



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2015



Weekly Report of 27 December, 2014

The endless fall has finally given way to real winter. This morning the grass, which had stayed green so far, was covered by a thin layer of frost, the shallow still waters seemed on the point of freezing over, and a sense of imminent snow hung about. Indeed, snow soon started to fall, blown in by a malevolent wind.

Several inches of snow transformed the landscape at La Cassinazza, and in all likelihood this sudden change in weather will also affect the local birdlife: many birds will leave, especially waterbirds, and if we are lucky we might see a few new arrivals.

So far, a number of species we had hoped would winter at La Cassinazza seem to have moved on, as we could not find them in spite of our efforts: Stonechat, Skylark, Kestrel, and Hen Harrier have all been missing the last few weeks. The former three passed through on migration – the Skylarks in good numbers – but subsequently disappeared, while there is still hope that the cold snap will push a Hen Harrier or two our way.

On the other hand, we do have a few species of note. First and foremost are the two Goshawks, an adult and a juvenile female, which are both exploiting the same food source: Cascina Cadenazza's Feral Pigeons. Today, they fought long and hard over territory, with cries, flight chases, and finally a ferocious tussle as they rolled around on the ground.

After having deserted our local area last year, finches are once again abundant; Hawfinch numbers in particular are exceptionally high, as I have said repeatedly. Hundreds of Reed Buntings haunt the sorghum fields. Another species that has become easy to find is the Great Bittern: on our recent outings, we have been able to see them three or four times a day. This photo, of a bittern stalking its prey along a ditch under a heavy snowfall, perfectly conveys what today felt like.





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Weekly Report of 03 January, 2015

The weather has settled after last week's snowfall, and the days are sunny and cold. Temperatures dropped a little below zero for the first time this winter, and the impoundments have begun to freeze over. The waterfowl are crowding into the open water that does remain, and this helped us realize that numbers are actually higher than we had been estimating. Teal in particular are now out in the open, and we counted about 800-1,000, twice as many as in December. As we suspected, many were lurking out of sight in the reedbeds.

Just a few days into this spell of cold weather, many species are already in lower numbers, but diversity remains very high, surprisingly so for what should be the duller time of year. Numerous Little Egrets are still present, white-on-white against the snowy backdrop; they have not yet left the area, unlike the Cattle Egrets that are now gone. The Lapwings have left, but about 40 Common Snipe and several Ruff remain.

The small insectivores seem to have been most affected by the cold snap: Chiffchaffs, Goldcrests, Cetti's Warblers, Robins, and even Meadow and Water Pipits seem less common than before, although they are all still present.



Seed eaters are hardier and can find food even in wintery conditions, and their numbers seem largely unaffected so far. Thanks to the endless supply of seeds in the sorghum fields, which have been planted especially for them, the Reed Buntings don't need to worry about winter hardships. They commute between the fields where they feed by day and their night-time roost in the reedbed at La Cassinazza.



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Weekly Report of 10 January, 2015

Today was a rather unique day. The weather, for one thing, was unusually warm, thanks to the Foehn winds blowing down from the Alps, which made for a spring-like afternoon and drew out the year's first butterflies – Red Admirals (*Vanessa atalanta*) – from their hibernation.

The birding was also out of the ordinary, with an unprecedented number of species for this time of year and some noteworthy sightings: three Great Bitterns together in the reeds bordering the lake, at least twenty Marsh Harriers circling their evening roosting site in the main reedbed, and two Cranes dropping into a field.

We also saw Hen Harrier, Kestrel, and Stonechat, all three of which had gone unseen in December.

This is the time of year when the International Waterbird Census takes place, and we took advantage of the perfect weather to painstakingly count the waterfowl. Our impression that their numbers had dropped compared to last week was confirmed by our count: indeed, we recorded 'only' 3,800 Mallards, 600 Teal, 14 Gadwalls, 9 Wigeons, 2 Pintails, 47 Lapwings, 70 Coots, 60 Cormorants, 6 Green Sandpiper, 20 Common Snipe, and one Ruff. If the conditions allow it, we will repeat the counts in the coming weeks, in order to have an accurate average value.

Over the last few weeks, the species we most enjoyed was the Coal Tit: we don't see them often here, and they only wintered locally in two of the last 15 winters. There are only a few of them, perhaps just a pair, but they have a well-defined territory centred on some seed-rich maple trees, and we know exactly where to find them.





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Weekly Report of 17 January, 2015

Today was the exact opposite of last Saturday: grey, humid, and misty, at least through the entire morning. There wasn't much to see, and for lack of better things to do we resorted to stripping bark off of rotting logs to check for hibernating insects. Still, this allowed me to find one of Italy's most colourful beetles: *Panagaeus cruxmajor*, a species I had long been looking for, if for no other reason that it is featured on the cover of my beetle identification book.

Visibility briefly improved during the afternoon, when the sun peeked out of the clouds, but not enough to allow us to reliably repeat last week's waterfowl census. It did allow us to spot two Shovelers that had gone unnoticed – this is one of the rarer wintering ducks in our region.

The day's birding was rescued by an unexpected Osprey – a bird that should be in the tropics at this time of year – that appeared just as the setting sun burst through the clouds and bathed the landscape in its low, side light. At La Cassinazza, Ospreys are uncommon but regular visitors during migration, but seeing one in winter was a real surprise. Like just about every other Osprey that has come through these parts, it perched on top of the tall, isolated dead poplar that stands in the middle of the lake.





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Weekly Report of 24 January, 2015

The clear, bright weather made it possible for us to resume our waterfowl counts on the very last day of the IWC (International Waterbird Census). The numbers, rounded off, were as follows: 750 Teal (a remarkable total, one of the highest IWC counts ever at La Cassinazza), 16 Wigeons, 10 Gadwalls, 1 Shoveler, 250 Lapwings, 40 Snipe, 12 Ruff, 5 Green Sandpipers, 60 Coots, 3 Spoonbills. I simply refused to count Mallards one by one; a reasonable estimate is 4,000, perhaps 4,500. We only estimated numbers of Sacred Ibis (about 100 flew over us in small flocks as they headed towards their evening roost), Moorhens (also about 100), Little Egrets (about 10) and the elusive Great Bittern (our highest minimum count so far is of 4 individuals). We did not census Grey Herons and Great White Egrets, which are widely scattered over a vast area of farm fields and do not form an evening roost where they can be counted together.

All of our census work meant that birds other than waterbirds received very little attention. We couldn't help but notice the Fieldfares, though: their chattering calls attract the birdwatcher's attention. Like all thrushes, they are fond of red berries, especially hawthorn berries; whenever they find a fruit-laden bush, they descend upon it until they have stripped it bare.





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Weekly Report of 31 January, 2015

The month that ended today featured an extraordinary variety of birds, exceeding that of any previous January at La Cassinazza. Indeed, the entire winter proved quite special, and November and December also featured unprecedented diversity.

Today was exceptional not only in terms of species numbers, but also thanks to the arrival of a rarity, a Great Grey Shrike, a species that had only been seen twice before at La Cassinazza in 15 years. We'll be on the lookout for it in the coming weeks, and it will be interesting to see whether it lingers or was only a one-day wonder.

The Great Grey Shrike was the only new arrival of the week; otherwise, the birdlife was much as it has been for the last month or more. The only other unusual event concerned the great numbers of Tree Sparrows in the sorghum fields. We had not seen such a large flock, comprising hundreds of birds, in years; the Tree Sparrow is one of those species that have undergone a significant population decline recently, for reasons yet unknown.

The Redwing is one of the many winter visitors currently being seen at La Cassinazza. Much like last week's Fieldfare, this species loves hawthorn berries and flocks to these bushes, where they are easy to find as long as they haven't been stripped bare. Once the berries are gone, they head off to new areas in search of more.





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Weekly Report of 07 February, 2015

I was out looking for last week's Great Grey Shrike before sunrise this morning. I found it almost exactly in the same spot as last Saturday; it has clearly established a wintering territory. In fact, it may have been there for a while: we don't check that area often and may have overlooked it in previous weeks, and the suitable habitat is so vast that it is impossible to cover thoroughly.

There were even more Teal than usual today – I estimated 800 and was about to embark on a careful count when, fortunately, a Goshawk distracted me from my tedious task. Perhaps unwittingly, it had crossed into the territory of our local wintering Peregrine. A spectacular, noisy bout of aerial combat ensued, featuring menacing nosedives and lightning-fast evasive manoeuvres. It was more of a show of skills than a fight. The Goshawk, playing an away game, managed to fly off unscathed.

Hazel trees have been in bloom for some time now; it began with a few precocious bushes, but now all trees are in full bloom, against the backdrop of Thursday's snowfall. The hazel trees' hanging yellow flowers are the sign of a cycle starting anew, the first stirring of spring.



The heavy, wet snow flattened parts of the reedbed and seed crops, but enough plants were left standing to feed a multitude of small birds, mostly Reed Buntings, Chaffinches, and Tree Sparrows. For the last couple of winters, several dozen Linnets have joined them. This species used to be absent in winter here, and has become regular thanks to this abundance of resources made available to it.



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Weekly Report of 14 February, 2015

Rain and fog plagued us all day long, making for difficult and unproductive birdwatching. It was one of those disheartening days and at one point I asked myself, what can I possibly write in today's report?

Truth be told, there's always something new to talk about, such as a few more Ruff than those we know overwintered at La Cassinazza – the spring's first migrants, perhaps? – and a lone Spotted Redshank.

So far, however, the most evident bird movements concern the wintering species that are gradually leaving: Brambling and Chaffinch numbers have dropped drastically, and Hawfinches even more so; as abundant as they have been this winter, it was a struggle to find just one today. We haven't seen any Coal Tits in a while, either. The latter two species probably left because they have run out of their favourite food, the seeds of the Field Maple. The thrushes, too, have devoured every hawthorn berry in sight, and are now largely gone

I must admit that even a day as dull as today ultimately managed to give me a moment of pure bliss. As the evening light waned and the colours faded away, the Marsh Harriers coming in to roost emerged from the fog as dark silhouettes flying on agile, lithe wings. Soaring in tight circles, they dropped ever lower, and finally dove into the reedbed and disappeared. Standing still atop the observation tower, I did my best impersonation of a wooden stump, and they kindly pretended not to see me, even though I was quite close. It's a shame I have no photos to convey the magic of those moments.

The Blackbird is also a thrush, and much like its congeners it is attracted to the nutritious berries of hawthorn bushes. Unlike other thrushes – Fieldfare, Redwing, and Song Thrush, migrants all – Blackbirds are here all year, and we cannot tell resident individuals from winter visitors originating in northern Europe.





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Weekly Report of 21 February, 2015

This month of February has not been kind to us, with spring-like weather during the week turning awful on the weekend. Today was no exception.

In spite of this, we recorded no less than 60 species, in large part thanks to the fact that three of us were out in the field: the more eyes (and binoculars) are out there looking, the more we see.

The Great Grey Shrike is still in the same spot, perching on practically the same bush where we found it three weeks ago. This territorial fidelity suggests that it had been present since early this winter, and that we only discovered it quite a bit later.

We saw the first Blackcap on the year, arguably our first spring migrant: each year, Blackcaps disappear from La Cassinazza in November, and return in February. The local climate must be just a hair too harsh to allow them to spend the coldest months of the winter here – they regularly overwinter in city parks and gardens in Milan and Pavia, where temperatures are slightly milder.

For every new arrival, there is a departure: we did not see a single Brambling today, in spite of them being common all winter.

Mallard numbers are dropping rapidly: pair formation has begun, and since the hunting season ended they have been dispersing throughout the local area to find quiet places to hide their nests.

The throngs of waterfowl still conceal a few Gadwalls. Their numbers at La Cassinazza fluctuate from one winter to the next, from a high of 50 or so to a low of one or two individuals. This year, about 15 individuals overwintered, which is about average.

Of all the dabbling ducks, drake Gadwalls have the most understated plumage; perhaps it is this lack of gaudy colours that gives it an elegance all its own.





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Weekly Report of 28 February, 2015

Today clearly marked a change in season, with countless signs of the imminent spring. The temperature was markedly milder: warm enough to encourage the first butterflies (Peacock *Inachis io*, to be precise) to take to the wing, the willows to begin budding, and for the first Dogwood and Blackthorn blossoms to appear. Blue Tits were inspecting nest boxes, the White Stork pair was carrying nesting material, and the first undisputed spring migrants arrived: a Spotted Crake and a Little Crake. They are both elusive dwellers of the reedbed, difficult to locate, let alone see. As such, they make any birdwatcher's day. They had a lot of help today, though.

Sharing the limelight with the crakes were the long-staying Great Grey Shrike (which masterfully evaded all attempts to photograph it ...) and a surprising Wood Lark in full song. One was heard in December as well: could it be that it wintered in a nearby woodlot or poplar grove, to be detected only when it vocalized ?

As if that weren't enough, we also saw just about every expected species for this time of year, keeping in mind that the first migrant waders and Garganey are not expected for another week or so. Our total number of species was an impressive 74. These included Peregrine Falcon, Spoonbill, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Jackdaw, Hen Harrier, and Stonechat, just to mention the ones we were particularly pleased to see.

Penduline Tits are one of the quintessential birds of the reedbed. At La Cassinazza, they are exclusively a winter visitor. In spite of perfect habitat, after many years we have not yet had the pleasure of hosting a breeding pair.





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Weekly Report of 07 March, 2015

We had our first real influx of migrants today, a flock of over 200 Ruff, one of the highest counts ever at La Cassinazza. They often all flushed together, a spectacular synchronized cloud taking to the skies.

True to their Italian name of 'March bird' (Marzaiola), we saw the year's first Garganeys, in addition to the spring's first Little Ringed Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, and Stock Dove – the latter was a species we missed altogether in 2014. The rest of today's list of species – once again, an exceptionally long one – comprised the regular species we expect to see at this time of year. In fact, a few went missing, first and foremost the Great Grey Shrike, which had been present for four weeks straight.

Other species – White Wagtail, Siskin, and Water Rail - seemed more numerous than usual, suggesting a migratory movement was underway. The only species we needed to dig out was the Tawny Owl, which replied to our playback efforts after dark.

At dusk, the Starlings flocked to the highest treetops before flying to their overnight roost. This flocking behaviour won't last much longer: many have already formed pairs, and are off on their own to inspect tree cavities for nesting.





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Weekly Report of 14 March, 2015

The many unusual species we found made it a memorable day for us birdwatchers. It began with a magnificent adult Goshawk. Although it is not really unexpected at La Cassinazza, we had the unique opportunity of watching it at length as it fed on a prey it had just captured, taking its sweet time as the Hooded Crows, keeping a respectful distance, settled for a few scraps.

Soon thereafter, one after the other, we saw the following: two Crag Martins (only the third record at La Cassinazza), two Shelducks, three Alpine Swifts, a Short-toed Eagle, and finally, as we walked across a wet meadow, two Jack Snipe and a Great Snipe, the latter being the first-ever record at La Cassinazza!

Spring migration is thus here in earnest. Among the expected species, we saw over 20 Shovelers, several Little Ringed Plovers, a great many Song Thrushes, lots of Ruff – not as many as last week, but still over a hundred – and a Common Redshank in pristine breeding plumage, the dark markings on its breast particularly evident.

It is spring for plants, too: the willows are in full bloom, and their pollen is an important food source for many of the small songbirds that are about to arrive. The meadows are dotted with wildflower; since La Cassinazza had long been given over to intensive agriculture, only the commonest species survived. Many other widespread species have since re-colonized it, their seeds brought by the wind. Other species, rarer and more prized, such as woodland flowers, had to be re-introduced. This was the case with the Lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*), which has thrived and is now present in many of La Cassinazza's hedgerows and woodlots.





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Weekly Report of 21 March, 2015

A small flock of six Cranes – our 100th species since the beginning of the year – was feeding in the corn stubble early in the day.

The list of seasonal firsts then rapidly grew over the course of the day, with Barn Swallow, House Martin, Common Swift, Black-winged Stilt, Yellow Wagtail, Black Kite, Night Heron, Wood Sandpiper, and Mistle Thrush. In addition, a Greenshank was seen on Friday.

Spring migration is bringing us species that will stay here for the summer and others that are just passing through, and that we won't see until fall.

The White Storks are back on their nests, the same as last year. The pair at Cascina Darsena seems to be incubating already; at La Cassinazza, one nest is occupied by a pair, while a single bird watches over the second one. The situation is thus much as it was last year, except that the three birds now seem to have learned to live together in harmony: they stare at one another indifferently from their nests, and all three were even seen to forage in the farm fields together.

Birds aren't the only animals getting ready for breeding: after sunset, the soft trills of the European Green Toads provided a lovely aural background.

Great White Herons are present at La Cassinazza all year round, although we know for sure that some of the birds we see in winter come from long distances, and replace the birds that are here in summer. Like many other herons, Great Whites are adorned in spring with long, puffy scapular feathers.

