



WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2011



Weekly Report of 26 March, 2011

Spring is progressing rapidly: in just one week, hawthorns are in leaf, blackthorns are in flower, and the new reed shoots are almost a foot tall. New butterflies for the year included Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*) and Green-veined White (*Pieris napi*).

Like always, however, birds drew the bulk of our attention.

Our birdwatching efforts were rewarded with the thrill of hearing a booming Great Bittern for the first time this year, and with finding a Little Crake, a species both rare (just the 5th local record) and very elusive and difficult to observe.

Migration brought us a great many Green Sandpipers (50 individuals, nearly a record high count), finally a few Garganeys – which are either quite scarce or late this year –, a geometrical increase in the numbers of Black-winged Stilts, and the arrival of the year's first Common Redstarts and Little Ringed Plovers.

On the other hand, many of our wintering birds are now gone or about to leave: we did not see a single Wigeon or Pintail, and only a few Wrens, Dunnocks, Goldcrests, Reed Buntings, Penduline Tits, Siskins, Bramblings, and Hawfinches are left.

There was only one of the latter, but it was so still and approachable that we managed to take some close-up pictures of it, which show off the power of its enormous beak.





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Weekly Report of 02 April, 2011

A series of spring-like days led to the departure of most wintering species: a quick perusal of today's checklist will show that many species that were common in the previous months are absent. They have been replaced by a series of new arrivals, which once again kept our species total very high.

Species making their first appearance of the year included Greenshank, Common Tern, Wryneck, Yellow Wagtail, and Subalpine Warbler, the latter a major rarity at La Cassinazza. Other uncommon species that enlivened our day included a Golden Plover, a Linnet, another Little Crake, and at least three Spotted Crakes.

Turning to regular visitors, the number of Black-winged Stilt has more than doubled – to over 100 – and the migration of Green Sandpipers is at its peak. The Great Bittern is singing with great conviction (we'll have to get used to it), but today it was almost overshadowed by the pair of White Storks bringing branches to its nest atop the tall mast at Cascina Darsena. Meanwhile, many species are already on eggs: Blackbirds, Starlings, Long-tailed Tits, Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Woodpigeons, and Collared Doves, while many hen Mallards already have ducklings in tow.

The afternoon's warmth encouraged reptiles and amphibians to be out and about, including Western Whip Snake, Grass Snake, Tree Frog, Green Toad, and countless Green Frogs and Wall Lizards.

The scent of Bird Cherry (*Prunus padus*) flowers fills the air, and the fields are dotted with wildflowers. The most conspicuous ones are the commonest and most colorful species. The flowers of *Taraxacum officinale* are both, and they are an irresistible draw for the few butterflies already on the wing.

Today's photo depicts a Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*).





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Weekly Report of 09 April, 2011

A pair of White Storks incubating on the nest, for the first time here. A pair of Marsh Harriers engaged in their spectacular courtship flight. At least four different Great Bitterns in the reedbed. A Crane strolling through the marsh, amidst the Black-winged Stilt colony. This is more than enough to testify to the great success of the habitat restoration project at La Cassinazza. I forgot to mention a couple of pairs of Kestrels; we found the nest of one of them.

Otherwise, our sightings were influenced by the weather, as they always are: after several days of high pressure and settled weather, migrants had no reason to stop, and continued straight over the Alps. A few new arrivals (Purple Heron, Nightingale, Hoopoe, Wood Warbler) did little to change our impression that many species are quite late this year.

Several butterflies made their first annual appearance: Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*), Orange Tip (*Anthocaris cardamine*) and Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*), but with the sole exception of the Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) their numbers are quite low.

The year's first dragonflies were cause of great interest: we started with a few early individuals of the common Blue-tailed Damselfly (*Ischnura elegans*), then with a single Broad-bodied Chaser (*Libellula depressa*), only the third record in 10 years at Cassinazza, and finally we found a swarm of Vagrant Emperors (*Anax ephippiger*), a long-distance migrant from Africa which is generally quite rare in northern Italy. The ones we saw today most likely emerged in North Africa and were brought northwards by the very strong scirocco winds that have been blowing in southern Italy for the last few days. Although they had just arrived, they were already mating and laying eggs.

The photo of the day can only be a tribute to the pair of White Storks atop their high-tech nest in the soft light of dawn.





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Weekly Report of 16 April, 2011

For us birdwatchers, the seasons don't always coincide with the dates on the calendar. Just like the ornithological autumn begins in July with the arrival of southbound waders, the song of the Nightingale and the rhythmic call of the Cuckoo kicked off summer today. The day began with a check of the White Stork nest, where things are going well. It continued with long periods of monotony interrupted by bursts of activity, such as when a Bonelli's Warbler was seen among several Wood Warblers, or later in the afternoon, when a male and female Lesser Kestrel appeared and just as quickly vanished.

Along with the Cuckoo, the Hobby, Sedge Warbler, Common Swift, and Black Kite also put in their first appearances of the year.

An increasing number of species are engaged in breeding activities: Great Crested Grebes, with three pairs and already one active nest on the lake; Great Spotted Woodpeckers, of which two pairs have chosen nest boxes and are adapting them to their needs; and the Lapwings in the farm fields.

There are still a few Vagrant Emperors (*Anax ephippiger*) about – the African dragonflies that arrived on the heels of last week's heat wave – and the year's first White-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum albistylum*) was also recorded.

Among butterflies, today's sightings of Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*) and Short-tailed Blue (*Everes argiades*) were the first of the year.

Several years ago, a flock of Greylag Geese was introduced to La Cassinazza. Although they are not truly wild, they are well established and numerous pairs are currently breeding. The first chicks have already hatched. The photo of the day is dedicated to them.





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Weekly Report of 23 April, 2011

I had high hopes that last night's front would have grounded hordes of migrants. The exact opposite happened: today La Cassinazza seemed emptied of all birdlife, resident and migrant.

Only the Nightingales were singing, and not very many of them, either.

The only event of note was the abundance of Wood Sandpipers, over 150 of them, signaling the peak of their migration. There is not much else worth mentioning, apart from the year's first Turtle Doves.

The absence of numerous species which should already have arrived by now is particularly striking. These include Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Tree Pipit, Great Reed Warbler, Melodious Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, and Golden Oriole. It seems that migrants are either quite late or quite scarce this year.

The biggest disappointment came from the Black-winged Stilts, which have

almost all gone: only about twenty are left, and just one pair is showing signs of breeding. Last year, the colony was deserted, but it seemed like poor weather was to blame. It is much harder to understand why the colony was abandoned this year as well. Today's photo expresses our desire to see them back at La Cassinazza in the high numbers of old.

Turning to dragonflies, I saw another Broad-bodied Chaser (*Libellula depressa*): it is the fourth in ten years, but the second in just two weeks. Could this be the start of a colonization event? I also saw a small beetle I had never seen before, but I will need to seek expert help in order to put a name to it.

Plants in full flower included Black Locust, Common Elder, Guelder-rose, and Yellow Iris, along with many wildflowers.





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Weekly Report of 30 April, 2011

It took only ten minutes this morning to realize that today would be far different from last Saturday: La Cassinazza was ringing with bird song and hopping with activity. Thunderstorms during the night forced down many migrants: lots of Whinchats, several Northern Wheatears, and a handful of Yellow Wagtails in the meadows; Pied Flycatchers (very late, but finally in good numbers; the fact that almost all were male is a sign that their migration is just starting), Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Wood Warbler (quite numerous; this is the first year in which we saw good numbers of migrants), Bonelli's Warbler (which isn't so rare at La Cassinazza after all), and Willow Warblers. Today's photo is dedicated to this species: this week's sightings may have been the last of the spring, and we won't see them again until the fall.

Several breeding birds also arrived this week: Golden Oriole, Great Reed Warbler, and Squacco Heron. The Black-winged Stilts abandoned us completely: they are all gone. The more reliable Common Terns occupied most of the floating platforms and have already laid eggs. The frequency with which we are finding nests of Green and Great Spotted Woodpecker tells us that the density of these two species at La Cassinazza is extremely high.

For once, the waterbirds that are usually the highlight of our surveys at La Cassinazza were lacking: even Wood Sandpipers, which were in record numbers last week, disappeared altogether.

It is now the Dog Rose's turn to be in full flower, but the rain damaged most of its early blossoms.





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Weekly Report of 07 May, 2011

Sometimes bad weather drives the movements of migrants, but other motives can also regulate their comings and goings. This week, for reasons unknown to those of us who don't have feathers, the Po Plain emptied of migrants on Friday. As a consequence, a great quiet reigned over La Cassinazza, due in part to the fact that many breeding birds are busy feeding young or have just fledged their first brood, and have largely stopped singing and defending territories, preferring to remain inconspicuous. The Great Bittern, for example, has already stopped singing, and we only saw it hunting outside of the reedbed thanks to a stroke of luck.

At Cascina Darsena, a dozen Lapwings are incubating in the newly planted fields. Their eggs should hatch in ten to fifteen days, before the rice fields are flooded. The White Storks are expected to hatch their eggs any day now, but so far all we have seen is the female incubating. Mallard ducklings, on the other hand, have already hatched, and the peeps of new broods can be heard everywhere. We also found a pair of Teal, perhaps they will stop to breed.





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Weekly Report of 14 May, 2011

The White Stork chicks have hatched. We cannot see them yet and do not know how many there are, because the deep nest is placed atop a tall pylon, but the adults' behaviour leaves no doubt. They are not the only births we are celebrating today: Great Crested Grebes, Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, Blue Tits, Coots, and Moorhens have all hatched chicks. The Common Terns are taking their time, but they have at least 16 active nests. The Little Bittern is also quite late: we only heard our first one today, two or three weeks later than usual.

The first wild berries are about to ripen, and flocks of Starlings, including both adults and juveniles, are getting ready to plunder them: there won't be many mulberries, sour cherries, and wild cherries left after the birds are through with them. Lingering spring migrants included several Wood Warblers and two Whinchats; the rarity of the day was a Whiskered Tern.

A good variety of butterflies and dragonflies continues to be seen. Among the former, the most noteworthy were several Large Coppers (*Lycaena dispar*), and especially Black-veined Whites (*Aporia crataegi*), which were simply everywhere and included many mating pairs. Once hawthorns, their larval host plants, were planted at La Cassinazza, the butterflies followed. As the photo shows, adults prefer blackberry flowers.





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Weekly Report of 21 May, 2011

Today, the White Storks took centre stage.

Our day started off with a sigh of relief, when we confirmed that the male of the breeding pair is still around. He had been missing for a while and we were worried that the female had to raise her chicks alone. This morning, we saw them together on the nest as they greeted each other ceremoniously.



Later on, we were even more surprised by the sight of another White Stork that landed on top of La Cassinazza's chimney and proceeded to remain there the entire afternoon, unflappable in spite of the human comings and goings just a few meters below.

The tail end of migration brought us yet more Whinchats, a female Red-footed Falcon (a rarity at La Cassinazza) and, finally, the last two summer breeders that were still missing: Spotted Flycatcher and Marsh Warbler. The Great Bittern has resumed singing vigorously, a sign that it has completed its first breeding attempt. Its presence allowed us to record all of the European herons in one day.

Other noteworthy birds included two Sand Martins and a Peregrine dragging off a large prey, perhaps a Moorhen.

Four dragonfly species put in their first appearance of the year: Banded Demoiselle (*Calopteryx splendens*), Azure Damselfly (*Agrion puella*), Broad Scarlet (*Crocothemis erythraea*) and the much sought-after Common Clubtail (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*), a species that only colonized La Cassinazza last year. There were no news on the butterfly front.

The peak of the flowering season is now past: as the flowers of the Wild Privet are withering, the air is thick with the scent of honeysuckle.



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Weekly Report of 28 May, 2011

Thanks to this year's late migration, a time of year that is usually quite uneventful and when our birdwatching efforts are focused on surveying breeding birds, was enlivened by several surprises and rarities.

The day began with a Wood Warbler. Although they were particularly abundant this year, and their migration quite protracted, we had never seen one so late. Next came two Spoonbills, then Bee-eaters overhead, a Common Whitethroat, and a female Red-footed Falcon, almost certainly last week's bird still lingering in the area. Finally, as we were driving to the local tavern for lunch, we spotted an immature Long-legged Buzzard, only the second for La Cassinazza. We had left our cameras behind, but a real birder is never without his binoculars, even on his lunch break, because, after all, you never know...

In the afternoon our attention turned to the great variety of insects on show, including butterflies, dragonflies, beetles, and grasshoppers, but the undisputed star was a new butterfly for La Cassinazza, the White-letter Hairstreak (*Satyrium w-album*). This uncommon and local species has recently suffered widespread population declines. Hopefully, it was not an isolated individual. In any event, it was the 38th butterfly species to be recorded here.

We took a great deal of photos over the last several weeks, which we still need to sort through and identify. Perhaps other new butterfly species remain to be detected among them.





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Weekly Report of 04 June, 2011

Kids grow so fast! Today, four robust White Stork chicks were standing upright in the nest, as their parents, who won't leave them alone a second, looked on with understandable pride.

Also today, the arrival of a flock of Green Sandpipers signals the beginning of migration...fall migration! Indeed, these sandpipers migrated northwards in early April, and they are now on their way south again, at least those individuals which failed to breed this year. The presence of a Gadwall and three Garganeys – all drakes – is harder to interpret; we have always hoped to see these two species breed at La Cassinazza, but so far we have seen neither females nor chicks. Poor weather and thunderstorms did their best to dampen our birdwatching, but they did force down several Pallid Swifts over La Cassinazza's impoundments; this species is quite unusual here.

Summer offers an infinite variety of insects, which capture the attention of even us birdwatchers. Today's photo is a break from the usual routine of bird photos, with a butterfly thrown in every now and then: this leaf beetle, barely one centimeter in length, is called *Clytra laeviuscula*.





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Weekly Report of 11 June, 2011

Ten days of abundant rainfall have encouraged plant growth, and in some places La Cassinazza looks like a tropical forest.

The wind and thunderstorms took a heavy toll on butterflies, many of the few remaining individuals have torn wings.

Three or four Common Tern nests were destroyed, or perhaps predated, but at least a dozen pairs are still on eggs; they should hatch any day now. The reeds are now tall and dense, and the birds that live in the reedbed, which are rather shy to begin with, are now all but impossible to see. Reed and Marsh Warblers can easily be heard singing; the latter seems to be more numerous, and its song features mimicry of many other bird sounds. Over the course of just two minutes, one particular individual today imitated Chaffinch, Bee-eater, Cetti's Warbler, and Italian Sparrow! Only the Great Reed Warblers are sometimes seen, albeit rarely, perhaps because they are curious and climb to the top of reed stalks to check out intruders.





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Weekly Report of 18 June, 2011

Early this morning, as I was checking up on the White Stork family, others enjoyed the day's most interesting sightings: a Short-toed Eagle still perched in the canopy of a tree where it had probably spent the night, and two male Red-backed Shrikes. Ten years ago, the latter species would have hardly rated a mention, but unfortunately its population crashed to the extent that any sighting is noteworthy now. Later, we found a third individual, whose behaviour clearly betrayed the presence of a nest nearby.

The two Spoonbills that arrived in late May look to be set in for the long haul. The days go by in the Common Tern colony, but a month and a half after the first eggs were laid, we have not seen any chicks. This is a bad sign, and means that the first clutch was lost and had to be replaced. For the time being, the small fish that are brought to the nesting platforms are not meant for the chicks. Instead, they are offered by the males to the females as part of a courtship ritual.

The season is advancing for butterflies as well. Today we saw 17 species, including the year's first Clouded Yellow (*Colias crocea*), Berger's Clouded Yellow (*Colias alfacariensis*) and Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*). The variety of dragonflies was rather lower, with the only sighting of note being the first Brilliant Emerald (*Somatochlora metallica*) of the season.

