



## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 24 March, 2012

This week saw the arrival of a flock of over 100 Ruff and the return of good numbers of Night Herons, which for now are behaving as nocturnal animals: they roost in the bushes during the day and only come out at dusk.

Among waterfowl, Mallard numbers are dropping as they are pairing off and dispersing to any nearby area that provides breeding habitat – a ditch, a pool, or a small reedbed. Teal numbers are also falling, reflecting their departure for breeding areas to the north. The numbers of other migrant waterfowl – Shovellers, Garganey, and Wigeons – have held steady. In their midst was a drake Chiloe Wigeon, an exotic species often held in captivity due to its beautiful plumage.

The White Stork pair is using last year's nest, perched on top of the telecommunications tower, surrounded by antennas and parabolas.

Seasonal farm work has begun and tight flocks of Cattle Egrets closely trail tractors and ploughs.

This week also featured an array of uncommon species much prized by us birdwatchers: a Goshawk and, for the second week running, Spotted Crake, Jackdaw, and Mistle Thrush. Finally, we had a flock of 16 Greater White-fronted Geese. For this first time in many years, this species was fairly widespread in the Po Plain, and had already appeared at La Cassinazza in December and January. It surely deserves a place in our photo archive.

All of this variety contrasts with the almost total lack of small passerines: inexplicably – all the more so since spring migration is well underway – the hedgerows and bushes are empty and silent. We hope that this strange situation will end as soon as possible: we'll keep waiting!



### **Weekly Report of 31 March, 2012**

A dry and all-too-warm month of March ended on a day more suitable for sunglasses and a hat than for early spring attire. On top of this, the Naviglio Pavese – the irrigation canal that supplies water to La Cassinazza – has been dry for a month due to maintenance work. Combined with the lack of rain, this has meant that La Cassinazza's impoundments are almost dry: they currently look as they do in late July, when they are drained on purpose.

In just one week, many trees and shrubs are fully leafed out. Many other plants are flowering; in particular, the Bird Cherry (*Prunus padus*) is heaving with clusters of sweet-smelling flowers.

Earlier than usual butterflies included the Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*), Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*), and Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus malvoides*). They do not overwinter as adults, and so the birds we see in spring are a new brood.



The pattern of low overall numbers but good species variety continues. Today, our attention was captured by several Spotted Crakes and one Little. The year's first Hobby, Common Swift, House Martin, Hoopoe, Common Tern, and Common Redstart played second fiddle.

We were quite pleased, albeit not surprised, to see the White Stork, which appears to be brooding eggs.

The list of interesting sightings also includes an immature Spoonbill, a magnificent male Marsh Harrier, a Peregrine Falcon, 25 Sacred Ibis, and ten Greenshanks (all other waders being unaccountably scarce).

Giorgio's infinite patience earned him this photo of a Spotted Crake.



## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 07 April, 2012

In just a few days, La Cassinazza underwent a makeover: water is back in the impoundments, as is the norm, and the past week's rains caused an explosion of plant life, turning the landscape every shade of green.

On the other hand, changes in the birdlife were quite minor, the most evident being the increase in Black-winged Stilt, from ten last week to sixty or more. Cuckoos, a new arrival along with Purple Heron and Nightingale, were much in evidence as they sang from the treetops.

Turning to raptors, there was an evident passage of Sparrowhawks. Towards evening, the approaching storms forced many House Martins to fly at low altitude, with a few Swallows among them.

At least one Spotted Crake – normally an uncommon and elusive migrant – was still present this week. For the fourth time in a month, we saw two Jackdaws. This species nests in cavities in the walls of old buildings in towns and cities, including Milan and Pavia, and is generally quite sedentary. Perhaps this pair has found a suitable nesting site in an abandoned farmhouse nearby.

The ploughed and flattened-out rice fields host several nesting pairs of Lapwings, now on eggs.

Finally, there is no longer any doubt that the White Stork pair is incubating. Like last year, we will watch them closely and with trepidation; the photo of the day is dedicated to them.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 14 April, 2012

Even after several days of low temperatures and rain, which freshened the atmosphere, the air is thick with the slightly bitter scent of Hawthorn.

Spring migration has finally kicked into high gear.

A host of Swallows and Martins swarmed over the impoundments, and new arrivals this week included Willow Warbler, Wood Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Yellow Wagtail, Squacco Heron, and an early Honey Buzzard. Also of note were five Spoonbills, about a hundred Wood Sandpipers, and twenty or so Greenshank, a good count locally. There are several dozen Black-winged Stilts around, but we have still not figured out whether they intend to breed here.

The numbers of Teal – a typical bird of winter – have been steadily dropping, from 400 early in March to a mere handful now. At the same time, Garganeys – a typical spring migrants – began to appear, albeit in much lower numbers. The regular presence of 10-12 birds nevertheless represents a fair volume of migration.

For the third time in three months, we saw a Booted Eagle; it appears likely that this is always the same lingering individual.

Early in the spring, buck Roe Deer shed the velvet on their antlers, become irritable and combative, and release their tension with a loud, hollow sound, similar to barking, which is quite startling for those who do are not familiar with it.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 21 April, 2012

It is always a thrill when, every April, we hear the booming calls of the Great Bittern. For the fourth year in a row, this species has chosen La Cassinazza as a breeding site. Although we only heard it sporadically today, this is a sure sign of its intention to nest here.

We were also quite pleased to see several pairs of Black-winged Stilts using twigs and plant stems to build their own nests. Hopefully they will continue and resume breeding at La Cassinazza, which they haven't done for the last two years: we came up with countless guesses to explain this abandonment, but have never found a fully satisfactory motive.

One pair of Common Terns seems to already be on eggs, while there are numerous Mallard broods about, and the first Coot chicks as well.

After a week of rain and the first starry night in some time, all the migrants - apart from a flock of about 80 Wood Sandpipers - have gone somewhere else, most likely well to the north of here.

On such a mild day, insects were finally common: today we saw 12 species of butterfly and the season's first odonate, the Blue-tailed Damselfly (*Ischnura elegans*).

We can thus put an end to a long series of exclusively avian photos: the Wasp Beetle (*Clytus arietis*) is a longhorn beetle. It mimics wasps both in terms of colours and movements, but it is entirely harmless. Although its attempt at mimicry seems mediocre at best to human eyes, it only needs to be mistaken for a something dangerous to discourage predators from threatening it.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 28 April, 2012

The mist rising off the meadows in the soft dawn ushered in a day filled with light, colours, and scents. In the impoundments, several pairs of Black-winged Stilts are already on eggs, while coots swim by with the chicks from their first brood in tow. Several dozen Wood Sandpipers are still around, along with two Greenshanks and a Spotted Redshank, elegantly clad in black. The impoundment where the stilts are nesting also hosted two Shelduck and a pair of Garganey. These two species could potentially breed locally, but they have not shown any evidence of doing that at La Cassinazza so far. The most satisfying sightings of the day came from migrating raptors: at the lake, an Osprey made repeated dives, but evidently needed to refine its hunting techniques, because it kept coming up empty in spite of the fact that the large, herbivorous carp did not seem particularly difficult to catch. The other highlight came when two, perhaps three Red-footed Falcons made several passes high overhead as they hunted flying insects high in the sky, together with two Hobbies. Among the insects were many ladybugs, those pretty yet voracious hunters of aphids. Their use in agricultural pest control brought about the introduction of an Asian species, *Harmonia axyridis*, also known as the Harlequin Ladybird due to the great variability in its colour and number of spots. This species, however, has caused a rapid decline in the population of the many ladybird species native to Italy.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 05 May, 2012

Today seemed like an exact replica of last week. The fine weather probably meant that migrants were able to head north with no delay, and none stopped in the impoundments and hedgerows of La Cassinazza. The entire migrant tally for today was a single Willow Warbler in some bushes next to a footpath. It seems that the number of incubating Black-winged Stilts has increased to about ten, but this odd, cool spring is slowing the breeding season down, and we are having a hard time figuring out whether more birds will join the colony. On the main lake, the hen Ruddy Shelduck continues to call insistently to an inexistent drake. Perhaps the many pairs of Common Terns nesting on the floating platforms are testing the lonely duck's nerves.

A pair of Little Ringed Plover were on the gravel bar this week.

The Golden Orioles, which arrived two weeks ago, are at the peak of their spring activity: their constant singing, whistling, and mewling bursts with energy, and we often glimpse them chasing each other to and fro in the canopy. Although males and females are quite different, our distant views in the dense foliage make it difficult to understand whether they are rivals fighting over territory, or pairs engaged in courtship display. While hen Mallards have had ducklings in tow for several weeks now, the female Great Crested Grebe is nowhere to be seen: it must still be incubating eggs, because the male wanders the lake by itself. The Great Bittern also seems to have stopped singing; perhaps, if the female is on eggs and there are no rivals around, it simply doesn't need to. On the basis of plumage colour and bill thickness, today's photo, which was taken about a month ago, seems to depict a female.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 12 May, 2012

I came back to La Cassinazza after a two-week absence. In spring, the landscape changes quickly and fifteen days can seem like a long time. The biggest surprise was finding La Cassinazza coated in white: the poplar trees have dropped their seeds, which are coated in dense white wool. The wind carries them everywhere and they cover everything: meadows, bushes, roads, and even ponds, making it look as if snow had just fallen.

The eggs of our breeding pair of White Storks have hatched, while another pair seems to find the chimney of the main house very attractive. Numerous Lapwing pairs have successfully nested in the rice fields; the recent agricultural practice of sowing rice in unflooded fields helps them, since the eggs are no longer at risk from flooding, but the newly-hatched chicks must now contend with tractor traffic, which will certainly cause a few losses. Let's hope they're skilled at running away.

We carefully counted at least 18 Black-winged Stilt nests; needless to say, we are thrilled. Counting the Common Tern nests proved more difficult: there are currently 10-15, but I'm sure a few more pairs will breed. Little Bitterns call from deep within the reedbed; but Reed and Great Reed Warblers have been silent so far. They seem to be late this year.

Butterfly numbers increased. We saw 15 species today, including the rare Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*). The most ubiquitous was the Black-veined White (*Aporia crataegi*), hundreds of which could be seen. However, I'd like to dedicate today's photo to an abundant, albeit inconspicuous summer butterfly, the Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*).







## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 19 May, 2012

We were overjoyed this morning to find a pair of White Storks sitting on a nest on the roof of the main house as we entered La Cassinazza. This is obviously a different pair from the one at Cascina Darsena, whose eggs hatched about two weeks ago. These two new storks only settled in their new nest a few days ago, and are still carrying material. We watched them mating, and the female spent a couple of hours sitting on the nest as if she had been incubating. They seem to be practicing for imminent egg-laying, even though one of the pair (probably the female) appears to be an immature bird and may not be quite ready for breeding. We now have two active White Stork nests within one kilometre of each other; the new one is atop a one-story building, and is much easier to observe than the first nest, on top of a very tall metal mast.

Everything else paled in comparison. With the arrival of Spotted Flycatcher, Melodious Warbler, and Marsh Warbler, spring migration – which was disappointingly uneventful this year – has just about come to an end. During the coming weeks we will have to settle for the local breeders, who will do their best to remain inconspicuous.

Much of the day was dedicated to guiding a large group of visitors, every last one of whom was keenly interested in seeing the local wildlife, and had a seemingly endless store of questions.

The photo of the day is all too predictable.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 26 May, 2012

La Cassinazza welcomed us with the fragrant scent of Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*, a non-native garden plant which is now widespread in the wild), overpowered here and there by the cloying smell of Privet.

Turning to birds, it's time to update the registry of births.

In spite of the driving rain and cold temperatures earlier in the week, several pairs of Black-winged Stilts have successfully nested, and are now fretfully defending their chicks. Unfortunately, it seems that others were unable to protect their eggs or chicks from the poor weather, and several clutches are missing. A handful of birds are still incubating. While we were watching one such nest in the late afternoon, we saw three tiny heads emerge; soon thereafter, the chicks gingerly stood up, and within ten minutes they were out of the nest and wading in the nearby water, timidly at first, and then with increasing confidence as their parents watched over them. The Black-winged Stilt undoubtedly deserves the photo of the day.

Of the three pairs of Great Crested Grebe, one is raising a single chick. The other two look as if they are no longer nesting, and are without chicks in tow. They may have suffered nesting failure, as may have the pair of Little Ringed Plovers. The Common Terns do not seem to have such problems, and in fact the first chicks have hatched. We counted a total of 16 nests, 9 of which on the small gravel bar in the lake.

Underscoring the endless variety of biodiversity, we spent part of today helping an experienced invertebrate biologist search for a species whose presence at La Cassinazza was suggested by a random observation last fall and confirmed by a recent photograph: a slug, *Limax ameliae*, which can generously be described as unattractive, but with must be a very rare and significant find, judging by the expert's boundless enthusiasm when we laid our eyes upon it.



**Weekly Report of 02 June, 2012**

This week, I am the bearer of bad news: the breeding failure of our local pair of White Storks. I should have figured it out already last week, based on the behaviour of the adults and especially the fact that I could not see any chicks peeking out of the nest. The chicks, which must have been about three weeks old, probably died during the severe weather we experienced in the night of 20-21 May, and the two adults have now abandoned the area. Meanwhile, the second pair of White Storks continues to hang around the main house at La Cassinazza, but they do not seem quite ready to breed this year.

For different reasons, the Common Tern nests on the gravel bar on the main lake also suffered an unlucky fate: they all disappeared. In this case, the culprit must be a predator. During the day, the terns are quite aggressive and are perfectly able to keep Hooded Crows at bay, but they are far less efficient at night. The main suspect is thus the Night Heron.

The only species seen today that was not one of our routine residents was the Black-tailed Godwits, three handsome individuals clad in their brick-red breeding plumage.

Early summer is a great time of year to observe insects. Small beetles are abundant and diverse, but turning our attention to more familiar critters, dragonfly highlights included the return of the Common Clubtail (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*), a prize species with a breeding population at La Cassinazza.

Butterflies were represented by twenty species, including the Bath White (*Pontia edusa*) and the Large Tortoiseshell (*Nymphalis polychloros*); the former had not been seen at La Cassinazza for two years, and the latter for much longer. Although I managed to photograph both, today's photo is dedicated to *Polyommatus icarus*, whose name, the Common Blue, is self-explanatory.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 09 June, 2012

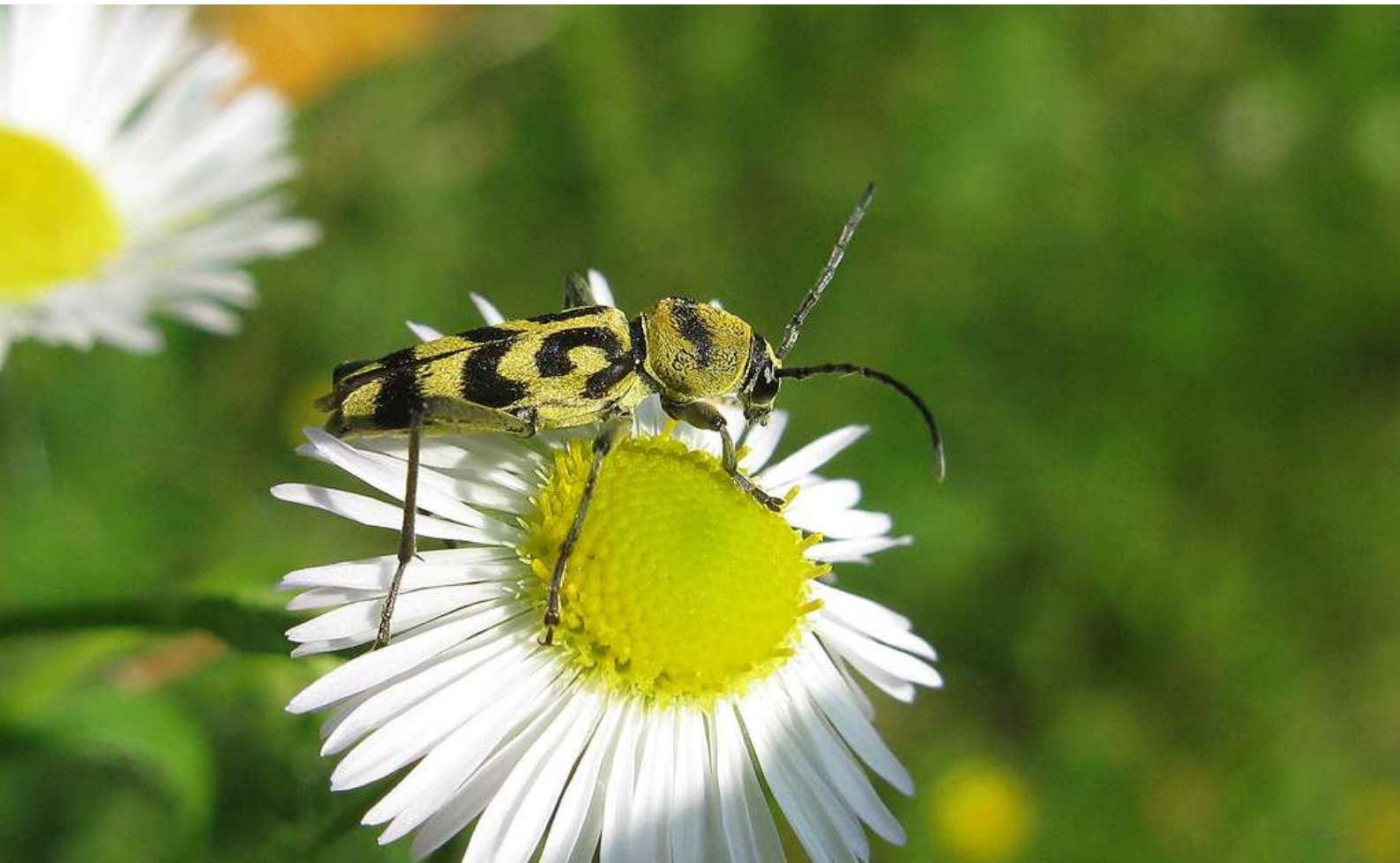
We finally heard the song of the Great Reed Warbler. Although it was a single bird and several weeks later than normal, at least the species has not abandoned La Cassinazza, as I had begun to fear.

The Water Rail and Little Grebe were also betrayed by their calls; at this point in the season, it is reasonable to assume that they're breeding here. Evidence of the Barn Owl's presence was even more indirect: a feather from this elusive, ghost-like bird was found on the ground, proving that it does at least occasionally occur here.

A pair of Black Tern briefly flying over the main lake was the most noteworthy bird sighting.

There was much more variety in the insect world, in spite of the overcast morning. Two dragonfly species put in their first appearances of the year, the Small Pincertail (*Onycogomphus forcipatus*) and the Brilliant Emerald (*Somatochlora metallica*). I am now almost sure that La Cassinazza's butterfly list has grown by one: the Essex Skipper (*Thymelicus lineolus*), which is extremely similar to the closely-related Small Skipper (*Thymelicus sylvetris*) and quite difficult to identify, but I think I have sufficient photographic evidence.

Today's photo is yet another attempt on my part to encourage interest in beetles, which I find fascinating, but which have few other fans. The subject is *Chlorophorus varius*, a longhorn beetle with a striking gold-and-black pattern.





## WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2012



### Weekly Report of 16 June, 2012

Today was our first true summer day, hot and sunny.

Early in the morning, one of the two White Storks that lost their clutch, most likely the male, returned to its nest site after a ten-day absence, with much bill clapping. He seemed to be saying that even though things did not work out this year, this is still his home after all. Speaking of which, since there are now two pairs of White Storks, we decided to name the individual birds. This particular male's name is Arturo.

The Black-winged Stilts patiently continue incubating their second brood, which if I'm not mistaken should hatch in a week or so. One new nest has appeared recently; it will be the last to hatch, in July. We are overjoyed that they have resumed breeding at La Cassinazza. We missed their noisy antics greatly these last two years, and even at the cost of repeating ourselves, the photo of the day is dedicated to them.

An Avocet was in with the stilts today. It hung around all day, but being quite diffident, it always kept itself at a distance.

The Lesser Spotted Woodpecker has resumed singing and is excavating a new nest. A Honey Buzzard was still around, perhaps the same bird for the last three weeks. Finally, we have been told that the Spoonbills we regularly see at La Cassinazza may be nesting in the nearby Villarasca rookery.

More than anything else, today was a celebration of the endless variety of insects: butterflies, dragonflies, grasshoppers, beetles - the more the merrier. And with nary a mosquito in sight.

