



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2018



Weekly Report of 23 December, 2017

The month of December had not been this cold for a number of years now; if we did have a freeze, it did not come until the middle of January. This year is different: La Cassinazza was already in the grip of ice today, silent and still.

The waterfowl were a notable exception: their numbers just as high as they were last Saturday, they crowded into the remaining ice-free areas, which made the flocks look all the more impressive. Once again, Teal were abundant, with at least two thousand on show.

Songbird numbers however dropped dramatically, with seed-eating birds – Chaffinches, Bramblings, and especially Reed Buntings – the only ones maintaining a healthy presence. Most of the thrushes are gone along with the majority of the insect-eating birds: Chiffchaff, Cetti's Warbler, and Firecrest were all absent.

Pipit numbers also dropped. Of all our winter guests, Meadow and Water Pipits are among the least conspicuous. Their colours are drab, and they crouch among the rice stubble and clumps of mud. Seeing them on the ground is difficult, and they are best found thanks to their flight calls, which while characteristic, are not particularly loud or distinctive. They are so anonymous that today's photo of a Meadow Pipit is the first we ever devoted to them.

Merry Christmas to you all.





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Weekly Report of 30 December, 2017

In the early pre-dawn glow, a small island in the middle of the main pond appeared to be covered by a thick white layer. Could it be snow? Impossible, it did not snow. Ice, perhaps? Not a half-meter layer of it. As the light increased the white layer turned into a flock of Sacred Ibis, huddled together for the night. A taller hump right in the middle was a Spoonbill.

Speaking of roosts, the Marsh Harriers have failed to show up for several weeks now, to my great chagrin. It seems they are now spending the night elsewhere, much like the Red Kites, which have been unaccounted for the last two weeks.

A second Peregrine Falcon has arrived in their stead, but it has not yet solved a border dispute with the resident Peregrine: the two put on quite the dogfight. It seems that two Peregrines cannot share the same sky.

The Little Owl is once again peeking out from behind the chimney stack; we had not seen it since mid-September. It happens every year: it seems to disappear for a couple of months after the breeding season, only to come back in early winter. It appeared a little later than usual this year.

To all of you friends, my best wishes for a joyful and successful New Year.





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Weekly Report of 06 January, 2018

Someone once wrote that "there is no such thing as bad weather, but only bad moods". My mood must have been truly foul today then, since the rain and fog soon extinguished any desire I had of birdwatching. As a consequence, my sightings were few and lackadaisical.

As always at La Cassinazza, there were plenty of waterfowl. I did not even try to estimate their numbers: next week the International Waterbirds Count will take place and we will carry out a comprehensive census.

Also par for the course were sightings of Great Bittern, Peregrine Falcon, Marsh Harriers, Spoonbill, Coal Tit, a Stock Dove in a flock of thousands of Woodpigeons, a couple of lingering Little Egrets, and a full supporting cast, for a total of about 50 species, not such a bad haul for a rainy day.

The Little Owl in last week's photo was on the roof of the main house, and today's photo was taken from inside the house itself. The balcony overlooks a ditch and a Kingfisher used the railing as a perch from which to dive for minnows. It is used to people moving on the inside and pays them no mind. On the contrary, it watched me with a curious looked on its face while I fiddled with my camera just a couple of meters away. It doesn't get much easier than this....





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Weekly Report of 13 January, 2018

Standing by the reedbed at dawn and watching it awaken is captivating. All of the birds that spent the night there – Reed Buntings, Chaffinches, Bramblings, Penduline Tits, Blue Tits, and smaller numbers of other birds - begin their day and flit around restlessly. The entire reedbed comes to life; within half an hour, all of the birds will have left and it will seem deserted.

Perched on a branch, a Peregrine Falcon was also asleep. It voiced its displeasure at my disturbing it, quietly at first, then with loud shrieks. As I was walking underneath it our eyes locked for a few seconds before it flew off. Encounters like these are only possible early in the morning. Later in the day, Peregrines keep their distance.

For organizational reasons, we postponed the annual wintering waterbird census to next Saturday. I'll have a detailed report next week.

The hazelnut buds are beginning to open. As inconspicuous as they are, they are still a sign that nature is reawakening and a new cycle is beginning.

The Siskin is one of our typical wintering species. It is very closely associated with alder trees: the small catkins and their tiny seeds are its favourite food.





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Weekly Report of 20 January, 2018

The fateful day of the International Waterbird Census, the communal rite that brings together the community of birdwatchers from Europe and beyond, finally arrived. La Cassinazza, of course, played its part. The 'official' numbers may yet see some changes as we finish adding up the notes jotted in our notebooks, but I think I can already provide a rather accurate summary.

After last year's record high, Mallard numbers dropped to below average, with just a little over 3,000. All the other species were in line with expectations: almost a thousand Teal, plus 20 Shovelers, 17 Gadwall, 8 Wigeon, 1 Pochard, 25 Coots, almost 100 Lapwings (a flock that flew by, so difficult to count), two Common Snipe, a single Green Sandpiper, 2 Great Bitterns, 2 Little Grebes, and 2 Little Egrets. The numbers for Grey Heron, Great White Egret, and Water Rail are not yet in. Moorhens were widely scattered and they were counted a few days ago, for a total of 180. At their evening roots, we counted 130 Cormorants, 130 Sacred Ibis, and 30 Cattle Egrets.

The most unexpected sighting was a Goshawk that plucked a Teal from under our very eyes, one less bird for the census!

Although it is not a waterbird, the year's first Hen Harrier was nevertheless of note. Landbirds, for once, played second fiddle.

Today's photo can only be of a spectacular flight of Teal, a common show at La Cassinazza.





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Weekly Report of 27 January, 2018

This time I'm struggling. It is not easy to find anything to say about today, with its steady rain, in spite of a late improvement. La Cassinazza always gives me something of note: an interesting sighting, a thrilling encounter, a rarity, or just an abundance of birds. But not today.

This was due to a combination of factors: the rain, a lack of time, and the fact that I stayed away from the wetlands. This was the last weekend of the hunting season, and I was reluctant to disturb the waterfowl knowing that hunters were waiting just outside the property, hoping for a shot at a bird that strayed from the safety of La Cassinazza.

By this time in the season, there are not many landbirds around. They tend to disperse during the day, and they are thin on the ground.

Nevertheless, I did manage to confirm that the Coal Tit is wintering here this year. It is far from annual, occurring only when a favourable breeding season has boosted populations in northern Europe enough to push them southwards in search of unoccupied wintering territories. This is only the fourth winter since the year 2000 that we have had them at La Cassinazza.





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Weekly Report of 03 February, 2018

It is now the middle of winter, Candlemass.

As we know, the birds have a different calendar than ours, and it is now – the very heart of winter – that the first signs of a reawakening can be perceived.

In the pre-dawn darkness, the Blackbirds belt out their melody, the Coots squawk and chase one another, and the Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers' song echoes from the poplar tops. These are subtle signs, but they all show that the struggle to establish a breeding territory is on.

What's more, adult Cormorants now have white heads and tarsal feathers, and the Gadwalls have left.

All in all, many birds are now getting ready for the coming breeding season.

Most of our wintering species, however, will stay put for several more weeks as conditions improve.

Of all the species that winter at La Cassinazza, the Great Bittern is the rarest and most prized: it is listed as a priority bird species under the EU's Habitats Directive. Seeing it is challenging and is always a thrill. To be able to photograph it from a few meters away is a priceless opportunity.





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Weekly Report of 10 February, 2018

The first spring migrants of the year were a small flock of Pintail, almost all drakes. I will now take the opportunity to recap the events of this past winter. They include several negative developments, which I will detail here not to wallow in pessimism, but for the sake of a complete chronicle. The only interesting wintering species La Cassinazza hosted this year were Coal Tit and Firecrest; the Great Grey Shrike let us down, after three consecutive winters here, and the Red Kites dashed our hopes, disappearing after a short sojourn early in the season. Among waterbirds, Teal were at an all-time high, with some daily counts above 2,000. After peaking in November, Mallard numbers fell by more than half by the time of the I.W.C. Apart from a handful of Common Snipe and Lapwings, very few waders attempted to overwinter.

Sparrow numbers fell dramatically: after a decade-long decline that mostly affected Tree Sparrow, a sudden collapse in Italian Sparrow numbers became evident in winter 2017.

I saved the worst for last. In 2009 two Spoonbills took up residence at La Cassinazza, and since 2012 they have been breeding at the Villarasca rookery. The last time I saw them together was a month ago; since then, I had only ever seen a single individual. Today I found the other. It was dead – from the looks of it, for several weeks.

All winter long the skies above La Cassinazza have had an undisputed master: the Peregrine Falcon. Whenever it flies over it sows panic among the Lapwings and Teal. At rest, it towers above the area from atop the tallest tree.





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Weekly Report of 24 February, 2018

I've very rarely failed to send the weekly report. This is one of those occasions, due to some unforeseen circumstances. Today's mailing thus covers two weeks, with sightings from the entire period. And now back to our sightings.

The seven or eight Pintail that had arrived at La Cassinazza on the 10th lingered for about a week before leaving.

Some more early spring arrivals included the White Storks, which have already re-occupied all four nests and have resumed their squabbling; numerous Cattle Egrets and the Blackcaps are also back at La Cassinazza until next winter. On the other hand, a couple of Ruff in a Lapwing flock, a Red Kite, and some Song Thrushes and Hawfinches were also passing through.

The two dozen Shovelers may be the same birds as in mid-winter, or perhaps newly-arrived birds that have replaced them. The Peregrine that was giving no quarter to the Teal and Lapwings was certainly the same individual as in past weeks, as was the Goshawk that is wintering locally.

When fishing in shallow water, Great White Egrets use a tried-and-true technique, popular with other herons as well. They shuffle their feet on the muddy bottom and carefully watch for any potential prey fleeing the disturbance. This makes it possible for them to capture small fish and other creatures that would have otherwise remained motionless and invisible in the mud.





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Weekly Report of 03 March, 2018

The beginning of March brought us the coldest temperatures and the only snowfall of the winter, breaking up what seemed to be a preview of spring. It was fun reading the tracks left on the snow by the animals that came before me: Roe Deer, Red Fox, Wild Boar, Italian Hare, Cottontail, Nutria, and even rats, plus the footprints of all the birds that forage on the ground, from the tiniest prints to the Great White Egret's giant ones. In the freezing cold morning, the waterfowl retreated before the advancing ice, and in the bushes Blue Tits, Great Tits, Long-tailed Tits, and Wren frenetically flitted about in search of a bite to eat. Robins took over the few patches on open ground beneath the densest canopies, and fought over them, facing off and chasing one another. The Blackbirds sought shelter behind the cascades of English Ivy, which provides cover and berries.

All too soon, even before mid-morning, the snow began falling hard, with icy squalls of wind, and I wasn't having much fun anymore. As the snow began accumulating on the binoculars around my neck, I realized it was time for a break. Only in the late afternoon did the snow turn to rain.

Standing still in the snow, these two White Storks look anything but happy.





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Weekly Report of 10 March, 2018

Last Saturday we were dealing with a snowstorm. Mid-week brought spring-like weather, and today, just so we could experience a little bit of everything, the rain never let up. Such fickle weather means the seasons have changed: it is now spring. For us birdwatchers, this means the party is on!

Immediately, we saw Garganeys and Black-winged Stilts, both new arrivals, and we quickly added Greenshank, Redwing, and Night Heron. A couple of hours later a solitary Crane flew over. Cranes typically migrate in large flocks, but this one was by itself: did it lose its companions, or were we distracted and failed to notice a much larger flock?

The main pond hosted a pair of Great Crested Grebes and two Graylag Geese. The feral Greylags that had been resident at the pond have been missing since last summer, and in all likelihood today's visitors were proper wild birds.

Today's rain made it impossible to take photographs. On the other hand, a Great Bittern out and about during last week's snowstorm provide a rare opportunity for some pictures.





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Weekly Report of 17 March, 2018

Yet one more Saturday of poor weather! We complained about it at great length this morning, as we headed to La Cassinazza under the driving rain. But in spring, poor weather can sometimes force down migrant birds as they await better conditions. This is exactly what must have happened during the night. How can I begin recounting this memorable day of birdwatching?

First of all, by mentioning today's species total, an impressive 75. Good numbers of Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, and Barn Swallow have arrived, along with several dozen Green Sandpipers and even a small flock of White Wagtails. Black-winged Stilt numbers rose to 40, together with 45 Shovelers, 25 Garganey, and 13 Pintail. Also present – in small numbers or single individuals – were Wood Sandpiper, Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Stock Dove, Ruff, and Spotted Crake. As many as 400 Sacred Ibis in a flooded meadow were quite surprising.

But there is more: we have yet to mention the two most important species.

A Black Stork circled above our heads looking for a place to land, while the most exceptional and thrilling sighting of all was a young Greater Spotted Eagle, which we saw on several occasions, both perched and in flight. It was the highlight of an excellent list of raptors, which in addition to the usual Buzzards and Marsh Harriers also included Kestrel, Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Black Kite, and Sparrowhawk. In addition to all the regular species for this time of year, they made for quite a special day.

