



WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 25 September, 2021

Every year, the appearance of the season's first Robins heralds the shift from summer to winter. Just a few days ago there were none, but today they were common. The sensation of having turned a corner was bolstered by the arrival of the first Siskins.

The Pied Flycatcher migration seems to be over (or perhaps just interrupted?); the two commonest species are now the Garden Warbler and Cetti's Warbler, whose territorial song rings out from dense patches of reeds or brambles. Other migrants seen included Spotted Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Tree Pipit, and Grey Wagtail.

In the shallow impoundments, the 700 or so Teal outnumber the Mallards; they are accompanied by ten Shovelers and two Garganey, the last of the year, perhaps. We also saw a Fulvous Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*), an exotic species that surely escaped from somewhere.

In addition to the usual Common Snipe and Lapwings, the waders included Wood, Green, and Common Sandpipers, several Greenshank, Ruff, Dunlin, and Spotted Redshank.

At least 80 Pygmy Cormorants are crowding into a nighttime roost in a poplar and willow grove, together with Little Egrets, Cattle Egrets, and Sacred Ibis.

Turning to departures, the Hobby, Squacco Heron, and most Night Herons seem to have left.

The Violet Dropwing (*Trithemis annulata*), a dragonfly that only recently colonized La Cassinazza, was on the wing this week as well.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 02 October, 2021

Songbird migration seems to be on hold, with only a few small Chaffinch flocks passing through.

Our attention is currently concentrated on waterbirds. Teal have continued to increase to near one thousand; there are well over twenty Shovelers, and we have seen the arrival of several Greenshanks, a handful of Dunlins, and a scattering of Spotted Redshanks. Finally, the single Grey Plover we saw was much admired: it is only the fourth record at La Cassinazza in over twenty years, with the previous one being found in fall 2020.

The sky, which we all-too-quickly dismissed as “empty of birds”, was filled with hundreds of migrating Alpine Swifts in the afternoon. A juvenile Red Kite was another nice treat.

I have several holidays planned during the next month or more, and I will likely skip some of my weekly reports. If you don't receive them, don't worry.

There are no more than 20 Greenshanks around, but they are quite noisy and their calls ring out constantly, even occasionally at night. They have become the soundtrack to this week.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 16 October, 2021

Last week I skipped my usual report, and I might skip one again in the coming weeks. While I was away, a sudden turn in the weather caused a drastic drop in temperatures. Chiffchaffs and Robins are stealing the scene this week; some are passage migrants, others will settle in for the winter. Flocks of Siskins, Chaffinches, and Song Thrushes are frequently encountered, and the season's first Brambling, Wren, Penduline Tit, Dunnock, and Water Pipits were all tallied.

The shallow impoundments are hosting the fall's first Wigeon and a nice assortment of waders, including Common Snipe, Northern Lapwing, Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover, Ruff, and Grey Plover, with numbers ranging from 150 Lapwings to a single Grey Plover. The latter's prolonged stay – the same individual has been around for two weeks – shows that La Cassinazza provides excellent stopover habitat for migrating waders. We had definitive – and quite unexpected – proof of this when a Sociable Lapwing appeared among the Northern Lapwings. This is a critically endangered species that breeds in the steppe of Central Asia. Obviously, it is an extreme rarity in Western Europe, and not many birdwatchers can say they have seen one in Italy. In winter plumage, it is a dull, dun colour when standing on the ground, far less colourful than its Northern Lapwing cousins. Once it takes flight, however its strikingly handsome black-and-white wing pattern becomes apparent.

Technically speaking, the photo is nothing to brag about, but it documents an exceptionally rare event.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 23 October, 2021

Chaffinches, Siskins, and Bramblings added spice to the fall migration, which also featured the season's first Reed Buntings, which immediately settled into the sorghum field that was planted especially for them. Skylarks calling high overhead were also the first of the autumn, as were Meadow Pipit, Redwing, Firecrest, Coal Tit, and Black Redstart.

Earlier this week, we managed a few more glimpses of the rare Sociable Lapwing, always in flight with Northern Lapwing flocks; we have not seen it since.

As for the ducks, the Teal are far outnumbering the Mallards. Five hundred Mallards may seem like a lot, but it is a mere fraction of our counts from a few years ago, when as many as 8,000 – 10,000 could be seen in late October. We don't quite know what happened to the Mallard population. An optimistic hypothesis is that we began our surveys as they were undergoing a population explosion, and the current crash is merely a reversion to the mean. Alternatively, the lower hunting pressure may be allowing them to range more widely, without having to concentrate at La Cassinazza. The worst-case scenario is that they are suffering the catastrophic effects of some illness.

Last week's photos depicted the rarest species ever at La Cassinazza. Today's features one of our commonest, the Coot.

I am about to go on holiday again, so you will not be getting a report next week.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 06 November, 2021

My holidays this year are over and I am back at La Cassinazza, where I was greeted by wonderfully bright, albeit chilly, sunny days.

Goldcrests have arrived, rounding out the contingent of wintering passerines, while Blackbirds and White Wagtails are quite conspicuous. There was a clear influx of migrants of these last two species, but several encounters with Firecrests may have just been down to luck.

Among the hundreds of Northern Lapwings, we had a few additional sightings of the famous Sociable Lapwing first discovered three weeks ago. The other lingering waders, ready to face the season's first cold temperatures, comprised a handful each of Ruff, Greenshank, Common Snipe, and Dunlin, plus an invisible Spotted Redshank, assuming there wasn't some other species that was perfectly imitating its call.

For the sixteenth consecutive winter, our friend the Great White Heron is back from Hungary. The number on its metal ring confirms its identification beyond any doubt. It is back in the same exact territory, and always perches in the same exact tree.

Though it is quite late in the season, a few butterflies are still on the wing, mostly Red Admirals (*Vanessa atalanta*) and Peacocks (*Inachis io*), plus a few Cabbage Whites (*Pieris rapae*) and Clouded Yellows (*Colias crocea*).

The Grey Wagtail has never featured in the photographs that illustrate this report – I just checked. It is high time we corrected this oversight.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 13 November, 2021

Over the last few days we have slipped into that humid, foggy fall climate so typical of the Po River plain.

We added four more species to our list of wintering birds: Great Bittern, Gadwall, Fieldfare, and Mistle Thrush.

White Wagtails continue to be much in evidence, while Blackbird numbers seem to be back to normal, suggesting that the wave of migration has now crested.

Goldcrests have now become common, after the first few individuals had arrived last week.

Turning to waterbirds, in addition to the above-mentioned pair of Gadwalls, the only other event of note was a brief stopover on the part of a flock of fifteen Dunlins. Everything else stayed the same, including the great number of Northern Lapwings, which I carefully scanned countless times in the forlorn hope of relocating the rare Sociable Lapwing.

After having spent so much time watching them, it seems only fitting to conclude with one of my many Northern Lapwing shots.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 20 November, 2021

The number of Northern Lapwings crowding into La Cassinazza has become sensational: about a thousand. They are quite flighty and all it takes to send them into a panic is for a raptor to fly over, even the harmless Red Kite, or a mere Hooded Crow. They then suddenly turn into a flying cloud. Looking for something different amidst all these fluttering wings becomes a veritable challenge, which inevitably turns out to be fruitless.

The new arrival of the week is the Hawfinch, while Siskins form large flocks in the canopies of alder trees, and we are starting to see the first small flocks of Fieldfares and Redwings.

Towards evening, a flock of a hundred or so Cranes emerged from the low clouds, and gradually began to circle downwards, looking for a suitable place to roost for the night. I was the only person in the area at the time, and I left in order not to run the risk of being a disturbance and scaring them away.

Goldcrests are tiny, restless sprites, and an irresistible temptation for photographers. No matter how many photos you have already taken, you won't turn down the opportunity for just one more.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 27 November, 2021

This week began with brilliant sunshine, but this quickly gave way to rain and gloom, as the temperatures dropped day by day.

The Northern Lapwings are putting on quite a show. Compared to last week, their already impressive numbers have doubled or more: I estimated about two thousand. My estimates may appear to be quite random, but in this case I photographed a flock in flight that looked to comprise about one-fifth of the total number of birds. I then printed out the photo and painstakingly counted each dot, and used my count to arrive at my current estimate.

Among the throngs of lapwings I managed to pick out several Common Snipe, a dozen Dunlins, a few Ruff, and a Golden Plover, the first record at La Cassinazza in several years.

But the real surprise was yet to come: three Goldeneyes were swimming on the lake, a species we had never seen here before, and the second new addition to La Cassinazza's checklist of 2021.

Of all the ducks that winter at La Cassinazza, the Wigeon is the most uncommon, rarely breaking into the double digits; right now there are six or seven individuals present. Not all have completed their moult, and a few brown feathers on the mantle of this drake show that it has not yet fully moulted out of eclipse plumage.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 04 December, 2021

Temperatures have dropped, and the impoundments are covered by a thin layer of ice after clear night. This makes it all the more surprising to see Red Admirals (*Vanessa atalanta*) on the wing during midday hours – a butterfly in December!

The ice seems to have driven away the Northern Lapwings, whose numbers are now no more than a hundred or so. Speaking of lapwings, I just got the news that a Sociable Lapwing was recently seen in Campania. Given the rarity – or even uniqueness – of this species in Italy, I like to think that this is the same individual that stopped over at La Cassinazza in October continuing its migration southwards. Odds are, though, that it's a different bird.

Last week's Goldeneyes lingered for a few days, and at least one of them was still present in the middle of the week.

Hundreds of Chaffinches and Bramblings are combing through the rice fields looking for unharvested grains, and the Fieldfare flocks have grown imposing: one in particular featured well over a hundred birds heading towards their evening roost.

The Sacred Ibises spend each night in the impoundments, seeming unbothered by the cold as they stand in the freezing water. Their numbers can be quite impressive, sometimes exceeding a thousand individuals.





WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 11 December, 2021

These last few days have brought snow and ice. This should be normal in winter, but in recent years this has increasingly become an exception.

The ducks are crowding so thickly in the little open water left that they look like a carpet. The Lapwings have left entirely, and in their absence, the Goshawk and Peregrine have turned to hunting Teal.

The Snipe resting motionless on the ice look rather uncomfortable, while the Dunlins seem unperturbed as they pick at tiny prey floating on meltwater.

The snowfall caused many songbirds to depart, and there are only a few Chiffchaffs, Chaffinches, Bramblings and Fieldfares left. The Cetti's Warblers and Penduline tits seem to have left the reedbeds, and the hedgerows are bereft of Firecrests, Blackcaps, and Song Thrushes.

Goldcrests, Robins, and the large mixed feeding flocks of Blue, Great, and Long-tailed Tits seem unaffected. Coal Tits, on the other hand, are less sociable and tend to be on their own.



The Grey Heron takes on the cold by fluffing up its plumage.



WEEKLY REPORTS AUTUMN 2021



Weekly Report of 18 December, 2021

It is now deep winter. The impoundments are frozen over and icy snow sticks to the ground; the large reedbed has been flattened by the weight of the snow. After a couple of days when the sun was out, albeit always low over the horizon, the thick fog has taken over.

The drop in songbird numbers is even more evident compared to last week, as the Goldcrests and Reed Buntings are also starting to thin out. Only the Robins remain abundant, and they are fighting all the more vigorously among each other to maintain or conquer territories that provide less and less food as the winter wears on.

The lake at La Cassinazza is at least three-quarters frozen, concentrating ducks in an extraordinary fashion. Mixed in with the two commonest species – Mallard and Teal – were a dozen Gadwalls and an incredible surprise, a hen Smew, a species we had never seen here before. As small as a Teal, it belongs to a different group of ducks, the mergansers, which dive for fish and have pointed bills, unlike those of other ducks.

We are almost at the winter solstice and this report closes out the fall 2021 season, which already brought us a star rarity in October, the Sociable Lapwing, and finishes with this wonderful Smew, a wonderful Christmas present.

Happy holidays to all.

