



## WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2019



### Weekly Report of 28 September, 2019

Migration seems to be at a standstill, for several weeks in a row now. Usually September features lively bird migration and lots of fun for us birdwatchers, but the month that is about to end was one of the most boring we can remember. The few migrants we did find – Pied Flycatcher, Willow Warbler, Common Redstart – are known as trans-Saharan; these are the birds that make the longest journeys and are most typical of early fall migration in August. Everything else seems not to be moving yet, or late.

Still, there were plenty of birds to look at: ducks – Mallards and Teal – practically doubled in numbers this week: four or five thousand of the former and at least four hundred of the latter. Together with 250 Sacred Ibis and about two hundred herons of five different species, they made for quite a sight. There were also seven White Storks, presumably passage migrants and not the individuals that nested locally.

At this time of year, it is not unusual to find European Rabbits in a pitiful state, with eyes swollen shut and completely blind. They are destined to die soon, either by starving since they are no longer able to feed, or eaten by predators such as Red Foxes. These are the effects of myxomatosis, a mosquito-borne disease that has been decimating European Rabbit populations for decades now. The rabbit in the photograph fortunately appears to be completely healthy.



### **Weekly Report of 05 October, 2019**

The cold front brought with it a wave of migrants.

The early morning air at La Cassinazza was alive with sounds and movement. The calls of Robins and Chiffchaffs rang out everywhere, while the flight calls of Chaffinches could be heard from above. Song Thrushes were just as numerous, albeit not as vocally conspicuous.

Cetti's Warblers, on the other hand, were quite vocally conspicuous. This species does not generally migrate and is hit hard by harsh winters. This year it seems to have made a full comeback and is now as common as it was years ago.

Other migrants today included Pied Flycatchers, Tree Pipits, Siskins, and the season's first Wrens, Water Pipits, Coal Tits, and Hawfinch (for the last two, these were also the first for 2019).

Nothing much seems to have changed among the waterbirds, except for the arrival of a handful of Dunlin.

In the last month, the Common Snipe has consistently been the most numerous wader at La Cassinazza. When faced with a potential threat, such as an approaching human, snipe usually flush from a great distance. A few, however, react by crouching and freezing in place, remaining motionless in the hope of going unseen. Until the very last moment, that is, when they explode from underfoot.





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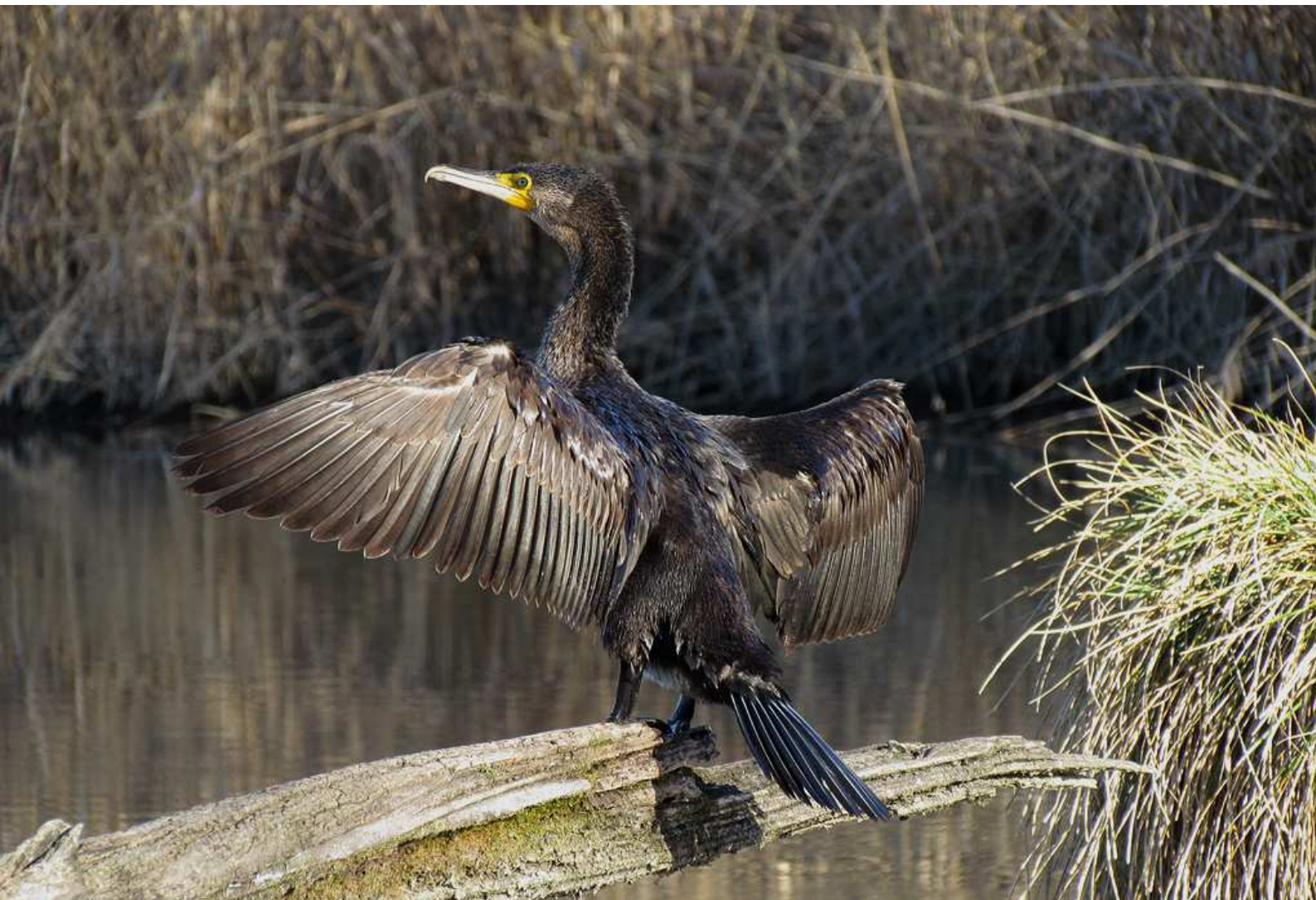


### Weekly Report of 12 October, 2019

The Chaffinch migration arrived like an incoming tide: there were countless birds both flying overhead and dropping down into La Cassinazza, where they immediately discovered and took advantage of the unharvested sunflower crop. If they keep this up, there will soon be no seeds left. Not quite as numerous were Robins and Chiffchaffs. All of our regular tits – Great, Blue, and Long-tailed – were much in evidence: the resident individuals have been joined or replaced by migrants from further north in Europe. Song Thrushes were frequent, and the Woodpigeons are starting to form flocks; so far, the numbers are run-of-the-mill, but there are nevertheless hundreds of birds together. The tiny Goldcrest and the minute – and closely related – Firecrest both put in their first appearances of the fall.

On the other hand, waterbird numbers and variety remained unchanged as concerns both waterfowl and waders. The only novelty was a single Wigeon, the first of the season.

Cormorants are present at La Cassinazza all year round. As the summer ends, their numbers swell, although we don't know if the new arrivals are migrants or merely birds that nested in nearby colonies. From now on, it will be normal to see up to a hundred Cormorants fishing or roosting at La Cassinazza.





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### Weekly Report of 19 October, 2019

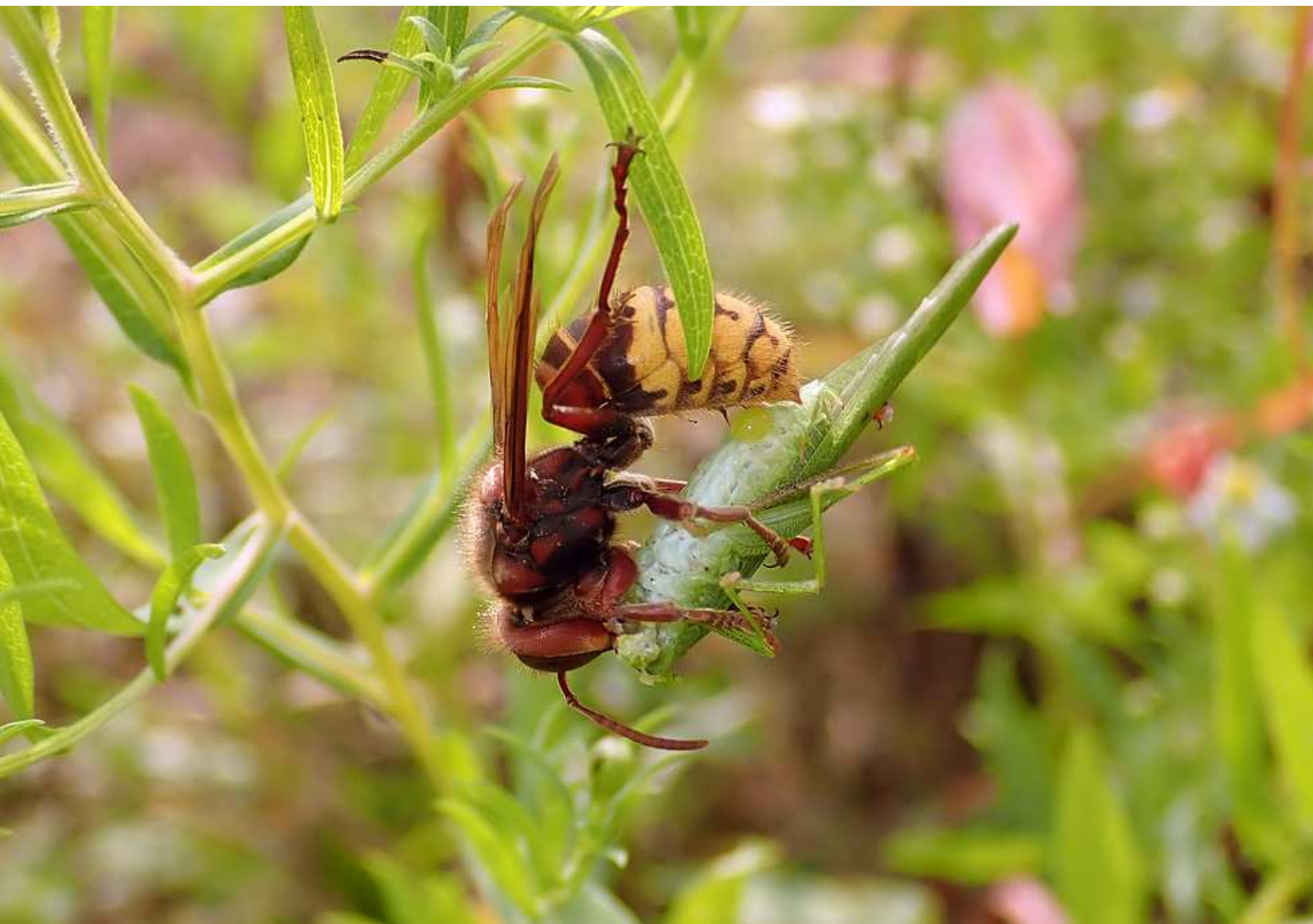
Once again, Chiffchaffs and Chaffinches were the stars of this week's showing of migrants. They were joined by good numbers of White Wagtails, Siskins, Song Thrushes, Skylarks, Goldcrests, and Woodpigeons. Also present, but in much smaller numbers, were Brambling, Meadow Pipit, Water Pipit, Firecrest, and Stock Dove.

Among the waterfowl, Teal numbers were noticeably higher, and a few other species of dabbling duck were in evidence: Gadwall, Wigeon, and Shoveler.

For the second week in a row, we did not see any Night Herons: they have left, although one or two isolated individuals may have remained in the area and could turn up again at some point this winter.

Although they are not wild, the pair of Black Swans (*Cygnus atratus*) – yet another exotic species that escaped from a nearby zoo – is worth mentioning, for its oddness but also because they are exceptionally elegant birds. In any event, they testify to La Cassinazza's attractiveness for any and all waterbirds.

The autumn rains are upon us and the temperatures are dropping; it is no longer time for insects. The most cold-tolerant among them seem to be Hymenoptera and Orthoptera. In today's photo, probably the last of the year dedicated to insects, a European Hornet (*Vespa crabro*: a Hymenoptera) is devouring a bush cricket (probably *Ruspolia nitidula*: an Orthoptera) after killing it with the venom in its stinger.





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### Weekly Report of 26 October, 2019

The wonder of migration. After days of poor weather bereft of birds, all of a sudden one morning the bushes, treetops, reedbeds, and all the vegetation are pulsing with life. And the sky above is alive with movement as well.

Numerically speaking, the primacy of Chiffchaffs and Chaffinches is being challenged by the Blue Tits, which have come down to our area en masse this week. This does not happen every year, but there are winters in which Blue Tits stage veritable invasions. New arrivals for the season included Black Redstart, Stonechat, Penduline Tit, and countless Reed Buntings. Meanwhile, the migration of Song Thrushes and Goldcrests has crested, with only a few individuals left behind.

The wetlands are just as alive: Mallard numbers have reached what will probably be their peak. Counting them is impossible, but we estimated between six and eight thousand. Teal and Lapwing numbers are also up compared to last week, with at least 800 of the former and 400 of the latter. A few dozen Shovelers and Gadwalls are also around.

Plenty of mushrooms appeared after the rain, mainly in the genera *Agaricus* and *Amanita*, both so diverse that I cannot attempt specific identification; this is best left to the experts.

The Blue Tit is very eclectic in its choice of habitat. It is happy to visit reedbeds, where its acrobatic skills and its small yet strong bill allow it to capture insects sheltering inside reed stems.





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### Weekly Report of 02 November, 2019

These last few days have seen a succession of storms that brought us heavy rains. Many birds that breed in northern European forests have crossed the Alps and reached the Po Plain. There are still plenty of Chaffinches, and they have now been joined by Bramblings in large mixed flocks. Coal Tits and new influx of Goldcrests have arrived, and together with the abundant Blue Tits, Chiffchaffs, Long-tailed Tits, and smaller numbers of Great Tits are all actively foraging for food.

I missed a flock of Cranes when I was eating lunch, but they did not escape the eyes of those who were still in the field.

The reedbed harboured the winter's first Great Bittern, but what was most striking was the number of Teal – probably over a thousand – and the huge Sacred Ibis roost: I counted over five hundred. These ibis numbers are unwelcome news, since this is a non-native species that continues to expand, and as if that weren't enough, it apparently predated eggs and chicks of other bird species.

Speaking of non-native species, the two Black Swans are still around. Native to Australia, Black Swans are not part of our fauna, but they have been introduced in Italy, and I am told they are now considered established here. In any event, this week's photo goes out to them.





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### Weekly Report of 09 November, 2019

This weekend gave us an interlude of winter sun, a respite from the heavy rains of recent days and those forecast for the coming week.

Enormous flocks of Woodpigeons fill the sky. One of them must have been several thousand strong – perhaps as many as ten thousand – and it took minutes for it to pass overhead. Plenty of Woodpigeons also stopped over, perching atop the tallest poplars, a few Stock Doves were mixed in with them.

Waterfowl numbers in the impoundments seem to be holding steady, apart from an influx of thirty or so Gadwall. Such good numbers so early in the season suggest that other arrivals are yet to come, which would make it a remarkable year for this species.

I have no words to define the Sacred Ibis roost: two large flocks totaling well over one thousand birds came together for the evening. Twenty years ago, when we began our surveys, we would occasionally see an individual or two. Gradually we began seeing flocks of 5-10, which turned into dozens, and finally hundreds in recent years. But I had never seen so many together before tonight!

The trees and bushes are alive with Goldcrests, which are particularly numerous this year. Their numbers can vary greatly from one winter to the next, in response to factors that we do not understand. As tiny as they are, they are balls of energy, never staying still, or quiet – not even for a moment.





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### Weekly Report of 16 November, 2019

The weather was awful for almost the entire week, with rain, fog, and general dreariness. Teal numbers are truly extraordinary: when they all took flight at once I exclaimed “wow!!” – along with a few other choice words I won’t repeat here. I estimated at least 1,500 and perhaps as many as 2,000 birds. The skies were made even livelier by a Lapwing flock numbering at least 600, with a solitary Ruff mixed in with them.

A Mistle Thrush was an uncommon sighting and a seasonal first.

Countless small passerines gather each night to roost in La Cassinazza’s reedbed, with most of them being Reed Buntings. They are joined by several hundred Starlings, but in numbers nowhere near the multitudes that roosted here a few years ago; that roost appears to be a thing of the past. Still, a Starling makes a much meatier morsel than a Reed Bunting, and many raptors converge to hunt them: Sparrowhawks, a Peregrine, and Marsh Harriers. The latter aren’t particularly skilled hunters, but one of them still managed to dive into the reedbed and emerge with a Starling in its talons. Even a Buzzard – which is not equipped to hunt birds – harassed the harrier in an attempt to steal its prey.

A Roe Deer peeks out of the rice stubble. It watches us carefully as it ponders whether to run away, hide, or whether it safely stay where it is.





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### Weekly Report of 23 November, 2019

We saw precious little sun this week, but rain? Oh yes, we had lots of that. This report covers my sightings from Thursday, the only dry day of the week.

Mallard and Teal numbers seem to have increased further, even above the surprisingly high total of the last few weeks. My eyeball estimates are of 7,000 of the former and 2,000 of the latter.

The Fieldfares were much in evidence; they have become numerous and are as noisy as ever. On the other hand, we have not yet seen a single Redwing this autumn. Other missing winter species include Penduline Tit, Hawfinch, and Dunnock. It looks like they may be nowhere to be seen this coming winter.

On the other hand, Black Redstarts and Stonechats seem to have gotten more common, at least relatively speaking. Not that we're seeing dozens of them, but the former seems to inhabit every rooftop, while the rice stubble can host up to two or three Stonechats at a time. Even more characteristic of this year is the Coal Tit. It has always been an irregular presence here: we did not see it at all last winter, although it had been presence in 2017-18 and before that, in 2014-15.

At sunset, about 50 Pygmy Cormorants in several small flocks flew overhead, all heading in the same direction. They must have formed a roost in some hidden corner I have not yet discovered. But I will soon.

Today's photo is dedicated to the Mallard, the most numerous bird species to be found at La Cassinazza, today as in pretty much throughout the year. It is also the most photographed one.





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### Weekly Report of 30 November, 2019

Redwings and Dunnocks have finally arrived; we had to wait for the temperatures to drop to see them. While we've had plenty of rain so far, we have not had much cold weather. This is evident in the meadows that are still bright green, and the leaves that are still on the trees as we head into December. They have turned yellow – the maple leaves are especially colourful – but they have yet to fall off.

Lots of large mixed flocks of small passerines are out and about, actively moving and feeding together. The core members are Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits, Great Tits, and Chiffchaffs, with a few Firecrests and Coal Tits occasionally thrown in.

A Peregrine was running amok above the impoundments: screaming like a banshee, it was panicking the flock of hundreds of Lawplings, which continued to fly around in desperation. It took a Goshawk instead to flush the many thousands of Woodpigeons, One last Cattle Egret keeps a solitary vigil over the horses grazing in the meadows. All of its companions as left, as they do every year at the beginning of December.



Grey Herons instead remain here through the winter. Much like the Mallard in last week's photo, they are common all year round, but unlike the latter they have received little attention from photographers.

After writing this report, I will go away on vacation: after an uninterrupted streak of many years, I will be away from La Cassinazza for a few Saturdays. I'll be back shortly before Christmas.



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### Weekly Report of 07 December, 2019

Cold temperatures and a timid sun welcomed us this Saturday. We had not yet seen any frost so far this winter, but this morning the meadows were covered with a sheen of icy crystals, ready to melt away at the first hint of warmth. An excellent variety of birds graced our day, with no less than 68 species found in La Cassinazza's diverse habitats.

In the wetlands, a most unlikely mixed flock of Lapwings and Jackdaws flushed repeatedly at the first sign of danger. A Great White Heron was perched on Geppetto's usual tree, but we were not able to ascertain whether it was ringed and confirm its identity.

We kept an eye out for Bramblings all day long, but they seemed to be missing, only to appear in good numbers in the late afternoon as if they'd been here all along.

As the sun was setting, the many birds that spend the night roosting in the safe harbour provided by La Cassinazza poured in: various heron species, Cormorants, Pygmy Cormorants, and Sacred Ibis. We carefully counted the latter as they flew in until it was too dark to see. In recent weeks, we had estimated about a thousand, and yesterday we counted 1,350.

The Roe Deer, which blend in perfectly with the autumn vegetation, were silhouetted against a pale frosty background.





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### Weekly Report of 14 December, 2019

As I write this, at the start of a rainy mid-December week, the thought of Saturday the 14th, a bright and sunny day, seems as pleasant and unreal as a half-remembered dream. And yet, on Saturday morning, we were welcomed by several White Storks soaring in a clear blue sky. There were four, to be exact. They should be in Africa by now, but many individuals choose not to migrate. This is the case, for example, with birds from re-introduction projects whose wild partners decide to adopt their sedentary ways. Whether this applies to our birds, or whether they were merely looking to save energy by foregoing a long journey, we cannot know.

After a long wait, thrush numbers were finally high, with many Redwings and Song Thrushes, and a pleasing variety of birds in general, with over 60 species. A Goshawk and a Peregrine were on hand to try to take advantage of this bounty. The former put up a cloud of about 400 Woodpigeons on several occasions, while the latter caused no reaction of any kind: it probably had a full stomach, and La Cassinazza's birds knew it.



In the middle of the day, a single Pygmy Cormorant was resting on the lake, drying out its wings.



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### Weekly Report of 21 December, 2019

Upon my return to La Cassinazza after a two-week absence, the driving rain that lasted though the morning didn't allow me to see much apart from waterbirds, whose numbers seem rather high. There are well over a thousand Teal, and nearly as many Lapwings. The latter were nervous and skittish throughout the day, flying madly to and fro as if they were pursued by droves of predators. Stressed out as they are, I have no idea how they manage to make it through the day.

Mallard numbers are holding steady at about 5-6,000.

The songbirds only came out once the rain ended in the afternoon. There was a noticeable drop in the number of Robins and Chiffchaffs. As they are both insect eaters, it is not surprising that they are moving away before the dead of winter, continuing their migration towards slightly warmer places, perhaps no farther than the nearest Mediterranean coast. Goldcrests, Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits, and Coal Tits are as common as before I left, while Fieldfares, Bramblings, and Chaffinches remain in good numbers.

Siskins, on the other hand, have never been particularly abundant this winter; they were far more numerous in other recent years. They are invariably to be found on alders, on whose catkins they feed. They often do so in a very unobtrusive manner, moving little and staying silent.

The winter solstice is upon us, the days are as short as they get, and it will be Christmas in a few days. Happy holidays.

