



## WEEKLY REPORTS SUMMER 2016



### Weekly Report of 26 June, 2016

After an oppressively steamy morning, a fresh wind cleaned up the air, which remained hot, but not as humid, making for a tolerable afternoon. To enjoy the outdoors in such weather, and to hope to find something interesting, a naturalist's eye must turn to insects.

At this time of year, the best way to go about it is to scour the patches of Creeping Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), a common pioneering plant that grows on bare, cracked soil, often after farm or other work has been carried out. Its pink flowers, with their gentle scent and abundance of nectar, oils, and nutrients, attract all kinds of insects: butterflies, bees, flies, beetles, and many more singular species: flies that try to pass as bees, beetles that look like wasps, multicolored wasps, and an entire menagerie of tiny, six-legged creatures.

Two of them in particular drew our interest: the longhorn beetle *Leptura auro lenta*, a species of mature woodlands that may have found suitable habitat at La Cassinazza, and more importantly the Southern Small White (*Pieris manni*), a butterfly that I had long been looking for. It is extremely similar to the ubiquitous Small White (*Pieris rapae*), loves fallow, sunny fields, and is widespread in the Mediterranean basin. Our failure to find it at La Cassinazza before today is due in no small part to its being difficult to identify.





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### Weekly Report of 02 July, 2016

July is upon us. The birds have mostly stopped singing; at best, we can hear a few subdued snatches of song, but identifying the songster on the basis of these few notes can be difficult.

The juvenile White Storks from one of our three nests have fledged, after one month of incubation and two months as hatchlings. They stay close to the nest, ready to return at the first hint of trouble.

A baker's dozen of Teal and an equal number of Wood Sandpipers made up the contingent of early fall migrants on their way south.

Of the more than twenty butterfly species we saw today, the Large Copper , (*Lycaena dispar*) was worthy of note. This rare and local species is regular at La Cassinazza. Usually, the individuals we see in mid-summer are from the second generation, with the first appearing in May; this year, however, we had not seen any until now.

Dragonfly diversity was much lower, and was highlighted by the year's first Small Red-eyed Damselflies *Erythromma viridulum*, right on schedule.

This week's photo is dedicated to the Ring-necked Pheasant, a species considered so ordinary it barely rates a mention. But if we look closely, a cock pheasant is just as colourful – if not more – than many other local or exotic species that are celebrated for their gaudy plumage.





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### Weekly Report of 09 July, 2016

The first fall migrant Wood Sandpipers arrive in early July. These are all adults, who have no reason to dally about up north; the first juveniles will be here in a month or so. Unfortunately, unlike in spring the vegetation – whether rice or marsh grasses – is fully grown and hides the birds from view. It was impossible to count them accurately, and we could only estimate between 50 and 100.

Several juvenile Purple Herons appeared out of nowhere. This species manages to become completely invisible when tending a nest. Once again, this year we had no clue as to if and where they were nesting, until the entire family finally showed itself once breeding was successfully completed.

On the other hand, we know exactly where the Marsh Harriers hid their nest. The juveniles fledged this week, and they still remain close to home. The female, needing to recoup her strength, hunts down easy prey, such as moorhen chicks. Twice today I came upon her as she made quick work of them. My presence bothered her and she flew off each time, but as soon as I walked away she returned to her meal.

Today's photo can only be dedicated to the proud daddy: the male Marsh Harrier. In addition to the elegance typical of all birds of prey, it sports its very own, uniquely fine plumage.



**Weekly Report of 16 July, 2016**

For the first time in many weeks, we did not hear the song of the Nightingale at dawn. This was the first sign that, this late in the season, our birdwatching could only be uneventful. The only bright spot was a Peregrine that appeared out of thin air and dashed away who-knows-where.

On the other hand, mid-summer is a great time for butterflies, and today was no exception. We saw an excellent 25 species, a remarkable number considering we are smack in the middle of one of the most intensively farmed areas in all of Europe.

The tiny Short-tailed Blues (*Everes argiades*) are everywhere. Among brush-footed butterflies, the Peacock (*Inachis Io*) was the commonest: one small magical patch of flowering thistles (*Cirsium arvense*) attracted many dozens, together with most of the other species we saw today. We even saw a dozen Large Coppers (*Lycaena dispar*) today, including seven together in the same bush. We rarely see more than one or two of this uncommon butterfly.

I had plenty of choice for this week's photo: the spectacular golden red of the male Large Copper for example, or the magnificent and intricate pattern on the wings of the Spotted (*Melitaea didima*), Knapweed (*Melitaea phoebe*) and Queen of Spain (*Issoria lathonia*) fritillaries. Instead, I was seduced by this small female Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) – as the name indicates, an abundant species – with worn wings, busily laying its eggs, one at a time, on the bud of its host plant, the Bird's Foot Trefoil (*Lotus corniculatus*).





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### Weekly Report of 23 July, 2016

The young in the last White Stork nest are finally ready to take flight. In fact, they might have done so already, before returning to the safety of their nest. Two juvenile Little Owls appeared on the roof of the main house, fresh off their maiden flight.

Night Herons have formed a large roost at Cascina Darsena; judging from the ratio of juveniles to adults, breeding must have been exceptionally successful this year. This large flock is attracting many other herons, including Little Egrets, Great White Egrets, Grey Herons, Squacco Herons, and five juvenile Spoonbills accompanied by their parents. For the fifth year in a row this Spoonbill pair nested at the Villarasca heronry; they have fledged a total of 19 young, with breeding failing only once, in 2014.

The only signs of migration were two Greenshanks and a handful of Wood Sandpipers, which remained invisible in the tall rice but whose calls we heard clearly.



This is also a great time to see Roe Deer does with their fawns: many have two, and some only one. They tend to remain in the tall grass, where the young can stay safely hidden.



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### Weekly Report of 30 July, 2016

Usually, we see the first fall migrant passerines in August. This year, the season's first Garden and Willow Warblers in late July mark a record of sorts. Several other landbirds we saw today – Melodious Warbler, Cuckoo, Spotted Flycatcher, and Barn Swallow – may have been lingering local breeders, or fall migrants themselves.

Butterfly diversity was visibly lower than in past weeks, and their numbers even more so. I noticed that this happens every time we get inclement weather, such as heavy rain and thunderstorms, during the week. I am not surprised that such delicate creatures as butterflies pay a heavy price.

I have hardly ever mentioned dragonflies this summer. Indeed, they have been quite scarce, with poor diversity and low numbers, even for those species that are usually abundant. This might also be related to the weather, and especially the cold spell we had in May, when many dragonfly larvae are in their final stages of development. The only odonate in good numbers today – in spite of the fact that it is difficult to spot in its shady haunts – was the Western Willow Spreadwing (*Lestes viridis*).

The Small Copper (*Lycaena phleas*) is an easy butterfly to overlook: it is tiny, a poor flower, and lacks bright colours. It is only by getting a close look that one can appreciate the subtle patterns on its wings.





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### Weekly Report of 06 August, 2016

On this crystal-clear morning the air was as crisp as on a bright winter day, and the mountains all around us – the Alps to the north and the Apennines to the south – were visible in all their detail.

The only birds that were conspicuous – large, bright, numerous, and noisy – were the Golden Orioles, which are grouping in small flocks as they prepare to migrate.

Apart from them, the day was rather uneventful. Several hundred Mallards, in the middle of their post-breeding moult, and the Spoonbill family are just about all I have to report, and I think the day's species total was the lowest of the year.

Yet another extremely violent thunderstorm yesterday took a toll on the local insect fauna: I saw few butterflies, and even fewer dragonflies.

But the world of nature always has a surprise in store: the purple flowers of the Common Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) and the yellow ones of the Giant Goldenrod (*Solidago gigantea*) were swarming with tiny Great Banded Furrow Bees (*Halictus scabiosae*). A handful of females were busy flying to and fro, while a great many males were idling about on the flowers. Like all other bees, the males lack pollen baskets on their legs, and thus cannot pollinate flowers. Are they just useless loafers then?





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### Weekly Report of 13 August, 2016

All of the White Storks – adults and juveniles alike – have left the area, and we have not seen them in the last two weeks. Now that their young have fledged, the Marsh Harrier pair is gone as well. And today was our first day without Cuckoos since mid-April. But departures were not the only noteworthy event of the day. Common Redstart, Spotted Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit, and Hoopoe all put in appearances, but the biggest surprise of all was a Short-toed Trecreeper. We had only seen it once before at La Cassinazza, way back in the year 2000, and never again. Back then, the habitat restoration effort at La Cassinazza had only just begun. Sixteen years later, the woodlands are now mature, and perhaps this species will become a regular visitor.

We have never failed to see Honey Buzzards these last few weeks. Today we surprised one as it scratched the ground in a woodlot. It must have been trying to dig out a wasp's nest.

And speaking of wasps, this week's photo is dedicated to them.

The family *Chrysididae* – or emerald wasps – contains a great many species, all of which are parasites of other wasps or bees. Their gaudy colours (red, green, and blue; only yellow is missing, but that's what the flower is for) shine incredibly bright in the sunlight.





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### Weekly Report of 20 August, 2016

Migratory birds have arrived, although they are difficult to see in the dense vegetation, which is uncommonly lush this year. Most in evidence are the Pied Flycatchers, whose migration is protracted and will continue over the next couple of months. Equally numerous, albeit less conspicuous, are the Reed Warblers and Water Rails; the latter would go entirely unnoticed if they weren't so noisy. Willow and Garden Warblers are around in much smaller numbers.

The Peregrine Falcon that hung around La Cassinazza all morning might also have been a migrant.

The lone, lingering Common Tern should have been long gone by now: all its conspecifics left weeks ago. For whatever reason, it continues to defend its territory, and is particularly aggressive towards us, calling harshly as soon as we walk up to the lake shore.

One or more Honey Buzzards – it's impossible to be sure – have been regularly seen at La Cassinazza for at least a month. In all likelihood they are from the population that breeds in the Ticino River Park, just a short distance away as the bird flies.





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### Weekly Report of 27 August, 2016

Pied Flycatchers account for the lion's share of migrants these days. Binoculars aren't necessary to find them. In fact, one does not even need to get out of the car, as their calls ring out from the treetops all day long. These flycatchers have arrived en masse, and have replaced the Reed Warblers that were so abundant last week. A few Spotted Flycatchers were also present among the hordes of Pies.

About a hundred Teal arrived, together with a handful of Garganey and the fall's first Common Snipe. This year, however, the tall vegetation is making viewing very difficult, and today's Green Sandpipers, Wood Sandpipers, and Greenshanks were only detected by their calls.

The Sacred Ibis also appear to be newly arrived: they had been seen sporadically since early May, but about fifty of them were present today. Who knows where they come from, or where they are going. Although their movements are dictated by the seasons, they are best described as wanderers rather than true migrants.

For every newly-arrived species, one has gone for the year, and today was our first day without Turtle Doves or Golden Orioles.

The Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*) is a warmth-loving butterfly. We see it in open areas and along dirt roads, where it likes to soak in the sun. La Cassinazza is quite wooded and too shaded for this species. This is why it is rather uncommon here, and had never been the object of a weekly photo before.





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### Weekly Report of 03 September, 2016

The major influx of Pied Flycatchers from last week has slowed to a trickle. There are still quite a few around, but nothing compared to last Saturday's numbers.

Unfortunately, no other migrant songbirds took their place: while we did see Garden Warbler, Willow Warbler, Reed Warbler, and Hoopoe, there were only a handful of each at most.

We had to settle for a nice influx of 200-250 Teal and about 30 Garganey. And whether we consider them true migrants or not, there was also a sizeable flock of at least 100 Sacred Ibis.

Many rice fields have been drained, and wading birds are concentrating near the small pools where the fish and frogs are trapped. Many dozens of Little Egrets, Great White Egrets, and Cattle Egrets are taking part in the feast, along with a sprinkling of Grey Herons and Squacco Herons. The Purple Herons, on the other hand, prefer to be off on their own.



The diversity and abundance of butterflies and dragonflies was underwhelming, with the only sightings of note including Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus morpheus*) and the season's first Migrant Hawker (*Aeshna mixta*), a typical autumn dragonfly.

The days are still quite summer-like, but the mornings are rather cool. The mist over the meadows hides many details – can you spot the two Roe Deer? – and creates light effects.



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### Weekly Report of 10 September, 2016

The days are still rather hot and steamy, and the only new migrants today were Tree Pipit and Grey Wagtail. Among waterbirds, Mallard numbers nearly doubled, and quite a few Common Snipe and Lapwings have arrived.

For a while, it looked like we would have to settle for this.

Our day was greatly enlivened at mid-morning by five adult Black Storks in a large meadow, where they had likely spent the night. Unfortunately, this is a very wary species, and they quickly took flight and disappeared to continue their migration. As with every appearance this species makes at La Cassinazza, it begged the question: "Where do they come from?". Since the number of known breeding pairs in Italy is quite small, and since all of their known breeding sites are quite distant, this is a very pertinent question. Our speculations on their origins and on unknown breeding sites yet to be discovered made for some lively discussions during the afternoon.

The Common Darter (*Sympetrum striolatum*) is a dragonfly that becomes more numerous at the end of summer. During such a poor year for dragonflies, it was a pleasure even to find a handful of individuals today.





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### Weekly Report of 17 September, 2016

Things are never as you expect them. But that's birdwatching. The weather, the time of year, and even the full moon all suggested a fall of songbirds.

It never happened, but there were still some migrants around.

Raptors were much in evidence, although they were flying over too high for us to really enjoy them: many Buzzards, a few Sparrowhawks, and a Goshawk.

There were at least four Black Storks this week, two adults and two juveniles.

In the afternoon, several flocks of Alpine Swifts – some small, some larger – flew over heading north. This is the opposite direction to fall migration, probably due to a storm front over the Apennines to the south of us, which must have pushed them backwards.

What about the songbirds then? Apart from the arrival of the first Robins and a couple of late Golden Orioles, the most numerous migrants appeared to be Reed Warblers. They were less wary than usual, and for once proved easy to photograph.

