



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 24 December, 2016

In the rosy glow of dawn, the Great Grey Shrike was one of the first birds we saw. It had gone missing the last several weeks.

Now that visibility is finally good again, we were able to count the waterbirds. There seemed to be a great many Teal, and I decided to count them one by one instead of making my usual rough estimate. The total was quite surprising: 1,700! And it is quite likely that I missed a few. This is an unprecedented count for La Cassinazza. Several thousand Mallards were a routine total, and among them I found 15 Shovelers, as many Wigeon, and a pair of Pintail. In spite of an extensive effort to find them, I did not see any Gadwalls; their numbers fluctuate from one year to the next, and this winter none seem to be around. Several other regular wintering species are conspicuous for their absence: Penduline Tit, Brambling, and Hawfinch. It seems that we will have to do without them this season.

After sunset, the whistled calls of the Marsh Harriers attracted our attention: about twenty of them circled over the reedbed, where they would then spent the night. This is a small number in absolute terms, but an impressive concentration for this species. It was a wonderful show to end the day.

The Shoveler owes its name to the peculiar shape of its bill; from below, this is even more evident.

Merry Christmas to everyone.





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Weekly Report of 31 December, 2016

Some moments are difficult to describe. In the early morning fog and frost, I was standing motionless by the water's edge when a flock of Teal took flight. They began flying in circles, as they often do, and followed the same trajectory, which brought them right up to me only to circle behind me: they appeared out of the fog, banked once they were so close that I could not only hear their wings whirring, but I could even feel the wind against my face, and then disappeared, only to emerge from the fog once again. They did this over and over, while uttering their soft calls. I was not a threat to them, but a beacon of sorts. It was pure magic.

Once the fog lifted, it became evident that despite the ice, the number of waterfowl remained as high as last week, although I did not count them this time. Indeed, major migratory movements are unlikely at this time of year, unless a drastic change in the weather mandates it.

Everything remained as it was last week then, with the exception of a remarkable rarity, which I ran into by chance in the morning in the fields of Cascina Darsena: a magnificent dark-morph Booted Eagle. With a bunch of Hooded Crows in relentless pursuit, it soon flew off towards the east.

The Peregrine Falcon that took possession of La Cassinazza's skies last fall is a juvenile, born last summer, as its streaky plumage shows. As is often the case for youngsters, she – the large size suggests a female – is impetuous, brazen, and loud. Once again she was attacking Marsh Harriers and Cormorants for no other reasons than to assert her primacy. And at dusks, when she settles onto its favourite branch to spend the night, her harsh calls are heard by the entire bird community. And by the photographer.





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Weekly Report of 07 January, 2017

The new year finally brought us some proper cold weather; nevertheless, it does not appear destined to stay, and last night will probably turn out to be the season's coldest. The impoundments are largely frozen, but this does not seem to have affected waterfowl numbers, which remain quite high. The Teal, in particular, still totaled well over one thousand. The cold snap brought with it one of the few regularly wintering species we had not seen yet, the Penduline Tit, albeit only a handful of individuals. The other species that is missing is the Hen Harrier, but we have not had a sniff of it so far.

On the other hand, two noteworthy species are still present, and they were among the first we saw on our initial birdwatching outing of the new year: the Great Grey Shrike we knew to be wintering here, and two Red Kites. We already suspected the latter may also be wintering here, having seen them a couple of times over the last two months. Their behaviour is what makes them elusive: they only arrive to roost here in the canopy of the tallest poplars, and leave before the sun is up. We don't know where their hunting grounds are, and they rarely return before dusk.

A thick layer of ice covers the main impoundment, and a Red Fox took advantage of it to walk across its surface. In settled areas, Red Foxes are mainly nocturnal; hunting must have been unproductive on this icy night, and this particular fox was still out and about in the light of dawn.





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Weekly Report of 14 January, 2017

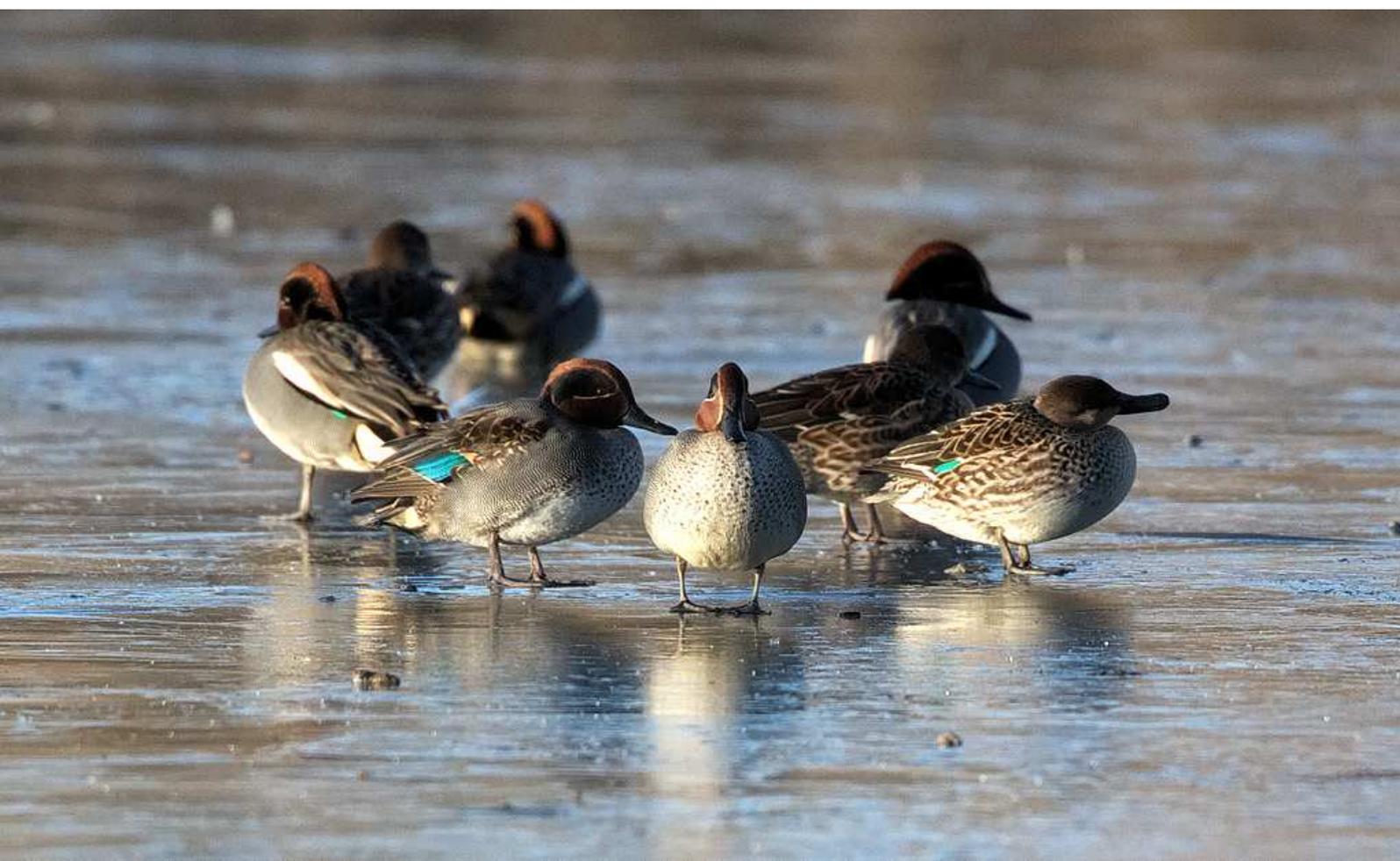
Today was dedicated to the International Waterbird Count, and so the focus of our attention was on waterfowl. Most of La Cassinazza's impoundments are frozen, and the ducks crowd into what little open water remains, making it easier to achieve an exact count.

And the results were surprising. What I figured were about 5,000 Mallards turned out to actually be 7,300 once we were done painstakingly counting them! In addition, there were 800 Teal, 22 Wigeon, and one each of Shoveler and Pintail. This was an impressive concentration of birds, and I am quite sure it will turn out to be the largest in Lombardy and quite significant at the national level as well.

Other waterbirds we counted included 3 Great Bitterns, about 100 Cormorants, 10 Great White Egrets, 3 Little Egrets (a few were found dead, killed by the cold snap), 2 Spoonbills, 18 Sacred Ibis, 85 Coots, a hundred or so Moorhen, a handful of Common Snipe, Water Rails, and Lapwings, and finally 19 Marsh Harriers coming in to their evening roost.

We were too busy to pay much attention to the other good birds we saw: a Red Kite, a Great Grey Shrike, two Peregrine Falcons, and Penduline Tits, finally in good numbers now that cold temperatures are upon us.

There are fewer Teal compared to the last few weeks. Watching them on the ice at dawn, these small ducks seem to be ill-equipped to deal with the freeze





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Weekly Report of 21 January, 2017

Yet another week of below-zero temperatures could not fail to have an impact. There are less than half the Mallards there were last week, and the Wigeon are gone, at least for now. On the other hand, the Teal seem not to mind the ice, and their numbers might have even gone up.

The effects of the cold are evident on small songbirds: Chiffchaffs and Cetti's Warblers are practically gone, while Robins and tits are much reduced in numbers.

We found two new firsts for the season today: Hen Harrier and Stock Dove. Another Peregrine Falcon has joined our wintering resident, which has been here for at least three months. The two seem to tolerate each other without clashing. The new arrival appears to be an adult male.

Moving beyond birds, now is the time for an event that happens every January, yet never ceases to amaze me: as soon as the days begin to lengthen, and regardless of the temperature, hazel trees begin to bloom. It is a sign of a cycle starting over again.



The Little Owl takes advantage of sunny afternoons to soak in some warmth; much like a wise gnome, it observes everything that is happening around it. If we know where to look, we can find it without fail.



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Weekly Report of 28 January, 2017

The ice seems to be loosening its grip. The effects of three freezing weeks can be clearly seen. Passerines have thinned out; in fact, they are downright scarce, and we missed many species altogether. The most vulnerable of all is thought to be the Cetti's Warbler: it undergoes population cycles as each harsh winter decimates local populations, sometimes wiping them away altogether. This has been the case over the last ten years at La Cassinazza, a history of local extinctions followed by fitful recoveries. I only heard a single bird all day. The Teal, Mallards, and a handful of Shovelers have remained faithful to La Cassinazza, their numbers essentially the same as last week. The same is true of the evening roost of Marsh Harriers, with about twenty birds present. The numbers of roosting Sacred Ibis seem to fluctuate much more; this evening we counted 160. We have had higher numbers at La Cassinazza not too long ago; Sacred Ibis are very unpredictable, they change roosting sites often, and seeing them one week does not mean they will be back the next.

The Penduline Tit is a quintessential winter bird. They usually get here in October, but this year we had to wait until the new year for only a few birds to arrive.





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Weekly Report of 04 February, 2017

The temperatures have risen and we have finally had some rain, after two months of near-total drought. The beginning of February, right after a freeze, isn't exactly a time of year when we anticipate a lot of bird activity, and our expectations were low. We were quickly proven wrong: several large flocks of Fieldfares and a group of at least 40 Wigeon (plus others that were too distant to count in the morning fog) heralded some early movements by birds eager to return north. And because I was not expecting anything, I found the unexpected: a Pied Avocet. This coastal species is rarely seen in inland wetlands; there were only three previous records for La Cassinazza. This particular individual looked exhausted and spent most of its time resting: wherever it came from, it must have been a tough journey. It was quite odd, in the evening, to see it roosting among the Sacred Ibis. I know it does not make sense, but I could not help but think that the two species – both with a black-and-white plumage, both with curved bills – share some similarities, and that the avocet might have found the presence of the ibis reassuring. Shovelers are always uncommon at La Cassinazza in winter; this year there are no more than 5 or 6. A couple are young males, born last summer, and which have not yet acquired adult plumage. Seen up close, the grotesque bill proves to be a sophisticated tool for filtering all the particles that are suspended in the water.





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Weekly Report of 11 February, 2017

It was a dull and dreary day, both with regards to the weather and the birds. After all, it is about the worst time of year for birdwatching: wintering birds have thinned out, but migration has not really started. Last Saturday's sightings were more the result of good luck than of an early migration.

Hedgerows and bushes in particular seem totally bereft of birds: the Chiffchaffs are long gone, and today we could not even find a single Goldcrest or Firecrest, species that we had started to take for granted this winter.

The only new arrivals were a hundred or so Lapwings and a handful of Green Sandpipers.

Still, we were very happy to hear Cetti's Warblers in song, a sign that many survived the hard freeze, which is always a critical time of year for this species.

The Wren is another quintessential winter bird. In spite of its tiny size, it has very loud voice, which is quite surprising for a bird that weighs only 5 or 6 grams. It is no coincidence that it is known as the "king of the hedgerows" in the local dialect: it proclaims its presence so forcefully that it can only be their absolute, unquestioned ruler.





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Weekly Report of 18 February, 2017

Although there was nothing spring-like about today, this morning Blue Tits were singing lustily and a pair of Lapwings was already defending a territory in the fields that will soon be ploughed. The alders in bloom and the willow buds about to burst also testify to the coming season.

My birdwatching efforts however were lacklustre at best, and today's checklist will probably remain one of the year's poorest.

While I was not very motivated, there is still a moment that I would not give up for anything: watching the Marsh Harriers come down to roost in the reedbed at sundown. It has become a ceremony of sorts, my favourite time of day at La Cassinazza, and I simply cannot miss it: just me and the harriers in the deepening dusk. They clearly realize I am watching them, but they are not afraid: they never come too close, but do not seem worried. Finally, when it's almost dark, they drop down into the reeds just 50 meters from me; sometimes I can even watch them as they get ready to go to sleep. There are never less than twenty – I counted 25 today – and I am sure they are always the same individuals. They will not stay long: soon they will leave for their breeding grounds, and we will see each other next winter.

The Dunnock is a regular wintering species here in the Po Plain. Due to its elusive nature, it is hard to see in the dense hedgerows it inhabits. We must usually settle for hearing its call.





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Weekly Report of 25 February, 2017

The wind swept out the skies overnight, making for a bright, crystal-clear morning. Right away, this put us in a good mood.

Many changes are afoot in the world of nature.

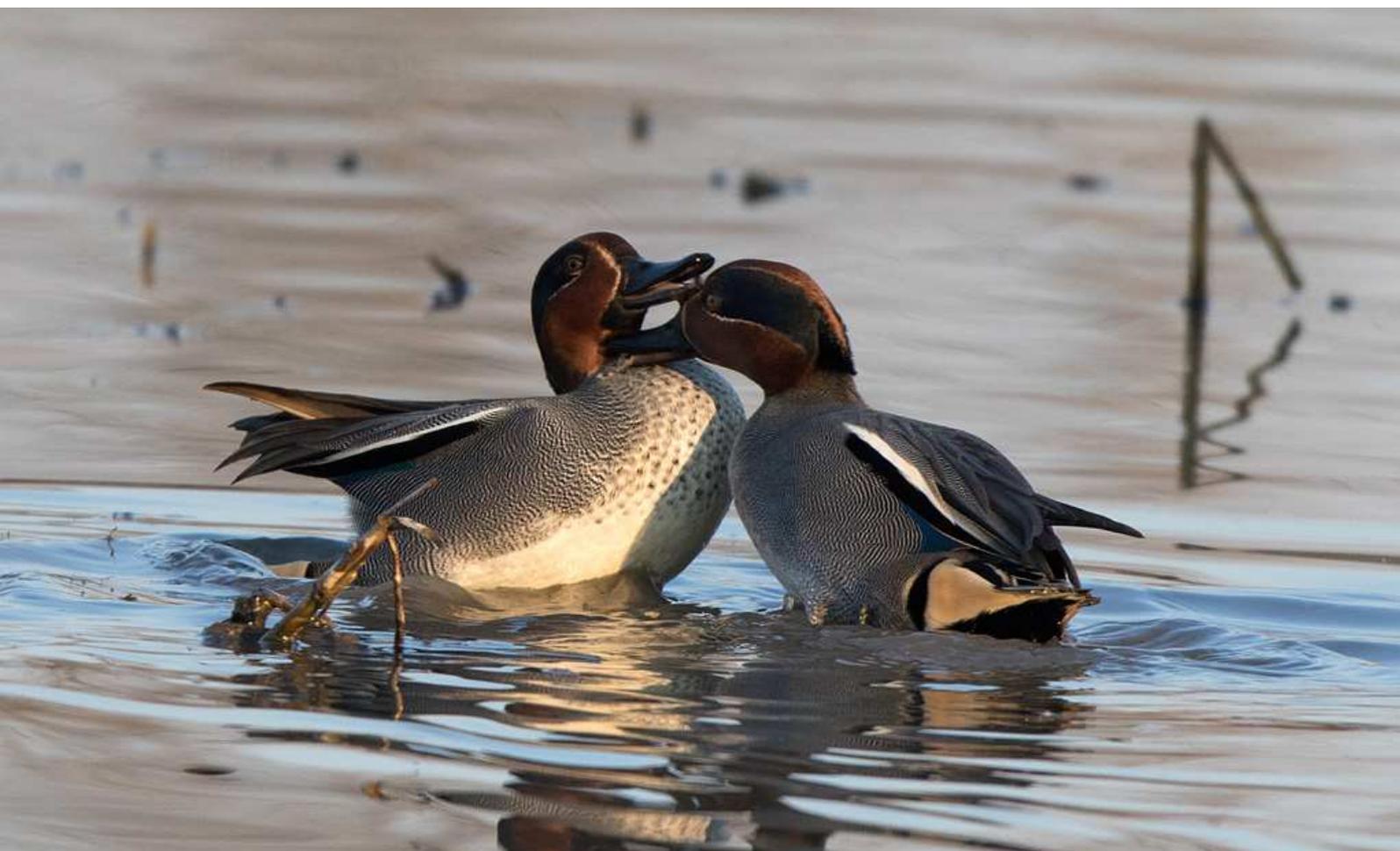
First of all, the White Storks are back. In addition to our resident pair, which spends the entire year here, the other two pairs were also back on their nests today. Chiffchaffs and Skylarks, which had been driven out by the cold of winter, also returned.

And there were also some new arrivals: Gadwall, which we had not seen at all during the winter, and an influx of Fieldfares.

The winter throngs of Mallards, which were in their thousands only a month ago, are now just a memory as pairs are scattering through the countryside looking for suitable nesting spots.

I'm afraid my beloved Marsh Harriers are also heading back to their breeding grounds, as their numbers were less than half of what they were last Saturday. The sunny afternoon produced our first Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*), the butterfly that heralds spring more than any other.

Lingering winter birds included the Great Grey Shrike, which I had presumed gone, and the Peregrine, which was busy hunting Teal. Many of the latter have already left, while the remaining drakes are feeling the onset of the breeding season: they are quite restless and are often squabbling.





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Weekly Report of 04 March, 2017

After a stretch of weather that felt like a Mediterranean spring, today's awful storms were more reminiscent of the North Sea. Or perhaps of an Alpine meadow, since a Mistle Thrush was singing from atop a poplar. Its powerful, somewhat dissonant song was unfamiliar to me and had me stumped until I managed to see the songster. Immediately after that, however, the driving rain and strong winds put an end to any hopes of birdwatching. In such a context, the first timid blossoms of the willows and cornel cherries seemed entirely out of place.

The weather finally improved in the afternoon, allowing us to go out again. Chiffchaffs definitely seem to be on the move: they were entirely absent two weeks ago but were quite numerous today, the commonest of the songbirds. Blackcaps are back – they usually vacate La Cassinazza in the dead of winter – and there was a minor influx of Shovelers and Snipe.

A Hen Harrier was hunting over the open fields. This species was more common in winter years ago, when the temperatures were colder. They can now winter in the plains of central Europe, without having to move further south.

Finally, two migratory species were new for the year: Spotted Redshank and Spotted Crake. The Water Rail is a close relative of the latter and is also a migrant, albeit one that spends the entire winter here. Neither is easily observed.





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Weekly Report of 11 March, 2017

The weather has been oscillating between extremes and today it gave us a wonderfully warm and sunny day.

In addition to the sun, the day was also brightened by a morning encounter with a flock of 18 Golden Plovers in a ploughed field. This species is not quite annual at La Cassinazza, and all of our previous records had involved single birds.

Not much later, we had a nice sighting of five Black-tailed Godwits, a regular yet rather scarce migrant here. Not all waders are as graceful and elegant as godwits are, and it is always a pleasure to see them.

Finally, today marked the arrival of one of the quintessential species of early spring, the Garganey, whose Italian name Marzaiola roughly translates as 'March bird'. Today's birds were almost all drakes; the hens usually arrive a little later.

Other new arrivals today included Yellow Wagtail and Serin.

The local Lapwings have established territories in the bare ploughed fields and are getting ready to nest.

Mallard pairs are already incubating eggs, and one can find them in every ditch or puddle. Actually, the hens remain invisible as they crouch down on their nests, and only the drakes are encountered as they stand guard over the females. One never knows when a rival might jeopardize their paternity.





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Weekly Report of 18 March, 2017

It is a truism – a cliché, even – to say that spring migration is bringing loads of new species for the year. This will be the routine for the coming weeks.

There was nothing routine about the Glossy Ibis we saw today, one of the many new species for the season. It was a beautiful adult, whose chocolate-coloured plumage flashed green in the sunlight. The last Glossy Ibis to be seen at La Cassinazza was seven years ago.

The Black-winged Stilts arrived en masse this week, with over 60 individuals seen. One was ringed and was present at La Cassinazza last year as well, when it nested successfully. We know it hatched in May 2007. This is a remarkable age for a bird that has migrated across the Sahara and back ten times.

Other new arrivals included Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, and the first of the songbird migrants, a Willow Warbler.

The Marsh Harrier pair is now on territory and the male displays above the reedbed.

Other noteworthy sightings today included Mistle Thrush, Stock Dove, several Spotted Crakes, a flock of Shovelers, and the usual Peregrine that spent the winter here, and which once again put on a show for us.

