



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2016



Weekly Report of 26 December, 2015

We have almost made it to the end of the year, and temperatures remain well above average and decidedly atypical for winter. One of the consequences of this unseasonal warmth is that the grass in the meadows is still green, with a few wildflowers scattered here and there. Another consequence – a most unwelcome one – is the fog.

Today it was so thick that it made it impossible to see anything, and as such our checklist is very short and contains only those species we heard, plus a few naturally bold birds that came close enough to be seen.

The only species worth mentioning is the Firecrest, quite an uncommon presence here in winter, and perhaps yet another consequence of the exceptional climate.

Today was the last weekly survey of 2015. Over the course of the year we found an unprecedented 161 species of birds (an all-time record) in addition to 22 dragonflies and as many as 40 butterflies (another all-time record).

We will long remember this year for the exceptional variety of the sightings it offered, making for great fun and endless enthusiasm.

A new year of surveys at La Cassinazza is about to begin. We wish you all a happy New Year.





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Weekly Report of 01 January, 2016

For once, we broke with tradition, and our weekly survey did not take place on a Saturday. This was partly due to the fact that going birdwatching on New Year's Day is a good-luck ritual of sorts, but also because the weather forecast for January 2 was awful.

The very first bird of 2016 was a Kestrel that zipped by before the sun was even up, and before I got out of the car. Apart from ushering in a new year list, the day was bereft of rarities or noteworthy encounters: our wintering species are now settled in, and there isn't any migration to speak of at this time of year – unless the long-awaited change in the weather forecast for tomorrow drastically reduces temperatures, and forces those birds still lingering to our north to come down to our latitudes.

In another sign that this anomalous winter has been far too warm, several lungwort and hazel bushes are in blossom: tricked by the unseasonal temperatures, they are far ahead of schedule.

The mild weather is perfect for the Sacred Ibis, about a hundred of which are roosting at La Cassinazza. This tropical species has extensive areas of bare skin, and a rather thin plumage, more suited to cooling off than to warming up. As if that weren't enough, they'd rather sleep with their legs in the water than sheltered in a reedbed or high in a tree, and having wet feet all night is not the best way to preserve body heat. I know it's wrong to interpret animal behaviour through human eyes, but they looked thoroughly chilled at dawn: with their feathers fluffed out and their necks drawn in, they looked more like a ball of rags than a flock of birds ready to take off.





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Weekly Report of 09 January, 2016

The rain never let up today. Thursday, however, was a holiday, and we enjoyed fine weather during this mid-week visit at La Cassinazza; this report includes what we saw then. It is thus a weekly rather than a Saturday report and includes sightings from throughout the week.

They say that winter temperatures have finally arrived, at least in northern Europe, and it may not be a coincidence that this week saw the arrival of several species we had not yet seen this season. The first were the Woodcocks seen last Sunday, followed by two Red Kites that soared in the skies above La Cassinazza all day Thursday, and finally the passage of a flock of 60 Cranes. The Great Grey Shrike is still with us. It is very predictable, and can dependably be found on the same perch, which it uses to hunt insects in the mown grass. It is only there when the sun shines and the insects are out, though. We have yet to discover where it spends the rest of its time.

Today, Saturday, we added a Goshawk – a massive female, so big it did not hesitate to attack a Grey Heron – and two rather unusual species for the winter, Osprey and Firecrest, yet another effect of the out-of-whack climate.



This might be the same reason why seed-eating birds remain scarce. There are dozens of Chaffinches, Bramblings, Greenfinches, Reed Buntings, and Goldfinches in the winter seed crops, but in previous years we would see many hundreds. The switchgrass seed crop is particularly plentiful this year, and it seems to be the favourite among seed-eating birds: the Tree Sparrows can't get enough of them!



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Weekly Report of 16 January, 2016

An odd day it was: temperatures were below freezing in the morning, but butterflies were out in the warm sunny afternoon. It has finally gotten colder, at least at night: we now have a mild winter instead of a warm autumn.

It was enough to cut into the numbers of small insect-eating birds. Chiffchaffs in particular chose to leave: all they need to do is fly a couple of hundred kilometres to the south and they can winter along the shores of the Mediterranean. It's a no-brainer, really. Fieldfare numbers also dropped to zero, not so much for the weather, but for the lack of food. They have stripped the hawthorns bare – their berries are a favourite food – and have moved on to new foraging grounds.

Still here are the Blue Tits – a great many of them – and most of the Goldcrests and Firecrests. The Great Grey Shrike, Goshawk, and two Red Kites are still around, along with several Stonechats, another addition to the list of wintering species.

The Teal put on a great show. Their numbers exploded; there must be a couple of thousand. A single flock on one impoundment had at least a thousand. To see them lift off, the sun glinting off of them, and fly around to and fro without leaving, as they are wont to do, is an indescribable scene.





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Weekly Report of 23 January, 2016

At the end of a freezing cold night, all the waterfowl gathered in the only pond that was not frozen. This small impoundment, just over one hundred meters in diameter, remains ice-free because it is fed by ground water, which stays mild through the winter. This entire operation, including the drilling of the wells, was carried out for the sole purpose of ensuring that waterfowl have ice-free water available even during the coldest times of the year, or when the Naviglio Pavese canal, which feeds La Cassinazza, is dry. This is a unique example of management, protecting a population of wintering waterfowl that is unmatched anywhere in the local area. Teal are particularly tied to ice-free water; the Mallards seem willing to waddle on the ice as they wait for the sun to melt it, and their flocks are more widely scattered. The number of either makes La Cassinazza one of the most important sites for these species in Lombardy, and of national relevance as well.

The day's star was a huge Peregrine Falcon, which we saw perched and in flight. It never took its eyes off of us, watching us over its shoulder. As soon as a camera appeared, it decided it was too much and flew away on powerful wingbeats, beguiling and impressive all at once. The presence of Firecrests is of particular interest: they had not previously overwintered at La Cassinazza. Most of all, they are tiny, cute, lively, and colourful: a joy to watch.





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Weekly Report of 30 January, 2016

An unexpected rain fell this morning, in spite of weather forecasts to the contrary. And when the rain stopped, the fog stayed behind. With little light and no visibility, it was not a suitable day for birdwatching. It was one of those mornings when you ask yourself why you're outdoors getting wet when you could be inside, a steaming hot drink in your hands. We did not see much.

What little we found included a Great Bittern, which saw me before I saw it and froze among the reeds; I only noticed it when it flushed from nearly underfoot. As always.

Also of interest were several singing Little Spotted Woodpeckers; the males begin to be territorial at this time of year.

In addition to waterfowl, the impoundments are hosting about 30 Common Snipe, 50/60 Lapwings, several Green Sandpipers, and two Ruff: the totality of the wintering wader population. It's not much, in spite of what appears to be the warmest winter ever. We've had larger numbers in the past during harsh winters.

On the other hand, the Teal are more abundant than they have ever been. Every week – today was no exception – we see at least one thousand, sometimes significantly more. Their calls were the soundtrack to the entire day.





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Weekly Report of 06 February, 2016

After several bright sunny days, skies were overcast all day long. Nevertheless, visibility remained excellent, as testified by the lengthy list of species we saw, once again back to nearly 70. This reflects an exceptional variety for the late winter period, when numbers of both species and individuals should be at an annual low.

Indeed, a drop in songbird numbers is quite evident: although all expected species are present, the woods and hedgerows seem rather empty.

Many birds have left after lingering a while, and inevitably some will have not made it through the season. Winter mortality is no joke for small birds; although the weather was mild, it is not the only risk factor.

On the other hand, waterbird numbers remained high over the last few weeks.

Today we found all of the species typical of this winter: Firecrest, Great Grey Shrike, Stonechat, Linnets, and Red Kite.

Towards evening, we began to see numerous Sacred Ibis as they gathered for an impressive roost of 200 birds. They are the most abundant species in the stork family here in winter, quite remarkable since they are both non-native and tropical in origin.

The Blue Tits remain abundant, as they have since last fall, and they are perhaps the true stars of this winter: of all the small passerines we see, at least half are Blue Tits.





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Weekly Report of 13 February, 2016

Winter is coming to an end. Many small signs suggest spring is just around the corner.

The melodious songs of Blackbirds in the pre-dawn darkness.

The territorial calls of Coots, which are already paired off.

The Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*), of all the butterflies the most quintessential harbinger of spring.

The very first spring migrant birds, about ten Pintail, usually the earliest ducks to return after the winter.

Finally, the bell-like blossoms of the Spring Snowflake (*Leucojum vernalis*), whose very name references the end of winter. At La Cassinazza it is a rare and much sought-after flower; it was a thrill to find it, and not just because it heralds a change of season.

We were equally pleased to find two old friends we had not seen for months at La Cassinazza.

The Little Owl, which for years could reliably be seen on the chimney stack of the main house, seemed to have disappeared after the roof was renovated. Instead, it had just moved to a ledge where it likely feels more sheltered, and where it is harder to spot.

And a Tawny Owl – another species that had gone missing for quite a while – sang in the dark as the day came to a close.





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Weekly Report of 20 February, 2016

The small hints of spring I mentioned in last week's report have quickly turned into concrete signs of the coming season.

The two White Storks that have bred at Cascina Darsena for many years now are back at their nest, and they have already begun their mating rituals. These individuals have lost their migratory instinct and stayed in the local area over the winter. This is now a common behaviour among southern European storks: with all of the refuse available in landfills and the abundance of rats, they can find plenty of food even during the coldest time of year. Our other local storks will arrive later, in accordance with their migratory schedule.

Several spring migrants appeared: a drake Garganey, the earliest ever at La Cassinazza; a dozen Green Sandpipers, which augmented the small contingent of wintering birds; and many Common Buzzards soaring on the thermals in the mid-day sun.

Whether it was a migrant or not, today's undisputed star was the Woodcock we flushed while walking in the woods.

The plant life is also heralding the coming spring: the Dogwood (*Cornus mas*) bushes are dotted with small yellow blossoms, and the budding willows will also soon be in flower.





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Weekly Report of 23 February, 2016

Today we had great expectations that the storm that rolled in during the night would have grounded some migratory birds. As always, our optimism was excessive, but we were not too disappointed with the outcome, even though the species we saw were not the ones we expected.

Finches, whose numbers had dropped greatly in recent weeks, were instead abundant, with two large flocks containing hundreds of Chaffinches and Goldfinches, together with many Greenfinches and a handful of Bramblings.

Blue Tits and Siskins are also migrating through. Their flocks forage frenetically, and their numbers are much higher than those of the wintering contingent. Siskins, as they do, spend most of their time on alder trees, while the Blue Tits seek out willow buds, ever-ready to exploit new sources of food.

Another species that's passing through is the Fieldfare, with many dozen birds, mostly in small groups, with only one large flock.

The Great Grey Shrike has stayed put so far, but I expect that the winter's rarest bird will depart any day now.

On the other hand, the Teal are definitely leaving: over the course of the month, their numbers have dropped by half each week, and there are now no more than 300. Mallard numbers have also dropped considerably, but this is because pairs are now scattered around the countryside as they seek out suitable nesting sites.

Many of the trees in the hedgerows are now in flower: dogwoods, blackthorns, elms, poplars, and the many varieties of willows; unfortunately, the rain that is now falling will end up ruining them.





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Weekly Report of 05 March, 2016

For a spring day, the weather could not possibly have been any worse: driving rainy, icy wind, thunder, and even a little sleet.

In spite of this, we enjoyed some pretty decent birding, perhaps as a reward for our persistence under the relentless rain.

An influx of Teal was quite evident, as their numbers climbed back up to around 700 or so.

With them were 30 Shovelers, a remarkable number for this species, especially considering that the peak of their migration is yet to come. Waterfowl also accounted for the day's biggest surprise: four Shelduck, a very uncommon species at La Cassinazza, and a record count.

And speaking of record counts, we can't fail to mention the 270 Sacred Ibis we counted (twice, just to make sure) in the flooded meadows, as they scrupulously foraged for any small creature fleeing the waterlogged soil.

Another record, that for earliest arrival ever, was set by the season's first two Black-winged Stilts.

On the other hand, the year's first two Black-tailed Godwits were perfectly on time according to their migratory schedule.

We were also told about the hundreds of Cranes that flew over La Cassinazza last Monday and Tuesday.



Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers are generally rather elusive and uncommon birds.

They were altogether absent from La Cassinazza during our first few years of surveys, but they are now well-established breeding residents, and we regularly see them on our outings.

We have only rarely been able to photograph them, though.



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Weekly Report of 12 March, 2016

Spring migration is starting in earnest. For the next several weeks, news on unusual migrants, first arrivals, and high counts will feature heavily in our reports from La Cassinazza.

The rice fields at Cascina Darsena, which remain flooded even outside the rice growing season, were crowded with waders: about 120 Ruff, even more Lapwings, a handful of Black-tailed Godwits, and last week's four Shelduck; a lone Spotted Redshank, the year's first, was among them. Other new arrivals included Little Ringed Plover, Willow Warbler, Blackcap, and Little Crake, which sticks to dense vegetation and is always difficult to see. The second pair of White Storks has also returned, and is back on the same nest it used last year, on the church steeple at Baselica.

Many birds sense the breeding season coming on and are beginning to sing, including some species that will move to nest somewhere else: Firecrest, Goldcrest, and Black Redstart. The Great Grey Shrike has not yet heeded migration's call, and was back on the usual perches it used all winter.

The Siskins, which usually associated closely with alders, now have a new source of food: the red catkins of the black poplars. Unlike the tiny alder seeds, which remain on the plant throughout the season, these catkins won't last long, and the Siskins must take advantage of them before they fall to the ground.





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Weekly Report of 19 March, 2016

The Ruff decided to put on a show: there are almost 300 of them, and they are snubbing La Cassinazza's impoundments in favour of two flooded rice fields right next to the public road. And they are easily enjoyed by the local birdwatchers – there are only a handful – who stop along the bike path to watch them. Together with the Ruff are Lapwings, Green Sandpipers, Spotted Redshanks, and 12 Black-tailed Godwits, the latter an excellent count for a species that is historically scarce at La Cassinazza.

The 50 Shovelers were also remarkable, while there were only 16 Garganey. There is still time for them, as sometimes their migration peaks in April instead of March.

The four Shelduck that spent a fortnight at La Cassinazza departed Friday night, and the Great Grey Shrike was nowhere to be seen, either.

New arrivals this week included Swallows and Night Herons, both perfectly on time. Now that they are here, and with the first Black-winged Stilts returning to their colony, we can truly say that spring is upon us.

This was confirmed by the butterflies, on the wing in good numbers for the first time today thanks to the pleasantly warm afternoon. We saw at least five species.

Songbird migration is not yet evident. Only Chiffchaffs, which were around all winter, seemed to be on the move today.

As on several other occasions this winter, today we found a Siberian Chiffchaff (subspecies *tristis*) among the Common Chiffchaffs. Separating the two on plumage is only for astute experts, who rely on subtle colour shades and small details. When it sings or calls, however, there is no mistaking it: its distinctive vocalizations make it immediately recognizable.

