



WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2015



Weekly Report of 26 September, 2015

Although many of the species we saw last Saturday were absent today, the new arrivals more than made up for them: species diversity was even higher and our enjoyment was assured.

The day's undisputed star was a juvenile Turnstone: it is only the second time in fifteen years of weekly surveys that we have seen this species at La Cassinazza.

The Osprey, which would have certainly received top billing any other time, is in fact becoming rather expected: for the third week in a row we have seen it on its usual perch, the same tall dead tree that has hosted just about every other Osprey to have ever appeared at La Cassinazza.

Common Snipe remained numerous, with over 100 seen, and Lapwing numbers jumped up to almost 300. Even more impressively, Teal were in great abundance, with a total just shy of a thousand.

Raptor migration brought us plenty of Common Buzzards, several Marsh Harriers, a Honey Buzzard, and the autumn's first Peregrine. An evident influx of Robins was noticeable in the bushes and hedgerows, and the same could be said of Cetti's Warblers in the reedbed. The same reedbed is once again hosting a large Starling roost: although the birds are not quite as abundant as in other years, there are nevertheless several thousand of them. The Cattle Egret roost, on the other hand, is hosting 3-400 birds.



The plumage of a juvenile Turnstone lacks the gaudy colours of the adults; in fact, it is downright dowdy. Still, its extreme rarity at La Cassinazza earns it photo of the day honours.



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Weekly Report of 03 October, 2015

Once again, migration brought quite a few new arrivals: Gadwall, Goldcrest, Stonechat, Carrion Crow, and Chaffinch were all new for the fall, with the latter in high numbers.

Song Thrush, Goldfinch, Chiffchaff, and White Wagtail – species that have been present for some time now - all staged veritable influxes today, and were present in abundance.

Common Buzzards were much in evidence as they circled in the sky, and so were Water Rails, albeit in their own way: we heard lots and barely glimpsed any.

Equally invisible, although for a different reason, were Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, Hobby, and Garganey: most likely they have all left for the fall.

The summer's Barn Swallows and House Martins are also largely gone, but today we saw several sizeable flocks migrating high overhead.

Last week's Turnstone was among the eleven species of waders we saw today, but it was overshadowed by a Temminck's Stint, which is just as much of a rarity around here; in fact, it is only the third record for La Cassinazza, after the first way back in 2001 and another earlier this year.

And speaking of statistics, today's Carrion Crows were the 158th species for La Cassinazza this year, tying the all-time annual record with another three months to go in 2015. This has plainly been an exceptional year in terms of diversity, and it is far from over.

Pied Flycatchers are among the songbird species with the most drawn-out migration strategies: the first fall migrants appeared in early August, and the tail end of the migration is still ongoing. Fall birds are quite nondescript: both sexes, regardless of age, have a very drab plumage, without a hint of the striking pied pattern to which they owe their name.



Weekly Report of 10 October, 2015

Migration is a game of highs and lows. After four straight weeks of exceptional diversity, today we undoubtedly hit a snag. The weather, or perhaps just the season as it wears on, meant that most of the passerines were gone, along with a good half of the waders. Apart from the fall's first Meadow Pipits and Skylarks, we had to settle for those species that will stay with us through the winter.

Mallard numbers also dropped: while 2,500 birds is still an impressive total, it is practically half of last Saturday's.

The afternoon featured a couple of hours of mild temperatures, which brought out those insects that are still active: butterflies, bumblebees, and bees. Butterflies were concentrated on Aster flowers, and I managed to identify 11 species. The most numerous ones were the Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) and Peacock (*Inachis io*), with many freshly-emerged individuals that will try to overwinter.



Xylocopa valga is a formidable insect: large, strong, black, and hairy. It is the largest of all European bees and has a stinger to match, but it is good-natured and in spite of its menacing aspect, it rarely stings. It owes its scientific name – and its English name of carpenter bee as well – to its habit of boring tunnels in wood, where it hollows out cells it uses as nests, laying an egg and a mass of pollen and nectar. At this time of year, *Linaria vulgaris* is one of the few available flowers, but its calyx is deep and the bee's tongue isn't long enough. But this is not enough to dissuade *Xylocopa*: with its strong rostrum, it pierces the base of the calyx and gets directly at the pollen.



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Weekly Report of 17 October, 2015

On a day when the weather was as changeable as can be – we had fog, bright hot sun, wind, overcast skies, and low clouds – the defining characteristic of our birdwatching efforts was the lack of variety. The birds that we did see, however, were around in excellent numbers.

Chiffchaffs were the commonest of all: they were our constant companions today, in every habitat. Robins were second commonest, followed by Great and Blue Tits. All are birds of hedgerows and bushes, which are still in leaf, and for the most part they were heard only – at best we had glimpses of them as they flitted through the foliage.

Mallard numbers (between 5,000 and 6,000) hit their seasonal high, as did the 300 Lapwings; Teal were also around in abundance (between 800 and 1,000).

As the plumbeous skies brought about an early dusk, the Starlings were streaming into the reedbed in compact, lightning-fast flocks that looked like meteors falling out of the sky. At the same time, the ducks were streaming out of La Cassinazza in one long ribbon that went on for a good half hour.

The season and the recent rains helped the emergence of countless mushrooms: many are non-descript, whitish, and difficult to tell apart.

Xerocomus rubellus is a bright and attractive mushroom; its colour is its most evident characteristic, as highlighted by its Latin name (*rubellus* means reddish) and by its English name of Ruby Bolete. It belongs to the family *Boletaceae*, much like the prized porcini mushrooms, but it is barely edible, if at all. It grows in broadleaf woodlands, especially oak forests.





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Weekly Report of 24 October, 2015

During migration, birds come in waves. It is a natural phenomenon we are quite used to after many years of birding. But it can still leave us with a sense of wonder.

Sometimes this is due to the sheer number of individuals involved, as is currently the case with Blue Tits. This morning the bushes were alive with hundreds of them, overshadowing the still abundant Chiffchaffs.

Other times, migration amazes us with the sudden mass appearance of species that had been completely absent just a few days earlier. Today, flocks of Bramblings and Reed Buntings took possession of the seed crops (sunflower, millet, and switchgrass) that were planted for the winter. With them were Chaffinches, Goldfinches, and the fall's first Hawfinch. These swirling flocks of small birds inevitably attract the attention of predators: a Merlin dove at them with a vengeance, flying at astonishing speed.

The last decade of October marks the peak of Skylark migration, and their flight calls filled the air all day long.

Waterbirds were mostly unremarkable, if not for the presence of a lingering Garganey and a slight increase in the number of Lapwings, which were however quite flighty all day and could not be precisely counted.

Wrens are another winter visitor, and this year they are particularly common; their elusive ways belie their real numbers. More often than not, their song – incredibly loud for such a small creature – betrays their presence.





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Weekly Report of 31 October, 2015

The autumn leaves and sun lit up La Cassinazza today.

New birds for the season included Water Pipit, Black Redstart, Linnet, Fieldfare, and Pintail.

Blue Tit numbers are back to normal, a far cry from last week's invasion. This week, it was the Siskins' turn to attract our attention with their calls and the many small flocks that passed by. The calls of the Skylarks were also much in evidence as they flew over the farm fields.

The most remarkable influx, involving truly surprising numbers, was that of the Teal, which were incredibly abundant today, with at least 1,500 birds. In many years of birdwatching at La Cassinazza, I can't remember such a high count.

Lapwings continue to arrive, and their numbers rose to 550.

Mallards also seemed to be more numerous than usual, but they are so abundant and ubiquitous that it is impossible to count them precisely: there are many thousands of them.

Not only are Siskins quite common this year, they also arrived early. We saw our first ones on 12 September, almost three weeks ahead of schedule. This is one of many hints that this winter will see one of the periodic invasions of Siskins, as is typical of seed-eating species whose breeding success fluctuates from one year to the next, depending on the seed crop of their favourite food plants.





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Weekly Report of 07 November, 2015

Like the rest of the week, today was sunny and mild, a preview of the Indian summer to come.

Unlike the weather, our bird sightings were unremarkable, with neither surprises nor rarities: we can safely say that fall migration is over. Just a handful of regular wintering species are missing – such as Redwing, Hen Harrier, and Dunnock. They may have not arrived yet, or perhaps we just failed to find them. Other than that, the coming weeks should mostly just see fluctuations in the numbers of the species that are already present. Nevertheless, I am confident we will have an exceptional sighting or two over the course of the winter.

Snipe migration is coming to an end, and their numbers have dropped drastically since they peaked about a month ago. This perfectly reflects their phenology over the last few years: only a handful of individuals will attempt to spend the winter at La Cassinazza.



On the other hand, Lapwing numbers continue to increase steadily. They will likely peak in early December, while trends for the rest of the winter will depend on how harsh and how long the freeze will be.

Reed Buntings first appeared several weeks ago, and are now common. During the day they feed in the winter seed crops, where they prefer switchgrass seeds. Once the sun sets, hundreds of individuals congregate in La Cassinazza's reedbed to roost for the night. Marsh Harriers, no more than four or five for the time being, have also started to roost there.

Two Roe Deer, shrouded in the thin morning fog, are the stars of today's photo.



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Weekly Report of 14 November, 2015

The first fog of the season is upon us. As someone who was born and raised in the Po Plain, I must confess a certain fondness for foggy days, when outlines are blurred, sight lines shortened, and everything sounds softer.

This morning, these sounds including the chattering of the Fieldfares and the high-pitched wheezing of the Goldcrests. As seems to be the case during this migratory season, these two species also arrived here with a sudden flood of countless individuals.

Together with the Fieldfares were many Blackbirds, a sign of a major influx of migrants from the north, while a handful of Firecrests were to be found in the Goldcrest flocks.

A Peregrine Falcon and the fall's first Great Bittern and Hen Harrier emerged from the fog, while the first Woodcock of 2015 was seen during the week.

Surprisingly, Lapwing numbers dropped to near zero: that is exactly the opposite of what we expected. Perhaps they went somewhere else, hopefully only temporarily, because of some type of disturbance or a predator that would not leave them alone.

Blue Tits arrived en masse three weeks ago. The crest of the flood has now passed, but it left a good number of individuals behind. They are now flocking with the other small birds of winter woodlands: Chiffchaffs, Long-tailed Tits, and the abundant Goldcrests. Together they form compact flocks that travel and forage together.





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Weekly Report of 21 November, 2015

As we await the cold snap that has all the local weather forecasters aflutter, La Cassinazza took on a decidedly wintery feel: leaden skies, dim light, and bare trees. In spite of all this, the day's birdwatching had plenty of excitement to offer.

Around mid-morning, the loud calls of a flock of Cranes reached our ears well before a flock of 58 birds flew over our heads in a single file, headed southeast. Another two Cranes flew over in the afternoon, for a nice round total of 60 birds.

Later on, as we flushed a small Lapwing flock, we noticed a Golden Plover in their midst. This is not a regular species at La Cassinazza, and we have only seen it a dozen or so times before.

Goldcrests continue to be abundant, accompanied by a handful of Firecrests. Fieldfares are also quite common, and the season's first Redwing was with them today.

Finally, we saw Great Bitterns on several occasions and in different areas, proving that multiple individuals are involved.

Today was gloomy and grey, and my mind wandered back to a couple of weeks ago, during the warm and sunny first half of November, when La Cassinazza was ablaze with fall colours. The photo I'm attaching today is from back then.





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Weekly Report of 28 November, 2015

Real winter temperatures have finally arrived, as everyone expected. They weren't any harsher than normal for this time of year, just enough to form a thin veil of ice over still waters, only to quickly melt away.

One of this winter's most memorable aspects concerns the great number of Fieldfares that are around. A similar influx – in fact, an even bigger one – took place way back in winter 2004-2005.

Several interesting species were seen at La Cassinazza during the week, in between our Saturday surveys: a Great Grey Shrike, two Peregrines, and the first Red Kite of 2015. Needless to say, we couldn't manage to find a single one of them today in spite of a full day in the field. We had another noteworthy guest in their stead: an adult Osprey that spent the entire morning at La Cassinazza.

The onset of winter doesn't necessarily mean that all interesting insects are gone. The one featured in today's photo boasts brilliant colours, a bizarre shape, and unusual habits. This long-snouted insect is known as *Byctiscus betulae*, and its English name is Vine Leaf-roller. Its habitat requirements aren't actually that narrow, as it can live on a great variety of deciduous trees; here at La Cassinazza, they prefer poplars. Females select a fresh leaf, and patiently chew along the veins until they can roll the leaf onto itself as if it were a cigar. They then lay their eggs. The rolled-up leaf dries up and falls to the ground, and the larvae eat its fibers.





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Weekly Report of 05 December, 2015

The days are now much shorter, and if the weather is as overcast and foggy as it was today, it feels like there is precious little daylight indeed.

Winter is around the corner, and although the coldest temperatures are not here yet, several species have already left in anticipation. Since mid-October, a few Spotted Redshanks and Ruff (4 and 7, respectively) had been lingering at La Cassinazza and seemed set to overwinter, as these species have occasionally done in the past. Last week, however, the Spotted Redshanks were gone, and now the Ruff have disappeared as well. Waders are down to a few Common Snipe and a handful of Lapwings, joined today by a Golden Plover and a Greenshank – the latter is the latest record for this species at La Cassinazza.

Almost all of the Cattle Egrets have left, with only a few stragglers remaining. A scattering of Little Egrets are still around together with the Grey Herons and Great White Egrets, which are much more numerous, but also better suited to cold conditions.

The photo of this sunlit Great White Egret was obviously not taken today.





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Weekly Report of 12 December, 2015

The sun and the fog fought a tightly contested match for most of the morning, the lead changing hands several times. When the fog finally dissolved for good, interesting bird sightings followed.

The first was a Great Bittern, standing motionless in the middle of the path.

It only got better from there: we finally saw the Great Grey Shrike that was reported to us a couple of weeks ago – this may well be the same individual that spent last winter in the same area.

Soon thereafter, a Eurasian Curlew flew by calling. Unfortunately we did not see where it landed, but it was probably in one of the many rice fields nearby. It was our first record of 2015.

Later on, an adult Goshawk was hunting waterfowl before retiring to a line of poplars with its prey in its talons.

With the addition of just about every regular wintering species, including both common and elusive ones, our checklist for the day was rather impressive.



Cormorants can be seen at La Cassinazza all year round. In the past, they roosted on the small island in the middle of the lake, but over time the trees they perched on died and fell. Now the Cormorants gather for the evening in a line of poplars on an embankment separating two impoundments. On any given day, they can be seen swimming, diving, and fishing in the lake.

It is quite another thing to capture the moment they land on the water: congratulations to the photographer.



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Weekly Report of 19 December, 2015

Our day had one clear goal: photographing the Great Grey Shrike that seems to have established a winter territory at Cascina Darsena. In past years, this was a very rare species here, with only two records, both in winter, in 2009 and 2010. In January of this year, we found one that lingered until late February, but we never managed to get good photographs of this very wary bird. Now that it is back – we like to think it is the same individual – we have found its favoured hunting ground and today we were determined not to miss the chance to get a few images. The results speak for themselves.

As a consequence, we devoted less time than usual to birdwatching, but we were not without interesting sightings: three different Great Bitterns and a Golden Plover with the Lapwing flock stood out, but we also enjoyed a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, numerous Water Pipits, several Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards, a Stonechat and a number of Water Rails and Chiffchaffs.

These are the shortest days of the year, and Christmas is just around the corner. I wish you all happy holidays.

