

Weekly Report of 28 June, 2014

Last year, towards the end of summer, we reported in these pages our discovery of a rare dragonfly, the River Clubtail (*Gomphus flavipes*). Based on the habitat and behaviour of the lone individual we saw, we surmised the species may have been breeding locally. Today we revisited the very same spot along a small canal and found a clearly territorial small population, which is undoubtedly breeding here. *Gomphus flavipes* is a species of great conservation interest, and is listed in the European Union's Habitats Directive as requiring strict protection. It is quite rare in Italy, with only scattered populations in a few localities in the north. It was a great thrill to find them here at La Cassinazza.

The Black-winged Stilt colony is hosting full-grown juveniles alongside days-old chicks, and the adults are extremely defensive. Any other creature that comes close or even looks over the embankment, humans included, is met with fierce cries and a threatening flight display. The same treatment was reserved to a flock of migrant waders comprising twenty or so Wood Sandpipers and two Greenshanks; perhaps this intimidating welcome led them to leave almost immediately after arriving.



Purple Herons live deep within the reedbed and we are almost certain they nested, but they can only be observed on those rare occasions when they venture out in the open. Their plumage, with its warm brown and reddish tones, sets it apart from all other herons and indisputably makes it the family's most beautiful member. Another characteristic shown particularly well by this photo is its long and reed-thin neck.



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Weekly Report of 05 July, 2014

I was met with a very noisy welcome this morning, when I unwittingly walked underneath a Hobby nest, making the two adults very angry indeed. Eventually, since I am too big for their threats, they took their anger out on a Kestrel that was quietly perched some distance away.

The Night Herons have fledged their young, and both adults and juveniles have moved to La Cassinazza from the heronry at Villarasca. Today they were numerous and omnipresent, the juveniles looking hilarious as they stared at us blankly, undecided as to what we were and whether we were dangerous. The juvenile White Storks finally fledged at Cascina Darsena: the first two together, then another and finally the fourth bird. Their first flight was not without risk, since of all places they dropped into an active construction yard, right next to an excavator, and oblivious to the machine's movements.

Wader migration was much in evidence today, with Greenshanks, Wood and Green Sandpipers, Redshanks, Little Ringed Plovers, a Spotted Redshank, and a Black-tailed Godwit. The plovers were probably a family group of adults and juveniles that nested along one of our local rivers, and the Redshanks were all juveniles. The waders that come from farther north are all adults in breeding plumage: the Spotted Redshank is inky black, the Black-tailed Godwit reddish and barred, the Wood Sandpipers are dotted with white, and the Greenshanks sport black streaks.





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Weekly Report of 12 July, 2014

Waders are always the protagonists of the earliest stages of fall migration; like every year, the first arrivals were in late June. Today, Wood Sandpipers were the most numerous species, with several dozen individuals, together with a scattering of Greenshanks, Redshanks, Common Sandpipers, and Green Sandpipers, and three male Ruff still in their gaudy breeding plumage, a study in white, red, brown, and black.

The list of fledged young now includes Purple Herons and the Little Owls that are flying to and from the main farmhouse's roof and chimney stack. Little Bitterns have also left the nest, but it will take a while yet before they are able to fly; for now they just climb the reed stalks, which they grab with their long toes. Juvenile Marsh and Cetti's Warblers are flitting around the reeds and willows.

The weather continues to be very unsettled, with frequent downpours and thunderstorms. Today was no exception, making it difficult to see many butterflies. Nevertheless, a small meadow at Cascina Darsena, rich in alfalfa blossoms, attracts a great variety of them. For the last two weeks we have seen the rare Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*) there, and today we found a Small Tortoiseshell (*Aglais urticae*), not a rare species per se but one that we had only since twice before at La Cassinazza, in 2010 and 2011. It caught us unprepared without a camera; on the other hand, this female Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus armoricanus*) allowed itself to be photographed.

Well, not all butterflies are showy and colorful.....



Weekly Report of 19 July, 2014

La Cassinazza hosted Black Storks this week: two birds were initially seen, at least one of which lingered for several days. There was no trace of them for much of today, and it seemed as if they had left. It was rather late when a Black Stork flew in and dropped down towards La Cassinazza; it probably landed on a tree to roost overnight. I spent quite some time searching for it in the evening light, but was unable to track it down.

The day was marked by a stifling, oppressive heat. Birds are not singing anymore, and even Cuckoos are silent: passerines are now done breeding and there are no more nests to usurp. Soon they will be heading back to Africa. Swifts are already on their way there; like every year, they are the first species to leave us.

The only sounds are the cries of Black-winged Stilts, strenuously defending their young, and the calls of other waders, who are taking advantage of the teeming insects and larvae in the few remaining puddles of the drained impoundments. In addition to the usual suspects, with Wood Sandpipers accounting for the lion's share, we also saw two Black-tailed Godwits today, for a total of 10 species.

Our encounters with two juveniles, a Marsh Harrier and a Kestrel, both recently fledged and flying tentatively, confirm that both species nested successfully.

It terms of diversity, butterflies stole the show with no less than 24 species. Of particular note were the Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*), Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea phoebe*) and Eastern Bath White (*Pontia edusa*). The latter colonized La Cassinazza over the last few years, and although it is not a colourful species, it is nevertheless an elegant one: black and white with soft green markings.





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Weekly Report of 26 July, 2014

Sometimes, even the commonest species can give us thrilling encounters. Like today, when on the lawn of main house's courtyard a Moorhen was strutting about, its young chicks in tow, no more than two days old: they were so tiny and defenceless they could not even run away and hide. If we had wanted to, we could have picked them up.

A sighting of another kind was the high point of today's birdwatching: a flock of migrating White Storks, over 40 of them, flying low and searching stubbornly for thermals that weren't there, were trying to get away from an approaching storm.

It was one of the many of the last few days in what has been a cool and rainy summer. In fact, tonight's heavy rains flooded the drained impoundments anew, and allowed waterfowl and waders to return to La Cassinazza. On the other hand, this forced us to postpone the maintenance work that was scheduled.

Turtle Doves also seem to be getting ready to migrate: all of a sudden they have become conspicuous, with small groups perched out in the open on power lines.

Roe Deer finished their spring moult several weeks ago and are now in their summer pelage, with a fine, lustrous, golden-brown coat.





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Weekly Report of 02 August, 2014

The first outing of August brought us a few new fall migrants: Wood Warbler, Yellow Wagtail, Common Snipe, and a small flock of Teal.

The Black Stork is still present at La Cassinazza; it was seen for the first time over two weeks ago and was here again today, although as with every other sighting, this one was brief.

A juvenile Goshawk that zipped past us – sturdy, muscular, and confident – left us with an indelible impression of its power. It was part of a good showing of raptors today, with Honey Buzzard, Kestrel, Hobby, Sparrowhawk, Marsh Hawk, and Common Buzzard all putting in appearances.

In 2012 and 2013, a pair of Spoonbills nested at the Villarasca heronry; they were back on site at the beginning of the spring, together with their three offspring from the previous year. When the time came the adults moved away from La Cassinazza to breed, while the three non-breeding immatures lingered and were regularly seen. Now the adults are back, but unlike in previous years, there are no juveniles in tow: evidently, breeding was unsuccessful. The two have already moulted out of their nuptial plumage and have lost the characteristic long crest and yellowish collar.





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Weekly Report of 09 August, 2014

Today's outing was rather dull, due in no small part to the weather, with a dreary, rainy morning followed by a steamy afternoon.

Our birdwatching was brightened up by sightings of Hoopoe - a once-common species in the Po Plain that has now become quite scarce - and Garden Warbler, a species we had missed during spring migration.

Among the many absences, the near-total lack of Black-winged Stilts was immediately noticeable. Now that the juveniles have fledged, most birds have left. The White Storks are also gone, and we saw neither adults nor juveniles for the first time in many months. The last Cuckoo has also departed, and so have most of the Golden Orioles. And many other species are getting ready to do the same.

A brief sunny interlude in the early afternoon allowed butterflies to make a quick nectar run. Among them was the Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*), one of our largest and showiest species. Its favourite source of nectar is the flowers of the Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and it disdains all others. A fresh individual, with its tails intact and its huge wingspan, is simply spectacular and an irresistible photo opportunity, no matter how many times one has seen it previously.





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Weekly Report of 16 August, 2014

A Black Stork has been lingering in our local area for over a month now. We have seen it intermittently since our first sighting, and today it was once again soaring over La Cassinazza, taking advantage of the morning's first warm updrafts. Black Storks are quite rare anywhere in Italy; the fact that an individual decided to make such a long stopover on its way south is a truly exceptional event.

Waders are down to a mere handful and the only other fall migrants we saw today were Sedge Warblers and Honey Buzzards.

In spite of most of La Cassinazza's wetlands being dry, waterfowl are concentrating in the last remaining pools: Mallards are now in their hundreds, and we saw about 50 Teal and several Garganey. All are now in eclipse plumage, with hens and drakes similarly dull and featureless. We will have to wait several months before we can enjoy their more colourful plumages, such as that of this drake Mallard from a few weeks ago.





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Weekly Report of 23 August, 2014

The morning's driving rain left La Cassinazza soaked and partly flooded. Although the sun did come out once the rain stopped, by then it was noon and the best hours for birdwatching were behind us. The umpteenth storm of this relentlessly rainy summer nevertheless brought us a few new migrants: many Pied Flycatchers, a Common Redstart, and a Red-backed Shrike. The latter was the first and only of its species we saw in 2014. Once a common breeder in the Po Plain, Red-backed Shrikes have grown increasingly rare; they have practically disappeared from La Cassinazza, where they still nested only two years ago.

The list of migrants was rounded out by a couple of high-flying Honey Buzzards, a late Cuckoo, a Sedge Warbler, a scattering of Teal and Garganey – perhaps the same as last week's – and a single Spotted Redshank among the few waders.

The afternoon sun was hot – it's summer after all – and it stirred up many butterflies, which seem to prefer the flowers of *Mentha suaveolens* at this time of year. Large Coppers (*Lycaena dispar*) were present this week as well, but today's most admired butterfly was the Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea phoebe*), which we only saw a handful of times this year. Their upperwings are a nice rusty red with complex black patterns, but the underwings are much more colourful and adorned with wonderful arabesques.



Weekly Report of 30 August, 2014

The first influx of migrant passerines arrived today. There was a flurry of activity among the hedgerows this morning: lots of Pied Flycatchers, innumerable Long-tailed Tits, together with Willow Warblers and many Cuckoos. The latter were a great surprise: the local breeders left weeks ago and today's birds were certainly migrants, but we had never before seen a wave of Cuckoos. The list of newly-arrived migrants also includes Yellow Wagtail, Tree Pipit, Lesser Whitethroat, and judging from their calls, quite a few Water Rails.

Best of all - all the more so because we enjoyed close, long looks at it - was an Icterine Warbler, a species that does not breed in Italy and is locally uncommon: we have only seen in twice before at La Cassinazza, in 2003 and 2009.

Also included on today's list, even if unseen, are Long-eared Owl - one of whose shed feathers we found - and the remains of a very unlucky Common Swift, which was almost certainly predated by a Hobby, the only raptor that can catch such a fast-flying bird.

Despite the many birds we saw, today's photo depicts an altogether different subject: among the species that colonized La Cassinazza in recent times, the Western Whip Snake has become increasingly common over the last two years. This powerful snake sports a handsome, reticulated pattern and a nasty disposition.





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Weekly Report of 06 September, 2014

Today was also a day of heavy migration, but it mainly concerned a single species, the Pied Flycatcher. We kept seeing and hearing them everywhere, all day; none of us had ever seen so many during a day's birding. We must have hit the very peak of their migration.

Not that other migrants were lacking: we saw Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, and a flock of several dozen Common Swifts, high in the sky and headed due south.

And seven White Storks that dropped out of the sky to rest at La Cassinazza for a few hours.

Now that the impoundments are flooded again, Teal numbers jumped up, and we counted about 150, with several Garganeys among them.

On the other hand, quite a few species are gone for the year, and we failed to see Golden Oriole, Black-winged Stilt, Squacco Heron, Marsh Warbler, and Little Bittern.

Wader numbers remain low – the most numerous were the Lapwings, not more than 40 of them – but variety is high, with nine species, including two Little Stints we spent a long time observing.

A juvenile Hobby hunting dragonflies low over the water was also much admired.



The obligatory "photo of the day" naturally depicts one of today's innumerable Pied Flycatchers. At this time of year, this species is anything but pied: both males and females are predominantly dull greyish brown.



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Weekly Report of 13 September, 2014

Once again, Pied Flycatchers were much in evidence today, but unlike last week, they were accompanied by a good variety of migrants.

First and foremost among them were the Sedge Warblers, which had been quite scarce this fall until today, when the reedbed was hopping with them. In addition to these two species, we also found Lesser Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, Chaffinch, Tree Pipit, and the first Robins of the winter. Yes, I did say winter – we are accustomed to being in tune with nature's rhythms, and the season's first Robins are the classic sign that winter is near. It is a matter of what our sensations tell us, not the solstice.

Waterfowl numbers nearly doubled since last week: today there were 900 Mallards and 250 Teal, along with a handful of Shovelers. Lapwing and Snipe numbers also increased (respectively to 100 and 30) and we expect them to continue to rise significantly in the coming weeks. Most of the other waders are gone, although last week's two Little Stints remain.

The impoundments were alive with several species of heron, all of them strikingly white: at least a hundred Little Egrets, as many Cattle Egrets, and several dozen Great White Herons, in addition to over one hundred Sacred Ibis and ten White Storks: a feast for the eyes in black and white.

Lesser Whitethroats are elusive, as are all members of the genus *Sylvia*. For a brief moment, one was out in the open, on a hawthorn branch laden with red berries. It was a photographic opportunity not to be missed.





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Weekly Report of 20 September, 2014

This morning – the last day of summer according to the calendar – was a perfect preview of how dull and gray autumn days can be. The sun only came out in mid-afternoon, and all of a sudden, as if a switch came on, the butterflies appeared. At this time of year they are attracted by the purple flowers of mint and burdock; they are completely indifferent to the vast beds of white Aster and Erigeron flowers.

As for birds, it was soon evident that the migrant of the day was the Water Rail. As elusive as ever, their calls rang out from reedbeds and ditches.

There was an influx of waterfowl, with over 2,000 Mallards and about 400 Teal, most likely due to the fact that the rice paddies in the surrounding countryside are being drained.

On the other hand, there were fewer songbirds compared to last Saturday, but they did not go missing altogether: we found Reed Warbler, Common Redstart, Garden Warbler, Tree Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, and Willow Warbler.

It's getting to be a little late in the year for dragonflies, but there is one species that is quite typical of September, the large and robust Migrant Hawker (*Aeshna mixta*). Males patrol their territories tirelessly and ceaselessly, and they often stop and hover, suspended in mid-air. Then, and only then, can we photograph them.

