



WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2016



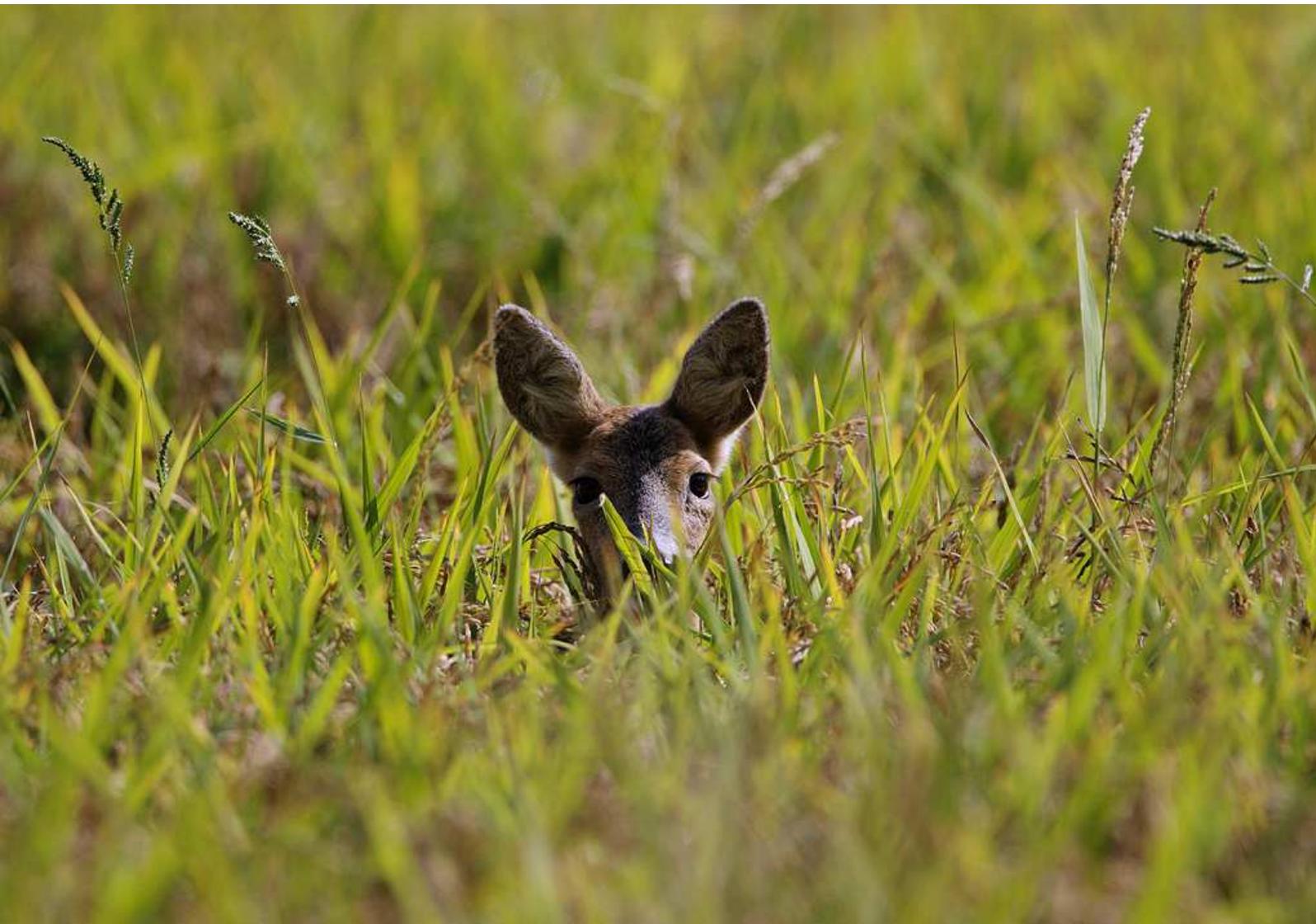
Weekly Report of 24 September, 2016

Many new species made their first seasonal appearance today. The most noteworthy was an Osprey, perched on the same exact dead tree where for years we have seen it every single time this species decides to visit La Cassinazza, regardless of the season. I wonder where we will see any Ospreys once the tree topples over.

Other arrivals included Chiffchaff, Song Thrush, Dunlin, Greenfinch, Jackdaw, and Pintail, while the Spoonbill, which had gone missing for several weeks, has returned. Last but not least was a Ruddy Shelduck, sporting a wonderful plumage but unlikely to be truly wild: they are common in captivity, and sometimes escape. A genuinely wild Ruddy Shelduck from the central Asian breeding population would be a mind-blowing rarity.

Of the birds that were also present last week, highlights included a juvenile Black Stork, Little Grebe, Squacco Heron, Honey Buzzard, Peregrine Falcon, Spotted Redshank, a late Turtle Dove, Yellow Wagtail, Lesser Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, and Pied Flycatcher.

The rice is just about ready to be harvested, but for the time being it is still standing, and hides from view waterfowl and more.





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Weekly Report of 01 October, 2016

Lots of Teal – at least 500 – flooded into La Cassinazza this week. It is not clear whether this is an influx of new migrants, or whether it is a result of the first two weeks of the hunting season, which pushed all of the local Teal to seek refuge at La Cassinazza.

The Robins, which only arrived recently, are fighting over wintering territories. They are constantly singing and calling, even in the middle of the day. This makes them very conspicuous and there seem to be countless numbers of them, but it might only be an impression brought about by all this frenzied activity.

A Peregrine has been hanging around La Cassinazza as of late, as evidenced by the piles of Woodpigeon feathers it is leaving here and there; indeed, it caught one before our very eyes. That was thrilling, and a spectacular touch was added by the Starlings grouping together to roost in the reedbed.

New arrivals for the season today included Ruff (relatively scarce in fall at La Cassinazza, but we could hardly believe we had not seen a single one until today), Common Redshank, Reed Bunting, and Firecrest.

We also saw a Great Crested Grebe, a rare appearance by this formerly regular species, before the lake was taken over by the huge Wels Catfish. This fish is a relentless predator of anything that moves below and above the water surface. Today's grebe is not likely to stay long. The photo is not exactly a recent one; it portrays one member of the last breeding pairs before the grebes abandoned La Cassinazza for good.





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Weekly Report of 08 October, 2016

We are now at winter's door. The sudden change in the weather is a strong hint of this, and confirmation comes from the appearance of numerous typical wintering species: Wren, Meadow Pipit, Dunnock, Goldcrest, Linnet, and a Great Grey Shrike. The latter has begun wintering regularly here in the last two years. Only time will tell whether today's bird will stick around for the season, or was merely a passage migrant.

The countless Chiffchaffs were today's undisputed stars, as they rained down on every possible habitat, from the tallest treetops to the dense reedbeds. Song Thrushes were far less numerous, but a good movement was underway nonetheless.

Today's lengthy list of species also included the following notables: Black Stork (two individuals), Peregrine, Dunlin, Little Grebe, Spoonbill, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Jackdaw, the first large flocks of Chaffinches, and a further increase in Teal numbers.

The real surprise, though, was a flyover Bullfinch, only the third record ever at La Cassinazza.

Only one species of dragonfly, the Common Darter (*Sympetrum striolatum*), was undaunted by the decidedly cool temperatures. Quite a few were on the wing, especially over short-grass meadows.





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Weekly Report of 15 October, 2016

I must admit that I did not give birdwatching my full attention today. For starters, there was nothing I could do about the rain. Then a convivial moment got in the way, with a suckling pig slowly turning on a spit and the bottles of wine the occasion called for. I took my time enjoying it. As a result, my afternoon sightings may not have been fully reliable As was the case last week, Chiffchaffs and Song Thrushes made up the bulk of passerine migrants, in addition to large Chaffinch flocks passing overhead. There was a surge in Mallard numbers, which we estimated at several thousand, while Teal numbers, which peaked early in the month, are now ebbing. This early October peak is an annual phenomenon and apparently comprises migrants on their way elsewhere; numbers generally rise again once the wintering contingent begins to arrive at La Cassinazza in November. Marsh Harriers are once again congregating near the reedbed at dusk, where they roost for the night. Numbers are still low, no more than 4 or 5. Starlings also roost in the reedbed. Today, a lingering Swallow was with them; hopefully it will soon wing its way south. I waited until dark and was rewarded with a hooting Tawny Owl.

Most drake Mallards have now completed their moult, but there are still a few individuals that are not yet in full finery.





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Weekly Report of 22 October, 2016

The bulk of the Skylark migration usually takes place during the last ten days of October. As if on cue, the calls of Skylarks rang out overhead throughout the morning.

Chiffchaffs remain quite numerous, and the many large Long-tailed Tit flocks suggested that some sort of migration was afoot for this species as well. Water Pipits appeared only now, about two weeks behind schedule.

The Great Grey Shrike was still at Cascina Darsena, although it only allowed a quick glimpse. On the other hand, we managed repeated looks at a Peregrine, and watched it capture a Jay.

All in all it was quite a good day, with excellent bird activity all morning long, albeit with only expected species on show. Two Jackdaws were the only sighting that was out of the ordinary.

For several years now Spoonbills have been regular at La Cassinazza. In particular, a pair is present all year round. They may disappear for a week or two, when breeding or when the impoundments are frozen, but they soon come back. They were with us today as well; this photo showcases their truly bizarre bills.





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Weekly Report of 29 October, 2016

All morning long, for the first time this winter, La Cassinazza was shrouded in fog. It only lifted around mid-day, revealing the beautiful fall foliage. Before the fog even lifted, it was evident that Reed Buntings and Blue Tits comprised the bulk of the migrants.

In addition to the Reed Buntings, the sunflower and sorghum fields are beginning to host Goldfinches, Greenfinches, and Linnets, although the Chaffinches do not seem to be interested in them yet. The fall's first Wigeon, Fieldfares, and Siskins all put in appearances today.

Mallard numbers continue to rise, to a total of about five thousands (two independent estimates confirm this). These are not the numbers of a few years ago, but they are nevertheless impressive.

Only a few dozen Starlings are now coming to roost in the reedbed, which has now been taken over by the Reed Buntings. A few Marsh Harriers – no more than five today – are also gathering there in the evening. Their numbers will surely rise as the temperatures get colder.

Many mushrooms appeared after the rains. They are mostly large species in the genera *Lactarius* and *Agaricus*, and they are all the more conspicuous because they are white. There are also a great many other tiny mushrooms, often concealed among the grass or dry leaves, which require a careful eye to find them. I found this dense stand of *Mycena inclinata* on an old oak stump.





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Weekly Report of 05 November, 2016

With non-stop rain, mist, and gloom, today seemed like one long twilight. It soon became clear that birdwatching was both pointless and impossible. Today's records are thus largely incomplete.

In spite of the conditions, a further increase in waterfowl numbers at La Cassinazza was evident. Estimates are becoming rather difficult, especially on a day like today, when I was alone. Flocks constantly fly from one impoundment to the next, and obtaining an exact count is impossible. There were certainly a lot more than last week: less than ten thousand, but more than five thousand. The Mallard estimate in the checklist splits the difference. There were also about 500 Teal. Whatever the actual numbers, this is an impressive total, and in line with the highest counts from the past, the recent drop in numbers notwithstanding. It highlights the great importance of La Cassinazza for wintering waterbirds.

Wrens never stray far from the understory, near ground level, and they are one of our most typical wintering songbirds.





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Weekly Report of 12 November, 2016

What a magnificent day! Bright, clear, and full of colour – and to think that I was expecting a dreary, foggy affair. The number and variety of birds that I saw made it all the more beautiful.

It began with the common ones: there was an influx of Long-tailed Tits and an even more obvious one of Reed Buntings, which are now all over the sorghum fields by day and the reedbed come nightfall.

Teal numbers literally exploded to an extraordinary 1,200. I am sure this is the highest concentration in all of Lombardy. Also newly-arrived were 250 Lapwings and about a dozen Wigeon.

Redwing and Great Bittern put in their first appearances of the fall.

The long list of uncommon species I saw made it a day to remember: Red Kite, Great Snipe, Bullfinch, and the Great Grey Shrike that is back in the same wintering territory as last year – in fact, the very same plants. It is undoubtedly the same individual.

There were also numerous expected species that are nevertheless a pleasure to watch: Firecrest, Peregrine, Linnet, Fieldfare, our local Spoonbills, and many Marsh Harriers. The latter were seen perched, flying, hunting Teal, or interacting with one another.

It is rather late for dragonflies to still be on the wing, yet Common Darters (*Sympetrum striolatum*) were quite common today, a sign that temperatures have not dropped all that much.

To conclude this memorable day, I enjoyed the spectacular rising of the full moon, bright as a beacon.





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Weekly Report of 19 November, 2016

This winter, many of the rice fields will remain flooded all season long. They are already attracting many Common Snipe, which are practically invisible among the rice stubble and clumps of mud. The only way to find and accurately count them is to walk up and down the rice fields. But the mud is treacherous, and wading in with costly photo gear in tow is most unwise. Our photographer Giorgio learned this the hard way today: SPLASH !

So don't blame the dreary weather if we don't have any new photos today. In fact, we had a fun and productive day of birdwatching in spite of the weather. Several new species put in their first appearance for the winter: Brambling, Black Redstart, Gadwall, and finally a Mistle Thrush that was seen well enough to clinch the identification. Speaking of thrushes, we also saw Song Thrush, Redwing, and Fieldfare, thus finding all the possible species for this time of year. La Cassinazza's resident Peregrine put on a show as it defended its territory from another intruding Peregrine. After a brief aerial battle and many loud calls, the intruder was quickly chased off, but the local Peregrine was so riled up it continue to take on any and all comers: a Marsh Harrier, for instance, or a hapless Cormorant that was chased around at length as it flew in circles, screaming with terror. What a nasty piece of work!

Waterfowl numbers remain very high: while the Teal seem to be a little less numerous than last Saturday, there are still many hundreds of them around.





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Weekly Report of 26 November, 2016

Migration still has something left in store. Fieldfares have arrived en masse, albeit a few weeks later than normal. After all, the weather has been exceptionally mild for the end of November; over the last few days, today included, it was downright warm. So much so that a few dragonflies – the Common Darter (*Sympetrum striolatum*) – and butterflies – the Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) – were on the wing.

New arrivals added to waterfowl diversity: the huge throngs of Mallards and Teal were augmented by 20 Wigeon, a similar number of Shovelers, a dozen Gadwall and a few Pintail.

There was a remarkable influx of Lapwings, certainly many hundreds, and perhaps a thousand.

The calls of a Eurasian Curlew echoed through the morning fog, as the bird itself remained invisible somewhere over the extensive flooded rice fields. This is a rather rare species at La Cassinazza.

The days are now all too short, and sunset comes too soon. This is the time to watch the waterfowl as they stream out of their daytime refuge at La Cassinazza on their way to their foraging sites: this river of birds lasts a good twenty minutes. The evening hours also see surprisingly high numbers of Sacred Ibis gathering at La Cassinazza to roost: it was impossible to count them in the gloom of dusk, but there must have been at least 400.

A Tawny Owl sang once it was full dark.

If the season remains as mild as it has been so far, Firecrests might be able to overwinter once again.





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Weekly Report of 03 December, 2016

Without a doubt, the Fieldfare was the most conspicuous species today: in great numbers, perhaps a couple of hundred, with a few Redwings mixed in, they swarmed over the red berries of the hawthorn bushes.

The rice stubble is once again hosting a Stonechat, a species that was once a resident breeder here but can now be found only in winter.

The local Peregrine continues to steal the show: it hunts down prey, tussles with other raptors, screams loudly to mark its territory, and when it lands, it chooses the most conspicuous perch possible. It really seems to enjoy the limelight.

The weather remains mild. The much-heralded influx of polar air that was supposed to bring temperatures crashing down this week came to nothing. And so many warmth-loving species that should have already left the area continue to linger here in northern Italy: several Little Egrets, a Firecrest, a Blackcap, plenty of Sacred Ibis, and even a juvenile Night Heron. By the same token, many regular wintering species – Hawfinch, Penduline Tit, Hen Harrier, Siskin, and Brambling – have hardly put in an appearance, if at all.



The delayed onset of winter is allowing us to still enjoy colorful autumn foliage, as in the photo that accompanies this report. We will soon return to our regularly - scheduled programming of wonderful images of La Cassinazza's birds: after digging it out from the mud, cleaning it, and leaving it to dry for a couple of weeks, Giorgio's camera is working once again.



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Weekly Report of 10 December, 2016

A thick, peasoup fog has been plaguing us for much of the week, but today it never lifted, not even for a second.

Testifying to an unjustifiably rosy optimism, one of us started the day by singing the praises of the "favourable acoustic environment ...".

To put it more bluntly, we could not see a damn thing and could only detect birds by their calls. Even when they were close, most remained blurry gray shadows that disappeared before we could even attempt to identify them.

Luckily the most interesting species of the day – indeed the only sighting of note during this tough outing – allowed us to glimpse just enough before melting into the fog: a raptor with a long, forked tail that could only have been a Red Kite.

There were plenty of ducks and other waterbirds, even though we could not count them: the calls of the Mallards, Teal, Lapwings, Coots, Water Rails, and a handful of Common Snipe are unmistakable. And the Great Bittern, as it is wont to do, waited until we almost stepped on it before moving.

A curious, wary snout peeks out of the fog: the Roe Deer freezes for a second to watch us. Then two hops and it vanishes once again.





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Weekly Report of 17 December, 2016

Compared to last Saturday, today was colder, more humid, and the fog was even thicker. Once again it was impossible to count the waterfowl; a shame, as they appeared to be particularly abundant. Their calls, the whirring of their wings as they took flight, and their crowding onto impoundments they normally eschew suggests that the numbers of Mallards and Teal were quite high. But it was impossible to see anything with such reduced visibility.

To be honest, we can't really complain about "seeing nothing"; we nevertheless recorded a fair number of species, much as we did last week under similar conditions. Even when it is foggy, one can count on finding 55-60 species at La Cassinazza. This is not only a testimony to the area's great diversity, but also to the tame and approachable behaviour of the birds, a consequence of the lack of any disturbance. The ease with which we can get close to them is one of the reasons why we manage to get good photos so often. Firecrests are not only approachable, they also seem to be quite numerous this year. Indeed, today we saw more Firecrests than Goldcrests, a reversal from the norm, since Goldcrests are usually much more common.

In the early morning cold, moisture condenses into tiny crystals of ice that coat spiderwebs and turn them into marvelous lacework. They do not last long: a single degree more and they melt away.

