



## WEEKLY REPORT AUTUMN 2014



### Weekly Report of 27 September, 2014

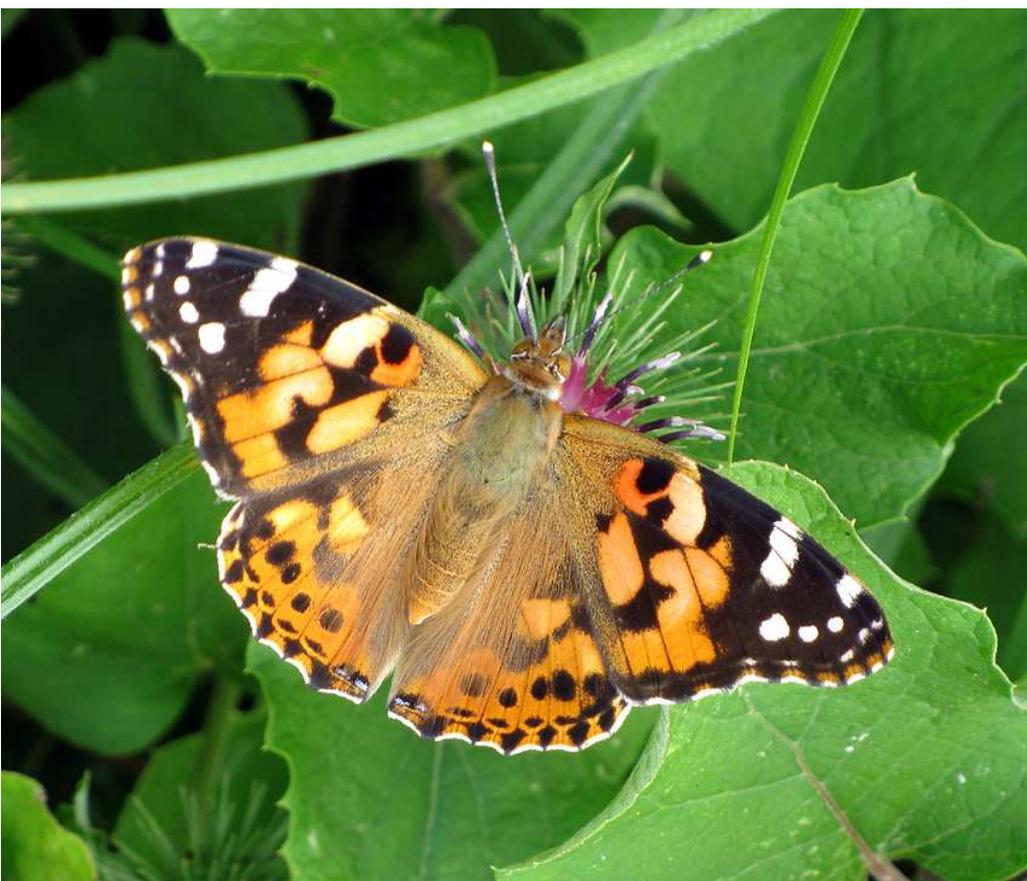
The temperature dropped low enough this morning for the autumn's first fog banks to form. As the sun began to warm the day, two juvenile Goshawks darted out of a line of poplars and, after scaring off all the local Woodpigeons and getting into a brief scuffle, resumed their southward migration.

The local Peregrine eschews the sturdy Woodpigeons to hunt the unwary Feral Doves, which feed in the open in the farm fields and are easy to capture, leaving a tell-tale series of feathers behind.

The Pied Flycatcher migration is winding down, while the first Song Thrushes and Wrens, two typical species of fall, have arrived.

Other migrants were present, and some were all the more interesting because we usually do not consider them migratory: the Jay and the Kingfisher. Both are present in numbers far superior to those of the resident breeders. In the Kingfisher's case at least, a major influx from the north has already been noted by other ornithologists and birdwatchers.

Equally overlooked as a potential migrant is the Silver-washed Fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*), a butterfly we had never recorded before at La Cassinazza; today we found two, both with wings so ruined they must have been at the end of a long and arduous journey. For this reason, all of the photos we took of this 43rd butterfly species for La Cassinazza are unpublishable. On the other hand, this immaculate Painted Lady (*Cynthia cardui*) specimen is also a migrant, which invades Europe from North Africa in early spring. After laying eggs, it gives origin to a new generation which flies back south to the homeland of its parents in fall.



Some years, these movements become veritable mass migrations, with millions of butterflies on the wing throughout Europe. The last time it happened, in spring 2009, this phenomenon was evident at La Cassinazza as well.



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### Weekly Report of 04 October, 2014

Migration is a fascinating phenomenon. Today was the day of the Chiffchaff, which occupied every possible niche: the reedbed, the willow stands, the tops of the tallest poplars, and even the rose bushes in the garden.

The Chiffchaffs overshadowed the Song Thrushes, which in fact were not uncommon; the thousand or so Woodpigeons, and even the first Penduline Tits, a species that symbolizes the arrival of winter. Other migrants worth mentioning included Lesser Whitethroat and Firecrest.

Waterfowl are getting more numerous every week: within the space of a month, Mallard numbers rose from 400 to today's 6,000 and Teal from 50 to 700. They share the impoundments with many other species of waterbirds (Great White Egrets, Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets, Grey Herons, Sacred Ibis, Lapwings, and Common Snipe), each of which is present in double-digit numbers.

Also seen today was an immature Little Bittern, the latest record ever for this species, which we had never seen after late August.

The days are noticeably shorter now, and after dark I was still out and about with my binoculars. This allowed me to hear, and then see, a Tawny Owl.

Today's photo depicts a bizarre, hairy creature, adorned with bristles, spines, and colourful tubercles. It is the caterpillar of the Rusty Tussock Moth (*Orgyia antiqua*). It eats the leaves of many different species, including fruiting trees, and is therefore a hated agricultural pest, but it can also thrive on just about any other tree or bush, without causing any harm.





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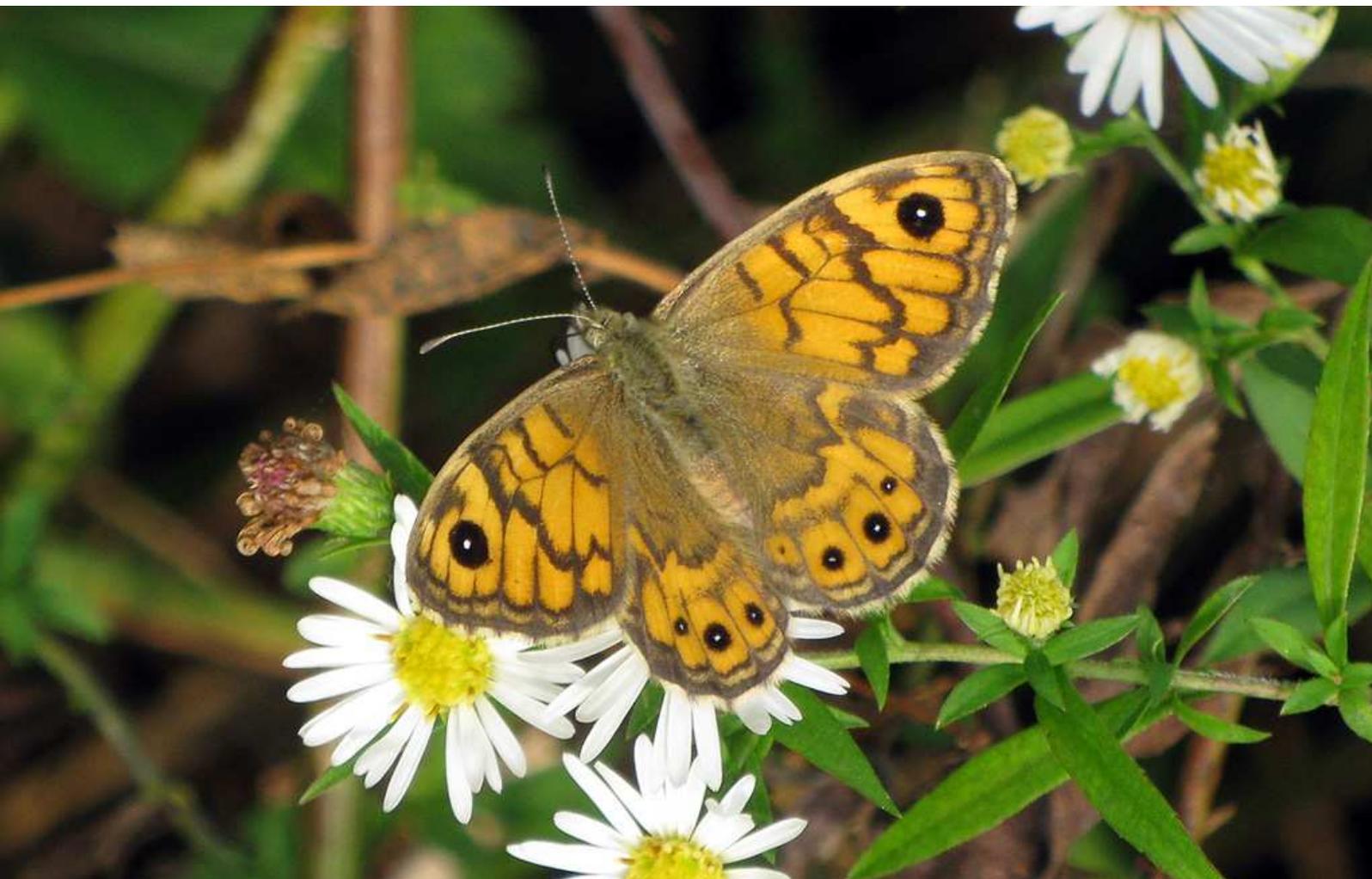


### Weekly Report of 11 October, 2014

The severe storms of the last few days weren't quite over by Saturday, meaning we had poor weather for most of the day. On the other hand, they did ground considerable numbers of migrants. These included species we had already seen last week – Song Thrush, Firecrest, and Chaffinch, the latter being particularly numerous – and many other annual fall visitors that made the season's first appearance – Hawfinch, Skylark, Siskin, Fieldfare, Reed Bunting, Dunnock, Meadow Pipit, and Goldcrest – quite a number of new arrivals for one day.

We also saw and heard Cetti's Warblers. There were only two or three around all summer, but today they were present in numbers. This shows that we had quite a few new arrivals, in spite of the fact that this species is not generally considered to be a migrant. If the coming winter will not be too harsh, we might finally see the local population of this species bounce back to the healthy numbers of ten or more years ago.

Temperatures remained fairly high even when the sky was overcast, and butterflies were on the wing: we are nearing the very end of their flight season, and old, worn individuals are flying side-by-side with pristine, newly-emerged ones. The latter are part of the year's last generation, which will have just enough time to lay the eggs from which next year's adults will emerge: this is exactly what this female Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*) was doing.





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### Weekly Report of 18 October, 2014

Each week has a different protagonist: this week it was the Goldcrest, which was present in great numbers. Their calls were a constant aural backdrop, so high-pitched that a good pair of ears – young ears – is needed to hear them. Nevertheless, I could hear them, too. Together with the Goldcrests was the closely-related Firecrest.

Hawfinches were also much in evidence: their huge bills are perfect for hulling large seeds, and the sunflower field at La Cassinazza drew in several dozen.

In the afternoon, as I was preparing my usual rant about the lack of waders – a couple of Spotted Redshanks, a couple of Greenshanks, a Dunlin (just one!) and the usual Snipe and Lapwing – I ran into a major rarity, even at the national level, which instantly made up for the low numbers: a Grey Phalarope. Their main breeding area in Europe is centred on the Spitsbergen islands, in the high Arctic, and they migrate offshore to their wintering areas in the southern Atlantic. They are very rare inland, and what is even more surprising is that this species had been seen once before at La Cassinazza, in spring 2013. At sunset, many thousands of Starlings flew in to roost in the reedbed at La Cassinazza, the usual Peregrine in tow. After sunset, as it was almost dark, we finally heard our first Night Herons.

I had never seen a Grey Phalarope before, and I spent a lot of time with it, taking many photos. This image is far from perfect, and will not be included in the archives, but the rarity of the sighting overshadows any technical shortcomings.





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### Weekly Report of 25 October, 2014

The great book of migration has turned another page. All morning long, Skylarks flew across the sky. Few dropped down to land, as they mostly kept going, calling all the way. Other migrants included Meadow Pipits, White Wagtails, and Hawfinches; the latter were mostly in the sunflower field at La Cassinazza, together with Bramblings and Chaffinches.

On the other hand, the sunflower crop at Cascina Darsena was quite poor this year, but the millet is in excellent shape, and attracts smaller-billed species: Reed Buntings, Goldfinches, Tree Sparrows, and the newly-arrived Linnets.

Today's new arrivals also included Black Redstart and Water Pipit.

Most species were in good numbers, except for the Mallards, whose contingent was much reduced compared to the previous weeks – I wonder where they went today? These highs and lows are random fluctuations and not a cause for concern.

Once again, there was a noteworthy sighting, this time a Black Stork fishing in a shallow ditch with herons and Sacred Ibis. Although this species has always been exceptional at La Cassinazza, it has become quite a bit more regular this year. It was as wary as always, and flushed almost immediately, but it did leave us time to take a photo.





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### Weekly Report of 01 November, 2014

The winter's first thick fog made birding impossible during the first few hours of the morning. The fog melted away before noon, when a tepid sun allowed the year's last butterflies, mostly Red Admirals (*Vanessa atalanta*) to take to the wing.

Nothing much changed compared to last week, apart from some fluctuations in waterbird numbers (Lapwing and Teal numbers rose quite a bit, respectively to 350 and 1,000, while the Mallards bounced back to the totals of two weeks ago) and the season's first Gadwall, Great Bittern, and Stonechat.

Finally, at dusk, an Osprey flew over.

As the sun sets, La Cassinazza's reedbed becomes a magnet for countless passerines, who use it to roost overnight. Reed Buntings literally fall out the sky and disappear in the reeds: every minute several dozen fly in, and this goes on for at least an hour. Joining them are Chaffinches, Startling, and a few Meadow Pipits, White Wagtails, and Brambling, until the entire reedbed is rustling with wings.

All these night-time visitors share the reedbed with other species that live there permanently. One of these is the Cetti's Warbler, which has little propensity to migrate and can spend its entire life in its breeding territory.





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### Weekly Report of 08 November, 2014

The autumn sun and colours made for a splendid day.

This year's migration brought us spectacular numbers of Hawfinches. This irruptive species appears here quite irregularly: we missed them altogether in fall and winter 2013, but now we are experiencing a veritable invasion. Numbers of other seed-eating birds - Chaffinches, Bramblings, and Reed Buntings - are also increasing.

Meanwhile, another type of migration is underway: tiny spiders that produce a long thread topped by a wisp of spider web. These threads are extremely light and they are airborne at the merest breath of wind; the spiders take advantage of this to colonize new territories. At this time of year, the spider web threads are scattered about by the wind and seem to cover everything.

The Cormorants on the lake were interesting to watch as they engaged in a bout of collective fishing: swimming in perfect horseshoe formation, they had surrounded a school of fish and were diving in unison to catch them, showing perfect teamwork.

Once the Lapwings become numerous (there were about 800 today), there are always a few other waders among them: today there were a handful of Dunlin and Ruff, and a bird we initially identified as a Golden Plover. It was only after discussing how cold it looked, without any golden tones even in the warm evening light, that we realized it was actually a Grey Plover. This species is usually found in coastal wetlands, and this was only the second record for La Cassinazza.





## WEEKLY REPORT AUTUMN 2014



### Weekly Report of 15 November, 2014

A tremendous wind and rain storm. There are no other words to define today's weather conditions. The rain was torrential and the south-east wind ranged across open areas, such as the farm fields at Cascina Darsena, while at La Cassinazza the hedgerows and strips of woodland provided some protection at ground level, although the treetops swayed in the gusts. At altitude, the storm must have been truly violent: we saw a pair of Cormorants trying to fly against the wind, but they remained stubbornly in place, incongruously suspended in the sky. Behind them, a flock of ducks with the wind at their back shot by like meteorites.

It went on like this the whole day. Testifying to our blind stupid persistence, we were nevertheless out for three or four hours in the driving rain – without seeing or hearing a thing, obviously.

Our only intelligent thought concerned our disappointments at having left our rubber boots at home, today of all days.

It is impossible to send you a "photo of the day"; our cameras never even left our backpacks. We'll have to make do with a 'seasonal' photo: once the tractors begin to plough the farm fields, several bird species are quick to follow, in order to take advantage of all the prey items the tractors bring to the surface. One of these opportunists is the Sacred Ibis, depicted here in all its irredeemable ugliness.



The plumes on their back and their chestnut axillaries can't make up for that bald head, bare neck, and black, wrinkled skin: they are hopelessly relegated among our avifauna's ugliest creatures.



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### Weekly Report of 22 November, 2014

The temperatures have finally dropped to more winter-like levels, and the dreary skies we had all day were also typical of the season.

Birdwatching, however, was excellent, with a great variety of species – almost 70 – and high numbers of individuals.

Finches were undoubtedly the most abundant of all, the vast majority being Bramblings and Chaffinches in roughly equal proportions, along with much lower numbers of Goldfinches, Siskins, Linnets, Hawfinches, Greenfinches, and Serins, in decreasing order of abundance.

Redwings and Fieldfares were also much in evidence, albeit in flocks of a few dozen birds each. Even the Blackbirds seemed to be more common as usual, with several small flocks – surely they included some newly-arrived migrants from the north.

Hen Harrier and Mistle Thrush were firsts for the season.

Lapwing calls rang out throughout the impoundments, as their numbers grew steadily to exceptional levels in November, up to a thousand or so today. In spite of our diligent efforts, we were unable to find any ducks that weren't Mallards or Teal; the scarcity of all other species this fall is inexplicable.

We enjoyed the sighting of a Goshawk hunting Feral Pigeons near Cascina Darsena.



Much like last week's Sacred Ibis, the Cattle Egret is also an opportunistic species: found on all continents, in tropical and temperate climes, it has evolved the behaviour of following grazing herbivores to capture the small animals disturbed by their hooves. They have rapidly adapted that behaviour to tractors as well, which they boldly approach, seemingly showing no fear of the moving wheels.



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### Weekly Report of 29 November, 2014

Last Saturday I was complaining about the lack of puddle ducks other than Teal or Mallards. Someone must have heard me, because this week Wigeon, Gadwall, and Shoveler were all present; oddly, there were exactly five of each. Once again we found an excellent variety of species, several of which were not around last week. Overall, this was the richest November on record.

This week's most notable species was the Common Crane, with one bird seen early in the week, while another (or the same?) was feeding in a flooded meadow today.

All the finch species are present and accounted for, although numbers seem to have dropped somewhat. The Hawfinches are particularly striking: there are many of them and they are quite conspicuous. This is an unpredictable species, and was entirely absent last winter. They are undoubtedly one of the star birds of this fall.

There are still several hundred Lapwings around. They are quite wary, and ready to flush at the least (false) alarm. The ducks usually flush with them, too, and have become more flighty as a result.

Today was not without a surprise; in this case, it was something only the keenest of birders could appreciate: a Siberian Chiffchaff. Its pale gray plumage tones and other details (which can be seen in the photo) and especially its distinctive call help tell it apart from the Common Chiffchaff, of which it is considered a subspecies, *Phylloscopus collybita tristis*.





## WEEKLY REPORT AUTUMN 2014



### Weekly Report of 06 December, 2014

It seems like winter just won't come this year. Temperatures remain well above average, and perhaps this is why many birds that would normally have already left for warmer climes are still around. We found over 70 species today.

Three of those species were particularly noteworthy: the season's first Coal Tit, an exceptionally late Osprey, and finally a true rarity for La Cassinazza – a Bullfinch.

A tractor ploughing a field unleashed a veritable feeding frenzy among the Cattle Egrets, which were joined by dozens of Sacred Ibis and Black-headed Gulls – a striking scene all in black and white.

Otherwise, things have not changed much compared to the last few weeks, with a thousand or so Lapwings stealing the scene, and the usual suite of wintering species.

Tree Sparrow is one of many species which sadly, and without an apparent motive, have grown much scarcer over the last decade. It was once abundant at La Cassinazza, and one of the birds we most took for granted. It occupied almost all of the next boxes, beating out the local tits at their own game, and in winter would form huge flocks in the sunflower fields. Today we can no longer take Tree Sparrows for granted, and to see them we sometimes have to seek them out in the reedbed, where we know a few dozen birds gather to roost overnight.





## WEEKLY REPORT AUTUMN 2014



### Weekly Report of 13 December, 2014

We have gotten used to seeing a remarkable diversity of birds at La Cassinazza. Once again, we saw over 70 species today – and they weren't all the same as last week, either. We can reasonably estimate that about 85 species are currently present at La Cassinazza, a truly impressive variety in mid-December for such a small area in the middle of the Po Plain. For pedantry's sake, I'll point out that I included in the above total 2-3 species that we have not seen, but which are elusive and undoubtedly present.

Today's most unseasonal sighting was of a Common Sandpiper, a species we had never seen later than early October before this year.

On the other hand, the Gadwalls were right on schedule. This is a species we expect to see beginning in early December, and indeed a small flock of fifteen or so birds was present today.

Other sightings were similar to those of the last two weeks, including a Goshawk, 2-3 Great Bitterns, three Spoonbills, about ten Ruff, a Spotted Redshank, Fieldfares and all the other regular winter songbirds, including healthy numbers of Hawfinches. At dusk, at least 14 Marsh Harriers were circling over the reedbed before dropping down to roost there overnight.

Temperatures dropped to near-freezing for the first time this week, and this may have thinned out the Lapwing ranks: after a month of being the centre of attention, their numbers fell by more than half compared to the 800-1,000 of last week.





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### Weekly Report of 20 December, 2014

The fog. It enshrouded everything, all day long, and not a single ray of sun filtered through.

It also hid from view most of the birds that were at La Cassinazza.

What we could not see, however, we could hear: the calls of an unspecified number of Mallards, Teal, and Lapwings, and every once in a while, the whistle of a Wigeon, the flute-like flight call of the Spotted Redshank, the cry of the Green Sandpiper, the racket of the Coot, or the hiss of an invisible Buzzard high above us. In the dark and foggy night, a Tawny Owl hooted.

The fog also concealed a rare pearl: a Woodlark, which had only been recorded once before at La Cassinazza, many years ago.

The only birds we did manage to see were those that, for whatever reason, allow a close approach: the Bittern, which freezes in a mimetic pose and bursts into flight only when we are right upon it; the Penduline Tits, which inspect the reed stems one by one; the Siskins hanging off alder boughs; and all of the tits, which are quite tolerant of humans.

The most approachable of all is undoubtedly the Goldcrest: tiny and restless, it seems to have no time to notice the presence of a human, and remains indifferent even down to a few meters. This makes it an alluring photographic subject, but it is devilishly elusive: as the shutter clicks, it almost always has already moved on.

