers, Wigeons, and Black-winged Stilts, and two pairs of Great Crested Grebes. Migrating Marsh Harriers were also in evidence, at least 6, including two adult males.

A Tawny Owl sang during the night, and rounding out the list of uncommon species were a Mistle Thrush and 4 Jackdaws. Truth be told, the latter species, which has been seen 3 times in the last two months, is about to struck off the list of species considered rarities here.

The unusual circumstances of a high diversity of species but low overall numbers (ducks excluded) continue. The high number of species is a characteristic of migration seasons, but we are only at the beginning.

Garganeys are such a quintessential March migrant that their name in Italian, Marzaiola, literally translates into "March bird". The drake is one of the most elegant of ducks; the hen that was in front of it ducked her head just in time: one photo, and they flew off .

