



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2020



Weekly Report of 28 December, 2019

Early this morning, a thick layer of frost covered everything. The temperature finally fell, for this first time this winter.

Whether due to the cold or simply to the calendar, the number of Lapwings dropped from nearly a thousand last week to just under one hundred today.

Perhaps the cold made me lazy – it definitely made me numb – but apart from decent numbers of Redwings, I couldn't detect any real changes in the bird community at La Cassinazza. Waterfowl numbers and species composition have remained the same, at most with an additional dozen or so Shovelers, and the same mixed flocks of Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits, and Goldcrests flit through the hedgerows, with the occasional Coal Tit and Firecrest here and there.

And the nightly spectacle of hundreds of Reed Buntings literally raining down into the reedbed to spend the night there is the same as always.

Jackdaws only settled La Cassinazza recently: they nested for the first time two years ago, with three breeding pairs this summer, and now a flock of thirty or so birds is spending the winter here.

I would like to wish everyone a happy New Year.





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Weekly Report of 04 January, 2020

It is a new year, a new cycle of outings at La Cassinazza. It will be the 20th consecutive year of our surveys here, which began way back in 2000.

The very first day of the year – the prospect of a good-luck outing on New Year's Day was too good to pass up – brought two interesting species: first a Eurasian Curlew, which flew off soon after dawn, having spent the night at La Cassinazza, and then a small flock of 5 Cranes that flew over at mid-morning.

The new year brought colder weather, but temperatures are not particularly harsh: while they hover near zero at night, the afternoons are warmed by the sun. The waterbirds seem unaffected so far; if anything, the Teal numbers actually seem to have increased, and they are now nearly as numerous as the Mallards. The only species that seems to fear the cold is the Sacred Ibis: while only a few weeks ago a record 1,350 individuals flew in to the evening roost, there are now only a few dozen individuals. They clearly don't like waking up to find their feet encased in ice.

Winter is always very tough on the local wildlife: it means cold temperatures, a lack of food, and disease. Some inevitably perish, but one animal's misfortune may mean salvation for another: this hungry Buzzard found a carcass, and at least for today, its belly is full.





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Weekly Report of 11 January, 2020

A week from now we will participate in the International Waterbird Census – or IWC – a global effort involving birdwatchers in Italy, Europe, and much of the world to carry out a contemporaneous census of wintering waterbirds. In preparation for this event, today I tried to find and count those few individuals of other duck species hidden among the throngs of Teal and Mallards. Getting a precise count of the latter two is a tedious job I am glad to leave to other friends who will take part in the census. After much careful scanning, I concluded that in this period La Cassinazza is hosting 25-30 Gadwalls, equally distributed between hens and drakes, 16 Shovelers (mostly hens), 3 hen and 1 drake Wigeon, and a pair of Pintail.

Finding the lone Stock Dove that was hiding in a huge flock of hundreds of Woodpigeons proved even more challenging.

The best sighting of the day was the passage, heralded by their calls, of a flock of 54 Cranes headed south-west. The fact that they are only on the move now, so late in the season, means that north-eastern Europe has had a pretty mild winter so far. Here at La Cassinazza, temperatures dip slightly below zero early in the morning. This is enough to cover everything with a thin layer of frost that soon dissipates a couple of hours after sunrise.





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Weekly Report of 18 January, 2020

The event of the year – the International Waterbird Census – is now behind us. I would like to thank all of the enthusiastic friends who today helped us count the waterfowl and other waterbirds at La Cassinazza, one of the most important sites in Lombardy for Teal and Mallard, and one of the most species-rich as well. Today we were all focused on the challenge of finding and counting waterbirds, and just this once, other birds were an afterthought.

Once again, our two commonest species – Mallard and Teal, as I said – were in their thousands: 3,300 and 1,100 respectively, to be exact. These are pretty remarkable numbers, even in spite of some unfavorable circumstances: first of all, the heavy rains that fell overnight turned vast hectares of cultivated fields into marshes, where some of the ducks must have dispersed. Then, right in the middle of the census, a Peregrine Falcon repeatedly endeavored to flush all the waterbirds, only stopping when it finally managed to catch a Teal. The other ducks eventually settled down as well, but only after the various flocks had moved about and reshuffled quite a bit. Here is a summary of the other species we counted: Gadwall (29), Shoveler (13), Pintail (3), Pochard (2), Lapwing (220), Great Bittern (3), Pygmy Cormorant (2), Moorhen (80), Coot (about 15), Greylag Goose (5), Little Grebe (4), Cattle Egret (4), Little Egret (just one), Green Sandpiper (1), Spoonbill (1), Marsh Harrier (2), White Stork (2), and small numbers of Grey Heron and Great White Egret. Finally, we saw a Woodcock, always a rare encounter. We also counted 77 Cormorants and 105 Sacred Ibis at their evening roost. I hope I am not forgetting anything.

More than any other birds, the Lapwings fear the Peregrine, which sends them flying about in a panic everytime it makes an appearance.





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Weekly Report of 25 January, 2020

Apart from Saturday, which was gray and rainy, the clear skies during the week brought cold nights and bright sunny days. The mild temperatures meant that hazels began to bloom; these are the very first plants to bloom each year. The water that froze overnight melted each afternoon, so that the waterfowl were moving about in search of open water.

During a time of year when bird movements are at their most limited, the week nevertheless gave us some sightings of note.

We had another lucky encounter with a Woodcock. This was not a surprise after last Saturday's sighting, but it is still not an easy bird to come across.

More unexpected was a Mistle Thrush, the first ever January record of this species at La Cassinazza.

Three Mute Swans came as a complete surprise. All were adults, swimming majestically on the lake, and were wary and flighty.

Everything else we saw were typical winter species: the Brambling is one of them. It only appears during the coldest months, and can be abundant in some winters and entirely absent in others. This year they are rather numerous, and as always, they flock together with their close relatives, the Chaffinches.





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Weekly Report of 01 February, 2020

Saturday was foggy and rainy and provided very little in the way of interesting birds. During the week, however, on a crystal-clear day, we enjoyed a very pleasant outing with natural history students from the University of Milan, which produced at least three noteworthy sightings: Hawfinches – which are not a rarity, but have been particularly scarce this winter, and which we had not yet recorded in 2020; followed by a Mute Swan, rather less of a surprise after the three birds we saw last week; and finally two Red Kites, a real surprise since the species is rather uncommon in this area. Other than those, nothing much changed compared to the previous weeks and the annual waterfowl census, including the Great Bittern, several Marsh Harriers and Sparrowhawks, a Peregrine, a Kestrel, and at least 200 Lapwings. Among the passerines, the only change is the apparent absence of the Firecrest, which seems to have gone missing these last two weeks.

The Reed Bunting is also a classic winter visitor. Unlike the Bramblings we featured last week, Reed Buntings are dependably present in good numbers every winter. They are probably attracted to La Cassinazza by its large reedbed, which offers them a safe and sheltered place to spend the night.





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Weekly Report of 08 February, 2020

The long series of spring-like days continues, and daylight hours have increased noticeably. The Great Tits are enthusiastically belting out their spring songs, the woodpeckers are drumming, and the Eurasian Collared Doves, which are only found near human settlements, are engaged in their awkward courtship rituals on the roofs of farmhouses.

There are some changes in the bird contingent as well. Waterfowl numbers dropped significantly, but this may merely be the result of the end of the hunting season, which means that nearby areas are now safe and some birds have dispersed there.

On the other hand, the great many Fieldfares that arrived this week could well be the first real migrants of the spring.

A hen Tufted Duck on the lake was quite a surprise: there is no deep water at La Cassinazza and any diving duck here is exceptional.

The Robin is one of our quintessential winter birds, and not only, since it arrives at the very beginning of fall and remains well into the spring.





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Weekly Report of 15 February, 2020

Spring is definitely early this year. The first wildflowers are blooming in the meadows, and in the canopy of the tallest White Poplars, the buds are beginning to open. This new food resource is attracting throngs of Chaffinches and Bramblings, along with Siskins, Blue Tits, Great Tits, and a few Hawfinches.

The pair of White Storks that breeds at La Cassinazza is back on its nest, taking back possession of its territory and making a great show of it.

The Mallards have turned their thoughts to breeding: many have already mated and have dispersed in the surrounding countryside, so that numbers at La Cassinazza have dropped noticeably. On the other hand, Teal numbers have increased, probably due to the arrival of some early migrants. There are over a thousand of them, and for once they outnumber the Mallards.

Fieldfares are continuing to move through, with several flocks numbering in the dozens.

The highlight of this early migration period came with a large flock of Cranes overhead. There were at least 200 birds, and perhaps many more, in one long line heading northeast and taking up much of the sky. Just one month ago we saw them flying south, and now they are already heading back.





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Weekly Report of 22 February, 2020

The blooming period for Alders and White Poplars is about to end; soon, it will be the turn of the Cornelian Cherry and of the willows. The latter's buds are already being inspected by Long-tailed Tits and Penduline Tits. Among the numerous wildflowers in bloom under the shade of the hedgerows are the Spring Snowflake (*Leucojum vernum*) and the Lungwort (*Pulmonaria officinalis*).

During the night between Friday and Saturday, at least half the Teal that were present at La Cassinazza left; nevertheless, there are still nearly 500 around. They have been replaced by an equal number of Lapwings, together with several dozen Common Snipe, a handful of Shovelers – all drakes, the first to return to their breeding quarters – and the first Common Sandpiper of the season. For the most part the Fieldfares, which had been very numerous these last few weeks, also decided it was a good time to leave.

As the air warmed by the sun formed thermals, numerous Buzzards took advantage of them to circle ever higher and then glide away. They, too, were migrating.

A new song for us was that of the Reed Bunting. At least so far, this species has never nested at La Cassinazza, but the males have their minds very much set on breeding, and this instinct will soon take them back to their nesting grounds.

Finally, two Red Kites put in a brief appearance. Perhaps they were the same birds we saw about three weeks ago.

The Great Bittern is one of the scarcer winter visitors at La Cassinazza, with three or four individuals at most present in a good year. It is also the most sought-after, because it is elusive and difficult to observe. It even nested on occasion – we never saw it, but heard its powerful booming call – but not during the last two years. My suspicion, for what it's worth, is that the Wild Boars are to blame: they like to seek shelter in the reedbed, trampling over everything in the process.





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Weekly Report of 29 February, 2020

It's the time of year when migration is starting, and the birdlife changes from one day to the next: the birds we are seeing today may already be somewhere else by tomorrow.

The Lapwings, for instance, were plentiful last Saturday, but they were essentially gone by mid-week, as were the Common Snipe. The number of Water Pipits, Meadow Pipits, and Fieldfares has fallen drastically, and the Teal are leaving as well.

Meanwhile, there has been a major arrival of Chiffchaffs, and the soft contact calls of Little Crakes can be heard from the reedbed.

These are the days in which we usually see the first returning spring waders. It didn't happen this week, but I expect that by next week we will see Ruff, Spotted Redshank, and the first Green Sandpiper influx.

Raptors were well represented this week: we saw three Red Kites and a Goshawk together with the winter regulars - Peregrine, Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, and Buzzard.

Raptors have long been a source of admiration and respect. Indeed, they have often been used to symbolize the power of empires and kings, in the emblems of ancient aristocratic families, and in the flags of several countries. This Buzzard seems to be well aware of this, and it is perching in a perfect heraldic pose.





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Weekly Report of 07 March, 2020

During the week, a weather front brought low temperatures and rain here in the plain, with snow in the nearby hills. This did not put a stop to migration, however. Most of the Reed Buntings have left, and the reedbed is much quieter, while the hedgerows are alive with Chiffchaffs and Blue Tits, and a flooded meadow was dotted with Meadow Pipits and White Wagtails. Newly arrived waterbirds included about 20 Shovelers and the year's first Garganey – a drake – two Black-winged Stilts, a Spotted Redshank, and a Shelduck. Numerous Buzzards – up to a dozen at once – were rising in the thermals then gliding away, always towards the north-east. A cloud of Starlings also flying north reminded me that while we are used to seeing them all year, this is a migratory species as well: Starlings from northern Europe winter in the Mediterranean area and are now returning north.

The early morning hours ring out with bird songs, and not just those of the local breeders like the Great Tit, Blackcap, all three woodpeckers, and Cetti's Warbler (which sings all year round). Migrants that breed elsewhere are also in full song as the breeding season approaches: Wren, Goldcrest, Chiffchaff, Robin, Chaffinch, Black Redstart, and even more surprisingly, the loud song of the Mistle Thrush. The booming of the Great Bittern could be heard from the reedbed; hopefully, it will stay to breed at La Cassinazza.

The abundant Blue Tits are drawn to blooming willows, where they find a sugar-rich source of food to replenish their energy stores.





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Weekly Report of 14 March, 2020

We will remember this for a long, long time: the raging epidemic and the quarantine that is forcing us indoors. Myself included, like everyone else.

This makes it impossible for me to get to La Cassinazza.

This week, and for the foreseeable future, you will not be receiving my weekly reports, until we will once again be free to travel.

Spring migration at La Cassinazza will continue, but I won't be there to witness it.