WEEKLY REPORTS

AUTUMN 2020

Weekly Report of 26 September, 2020

Over the course of a few days of severe storms, the summer-like climate gave way to fall. The transformation was complete on Saturday morning, which dawned clear, bright, and surprisingly cold, the air filled with the calls of the many newly-arrived Robins.
High in the sky, finally free of clouds, Alpine Swifts were streaming by, along with a small flock of Honey Buzzards, and followed by Marsh Harriers, Sparrowhawks, and Common Buzzards, all making a beeline towards the south.
On the ground, passerine migration was evidenced by Common Redstarts, Chiffchaffs, and Pied Flycatchers, none in particularly high numbers.
While Mallards are abundant, they are not quite as numerous as they were at this time in past years. Although hunting season began a week ago, they have not yet learned to find safety at La Cassinazza. On the other hand, Teal numbers are holding steady at 5-600, even higher than normal.
It seems that a lack of waders has been a constant this fall, apart from Lapwings and Common Snipe. It is almost as if it were payback for an excellent spring migration, which I was unable to enjoy due to the lockdown that kept me away from La Cassinazza.

WEEKLY REPORTS

AUTUMN 2020

Weekly Report of 03 October, 2020

The heavy rains that fell between Friday and Saturday raised the water levels in the impoundments at La Cassinazza. The many dozens of Snipe that were present just before the rain are largely gone; they have probably dispersed into the surrounding flooded fields.
The Night Herons are now gone, except for a handful of individuals that keep out of sight during the day and come out as it gets dark. Little Egrets numbers have also dropped significantly.
I'm still finding remains of the Goshawk's prey, but the bird itself remains elusive.
Migration this week once again brought large numbers of Alpine Swifts, together with several Song Thrushes, a couple of Common Redstarts, a handful of Grey Wagtails, and a single Willow Warbler. A small flock of Swallows, a few House Martins, and a solitary Kestrel heading due south were certainly migrants.
Among waterbirds, about twenty Shovelers and the first Gadwall of the fall were new arrivals.

In June and July, Starlings were forming a huge roost at La Cassinazza, comprised almost entirely of juveniles. Later in the summer, the Starlings went elsewhere. Now, as the fall begins, the Starlings are starting to return. We are only seeing a few dozen at the moment, showing off their elegant fresh winter plumage, black with white spots.

Weekly Report of 10 October, 2020

During the morning hours, the first fog of the season gave La Cassinazza an autumnal feel, which clashed against the greenery of the foliage.
In recent days, Chiffchaffs, Song Thrushes, and Chaffinches have been migrating in numbers, the first two in the hedgerows and bushes, and the last flying overhead in small flocks. Numerous species made their first appearance of the season: Skylark, Firecrest, Siskin, Meadow Pipit, Wren, and Water Pipit. A lone Swallow was most likely the last of its species we will see this year. The same can be said for the Hobby, which was last seen mid-week.
As a matter of passing interest, I'm reporting the sighting of a flock of Ring-necked Parakeets. This parrot is native to tropical savannas, and it has been introduced by man to Europe, where it now thrives in city parks. Like several other non-native species, it is now a full-fledged member of our avifauna.

More than anything else, the autumn atmosphere is epitomized by the countless mushrooms that have popped out of the ground. I can only identify them to genus; getting down to species level is only for specialists. We saw the white *Agaricus* and *Lactarius*, the red *Russula* and rust-coloured *Xerocomus*, the dark grey, menacing-looking *Amanita* and the yellow *Paxillus*; they are all common and widespread at La Cassinazza. There is only one spot where year after year, we see a small number of the elegant and imposing *Lepiota*.

WEEKLY REPORTS

AUTUMN 2020

Weekly Report of 17 October, 2020

This week, the most conspicuous migrants were Chiffchaffs and Siskins. The first were scattered everywhere: as insect eaters they feed on a widespread resource and keep a certain amount of social distancing. The Siskins, on the other hand, eat seeds, move about in flocks, and when they find the right tree they gather in great numbers.
Song Thrushes, Blackbirds, and Blackcaps were also much in evidence.
New arrivals included a Peregrine – who immediately set about terrorizing the Teal, Lapwings, and Snipe – about twenty Shovelers, several Wigeon, a Stonechat, and an exceptionally late Black Tern, which spent two days on the lake, picking off unknown prey from the water surface.
Mallard numbers remain lower than expected, with “just” a thousand or so. In past years, mid-October was when we saw them hit their peak, at about 5 or 6 times the current totals. We still don’t know whether they are merely late, spread out in nearby sites, or whether there has been a local or general population decline. We’ll have to wait for the International Waterbird Count in January to find out.
In the meantime, let’s hope this photo of a newly moulted drake Mallard will be a good omen.

WEEKLY REPORTS

AUTUMN 2020

Weekly Report of 24 October, 2020

Returning to La Cassinazza after a few days' absence, I found a grey, hazy fall day. Not much has changed in the last week.
The most obvious development was the arrival of the first wintering Reed Buntings. There were only a few today, but over the next couple of weeks they will become much more numerous.
The Chaffinches, which so far had mostly been flying over in flocks, are now starting to settle into La Cassinazza, attracted by the sunflower and sorghum crops.
Mistle Thrushes have never been frequent at La Cassinazza, but we had already seen it several times this year, in spite of the lockdown that kept us away for several months.

In the middle of one of the impoundments was a male Boar. It was big – massive, even – with heavy bristles, prominent canine teeth, a stiff tail, a muscular build, a menacing glare (and I imagine an offensive smell): a true bully.

WEEKLY REPORTS

AUTUMN 2020

Weekly Report of 07 November, 2020

You did not receive the usual report last week; after all, I go on vacation, too, sometimes.
In the meantime, the last of the wintering species are arriving at La Cassinazza.
The Reed Buntings have become the most numerous species, the Siskins have arrived en masse, Blackbirds and Chaffinches are also very numerous, and the recently arrived Goldcrests have become abundant. Also new for the season were the Redwing, Fieldfare, Black Redstart, Dunnock, Penduline Tit, Stock Dove, and finally a Merlin, a small falcon barely larger than a swift that was hunting the Starlings flying into their nightly roost in the reedbed.
We also saw a Spoonbill, the first since August. In the thick fog we heard Cranes migrating overhead, but they remained invisible.
Among the Mallards, a red-billed duck stood out like a sore thumb: a Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*), a New World species. A quick look online shows that this colourful duck is widely available in captivity even in Italy. Any talk about a natural origin is just hot air.

The male Black Redstart is resplendent in its frosted black plumage. Females – such as the individual in this photo – have a much drabber plumage that can only be described as dark.

Weekly Report of 14 November, 2020

This week was foggy throughout, a pale, milky sun coming only for a few hours. But as they say around here, at this time of year, if it isn't foggy, it's raining.
It is a strange feeling not to be welcomed by the quacking of the Mallards when one arrives at La Cassinazza. They are much scarcer than usual this year, their numbers having more than halved compared to any other year. There are various possible reasons for this, but a recent one is the shutting down of the hunting season as an anti-Covid-19 measure. As a result, the Mallards are safe pretty much anywhere. On the other hand, the Teal have remained faithful to La Cassinazza, and have been joined by a few Shoveler, Gadwall, and Wigeon. Lapwing numbers are gradually increasing, with daily counts of up to 500. The Cattle Egrets have gone missing this week, but these seasonal movements are expected, and they should start re-appearing by late January.
Among passerines, Siskins and Goldrests are particularly numerous, while Blue Tits are relatively scarce after several winters in which they were abundant.
In an out-of-the-way corner of La Cassinazza – where I had not stepped foot in years – I finally found the Pygmy Cormorant roost. There were about fifty, but I will not be going back to count them again, as they have already shown to be highly susceptible to disturbance at their nocturnal roost.

White Wagtails can often be found on rooftops; perhaps the tiles remind them of the pebbles on a riverbed.

Weekly Report of 21 November, 2020

The long spell of fog has ended, replaced by crystal-clear sunny days ushered in by bracingly cold mornings.
The ducks have gradually been leaving La Cassinazza, and now there are only a few hundred left. This must be an effect of the temporary suspension of the hunting season, and testifies to the fact that one of the major impacts of hunting – perhaps the most important one, even more than the take itself – is the widespread disturbance it creates, causing wildlife to abandon large swaths of otherwise suitable habitat.
Several Great Bitterns arrived this week, and one or two can be seen with relative ease.
The Sacred Ibis have begun to gather in the evenings before roosting at La Cassinazza, and while their numbers have varied to some extent, there are usually about 250-300.
In the dark of night, migrating Cranes flew over. Their numbers must have been impressive, and a lucky observer equipped with a night vision scope was able to see them and partly count them.

During the first part of the week, when it was still foggy, a Grey Plover spent several days at La Cassinazza. This is a species more typical of coastal areas and tidal mudflats, and had only been recorded here twice previously. During a brief break in the fog, it was kind enough to allow itself to be photographed.

Weekly Report of 28 November, 2020

Early in the week several relatively small Crane flocks flew over, the tail end of the impressive passage that took place the previous week.
The Merlin put in another appearance; any sighting is rare and much appreciated. Once again, it was seen in the evening, and once again it was in blazing fast and hot pursuit of prey, this time the Reed Buntings descending into the reedbed to spend the night.
Apart from these two excellent sightings, little of note took place his week, when foggy days alternated with sunny ones.
In the absence of waterfowl, the most common species was the Reed Bunting, followed in descending order by Chiffchaff, Goldcrest, Siskin, Robin, and Long-tailed Tit. Chaffinches do not appear particularly numerous, and the numbers of Wren, Blue Tit, Song Thrush and Fieldfare seem to be lower than usual. A handful of Blackcaps are still hanging on, while Redwing, Brambling, and Hawfinch appear to be absent, or nearly so

Dunnocks spend their time in dense scrub and are always difficult to see, at least in my experience. This winter, instead, I have been running into them quite often: either they have become more numerous, or I have finally gotten better at finding them. The photo perfectly depicts its favourite habitat, much better than words could.

Weekly Report of 05 December, 2020

The weather was awful all week long: whether it was fog and low cloud or severe storms with rain, wind, cold temperatures, and even snow, there were very few opportunities to observe wildlife.
The most obvious change was the gradual return of waterfowl to La Cassinazza; that this has happened just after the first restrictions on hunting imposed by anti-Covid regulations were lifted cannot be a coincidence.
I've said it before, and I continue to believe it.
Another key event this winter has been the confirmation that the Great White Egret wintering near the main house is indeed the same individual as in previous winters. Having managed to read the ring on its leg, we are now sure: born in Hungary in 2005, it is now over 15 years old and is the oldest known individual of its species. This isn't merely an interesting anecdote, but represents real scientific data: one of the goals of bird ringing – in addition to tracking bird movements and mapping their migratory routes – is to determine the longevity of bird species.

Of course, this week's photo is dedicated to it, one of La Cassinazza's oldest, dearest, and most faithful friends.

Weekly Report of 12 December, 2020

The rains continued until the middle of the week, thoroughly flooding the fields and meadows. The small animals that live in the soil – insects, earthworms, voles, moles, and shrews – were forced to the surface, where they were met by the Sacred Ibis, dozens of which patrolled the fields and hoovered up everything in sight. They were not alone: the feast was also attended by Great White Egrets, Little Egrets, and White Storks, but the ibis were the most numerous by far. It was a rough week for small critters.
Once the rains ended, a good influx of Fieldfares was evident, with numerous flocks of dozens of individuals. Chaffinches were also on the move, bringing with them the season's first Linnets and Bramblings.
Gradually, all the Starlings left. During the middle of winter they move to where the microclimate is warmer, whether in the nearby city or further south along the Mediterranean coast.
The bird of the week was a Goshawk hunting the local pigeons.

Reed Buntings continue to be the most numerous small passerine at La Cassinazza these days. Most are to be found in the reedbed, where they roost every night, and in the unharvested sunflower and sorghum crops, which are a major source of food for them all winter long.

Weekly Report of 19 December, 2020

This week saw a major influx of Woodpigeons, with enormous flocks the likes of which we had not seen for years. One flock in particular comprised several thousand birds.
The numbers of Chaffinches and Fieldfares also increased noticeably, the latter bringing in a handful of Redwings as well. This year, the hawthorn bushes are loaded with the red berries that thrushes are so fond of, and I expect the Fieldfares will stick around for a while, until they've stripped the bushes clean.
Two Peregrine Falcons also put in an appeareance. These birds will probably settle in for the winter, while the individuals we saw in October and November were likely passage migrants. And speaking of raptors, the Goshawk was seen again, presumably the same male as last week.
In the meantime, the ducks have returned to La Cassinazza in full force, the Teal foremost among them. They were the last to disappear after the hunting season was suspended, and right now they even seem to be more numerous than the Mallards. For one day only, they were accompanied by about 50 Shovelers. A hen Tufted Duck and a drake Pochard – both diving ducks, which are quite uncommon at La Cassinazza – rounded out the list of species.

Although Long-tailed Tits are present year-round, they become more numerous in the winter, when they form large flocks that flit through hedgerows and bushes and attract other species – Goldcrests, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chiffchafs – to forage alongside them.