



## WEEKLY REPORTS SUMMER 2015



### Weekly Report of 27 June, 2015

Only three young White Storks are left at the Cascina Darsena nest. The fourth one must have suffered a mishap, perhaps due to the heavy thunderstorms of the past few weeks. The three remaining juveniles are almost fully grown and should be able to withstand any more hardships. Although they should be about ready to fledge, from the looks of it they seem to have no intention of attempting a maiden flight.

Juvenile Purple Herons have now fledged and are out and about in the rice fields, where the rice plants are so high that they almost completely conceal them: only their heads peek out from the greenery. The Night Herons have left the Villarasca heronry, and the first juveniles have moved to La Cassinazza.

Four dragonfly species have put in their first appearance for the year: Lesser Emperor (*Anax partenope*), Small Red-eyed Damselfly (*Erythromma viridulum*), Brilliant Emerald (*Somatochlora metallica*) and Banded Darter (*Sympetrum pedemontanum*).

As always, butterfly diversity was higher, but without any new additions to the year's list.

The Queen-of-Spain Fritillary (*Issoria lathonia*) is one of the few butterflies with a common name in Italian, which translates as 'small mother-of-pearl'. Indeed, it owes its common name in many other languages – including German, French, and Dutch – to the conspicuous silvery-white dots on its underwing.





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### Weekly Report of 04 July, 2015

Fledglings and juveniles ruled the day.

The young Black-winged Stilts are now able to fly, and juveniles make up about two-thirds of the 80 individuals still present.

While La Cassinazza's wetlands are being drained, dozens of juvenile Little Egrets and Grey Herons find easy pickings in the receding water pools.

The juvenile Night Herons, on the other hand, roost in bushes during the day. They only flush when we pass by, and fly off with a loud, scolding "quack".

There are two families that we are following particularly closely: the three juvenile White Storks from the nest at Cascina Darsena have fledged – or rather, simply jumped off the nest. Once on the ground, one of the parents led them on a walk to the rice fields.

The juvenile Marsh Harrier is no top gun, either: it won't fly more than three meters off the ground or for more than ten seconds before plummeting into a bush.

It does represent proof that Marsh Harriers have successfully nested at La Cassinazza, something that until now we had only assumed, without ever having confirmation.

While many birds have finished their nesting cycle, one species has just begun: the Common Terns, which arrived in April but eventually snubbed La Cassinazza's lake, are now back and have laid at least four clutches. These are likely replacement clutches on the part of birds that had nested on gravel bars in nearby rivers and lost their eggs with the floods of two-three weeks ago.



Juvenile Barn Swallows have also fledged. The families are still united and often perch together on utility wires, the juvenile to rest and the adults to preen: the bird in the photo is not stretching its muscles, but rather the individual feathers on its wings and tail, so that they may be perfectly aligned.





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### Weekly Report of 11 July, 2015

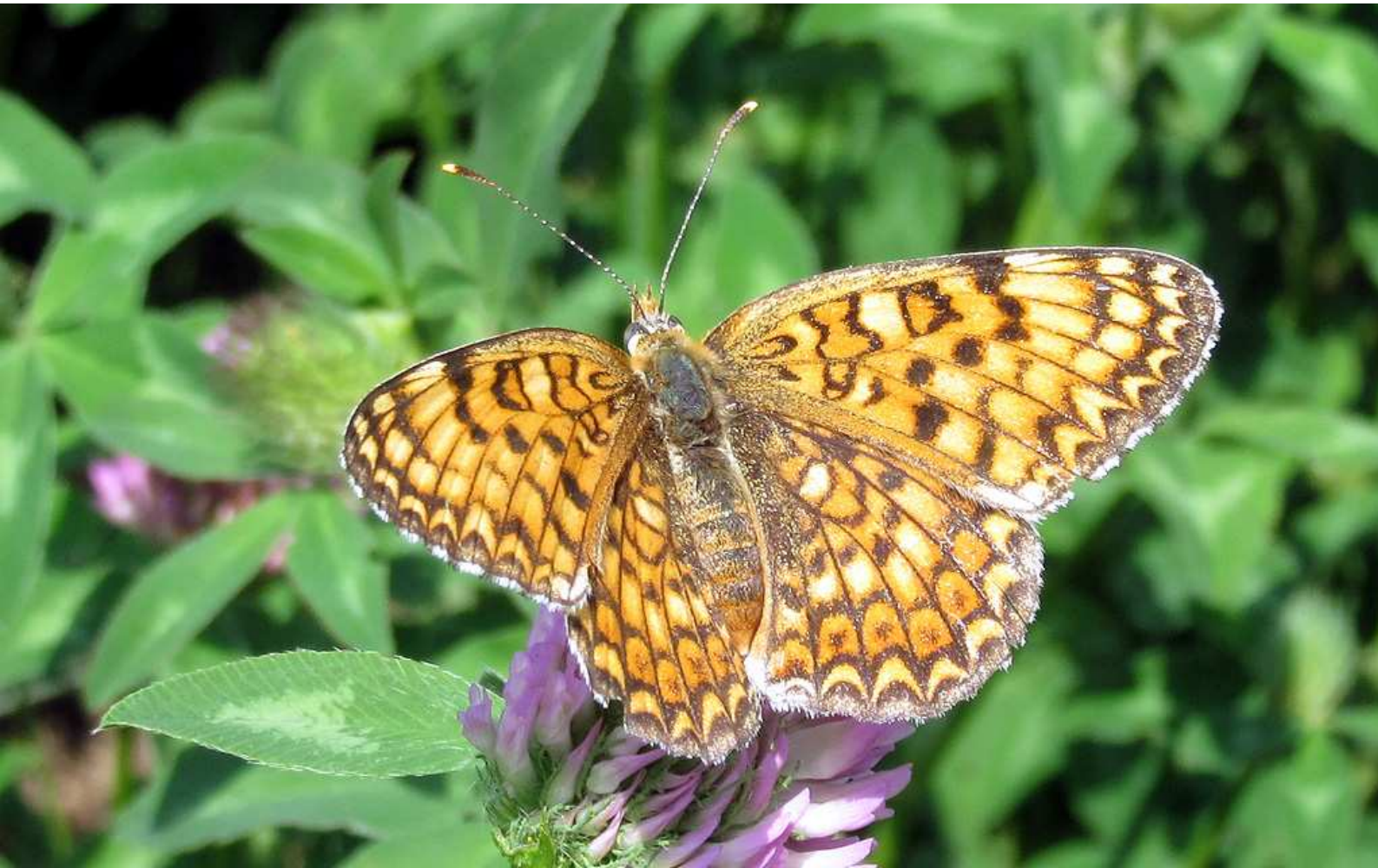
The juvenile Kestrels have now fledged; they exercised for a few hours in the old barn by flying from one wooden beam to the next, then they finally ventured outside, with the adults feeding them House Sparrows and juvenile Starlings the whole while.

That was about it as far as birdwatching went.

On the other hand, the summer is becoming quite interesting for insects. The dragonfly of the moment is undoubtedly the Red-veined Darter (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*), countless numbers of which are now emerging from the rice fields. More notably, we found several Small Pincertails (*Onycogomphus forcipatus*), while the highlight of the day was seeing a single Green Snaketail (*Ophiogomphus cecilia*). We had occasionally seen wandering individuals of this species at La Cassinazza before, presumably from one of the few colonies in the Ticino River Park. As with our previous sightings, this one was quite fleeting.

Butterfly numbers and variety are excellent. They are commonest in the meadows that have been planted with nectar-bearing flowers. The Clouded Yellow (*Colias croceas*) and the small Short-tailed Blue (*Everes argiades*) dominate in meadows with *Trifolium pratense*, together with smaller numbers of about 20 other species. Special mention should be made of the Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*), an unpredictable species that may be common some summers only to disappear for years.

Today's photo depicts the intricate black-on-orange pattern of the wings of the Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea phoebe*), a species that is becoming increasingly regular at La Cassinazza.





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### Weekly Report of 18 July, 2015

The two juvenile Marsh Harriers that were born in La Cassinazza's reedbed are calling constantly to attract their parents' attention. They can already fly quite well, but not enough to hunt on their own. In spite of this, they had full crops, because the adults are still feeding them. The juvenile White Stork on the church steeple at Baselica looks about ready to fledge. Like the harriers, is also being fed by its parents, whose assistance it welcomes with frenetic excitement.

Sightings of Hoopoe, Yellow Wagtail, and Honey Buzzard show that post-breeding dispersal is underway.

Butterfly diversity was rather underwhelming today, and much of our fun came from dragonflies – some were quite hard to identify and required us to capture them with an insect net during the afternoon's hottest hours. Highlights included Small Bluetail (*Ischnura pumilio*), Banded Darter (*Sympetrum pedemontanum*), the year's first Common Darter (*Sympetrum striolatum*) and Western Willow Spreadwing (*Lestes viridis*), and most notably, a spectacular River Clubtail (*Gomphus flavipes*).

This is a large, rare, and showy species, and contrary to its usual behaviour, this individual allowed itself to be approached closely and photographed.







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### Weekly Report of 25 July, 2015

Even before I got to the lakeshore, the terns' irate screams let me know that their eggs had hatched. The chicks are still tiny, no bigger than a ping-pong ball, and hatching appears to have been synchronized to a certain degree. This is most likely due to the fact that these birds had already lost their first brood and moved to La Cassinazza together, where they hurriedly laid a second clutch, all at the same time.

In spite of our attempts to completely drain the impoundments, a few puddles always remain. These are enough to attract a handful of waders. Lapwings and Green Sandpipers are routine sightings, but we also found two Black-tailed Godwits today. This species is far from guaranteed at La Cassinazza: while this is not the first record for 2015, we have sometimes gone years between sightings. Today's birds were juveniles, as revealed by their scalloped upperparts.

After three weeks of drought, the Red Clover in the meadows has now dried out, to be replaced by White Clover and Alfalfa, which in turn attract a great many butterflies, albeit common ones. On the other hand, the Birdfoot-trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*) hosts numerous Long-tailed Blues (*Lampides boeticus*), which use this legume as a larval host plant.







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### Weekly Report of 01 August, 2015

Last night's full moon was a remarkable natural phenomenon in its own right: it was the second full moon in the month of July. As the lunar cycle is not quite the same length as a month, this phenomenon only happens about once every three years. It is said that a full moon often brings migrants with it, but in this particular case it only brought some sudden storms. I spent the day dodging the downpours that, with uncanny precision, managed to strike every time I was well away from shelter. Compared to just two days ago, temperatures dropped by as many as 15°.

As a result, interesting sightings were few and far between.

At least one of the two Black-tailed Godwits from last week has remained at La Cassinazza. That particular puddle, as small as it is, seems to have enough food to sustain the godwit and the few other waders that were with it during their migratory stop-over.

The mating season for Roe Deer has begun. And while Roe Deer are generally very reserved in everything they do, that one couple was far, far less so...

A few butterflies were on the wing in spite of the weather. I already mentioned the Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*) in recent reports. It is quite common this year, and this is a good reason to feature it in our photo of the day. The wing pattern, both above and below, is unremarkable, but it stands out for the two slender 'tails' that earn it its common name.



### **Weekly Report of 08 August, 2015**

Teneral dragonflies crawl out of their skins at dawn. It was then that I found a newly-emerged Vagrant Emperor (*Anax ephippiger*), drying out its new wings as it stood motionless (unfortunately out of camera range). This is a highly migratory dragonfly whose core range is in Africa. Every year, a few individuals make it to northern Italy in spring, where they lay their eggs; the new generation emerges in August. These individuals in turn continue their migration, occasionally reaching far northern Europe, where they die as soon as the weather turns cold. It is a species we have observed only a handful of times at La Cassinazza, once in spring and several times in August.

Inspired by this encounter, I spent much of the day looking for dragonflies: my luck held and I managed to find River Clubtail (*Gomphus flavipes*), Small Redeye (*Erythromma viridulum*), Western Willow Spreadwing (*Lestes viridis*) and many Lesser Emperors (*Anax partenope*). Now that the water is back in the impoundments, the commoner species can be seen in their hundreds as they patrol over the ponds. The local Hobbies see them as well, and skim the water surface as they catch them.

The newly-flooded impoundments also attracted 50 or 60 Wood Sandpipers, a dozen Garganeys – the first of the fall – and a couple of Greenshanks, in addition to the Spoonbill family and several hundred Mallards. They joined the Green Sandpipers, Teal, and Lapwings that never left La Cassinazza even when the impoundments were dry.

Without rains, the wildflowers have withered and butterflies have become rather scarce. The most interesting was undoubtedly the Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus*

*morpheus*), and true to its name, the most abundant was the Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*). In this species, sexual dimorphism, which is strikingly obvious from above – males are brilliant blue and females are brown – is also evident on the underwings.







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### Weekly Report of 15 August, 2015

The water has been back in La Cassinazza's impoundments for only a short time, and the waders are already back and actively feeding: what was dry, dusty ground only ten days ago has already developed an invertebrate fauna.

In addition to the species that were already here last week, we also saw Common Sandpiper, Little Stint, and the fall's first Common Snipe.

Waterfowl numbers surged with the arrival of a thousand or so Mallards, 30 Garganey, and nearly as many Teal. The Garganey are all in one compact flock and are easy to count, while the Teal are scattered about, and their numbers can only be estimated.

The fall migration of songbirds has also begun. Pied Flycatchers were the first to arrive, early in the week, followed by a Wood Warbler today. I realized that for the first time in many months I did not hear a single Nightingale or Cuckoo today: they are already gone.

The overcast skies meant few butterflies were about. It was surprising, however, to note an abundance of Large Skippers (*Ochlodes sylvanus*), with what appeared to be a recent mass emergence. A new brood of Large Coppers (*Lycaena dispar*) also emerged recently.

The big news in today's report actually dates back to last Saturday, when I photographed a butterfly I now believe is a new species for La Cassinazza, the Chapman's Blue (*Polyommatus thersites*). This is not a rare species – in fact it is rather widespread – and I am sure they have always been around, but they are extremely difficult to tell apart from the ubiquitous Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*).

Over the last few days I examined my photos very carefully. Try to compare today's photo with that of a Common Blue from last Saturday's report, and you'll see just how much they look alike.







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### Weekly Report of 22 August, 2015

Things are beginning to stir, but the flood of migrants I had hoped for in my outsized optimism was actually more like a trickle.

Among waterbirds, a few Ruff and Shovelers have arrived together with more Teal. The further increase in Mallard numbers reflects the drying out of local ricefields more than newly-arrived migrants.

Migrant songbirds included Pied Flycatcher, Reed Warbler, Cuckoo (our local breeders are long gone, so today's birds were migrants) and Garden Warbler. Of the latter, the birds we saw today were presumably early migrants from the nearby Alps; Garden Warblers from northern Europe will probably only get here two or three weeks from now.

The young Roe Deer were born in May, and we are now seeing them ever more frequently: they are fearless and actually curious about what they have never seen before, including humans. It is up to their mothers to sense danger and encourage them to run away.

There are only a few scattered clumps of wildflowers left, always with bumblebees in attendance. Their role as pollinators is fundamental not only for wild plants and flowers, but also for the very survival of our agriculture: without them, the great majority of cultivated plants could not bear fruit. I have spent the last several weeks trying to photograph them, but they fly about erratically as they collect pollen, or have their heads buried in the corollas, making them anything but photogenic. I finally found one sitting still on a leaf, still numb from the cool temperatures of the early morning.





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### Weekly Report of 29 August, 2015

Migration has started in earnest. Teal arrived in numbers – there are now over a hundred – as did Garganey (about 60) and several dozen Common Snipe. A few Shovelers were also new, although they numbered in the single digits. The list of waders included Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, and a single Little Stint; this is generally an uncommon species at La Cassinazza, but one was seen early in the month as well.

The hedgerows and especially the reedbed are alive with Reed Warblers, Sedge Warblers, Garden Warblers, Lesser Whitethroats, Pied Flycatchers, and Willow Warblers, while the calls of Yellow Wagtails could be heard over open fields.

Now that the juveniles have fledged, the last of the Common Terns left during the week. They stayed at least a month longer than usual this year, as they cared for their replacement clutches.

Butterfly and especially dragonfly activity seems to have hit a trough, with few species and individuals of either.

Garden Warblers are dull and gray, with a plain, patternless plumage. This lack of any field marks is actually their defining characteristic. We could have photographed this individual in black and white and it wouldn't have made a difference: colours are superfluous.







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### Weekly Report of 05 September, 2015

The overnight rain continued through the morning. While it put a damper on the best time of day for birdwatching, it did force down a number of migrants.

Teal were by far the most numerous waterbirds, with several hundred present. Garganeys are largely gone, and although less than 20 Shovelers were seen, this is still a good influx for this species. Lapwings, Common Snipe, and Wood Sandpipers all increased substantially; of the ten wader species today, the most noteworthy was the year's first Dunlin.

Pied Flycatcher was easily the most abundant passerine species, while the most unexpected was a Great Reed Warbler that even burst into song. Another surprise was a family group of Reed Warblers with the fledged juveniles still being fed by their parents. By the time the young are independent, it will be rather late for migration.

Rounding out today's checklist were a Red-backed Shrike and a Black Stork that briefly flew low overhead.

The increased moisture has helped the first mushrooms emerge: *Leccinum*, associated with poplar trees; *Agaricus*, which grow in meadows; and *Amanita*, apparently *Amanita gemmata*.

An interesting finding came from an oft-neglected group of animals: grasshoppers. *Aiolopus strepens* is a late-flying species that appears mostly in autumn, and which we had never seen here before: La Cassinazza's grasshopper list is now up to 19 species.



**Weekly Report of 12 September, 2015**

An outstanding day in the field saw us recording an exceptional variety of birds. While waterbird numbers remained similar to last week's – save the departure of most Shovelers and the arrival of several Wigeons – songbirds accounted for the lion's share of our list: Tree Pipit, Chiffchaff, Whinchat, Robin, Grey Wagtail, Song Thrush, Wren, and Siskin were all firsts for the fall, some well ahead of their expected arrival. We also found an Osprey, a Black Stork, and the rarest bird of the day, a Merlin.

With the addition of some lingering summer species such as Great Reed Warbler and Little Bittern, plus all the usual suspects, our checklist was quite lengthy.

A dozen Hobbies hunting flying insects over our heads were an enchanting end to our day.

In spite of the great variety of birds, I would like to dedicate a few words to an insect. I finally found a bug I had long been searching for at La Cassinazza: the Musk Beetle (*Aromia moschata*). This longhorn beetle owes its name to its ability to release a delicate, rose-like musky scent, which was even used to flavour tobacco in the past. When caught, it can also emit a strange and easily audible sound. With its 3-4 cm body and huge antennae, it is one of our largest insects. Its larvae live in willow wood, and can take up to three years to reach maturity. I wonder whether this individual is a new arrival, or a descendent of pioneers that colonized La Cassinazza years ago.







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### Weekly Report of 19 September, 2015

Another fine day of birding, with lots of migrants, and Common Snipe taking centre stage: we counted about 200, but given how difficult they are to see as they crouch in the mud and dried grass, there may have been a lot more. Early in the morning, the masses of waterfowl and waders were truly impressive. Over the course of the morning, their ranks thinned out as the ducks gradually headed to nearby fields to forage. This daily routine is soon destined to change. Hunting season begins tomorrow, and the ducks will quickly learn that it is much safer to seek shelter at La Cassinazza during the day, and only wait until nightfall to venture out and forage.

Several Honey Buzzards and a healthy number of Common Buzzards served as confirmation that raptors are on the move, too.

Among songbirds, new arrivals included Common Redstart, Penduline Tit, and especially Firecrest: a flock of ten birds crowded in the same bush was a joy to watch – we almost always see isolated individuals here.

Thanks to the afternoon's warm sun, butterfly variety was also excellent, with 18 species, a remarkable total so late in the season.

The rarity of the day was an Osprey, most likely the same individual as last week. This time, however, it was kind enough to pose for a few photographs.

