



WEEKLY REPORT SUMMER 2013



Weekly Report of 22 June, 2013

We had a busy schedule on this, the first day of summer, and only had time for birdwatching early in the morning. Nevertheless, those few hours produced a major rarity, a Black Stork soaring low overhead before rising on a thermal, and we confirmed that a pair of Spoonbills breed in the heronry at Villarasca once again, with at least two fresh juveniles foraging in La Cassinazza's impoundments.

The rest of the morning was dedicated to leading a group of visitors – some of the most enthusiastic we have ever had – around the property.

In the afternoon, it was finally time to ring the White Stork chicks at their nest, now that they are close to fledging. This was only possible at the Cassinazza nest, which was built rather low on a poplar tree; the nest atop the mast at Cascina Darsena is far too high to be accessible.

The colour rings will not only make it possible for us to recognize them if and when they come back - if we are lucky, they will also allow us to track them during migration and winter.

Later on we took a canoe out on the lake to check on the Common Tern nests: all nine contain young chicks, some of which hatched only yesterday or even today. All these chicks are from a second brood; the first, which was laid in late April, was destroyed by predators or by the inclement weather.

Much like the storks, the terns did not seem to mind our intrusion into their private space too much: they just flew all around us and went back to their nests as soon as we left.





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Weekly Report of 29 June, 2013

The Spoonbill family is quite numerous: there are eight of them. This means that the two adults managed to raise six juveniles this year, one more than in 2012. Although this is not a record, it is still an exceptional brood for this species. Congratulations to mom and dad.

The Kingfisher is also quite busy raising a second brood in the same burrow as the first one. Judging from the racket they're making, the young are about to fledge any day now.

The rice fields at Cascina Darsena are hosting a flock of 70 or so Lapwings, comprising the adults that recently completed nesting and their fledged juveniles. In addition, two or three pairs are still incubating.

The young Great Crested Grebes were not so lucky: a second pair lost its brood just like the first one, surely due to the same predator.

A pair of Little Bitterns is once again nesting near the pond in the courtyard, right by the front door of the house. While this was a routine event in the past, some overly drastic gardening work three years ago had interrupted this tradition.

Apart from these updates on nesting trends, the only sighting of note regarded an Alpine Swift in a large flock of Common Swifts. Although this was just a random fly-by high above La Cassinazza, it nevertheless increased the list of species seen this year, bringing it to a very respectable 144 at the halfway mark.



The birds that lurk in reedbeds are always mysterious: not only does their impenetrable habitat hide them from sight, they have also developed a natural tendency for skulking. The Reed Warbler is one such bird: it moves furtively through the reeds and only shows itself when the urge to sing forces it atop the reed stalks, where it is easy to see. And photograph.



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Weekly Report of 06 July, 2013

The young White Storks from the first nest (at Cascina Darsena) have fledged and can now be seen following their parents around on the ploughed field; every now and then they fly back to the nest for some rest.

The young Kingfishers have also left their burrows; not yet experienced in the art of flying and with less-than-rudimentary survival skills, all four of them they landed next to me amidst awkward wing flapping, and looked at me with more curiosity than fear. They were truly hilarious as they wagged their tails excitedly, craned their necks and swivelled their heads to examine this strange two-legged creature they had never seen before.

Wader migration brought us several Greenshank and many Wood Sandpipers, which preferred the rice fields over La Cassinazza's impoundments.

Normally at this time of year, which is the quietest of all as concerns birds, we delight in the great variety of insects on show.

However, this year seems much different: the prolonged rains and cold temperatures of spring must have done away with most butterfly larvae (caterpillars), while dragonflies and beetles also seem thin on the ground. It is bewildering, and a bit sad, to see meadows thronged with wildflowers, but without a single butterfly over them.

Grasshoppers seem as numerous as in previous year, but so far we are seeing mostly juvenile stages – also known as nymphs - with few adults.

Today's photo continues last week's reedbed theme: this time it's the Great Reed Warbler's turn. While it is the easiest of the reed-dwelling birds to actually see, it is downright impossible not to hear it.





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Weekly Report of 13 July, 2013

On a lazy summer day, dominated by the oppressive heat, the only sightings of note were the first returning Ruff and a passing flock of Bee-eaters. Otherwise, everything was in the norm – the abundance and ferocity of the local mosquitoes notwithstanding. Along with the Ruff, other migrant waders comprised several dozen Wood Sandpipers, Green Sandpipers, and a handful of Greenshanks. Lapwings and Black-winged Stilts, local breeders, remain numerous.

The young White Storks at La Cassinazza have not yet left the nest, while those at Cascina Darsena are already confidently flying about.

Although at least one juvenile from the Common Tern colony on the main lake has already fledged, most chicks are still far behind schedule in terms of their development.

The woodlots and hedgerows seem bereft of birds: the Nightingales, Cuckoos, and Golden Orioles are largely silent. All is quiet in the reedbed as well (this year, truth be told, it was never very lively to begin with).

The Roe Deer does are taking care of their fawns, which were born in May, and during this time they become very wary and alert to any potential danger.





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Weekly Report of 20 July, 2013

When I arrived at La Cassinazza early in the morning, three young storks were looking right at me, standing proudly atop the roof of the main house. For a maiden flight, it was rather underwhelming: just a short horizontal hop from their nest. They seemed mighty pleased with their achievement, though: they soon returned to the nest, and stayed put for the rest of the day.

With mid-July now behind us, the time came to cut the meadows, and as soon as the hay was harvested, several meadows were intentionally flooded. They became irresistible magnets for birds: a dense flock of Black-headed Gulls, over 100 Cattle Egrets, Black-winged Stilts, and other herons and waders. With the horses prancing in the water, it was the spitting image of a scene from the French Camargue. In fact, when a pair of Roe Deer wader across the picture, it may have been even better than the real thing.

We did not see a single raptor all morning until a distant Black Kite flew in. Immediately, Hobbies, Kestrels, Buzzards, and a Marsh Harrier appeared out of nowhere to mob the intruder, with the Hobbies standing out for their aggressiveness.

Butterflies are gradually reappearing after the dearth of sightings in spring and early summer; numbers are still low, but species variety is once again decent, with twenty or so species seen both this Saturday and last.



The best species was, as usual, the Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*), of which we saw numerous males and females today, providing me with the occasion of including a photo of it with this report.

Weekly Report of 27 July, 2013

The heat and humidity have become unbearable; in the middle of the day, we had no choice but to hole up indoors and refrain from birdwatching.

The arrival of the first fall migrant songbird, a Wood Warbler, coincided with the departure of the Common Terns, who left en masse as soon as their juveniles fledged.

A great many juvenile Night Herons and Little Egrets have appeared at La Cassinazza. The former, their streaky brown plumage drastically different from that of the adults, seem as scruffy as the adults look refined in their elegant gray and black ensemble; the juvenile Little Egrets, on the other hand, are as snowy white as the adults and difficult to tell apart from them.

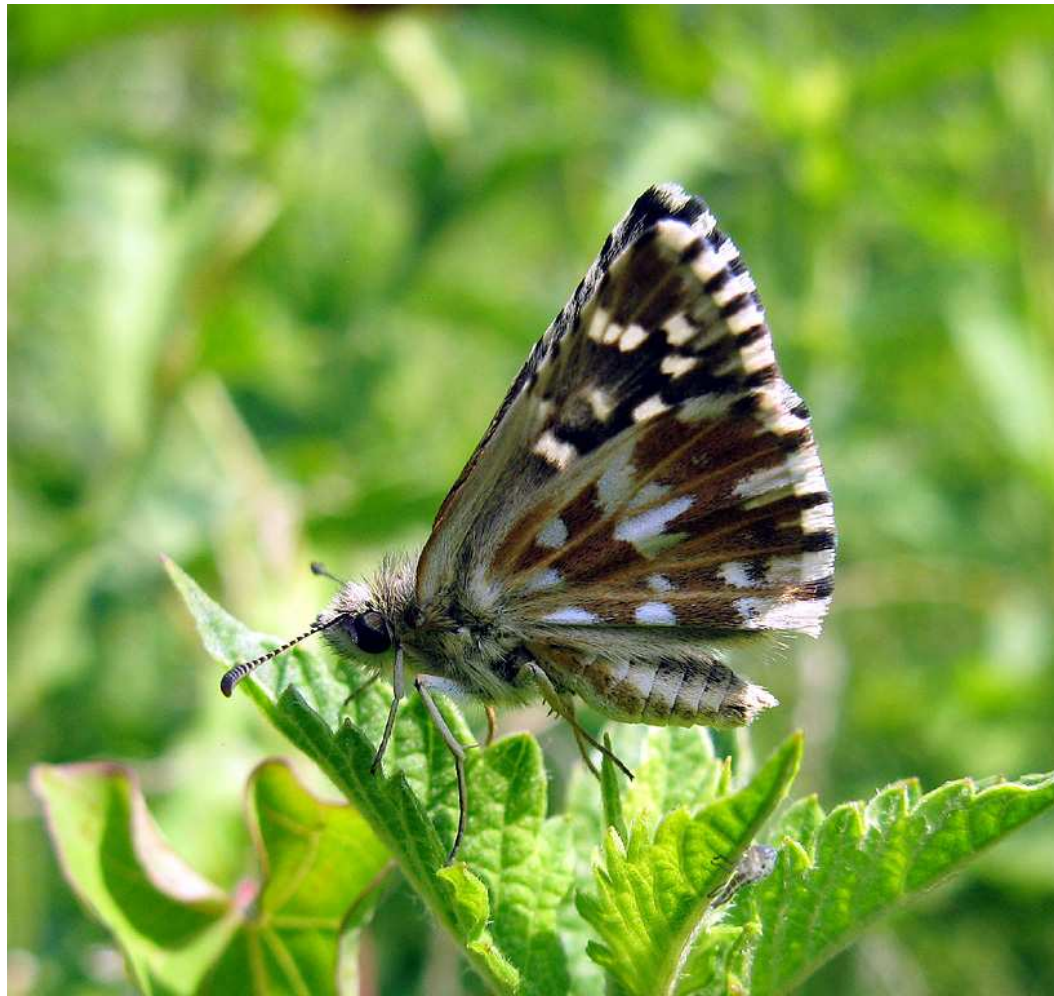
A pair of Buzzards was flying around La Cassinazza with a juvenile in tow, raising the ire of the local Hobbies, who quickly cleared their territory of the intruders.

The juvenile White Storks have already begun to range widely, and not all of them were accounted for today.

And to conclude with the baby birds theme, we also saw a crisp, fresh juvenile Honey Buzzard today, most likely a bird that fledged in the nearby woodlands of the Ticino River Park.

Turning to insects, today we had the first seasonal records of two dragonflies: Banded Darter (*Sympetrum pedemontanum*) and Red-veined Darter (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*). Once again, the butterflies beat out the dragonflies in terms of number of species: we saw a total of 27 this month of July.

One of the least conspicuous of all is the insignificant-looking Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus armoricanus*), which belongs to the family HesperIIDae. It lives hidden in the grass, makes very short flights, and has dull colours: among all the butterflies, it is one of the most "differently beautiful": a good reason to give it a moment of glory with the photo of the day.





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Weekly Report of 03 August, 2013

It is now time to drain La Cassinazza's impoundments for a couple of weeks; they will be flooded once again as soon as the annual maintenance work is completed. As the water drops, it exposes mudflats with a rich and previously unavailable trove of big fat worms, while millions of gnats concentrate in the shrinking pools: a sudden bonanza for Black-winged Stilts, Lapwings, and many other waders, including the fall's first Common Snipe and two Redshanks that have been present at La Cassinazza for at least two weeks. The fish trapped in these pools are easy prey for the many dozen wading birds that congregate here – Night Herons, Little Egrets, other herons, Sacred Ibis, and White Storks. This is a veritable feast for the birds and a wonderful show for the birdwatchers, but it will all be over in a few days.

The frenzied waterbird activity contrasts with the near total lack of songbirds.

Some of the Black-winged Stilt pairs whose nests were destroyed by storms in April and May managed to lay a second brood. The latest young to fledge from these broods are still dependent on their parents. The adults are very aggressive and boldly face off against any potential predator, humans included.





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Weekly Report of 10 August, 2013

The weather front of the last few days cleaned up the air, and thanks to this morning's crystal-clear visibility we could see many distant Alpine peaks, including the imposing Jungfrau, 160 km away in Switzerland!

Closer to home, the local birdlife was nowhere near as impressive. In spite of low overall numbers, variety was good. Newly arrived migrants were well represented by Garden Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Pied Flycatchers, and the soft calls of a Little Crake deep within the reedbed.

There has been a sudden and unexpected recovery of the local butterfly population: today we saw no less than 22 species, and Lycaenidae were particularly conspicuous, with five different species in evidence since the early morning, when many were still perched on blades of grass as they awaited the first warm sunrays.

Dragonfly diversity paled in comparison, with only ten species.

Today I finally managed to get a picture of a species I've been trying to photograph for several seasons: this small wasp with its intense metallic sheen is called *Stilbum cyanurum*, and it is a parasite of mud dauber wasps (hence its common name of Cuckoo Wasp). As it forages, it rapidly flies from flower to flower, often with its head down, and the colours change with the angle of the light: this makes it a difficult subject for a photograph. The image attached does not fully do justice to the beauty of its colours: when a ray of sun hits it in just the right spot, it lights up as if it had a fire within.





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Weekly Report of 17 August, 2013

With no water in the impoundments and the breeding season behind us, calm and silence reign over La Cassinazza.

Only a handful of waders (a few Green Sandpipers and a couple of Greenshanks) and twenty or so Teal haunt the last remaining pools. Several hundred Mallards were standing on the dried mud: they seem not to have noticed the changed conditions and it appears they would rather continue pretending they still have open water in which to swim.

At first glance, the woodlots and hedgerows seem completely empty: only after careful searching did we find a scattering of migrant passerines – a Garden Warbler, several Pied Flycatchers, a calling Willow Warbler, and a Hoopoe.

The only birds which we constantly ran into were Night Herons, both adults and juveniles. Now that the breeding season is over, they have resumed their nocturnal habits and spend the day hidden in La Cassinazza's hedgerows. Walking around the property, we flushed them every several dozen meters or so; as we roused them from their slumber, they flew off, giving the distinctive call that earned them the name of "quack" in the local dialect. Their slow wingbeats make them easy to photograph in flight.





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Weekly Report of 24 August, 2013

The day began with typical fine summer weather and ended with the arrival of the first major weather front, which is supposed to usher in the end of summer.

With the impoundments still dry, waterbird numbers were inevitably low, at least for La Cassinazza's standards: a handful of waders and about fifty Teal were the only obvious migrants.

Migrant passerines flitting among the hedgerows included Pied Flycatcher, Spotted Flycatcher, Willow Warbler, Garden Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Turtle Dove, and some very restless Golden Orioles. Also of note was a Black Tern, a very uncommon visitor to La Cassinazza.

Migrating raptors were also much in evidence: as soon as the air warmed up, a dozen Honey Buzzards and several Buzzards took to the skies, together with a Peregrine Falcon.

The Hobbies, on the other hand, have just fledged their young, and are noisy and conspicuous as they give the juveniles their first hunting lessons, with dragonflies being a popular prey.

After last week's Night Heron, today's photo depicts another ubiquitous species: Grey Herons have become so familiar that we hardly ever stop to watch them, let alone photograph them.





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Weekly Report of 31 August, 2013

Sunrise gets later each day: today it came a few minutes before seven, when the countryside was shrouded in a thin layer of fog, no more than a couple of meters off the ground. This early-morning landscape and the appearance of the season's first mushrooms (a few *Amanita vaginata*, several *Leccinum duriusculum*, and an unidentified *Russula*) clearly tell us that summer is coming to an end.

The morning's first sighting was also the most unusual one: a juvenile Cuckoo that had just left the nest and was still being cared for and fed by its foster parents, a pair of Nightingales. This seems the result exceptionally late egg-laying - adult Cuckoos have all long left the area.

With no water in the impoundments, waterbird numbers are down to a bare minimum, and the only conspicuous migrants are Pied Flycatchers, hundreds of which can be seen or heard. Among them are a few Willow Warblers, Spotted Flycatchers, Garden Warblers, and Common Redstarts. A brief stopover by an Osprey made for a pleasant surprise.



The highlight of the day concerned a dragonfly, the River Clubtail (*Gomphus flavipes*). This rare and much sought-after species had only been seen at La Cassinazza on a handful of occasions, all in the last 3-4 years, and we presumed these were wandering individuals from a distant population. Today, however, I found a clearly territorial male near a fast-flowing stretch of a canal, this species' preferred habitat. Everything seems to suggest it may breed here; I rarely check this spot, but from now on will visit it more frequently.

Today's photo of a Little Egret completes the trio of La Cassinazza's commonest herons. These three species are ubiquitous here except during the heart of winter, when Little Egrets and Night Herons wisely opt to head southwards.



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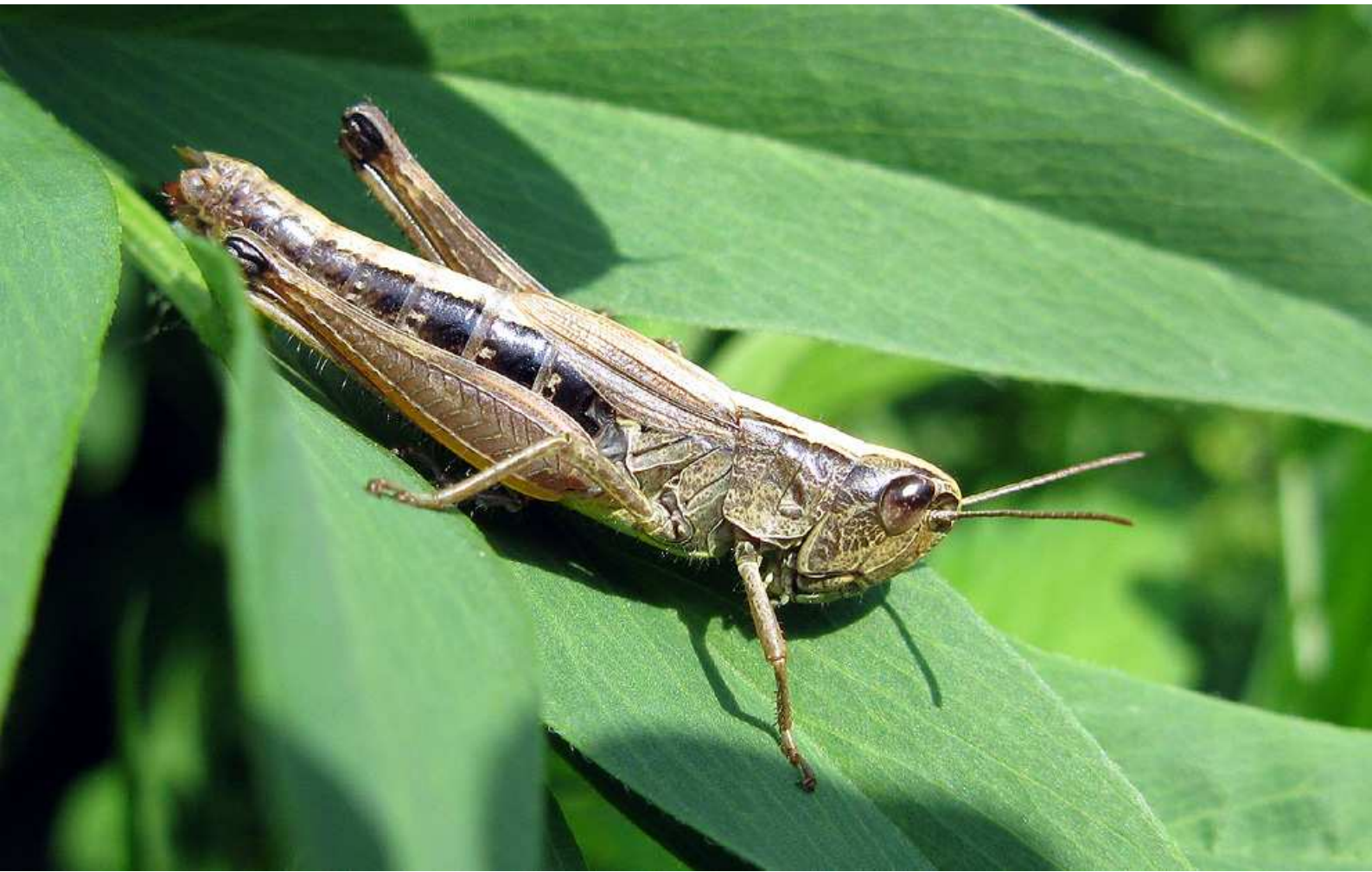
Weekly Report of 07 September, 2013

One of the consequences of the spring's endless rains was that much of the countryside was only ploughed once it was too late for many crops. For this reason, many fields that would have been left fallow were instead planted with sorghum and sunflower to provide a winter food source for birds. Now that these seeds are starting to ripen, they are already being visited by the first flocks of Woodpigeons, Turtle Doves, Goldfinches, Tree Sparrows, and Italian Sparrows . (Not to mention Feral Pigeons, but I never mention them on principle.)

La Cassinazza's impoundments are being flooded again, and immediately we have seen a mass return of herons, Spoonbills, Sacred Ibis, hundreds of Mallards, Teal, the fall's first two Gadwall, and an unexpected Shelduck .

Turning to passerines, last week's innumerable Pied Flycatchers are almost all gone, and they have been replaced by nothing: the only other songbird of interest was a Tree Pipit.

Another development that I think might be attributable to the spring's poor weather concerns the generally low numbers of insects: butterfly and dragonfly diversity remains good, but their overall numbers are not. On the contrary, grasshoppers seem to be as abundant as always this year. The species in today's photograph, the Meadow Grasshopper (*Chortippus parallelus*), is distinguished by its very short wings, especially in females, which make it flightless.





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Weekly Report of 14 September, 2013

The area's rice fields have been drained in preparation for the harvest, and all the local waterfowl – at least 2,000 Mallards and 150 Teal – have crowded into La Cassinazza. Tomorrow is the first day of the hunting season, and soon the waterfowl will realize they can find safe haven here and become even more numerous. Lapwings and Snipe will join them.

There weren't very many migrant passerines, but they included numerous Pied Flycatchers, several Tree Pipits, Garden Warbler, Willow Warbler, and Lesser Whitethroat. Once the sun warmed the air later in the morning, songbird activity essentially ceased, but the rising columns of warm air brought with them a small flock of raptors (several Honey Buzzards, a Marsh Harrier, and a Sparrowhawk) together with two Black Storks.

Most of the Night Herons are now gone, and the remaining ones are strictly nocturnal, spending their days hidden in dense vegetation. The most mimetic ones are the juveniles, whose dark plumage with small white spots breaks up their outline and conceals them in the shadows.





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Weekly Report of 21 September, 2013

This morning a full moon peeked through the light mist. At dawn the mist turned into fog, the moon disappeared, and the sun was unable to shine through until a couple of hours later.

It was a rather ordinary day of fall migration, with Pied Flycatcher, Garden Warbler, Reed Warbler, Sedge Warbler, Grey Wagtail, White Wagtail, Song Thrush, and Great Bittern. All of these birds were seen during the first two hours of early morning fog.

Apart from Lapwings and Common Snipe, there was a real dearth of waders, with a Common Redshank providing the only note of interest.

The great mass of waterfowl, Mallards and Teal for the most part, concealed a handful of Garganey and a juvenile Shelduck, whose drab and faded plumage is quite different from that of the dapper adults. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers have become quite vocal over the last few weeks, but they remain very difficult to see. Turning to raptors, Kestrel and Peregrine were present today in addition to the regulars (Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, and Hobby).

Bizarre-looking creatures can often be found among the myriad invertebrates. The grasshopper in the photo, with its elongated, cone-shaped head, is of the exact same shade of green as the grass and very difficult to spot; it only betrays its presence once it takes flight. Its scientific name is *Acrida ungarica* and in most European countries its common name is similar to its English name of Snout Grasshopper. It does not have a common name in Italian, but in several regional dialects it is known by the remarkably appropriate name of "bishop".

