



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2021



Weekly Report of 26 December, 2020

Gadwalls usually arrive in December, and the rule held up this year as well. We usually see 20-30 individuals here, though it is difficult to be more precise since small flocks constantly move from one impoundment to the next, and it is impossible to rule out double-counting.

Most of the Woodpigeons that passed through La Cassinazza last week have moved on, but there are still quite a few left. They are busy eating every last grain of rice that was left on the ground during the harvest.

A flock of about seventy Common Snipe appeared, after days during which only the occasional singleton was seen. They may have already been scattered about the local area, but given the cold snap that has affected Europe in recent days, they could also be new arrivals.

The Fieldfares and Redwings have now banded together in one large mixed flock of at least 150 birds. Several Song Thrushes and at least one Mistle Thrush round out the thrush contingent.

The one remaining thrush I have not mentioned yet is the Blackbird. This is a resident species, whose local numbers are boosted in winter by migrants from northern Europe. They are an everyday presence and it is easy to take them for granted: it's been years since we last dedicated a photo to one.





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Weekly Report of 02 January, 2021

Early this week a heavy snowstorm and a freeze radically changed the landscape at La Cassinazza; we had not seen this much snow in several years. The constant rain that followed transformed everything into a muddy quagmire. Either way, this did not help our birdwatching effort.

While the conditions were difficult for us birdwatchers and even more challenging for the birds themselves, they did make it easier for us to find one particular species. Woodcocks are very skilled at remaining invisible, but when the ground is covered in snow they are forced to forage in what few snow-free areas they find, such as road margins. This allowed us to observe them on two different occasions. The two meadows that were flooded with running water to prevent the ground from freezing – a very ancient farming technique – were a magnet for Water Pipits, Meadow Pipits, Skylarks, and White Wagtails, in addition to good numbers of Lawplings. By and large, however, the bitter cold meant that bushes and hedgerows were mostly bereft of songbirds, which likely moved towards milder climes. Chiffchaffs in particular seemed much scarcer, after being quite common from October to last week. Today's photo was taken a few days before the weather turned bad.





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Weekly Report of 09 January, 2021

There is no trace of the snow that fell before New Year's Day; it has all melted. Those three days of snow and ice were enough to drive many small birds away, especially insectivores: Stonechats and Black Redstarts are gone along with the bulk of the Chiffchaffs, while Goldcrests, Blackcaps, Cetti's Warblers, and Dunnocks are much thinner on the ground. Robins are the only insectivores that seem to be able to withstand the weather, but the fact that we are seeing many individuals fighting to defend a territory suggests that times are hard for them as well. Among seed-eating birds, Chaffinches and Reed Buntings have also become much less numerous, in spite of the fact that there is still a great amount of food left in the unharvested seed crops. The large flocks of Fieldfares, with a few Redwings and Blackbirds thrown in, that were busily stripping the hawthorn bushes of their red berries during the cold snap are much smaller now.

The avifauna as a whole has been impoverished, and I think it will remain that way for the remainder of the month. The only new species of the year was the winter's first Hen Harrier.

The ice and snow provided some good opportunities for bird photography, as their frenzied search for food makes birds more approachable. Sometimes they are almost too close, as was the case with this Common Buzzard.





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Weekly Report of 16 January, 2021

The cold snap is causing many birds to leave. There are only a handful of Fieldfares left, and the Penduline Tit and Firecrest seem to have joined the list of those that are altogether gone.

The Song Thrush alone seems to be bucking this trend. We are seeing them more frequently, and some may have already begun their spring migration.

In normal times, mid-January would be the time for the International Waterbird Census, but the restrictions due to the pandemic, both in Italy and abroad, make it difficult for birdwatchers to go out in the field. 2021 will be the first year to lack a numerical estimate of wintering waterfowl populations, after decades of yearly surveys.

Nevertheless, I tried to do my small part and estimate the numbers. These can vary greatly depending on the day, the time of day, the extent of ice, and whether or not hunting is allowed in the surrounding areas. I chose one of the times when numbers were highest. Having to survey all the impoundments alone, my numbers can only be estimates: I came up with a total of 2,700 Mallards, 6-700 Teal, 20 Gadwall, 10 Wigeon, 4 Shovelers, and 250 Sacred Ibis that dropped in before nightfall. Although these are high numbers, they are just half of what we had become accustomed to at La Cassinazza in recent years.

On these freezing cold mornings, the ground is covered with frost, and I caught these Roe Deer crossing a white meadow at dawn.





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Weekly Report of 23 January, 2021

The entire week was oppressively foggy, rainy, and grey, with only one short break. In spite of this, the days have gotten visibly longer, by at least one hour compared to a month ago. Yellow blossoms are appearing on the branches of the hazel bushes, the Roe Deer stags have well-developed antlers, and the Mallards are beginning to pair off. Nature has started a new annual cycle.

Birdwatching is characteristically dull at this time of year. I have been lamenting the departure of numerous species, and I only saw a single Chaffinch the entire week: they have practically all left.

I had another Merlin sighting, one of several this winter. The previous ones were always of it zig-zagging among trees and bushes as it hunted small birds. This time I managed to admire it as it flew across an open field, with its typical sickle-shaped wings and its frantic wingbeat.

Turning to waterbirds, which we would have counted as part of the International Waterbird Census had Covid-19 restrictions not made it impossible, I would like to report the sighting of a Mute Swan, which is quite unusual at La Cassinazza. The Cormorants, on the other hand, are a habitual presence, especially around sunset, when a roost of a hundred or so individuals forms.





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Weekly Report of 30 January, 2021

At this time of year, enthusiasm is reawakened by the myriad little signs of the changing season. When the sun is out, the Great Tits belt out their springtime song; the Common Buzzards engage in intricate display flights, and the Magpies have re-occupied their old nests and fixing them up with new twigs.

Apart from a continued drop in Mallard numbers – and to a lesser extent in the number of Teal as well – little else has changed concerning our wintering avifauna.

A Goshawk did its best to put on a show: it panicked and flushed all the Teal, and after pursuing them at length, then zeroed in on an individual that had found itself isolated from the flock, and with a lightning-quick maneuver it literally fell upon it. It forced it to the ground, then seized it by the neck and flew away with it.

The Mute Swan that put in a one-day visit last week has now returned to La Cassinazza with its entire family in tow: we now have a pair with their two one-year-old offspring.





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Weekly Report of 06 February, 2021

Unless it has a final surprise in store, winter is nearly over, and in spite of awful weather all week long, the first migratory movements are becoming evident.

The Cattle Egrets and Starlings are back; these are both common species, but they disappear from La Cassinazza in the dead of winter. Flocks of Fieldfares and Redwings are once again around, after thinning out significantly during January; on the other hand, we hardly saw any Song Thrushes, which had appeared to be moving through in January. And a nice flock of at least 25 Wigeon dropped in, a very good count for this area.

The presence of a Carrion Crow also testifies to bird movements, in this case from the mountains to the plain, most likely due to recent heavy snowfall in the Alps.

Small passerines tend to clear out during the coldest spells, and indeed the hedgerows and bushes were rather empty. The only songbirds that remain common are Blue Tits, Long-tailed Tits, Goldcrests, and especially Robins. Although the last-named species is a strict insectivore, it is quite able to survive even the harshest periods: each individual defends its own territory, and once the vegetation no longer offers any resources, they are happy to hop on the ground and forage among dry leaves.





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Weekly Report of 13 February, 2021

All week long, the weather seemed dead set on giving us a taste of everything: pouring rain, sunshine, thick fog, high winds, spring-like afternoons, frosty mornings, and even a dusting of snow. In spite of this, the birds continued to move. The Wigeon I mentioned in the previous report left as soon as they arrived, but at the beginning of this week they were replaced by ten Shelduck, with three birds leaving right away and the remaining seven lingering for a couple of days. While they are rather uncommon away from the coast, in recent years they have become more-or-less regular at La Cassinazza.

Other birds are also on the move: more Green Sandpipers have arrived in addition to the two individuals that wintered here, the Common Snipe are back, and the Lapwing flock has grown to at least 800 on some days.

A flock of about 60 Jackdaws has become a regular denizen of the area. The Jackdaw is a success story: it was only occasionally seen here before 2017, but that year the first pair nested in a farmhouse and now its progeny has become quite numerous.

Shelduck have a bright, high-contrast plumage, which may not be elegant, but is no less beautiful for it.





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Weekly Report of 20 February, 2021

This week was one of transition towards spring. Weather wise, it was mostly wet and grey – as it was for most of the winter – but the temperatures were distinctly warmer. As far as birds go, their movements are largely on hold, as we wait for migration to take off.

Four Shelduck appeared once again – I can't say whether they are the same ones we briefly saw ten days ago – and dozens of Common Snipe continue to pass through.

The number of Reed Buntings has dropped significantly: among the few that remain, some males have started to sing. The Long-tailed Tits that moved around in large flocks all winter long have now paired off and are clearly looking for places to build their nests. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers have also turned their thoughts to breeding, as the males drum from the treetops. As small as they are, their drumming is gentle and muted, quite unlike the pounding of their Great Spotted or Green cousins.

A magnificent sunny interlude brought out the year's first butterflies: the Peacock (*Inachis io*) and the Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni*); another sign of nature's reawakening was the reappearance of the European Green Toad after winter dormancy.

After the hazel – always the first to bloom – it is now the turn of the alder, while the bird cherry is just starting out. The willow buds are still closed, and the fog leaves them covered in dew.





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Weekly Report of 27 February, 2021

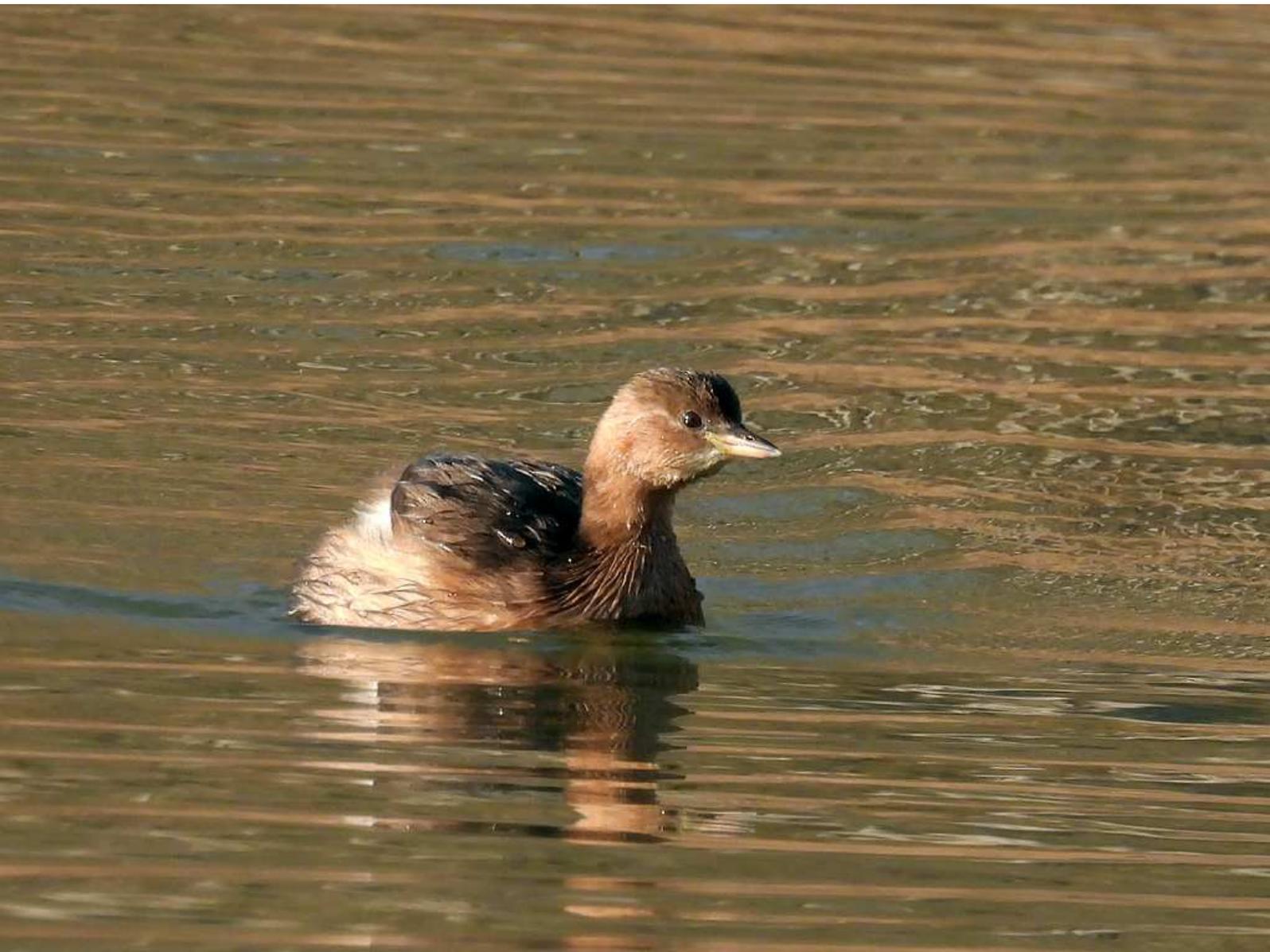
The weather rapidly veered towards an early spring, which brought lizards, treefrogs, and butterflies out from their winter hiding places.

The week's most evident migratory movements included large flocks of Black-headed Gulls passing by overhead, and Siskins foraging in the blooming poplar tops, with Goldfinches, Chaffinches, Great Tits, and Chiffchaffs joining in the feast.

During warm, sunny periods, Common Buzzards ride the thermals in groups of three or four, and the resident pair rises on ponderous flaps until it is as high up as the migratory birds – whether it is to greet them or drive them away is anyone's guess. Two Red Kites also put in an appearance, flying at lower elevations as they hunted.

The week also marked the beginning of wader passage, with the season's first Ruff, Spotted Redshank, and Little Ringed Plover all being logged.

Back before the Wels' Catfish invaded local waters, Little Grebes were numerous on the main lake at La Cassinazza, with several breeding pairs. Within a few years, they became uncommon: the presence of the catfish pushed them toward marginal areas such as small, shallow ponds and marshes, where they are safe from this large predator, which can swallow a grebe in one gulp.





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Weekly Report of 06 March, 2021

It was a week of strong contrasts, with gentle, spring-like days alternating with wintery nights and a blustery Saturday.

The numbers of Mallards and Lapwings have dropped significantly: the urge to breed is strong and they have dispersed in the surrounding countryside.

Teal numbers fluctuate from one day to the next, depending on the departures and arrivals of flocks of migrants heading to their breeding grounds further north.

Wader migration has yet to take off, with Common Snipe and Green Sandpipers the only species into the double digits.

The White Storks are also late: while last year they had already laid eggs by now, three of our pairs are merely hanging around their nests, while the fourth pair is nowhere to be found.

Notable passerine migrants this week included Fieldfares, with flocks of a hundred or more, White Wagtails, and right at the end of the week, the year's first House Martins.

Noteworthy sightings included several lingering Shelduck, a few small flocks of Cranes, and a handful of newly-arrived Spoonbills.



Spoonbills are always exceptionally wary: even the bird that is now semi-resident at La Cassinazza has never gotten used to people and flushes at a great distance. Managing to photograph it required luck and some truly special circumstances.



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Weekly Report of 13 March, 2021

In the pre-dawn darkness, the Blackbird chorus is deafening. At first light it begins to die down and is replaced by the songs of Robins and Blackcaps, the strident calls of Starlings, and the woodpeckers' loud cries and drumming, each doing as it can. Later in the morning is the time when Chiffchaffs begin their rhythmic song; they have returned in large numbers and are perhaps our commonest migrant at the moment, followed by the White Wagtail.

Rails are also passing through: Water Rails are quite vocal and are frequently out in the open, while encounters with the Spotted and Little Crake are much rarer.

With almost one hundred individuals around, the Green Sandpiper is the commonest wader, but we were even more thrilled to see the year's first Black-winged Stilt.

As our wintering birds depart, the Wigeons and Gadwalls have essentially left La Cassinazza.

In the meantime, the velvet on the antlers of Roe Deer – a thin layer of skin that covers them as they grow – is falling off, and now that the rut is about to begin the stags are dueling and butting horns.





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Weekly Report of 20 March, 2021

Winter decided to make its presence felt in March. This week, early morning temperatures dipped down to near zero, and a north wind lashed the plain. In spite of this, the season's first Swallows and Garganeys appeared right on cue.

Green Sandpipers continue to account for the bulk of wader migration, together with a mere twenty or so Ruff, about the same number of Common Snipe, and little else – although two Black-tailed Godwits and seven or eight Black-winged Stilts were noteworthy. During the middle of the week severe storms battered the Alps. Ahead of the incoming weather front a Golden Eagle flew over La Cassinazza, and the local Buzzard immediately took to the sky to chase off the new invader – quite a show of courage of the part of the (relatively) diminutive Buzzard!

The same wind that pushed the eagle down from the mountains forced a family of three Cranes to stop at La Cassinazza, where they lingered for at least two days.

Rallids were much in evidence for the second week in a row, with Water Rails the commonest among them. Spotted Crakes are much harder to find, but once discovered can be approached and photographed with ease. They seem to have no fear of humans and ignore our presence.

