



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 22 December, 2012

We were shrouded in fog all day, on the shortest day of the year.

The ever-wary ducks only needed to move a few yards to disappear from view, making it impossible to count them. There were Mallards, Teals, and Wigeons as well: the call of the latter is unmistakable.

On the other hand, the small songbirds that haunt the hedgerows are easier to approach in the fog. Bramblings are by far the most numerous, as we ran into flocks of dozens and even hundreds pretty much everywhere.

The heavy, wet snow of recent days flattened much of the reedbed, making it much easier to see its inhabitants: Penduline Tits, Blue Tits, and Reed Buntings. Their numbers, however, are a mere fraction of what they were before the snowfall.

Tracks in the snow betray the presence of hares, foxes, cottontails, Roe Deer, boars, voles, and the ubiquitous yet undesirable Coypus, along with innumerable birds.

All three farmhouses (Darsena, Cadenazza, Cassinazza) have at least one Black Redstart in attendance.

For the last couple of weeks, a flock of Cranes has been roosting every evening in one of La Cassinazza's fields. I missed them last Saturday and I looked for them before dawn today, but once again I was unable to see them.

Jackdaws were present for the second week in a row, and we also found the locally uncommon Serin.



Bramblings were undoubtedly the bird of the day, but it is easy to tell from the sunny blue skies that the photo was taken a few weeks ago.

Merry Christmas from La Cassinazza.



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 29 December, 2012

As the winter wears on, the natural world seems to have fallen into hibernation, and I'm afraid it will continue to slumber for quite some time, much to the detriment of our weekly surveys. The changes are evident, and they all point to one thing: decreasing bird numbers.

Chiffchaffs, for example, which were abundant throughout November, gradually decreased over the course of the month, and are now practically gone. There are fewer Chaffinches and Bramblings as well, while the hedgerows still host numerous Blue Tits – which were ubiquitous earlier in the winter – and Goldcrests.

The smallest and frailest birds are not the only ones to leave before the harshest part of the winter: the only herons left are Grey Herons and Great White Egrets, with a handful of Great Bitterns and a lone Little Egrets.

Only ducks seem to enjoy these wintery conditions; the annual waterfowl count will begin a couple of weeks from now, and unless the impoundments freeze over, we might break our record for Teal (there are nearly a thousand now), and see the usual throngs of Mallards and several hundred Lapwings. If the three Spoonbills and three Ruff from today linger, they will constitute unusual records for the winter count. On the other hand, the Cranes (18 of them to be exact) were seen on Sunday for the last time, and seem to have left.

The winter silence was broken by a noisy flock of Fieldfares, and by the Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, which has begun its territorial singing.



The Little Owl was also heard to call. During cold winter days, as soon as the sun comes out, it peeks out of the chimney in which it roosts in order to soak up the warm rays. It watches us intently from on high: a ball of feathers with eerie eyes.

Today, another year of surveys at La Cassinazza ends; next week will bring a new year. May it bring only the best to all of you.



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 05 January, 2013

Half an hour before sunrise, 8 Cranes took off from La Cassinazza and flew away towards the east. This is why I had been unable to find them these past few weeks: they are even earlier risers than I am! I did not see them again today, and their whereabouts during daylight hours remain unknown. I waited for them in the evening until the clear sky was studded with stars, but it was all for nought. Still, I must consider myself lucky.

Today's weather was quite special: clear skies and northerly winds, which blow over the Alps and warm up by the time they cross the mountains and reach us. This phenomenon is known by its German name of Föhn and it is not infrequent here in the Po Plain, but today it was truly out of the ordinary: the temperatures became spring-like and in the afternoon several butterflies (Peacocks *Inachis io*) were on the wing, awakened from their hibernation.

Other than that, today's noteworthy sightings included high numbers of Teal (a conservative estimate of at least one thousand), about 350 Lapwings, and a Stonechat, a species that was as common several years ago as it is scarce today: in fact, we missed it entirely in 2012.

Black-headed Gulls, on the other hand, are almost always present, to the extent that we never bother to mention them. Usually we see flocks overflying La Cassinazza, but sometimes a few birds linger in the impoundments, as was the case this morning. For once, the photo of the day goes out to them.







## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 12 January, 2013

Like every year in January, today we carried out our annual waterbird census. For once, it was not hindered by fog, and it certainly had its highlights, but our most rewarding sighting was not bird related: we found a Red Squirrel. We had gotten a report of one a couple of months ago, but today we laid our eyes on it for the first time at La Cassinazza. In the past, the area was totally unsuitable for this strictly arboreal species; the fact that it managed to reach La Cassinazza means there is now a biological corridor along which it was able to travel, and is yet another major achievement of the habitat restoration efforts that have been implemented.

Turning again to wintering waterbirds, the 8 Cranes that flew back to roost after sunset were undoubtedly our most welcome guests. Also highly unusual were the 27 Sacred Ibis, a tropical species which usually only lingers here during mild winters such as this one has been so far. Our rough estimates of waterfowl numbers from the past few weeks were proven accurate by our careful, painstaking counting efforts today: 4,120 Mallards and 900 Teal! We also found a few each of Gadwall, Shoveler, Wigeon, Pintail, Ruff, Green Sandpiper, Snipe, and Little Egret. Our only disappointment came from the Lapwings, whose numbers dropped to 150, less than half of last week's contingent.





## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 19 January, 2013

For various reasons, the poor weather foremost among them, today's sightings were far more lacklustre and mundane than even last Saturday's.

We confirmed that at least 4 Spoonbills and a flock of Sacred Ibis are wintering in the area, and found a few passerine species which, while traditionally thought to be common, we have learned not to take for granted: the Stonechat, which is undergoing a worrying decline; a few Linnets mixed in with the large finch flocks; the Cetti's Warbler, whose local populations are wiped out with every hard freeze; and finally the Firecrest, one of which popped up in front of me in the rose bushes in the garden after I had sifted through every Goldcrest flock this winter in search of one.

Hazel trees come into flower very early, in the middle of January. Right on schedule, a few bushes today were already in flower. Hazel trees have separate male and female flowers. The former are conspicuous and easy to recognize: they are yellow, pendulous, and several centimetres long. Female flowers, instead, are harder to see. They are enclosed in their buds, and only tiny red styles peek out, looking somewhat like tentacles in the cold winter air. The morning rain then turned to snow and encrusted them in ice.





## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 26 January, 2013

We had not seen a Tree Sparrow at La Cassinazza for over a month, and today I made a special effort to see it: it took me all morning, and it was nearly lunch time by the time I found one. Just one! This species' decline is nothing short of incredible: 10 years ago it was ubiquitous, occupying all available nest boxes (which amounts to at least 200 breeding pairs), and in winter it would form flocks so numerous they could be heard from afar. It was so common that we did not even bother to notice it: it was everywhere and abundant. Then, about three or four years ago, we began to realize that we could no longer take it for granted. And now, to find just one, we must spend hours scouring all potential habitats. Where have they all gone? I hate to be an alarmist, but if trends at La Cassinazza reflect global ones, this species' decline has been truly dramatic.

Turning away from my pessimistic thoughts, today's highlights included a flock of five Greylag Geese – almost certainly wild birds in light of their behaviour and the fact that our feral goose flock disappeared several weeks ago – and a flock of 20 Pochard, almost all drakes (18 drakes and 2 hens, to be exact), which suggests a vanguard of migrants, since males are the earliest to move north in spring. In addition, we found an enormous flock of Woodpigeons (an estimated 10,000), a Great Bittern, increasing Lapwing numbers, several Snipe, our usual Spoonbills, and all the other birds that have been regular at La Cassinazza in recent weeks.

The mud today bore the tracks of a Fox; this is almost always the only sign of its silent presence. We have only been able to see it on rare instances. One such occasion took place two weeks ago, early in the morning, when we managed to capture this image.







## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 02 February, 2013

According to an old proverb, "if Candlemas [today, February 2] brings clouds and rain, winter will not come again". If this holds true, then we can rest assured that winter is behind us. All in all, it was a rather mild one, with some snow but no real freeze.

Indeed, numerous species that normally do not make it through the winter here were able to do so successfully this year: today we saw Spoonbill, Ruff, Little Egret, Sacred Ibis, and White Stork, all species that we have seen regularly over the last couple of months. The only birds missing were the most prized ones, the flock of Cranes which had been at La Cassinazza since early December and disappeared in mid-January. Last Saturday's five Greylag Geese flew in at dusk. Great Bittern and Peregrine Falcon were also present.

The only subtle hints that the season is about to change come from the song of the Great Tits and the first territorial skirmishes by the local Coots.

In spite of this, the day did not offer anything new or different from what we have been seeing over the last several weeks, and the rain and gloom conspired to make it seem a little boring.

And like always, when we struggle to find new thrills, we turn to our old buddies: as reliable as a true friend, the Great White Heron was in its usual spot. Since winter 2005-6 it has never failed to visit us; this is now its eight



winter. By the end of February it will leave; we do not know where it will go, but it will almost certainly return to its birthplace in Hungary. I photograph it every year: this portrait (one of many) dates back to the last snowfall. Today he was kind enough to let me approach it close enough to read and photograph the numerical code on his ring.



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 09 February, 2013

My optimism was countered by a new cold snap. Truth be told, it wasn't a particularly harsh one, with nighttime temperatures dropping just a few degrees below zero, but it must have been the final nail in the coffin for several Grey Herons we found starved to death. If the weather forecast is to be believed, the local fauna will have to withstand at least one more week of winter. Under these conditions, we cannot expect any additions to the local avifauna; indeed, between today and last Saturday we found most of the area's expected wintering birds. Unfortunately, we did not turn up any surprises or unusual species.

The day's main highlights were three, perhaps four, different Hen Harriers – we thought there were only two individuals wintering locally – and a lightning-quick apparition by a magnificent Peregrine Falcon, almost pure white below and silvery grey above.

The sunflower field continues to attract large storms of finches – mainly Bramblings, Goldfinches, Chaffinches, and Greenfinches – often with a Sparrowhawk in hot pursuit. We've often talked about this site over the course of the winter, and the show will soon end. The time has thus come for a photograph depicting the field's appearance in the eyes of those who know how to observe it: the sunflower plants, now withered but still standing upright, create a rather ugly and monochromatic landscape that is enlivened by the presence and colours of small passerines.







## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 16 February, 2013

The winter cold is stubbornly hanging on, with sub-freezing nights, ice, and a snowstorm a few days ago – the heaviest of the winter, but also the last, we hope – that razed to the ground La Cassinazza's reedbed.

It's no wonder that the alders haven't begun to flower yet this year, as they would have done had the temperatures been milder. A few more Grey Herons paid with their lives their risky decision to remain here instead of heading for more Mediterranean climes.

Had the season been milder, we would already have been seeing the first migrant waders: Ruff, Green Sandpiper, and perhaps a Black-tailed Godwit or two. Instead, it feels like they are still very far away. Nevertheless, things are beginning to stir. At least 50 Common Snipe and a flock of as many Fieldfares seemed to herald the initial vanguard of northward migrants.

Obviously, I am not the only one to impatiently await the end of the winter: Magpies are already near their nests, while Great Tits, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Little Owls, and even a few Greenfinches dare to sing in spite of the cold.

Turning to waterfowl, Teal numbers have remained steady, while Mallard numbers have clearly dropped. The ice certainly played a role in this, but many other Mallards are dispersing locally, and are paired off in ditches and irrigation canals. Under more favourable circumstances, they would already be laying eggs.





## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 23 February, 2013

Our outing had one main focal point: the return of the Cranes. They flew off early this morning and returned to La Cassinazza in the afternoon, when they landed in an open field and allowed us to study them carefully: they are all adults, certainly the same flock of 8 birds that we saw on several occasions in December and January, but that had been missing for more than a month. I think it is very unlikely that they were here all along and remained undetected for so many weeks. My guess is that they moved somewhere else for a while, and have just returned.

Apart from the Cranes, there was much mumbling and grumbling about what was allegedly a "boring" day. Sure...apart from the Cranes and the fact that most of the Chaffinches, Bramblings, and Reed Buntings are now gone, we "only" saw the usual species: Spoonbill, Great Bittern, White Stork, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, a few thousand Mallards, hundreds of Teal, several other waterfowl species, Snipe, Ruff, Lapwings, Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk, a Tawny Owl calling at night and a Little Owl during the day .....

In other words, all the riches we have grown accustomed to seeing at La Cassinazza in winter, and that we have the nerve to call "mundane". Admittedly, not everyone saw everything and today's checklist pulls together the sightings of various people, but where else could be find such numbers and variety in Lombardy? The truth is, we all can't wait for winter to end and for migration to start anew.



Finally, I almost forgot to mention the Firecrest, which probably also wintered here, although we only saw it a few times. Although restless and elusive by nature, it was no match for our photographer's dogged persistence today.



## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 02 March, 2013

Winter has finally loosened its grip. The sudden change in weather – it was still snowing less than a week ago – ushered in the beginning of spring migration. There were new arrivals and new departures.

The most timely of all - in light of its Italian name, which can loosely be translated as 'March bird' – was the year's first Garganey. Other new arrivals included a flock of Ruff, several Green Sandpipers, a Woodcock, and a Great Crested Grebe. Spring migrants also swelled the ranks of some of our wintering species, especially Teal, whose numbers jumped to well over a thousand. Quite a few Lapwings, Black-headed Gulls, Siskins, Blue Tits, and Buzzards are also passing through, and there were even multiple individuals of the generally rare Firecrest.

By the same token, many birds have left.

Only two Cranes remain, although they spent the entire week at La Cassinazza. Brambling numbers have dropped quite a bit, and to a lesser extent so have those of the other seed-eating birds, including the Chaffinches that had been so abundant over the winter; now we can hear several males in song, and it is difficult to know whether the flock we ran into was composed of migrants or of the same individuals that spent the winter here.

Today was also a working day: we installed dozens of new nest boxes, which during the upcoming breeding season will hopefully host tits, sparrows, woodpeckers and, if we are truly fortunate, perhaps a Wryneck or Common Redstart.







## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 09 March, 2013

The White Storks are back on the roof of the main house! The pair that formed last year and took possession of the chimney stack, albeit without nesting, has taken up residence there again. Unlike the pair that has nested at Cascina Darsena for the last two years – at least one of whose members originates from a reintroduction scheme and was raised in captivity, losing its migratory instinct before being released into the wild – the two new storks are true migrants: when the time came, they flew south, and now, right on schedule, they are back with us. The meeting of the two pairs sparked a noisy territorial face-off, which quickly concluded with a truce when each pair returned to its own territory.

Starting now and for the coming weeks, you can expect us to list all of the day's newly-arrived migrants; today they included Hawfinch, Cattle Egret, Night Heron, and Little Ringed Plover, and we saw a Firecrest once again. Green Sandpipers arrived in numbers.

The day's biggest surprise involved a huge concentration of Sacred Ibis, all busily searching for earthworms in a flooded meadow: we counted over 150. Sacred Ibis are not native to Europe, but they are considered to be established in northern Italy, and it appears they are successfully spreading. Many consider them a pest, since they are ruthless predators of the eggs and chicks of other bird species. One thing we know for sure: they are very, very ugly...







## WEEKLY REPORT WINTER 2013



### Weekly Report of 16 March, 2013

After clear skies and northeastern winds overnight, the day dawned icy and frosty, but all it took to warm us up was the arrival of the Swallows and Black-winged Stilts, true harbingers of spring no matter what the weather.

The day continued with a great variety of birds and included almost all the species we could reasonably expect with the exception on the Cranes, which may have left for good. If last week's count of Sacred Ibis seemed impressive, what can we say about the over 250 birds that gathered for the evening roost this week?

Marsh Harriers have also formed a roost: with only six birds, it was far less crowded, but it included a stunning male, its silvery wings contrasting with a hazelnut body tinged pinkish by the low evening sun.

European Cornels are now flowering, the first true flowers of the spring. Although hazels and alders come into flower even earlier, the former by late January, their flowers are so inconspicuous that they don't even look like flowers. The cornel flowers, on the other hand, look like proper flowers, and they are bright yellow to boot. The White Poplars are also in flower, with Blue Tits and Siskin in attendance, feasting away.

The pair of White Storks – “our” pair – is moving.

The nest on the chimney stack seems to have fallen into disfavour and they are building a new one, on top of the pollarded poplar tree in the parking lot. If things go as they should, it would be wise to take great care when parking one's automobile over the next few months. The new nest is closer to the ground and even easier to photograph; I promise to undertake restraint and add some variety to the photos I will be posting in the next few weeks!

