



WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2013



Weekly Report of 23 March, 2013

Spring migration brings new birds every week: today they included Wood Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Dunlin, Serin, Yellow Wagtail, Quail, and Common Swift. Among the species that arrived earlier in the month, Ruff, Garganey, and Black-winged Stilt were all present in higher numbers, and we even saw a few stilts mating.

The White Stork pair at La Cassinazza continues to add material to its nest atop the poplar tree and spent the day carrying a great many sticks to it; the other pair at Cascina Darsena is also on the nest.

Our species total for the day was truly remarkable, in spite of our spending the afternoon cleaning and preparing the floating platforms on the lake for the imminent arrival of the Common Terns that will nest there. My work on the platforms ended almost immediately as I took an involuntary, yet spectacular plunge into the lake's icy waters.

We can track the advancing spring by the appearance of new flowers every week: Pussy Willows are in full flower, in feathery clusters that are as yellow as the flowers of the Cornel, while only the earliest shoots of the Purple Willow are evident. The pink flowers of elm trees are quite inconspicuous, while the meadows are peppered with wildflowers.

It is not yet time for insects, at least not on rainy days such as today, but if we seek them out in sheltered places, such as underneath the bark of dead trees, we can discover an entire universe of life. One example is this colourful beetle in the family Carabidae: its name is *Drypta dentata*, it lives in small colonies and preys on other insects, the equivalent of a raptor in the bird world.





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Weekly Report of 30 March, 2013

Today was a typical winter day in all but one detail: the date on the calendar. The early morning's dense fog was swept away by a driving, relentless rain for the rest of the day.

Our birdwatching outing was ruined, and just as spring migration is getting into full swing, bringing with it the peak of species diversity. Birds don't like rain: there was lots of activity in the hedgerows, much of it due to Chiffchaffs, but most birds stayed hidden as they sought out shelter in dense cover.

It was hard to say which birds looked more bedraggled: the White Storks standing forlornly on their nest, looking like two wet rags, the Swallows and House Martin flying just above the water surface in a futile search for insects, several Woodpigeons that were so soaked they had trouble flying, an equally drenched Black Kite, or a Graylag Goose that was literally splayed on the ground to cover its eggs. The Marsh Harriers never even left their roost: they stayed in the reedbed until mid-morning when we walked past and flushed them, a single flock of twelve birds.

Waterbirds were the only ones to seem at ease. About 10 Pintails arrived along with over 30 Shovelers, although most of these were males, which are easier to spot. Garganey numbers have hit their peak. There are now 65 Black-winged Stilts – the local colony back at full strength.



Against all logic, our blind stupid persistence in continuing to look for birds under the rain eventually paid off: a nice encounter with a Woodcock, a pair of Shelducks, and a Marsh Sandpiper. At the end of the day I was rather pleased, and certainly not as sopping wet as last Saturday!

Sparrowhawks are year-round residents and breeders at La Cassinazza. We often see them darting by, but until today we had been unable to photograph one perched.



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Weekly Report of 06 April, 2013

The song of the Nightingale is a sign that spring is truly upon us. Sadly, the weather continues to suggest otherwise. We had a great deal of rain for yet another week, and roads, fields, meadows, and woodlands are flooded, so much so that we ran into a Great Bittern in the woods – like always, it flushed from a few meters away before I realized it was there. A Great Bittern has also started booming from the reedbed, albeit still tentatively.

In addition to the Nightingale, other spring arrivals this week included Willow Warbler, Greenshank, Spotted Crake, and an Osprey carrying a large fish in its talons.

Two or three pairs of Black-winged Stilts have begun nest-buildings, while Shovelers and Garganeys have reached an all-time high at La Cassinazza, with 50-60 individuals each. Spotted Redshank numbers are also remarkable. Teal remain abundant, with several hundred seen, and they will continue to be around until the end of April.

Towards evening, I was surprised to see two Cranes fly in; I thought they had left for good. The birds were both immatures, which are in no hurry to return to their breeding grounds.

The landscape is dominated by the showy yellow flowers of the Pussy Willow, an important food source for many small birds, especially Willow Warblers and Chiffchaffs. It is a shame that all the rain has drenched them so thoroughly; it is difficult to find any that have retained their soft, feathery aspect.





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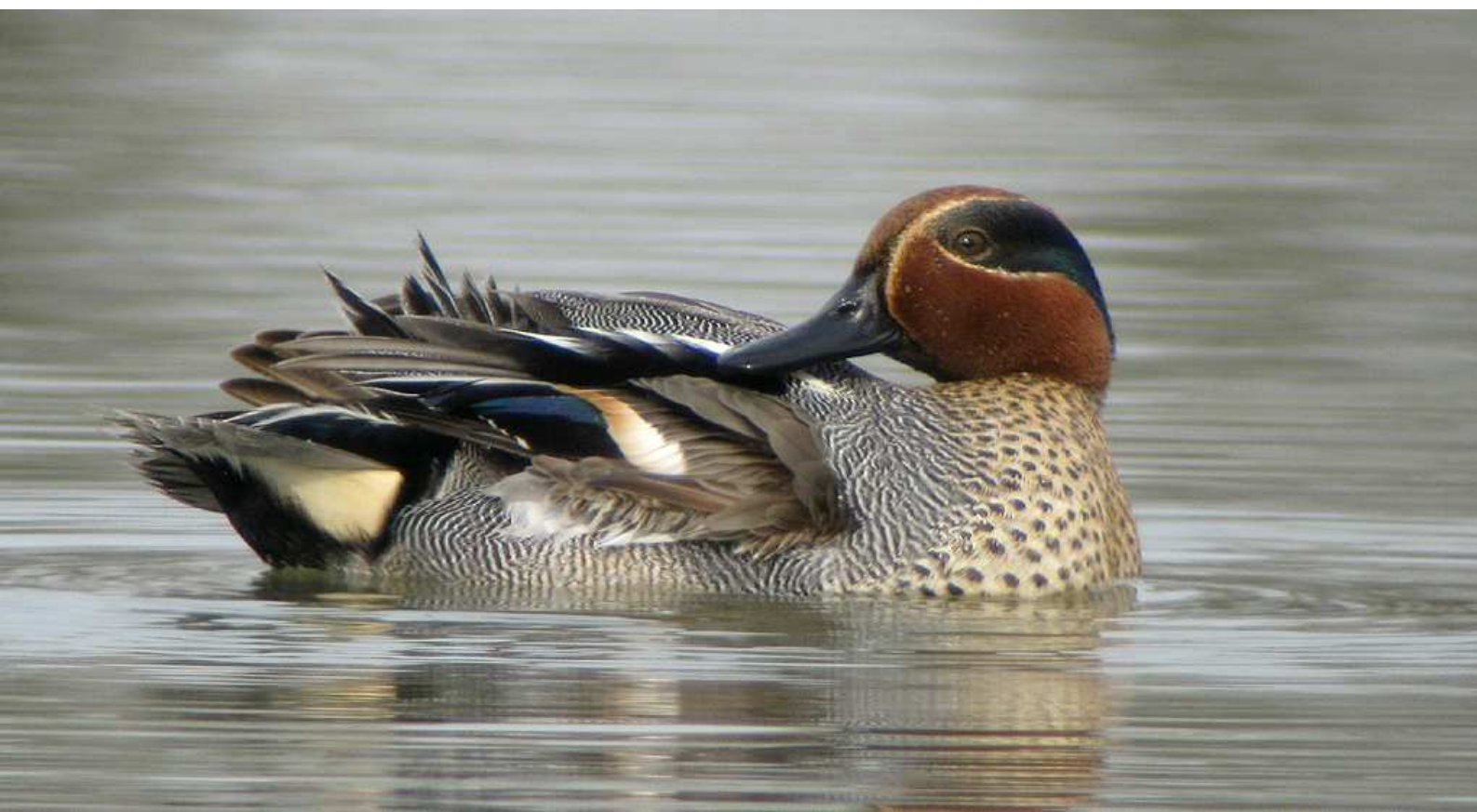
Weekly Report of 13 April, 2013

Finally! A proper spring day, wonderful for more than just the weather. It was also a fantastic day of birdwatching: the diversity of birds was astonishing. Our species list includes practically every migrant we could expect to find at this time of year, and grew throughout the day until reaching the record-breaking total of 90. I still have not come down from my high as I write this.

We understood right away that the day would be special: early in the morning, among the numerous Water Pipits, Meadow Pipits, and Yellow Wagtails flushing from the rice stubble, we picked out a Tawny Pipit, a new species for La Cassinazza. Soon thereafter we ran into a Long-eared Owl, mobbed by a multitude of excited passerines. As the day wore on, we added a slew of new arrivals: Cuckoo, Tree Pipit, Whinchat, Lesser Whitethroat, Common Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Wood Warbler, Hobby, Common Tern, Purple Heron, Golden Oriole, and Wryneck, in addition to several other uncommon species - Peregrine, Spotted Crake, Jackdaw, and Hawfinch.

Wader numbers were outstanding: I counted 300 in just one impoundment, including Ruff, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Spotted Redshanks, Greenshanks, Little Ringed Plovers, and Black-winged Stilts. There were almost 100 of the latter, and at least six active nests. The two White Stork pairs are also incubating.

Only waterfowl numbers have dropped: the peak of Garganey and Shoveler migration is behind us and Teal left en masse: there are only a few dozen left. Before they disappear altogether, I would like to dedicate a photograph to this small, delightful duck, for which I have always had a soft spot.





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Weekly Report of 20 April, 2013

It was a day of gusting winds and driving rain, which forced us to dust off our winter clothing – a stroke of bad luck for the group of visitors who were touring La Cassinazza today and were forced indoors. On the other hand, the lunch we were treated to fully met our lofty expectations.

Our bird sightings, though, were a mere shadow of last Saturday's, and yet it still felt like there were a lot of birds out there – they were just harder to dig out. A few new arrivals stood out: Common Sandpiper, Red-footed Falcon, Great Reed Warbler, and several dozen Sand Martins. Also much in evidence were the Black-winged Stilts, over 100 of them, with 23 active nests.

Hidden among the sedges, a hen Greylag Goose is incubating. We photographed her last week; this week, with all the rain, we left her alone.

The downpours ruined the flowers as well. Right now, the many species of cherry trees are in full bloom: Wild Cherry, Sour Cherry, Blackthorn, and especially Bird Cherry, but the latter's gorgeous clusters of white flowers are sodden and have lost their scent.

The day dragged on, dreary and wet, until evening. Just as we were getting ready to leave, a Pallid Harrier flew over us! This species, which had never before been seen at La Cassinazza, is a regular migrant in southern Italy, but it rarely makes its way up the peninsula, and is a most welcome surprise in the north. The first rule of birdwatching is: never say never!

I will be on holiday for the next two weeks; Violetta will be my worthy replacement in writing these reports. All my best, until my return.





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Weekly Report of 27 April, 2013

We have become so accustomed to inclement weather this spring that it seemed perfectly normal to start this Saturday under threatening, leaden skies. The threat was far from empty, since after a few minutes of drizzle, the rain began in earnest.

Along with the rain came a series of ornithological premonitions. "Little Bitterns ought to have arrived this week"...and after twenty meters one flushed out of a reed-filled ditch. "I'm alone and without a camera – I bet I'll find a major rarity"...and there it was, waiting for me: a Red Phalarope, a species which breeds in the Arctic Tundra, winters in the southern hemisphere, and generally eschews Italy. Thanks to the extreme approachability of phalaropes, I was able to take a series of poor, out-of-focus images, which nevertheless constitute irrefutable evidence for the many absent and unbelieving birdwatchers. Some of us plunge into the mud while cleaning nesting platforms for terns, while others roll around in it while trying to take photos....

The same unruffled tameness that allowed me to approach the phalarope almost caused it to be captured by a Hobby. Unless it falls victim to a predator, it may stick around for a few days: in was in heavy moult and La Cassinazza is certainly a good place for it to refuel and complete its moult before resuming its journey to the Arctic.

The heavy rain made it difficult to find much else of note, apart from the familiar birds one can expect on a quiet Sunday stroll through the countryside: tits and woodpeckers peeking out of tree cavities and nest boxes, the hen goose with six recently-hatched goslings in tow, and a great many males – Great Crested Grebes, Mallards, Teal, and Garganey – in evidence, which suggests that their mates are busy incubating.



Today's photo necessarily reflects the dreary weather: raindrops on feathers may be a photographic cliché, but a Common Sandpiper's plumage jewelled with tremulous gems has an irresistible charm all its own. And so, here it is.



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Weekly Report of 04 May, 2013

Within the space of a week, a complete turnaround took place. After a Saturday of inclement weather and one exceptional rarity, this Saturday was pleasantly sunny, but migration was at a complete standstill.

The morning was enlivened by the newly-arrived summer birds: the Squacco Heron and the song of the Golden Oriole are definitely here to stay. A handful of Reed and Marsh Warblers were singing tentatively; these were probably northward-bound migrants. On the platforms on the lake, among the Common Terns, the bulk of two Yellow-legged Gulls stands out. The mewling calls of this pair leaves no doubt as to the fact that they intend to nest there. Let us hope they do not bother the terns too much – perhaps their size will help keep other predators of nest and eggs, such as the Sacred Ibis, at bay. They are certainly much more efficient at scaring away intruders than the lithe and slender terns. Most waders seem to have gone, with the impoundments hosting only a few Wood Sandpipers, a handful of Ruff, and a Common Sandpiper.

Obviously, this list does not include the Black-winged Stilt colony, most of whose inhabitants are busy incubating. The first chicks should hatch soon: expect us to announce the new births in one of the coming weekly reports. The White Stork pair is also on the nest. When the sun is too hot, they occasionally turn the eggs over and shade them to help with thermoregulation.

In spite of the sun, only a few butterflies took advantage of the heat – the cold, rainy spring has taken its toll. These included the Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*) and the Orange Tip (*Anthocaris cardamine*), two of the earliest-flying species.

The photo of the day is dedicated to the Black-winged Stilt, to which we have a debt of gratitude for the leading role it plays in decorating our landscape.





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Weekly Report of 11 May, 2013

Back at La Cassinazza after a two-week absence, I was surprised by how much the vegetation has grown, with tall grass and dense foliage on trees and shrubs. At least the rainy weather was good for something.

The liveliness of migration has given way to the tranquil routine of the nesting season, when birds do their best to remain unseen (and succeed brilliantly, I might add): there is not much movement and very little song at this time of year. This is what I was telling the group of visitors I was leading on a tour of La Cassinazza, trying to justify the fact that I could only show them a few ducks, the Black-winged Stilts and Common Tern colonies, the White Stork nests – whose eggs hatched a few days ago – and the occasional flock of Bee-eaters overhead. “Unfortunately, it is too late for migrants”. Right then I got a phone call from Violetta, who found a pair of Rollers that were much admired by the group she was leading in another part of the property. This is yet another new species for La Cassinazza’s bird list, which now stands at 215. I partly redeemed myself by finding a Whiskered Tern, another nice rarity, albeit not of the same level.

The rather warm day reawakened the local invertebrate fauna: insects, spiders, and more. Dragonflies made their first appearance of the year, with several common species (*Ischnura elegans*, *Platycnemis pennipes*, *Orthetrum albistylum*, *Sympetrum striolatum*) and a quick fly-by from a possible *Cordulia aenea*, an uncommon and highly sought-after species. Every year, we get glimpses of this early flier, always too brief for a certain identification.

The tail end of wader migration was embodied by this Greenshank, whose multiple hues of gray give it a certain elegance.



Weekly Report of 18 May, 2013

We are going through what can only be defined as an endless rainy season. Plant life has drawn undoubted benefits from this: the grass in the meadows is as tall as a man, and completely conceals the local Roe Deer.

For the birds, however, all this rain is a problem, especially for the Black-winged Stilts whose nests and eggs were wiped out by the rising waters. The few chicks that managed to hatch found themselves soaked and freezing in their first few days of life. Only a handful survived. The same can be said of Mallard hatchlings. The White Storks, on the other hand, have managed to protect their offspring thanks to their size and bulk.

Farm fields have not yet been ploughed and last year's stubble is still standing: there is nothing but grass and muddy puddles where green rice shoots would normally be this time of year. The Lapwings took advantage of this, as they managed to finish incubating without the risk of their nests being run over by tractors. Quails are singing and Ashy-headed Wagtails are nesting in the tall grass. The Common Terns have another problem altogether: in the space of a couple of minutes, we twice saw a Hooded Crow raid the terns' nests, each time flying off with an egg in its bill in spite of the fierce reaction of the entire colony. Amidst all the hullabaloo, the Yellow-legged Gull remained placidly on its nest: it does not feel threatened by the crow and has no intention of helping out the terns, who attack it every time it takes to the air.

Few insects were about in the rain. Among the handful of butterflies on the wing, one was worthy of note: a Heath Fritillary (*Melitaea athalia*), a new species for La Cassinazza, which appeared just when I did not have my camera at hand. I managed to confirm the identification through photos taken with my mobile phone. The wonders of technology.....



Only ladybugs were numerous as they concentrated in stands of nettles. There is a great variety of species, each showing seemingly endless variations in colour and pattern.



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Weekly Report of 25 May, 2013

In the past few days we had wind squalls and sheets of rain, then the cold came. While last year around this time temperatures hovered near 30 degrees, they never rose above 10 today, and the rain was incessant. Nonplussed, we put our winter clothes back on, and faced a truly depressing outing.

It was sad to see that La Cassinazza's Black-winged Stilt colony was nearly wiped out by the crazy weather: of the 21 nests that were built, only a clutch of four chicks has managed to survive. No more than a dozen adults have remained, with the others having dispersed elsewhere to attempt a second brood. Our only pair of Yellow-legged Gulls also lost its brood, and is now flying around, no longer concerned with nest-tending duties. Some of the Common Tern nests are missing in action; others are still incubating, but no eggs have hatched so far.

The Great Crested Grebe ferries its just-hatched chicks on its back, hidden and protected underneath its feathers and wings.

As is often the case on rainy days, a great many Barn Swallows and House Martins, with a scattering of Sand Martins, skimmed the water hunting insects, with a Hobby making passes at the group to try and catch a swallow or two.

We saw hardly any insects; the only one of interest was a dragonfly, the Common Clubtail (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*), a single individual which had just emerged and was standing motionless in the vegetation, unable to fly because of the cold.

We had a very amusing encounter with a Cottontail, a small rabbit introduced from North America. This endearing mammal, with its eternally child-like appearance, first showed up at La Cassinazza several years ago, and is now very common.





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Weekly Report of 01 June, 2013

Maybe, just maybe, we could be through with this endless spell of bad weather, and summer might be upon us. Maybe.

I have already related the damage that breeding birds have suffered.

Noteworthy sightings today included Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, and a sampler of unseasonal ducks: Garganey, Teal, and Shoveler.

The pleasant temperatures brought out a great variety of insects. Among the most conspicuous ones – butterflies and dragonflies – there were few individuals, but decent variety, and numerous seasonal “firsts”: Lesser Purple Emperor (*Apatura ilia*), Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*), Reverdin’s Blue (*Plebejus argyrognomon*), Large Skipper (*Ochlodes sylvanus*), and Comma (*Polignona c-album*) among the former and Banded Demoiselle (*Calopteryx splendens*) among the latter. An endless array of tiny creatures reveals itself to those who know how to look for them. Early-season wildflowers attract the insects that rely on them to feed: bees and related insects filling up on pollen, beetles (some of which are quite colourful, although nearly all are minuscule), a bewildering variety of spiders, gaudy moths and others that are highly mimetic. The most fascinating of all to me was the Longhorn Moth *Nemophora degeerella* a golden moth with a blue stripe across its wings. Although it is barely one centimetre in size, the males have huge antennae up to 8 cm long, and their group displays consist of individuals dancing frenetically around one another. The life of insects seems idyllic and relaxing to us: a bee buzzing from flower to flower is the very image of carefree serenity. However, danger lurks among the flowers, and the careless bee in the photograph ended up a meal for a spider.



Weekly Report of 08 June, 2013

Today was a rather quiet early summer day, which could easily have been entirely unremarkable, but for the arrival of the first southbound migrants of the year! This happens like clockwork every June, but it never fails to surprise me how certain birds are in such a hurry to head back south. Perhaps the extreme weather that ravaged northern Europe earlier this week may have something to do with it this year. In any case, several Teal, a Pintail, and the first Wood and Green Sandpipers are already back.

The two White Stork nests are making good progress: the one at Cascina Darsena hosts four sturdy juveniles, which are already standing near the edge, exercising their wing muscles; the juveniles at La Cassinazza are at least a week younger, and there only seem to be three of them.

Things didn't go nearly as well for the Great Crested Grebe pair, which seems to have lost the last of its surviving chicks. I wonder who could predate a chick swimming in the water: my main suspect is the Wels Catfish, an unwanted guest in La Cassinazza's waters, which I blame for the near disappearance of the Great Crested Grebe. Twelve years ago, in 2001, we had at least ten breeding pairs, which fell to zero in the next two years, and we have never had more than one or two since. What happened in the meantime? Perhaps it was the arrival of this huge fish, a voracious predator of anything that moves. Here and there in the impoundments are four or five new Black-winged Stilt nests, while the Common Terns seem to be busy with replacement clutches, as the first ones were lost.

The Kingfisher, on the other hand, nested successfully: since it breeds in well-protected cavities, this spring's rain and foul weather did it no harm. It allowed us to take this close-up portrait.





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Weekly Report of 15 June, 2013

After they have claimed a territory and completed their breeding duties, birds are best served by remaining inconspicuous. At La Cassinazza, it felt like just another week went by, without any events of note. The only novelty – a touch of autumn – was the arrival of a Spotted Redshank in its finest breeding plumage, a bird already on its way back south after a fleeting sojourn in the Arctic.

With so few birds to identify and count, we can turn our attention to behavioural details and to other, less conspicuous denizens.

We can listen to the endless vocal battles of male Cuckoos, admire the courage and fury with which a Golden Oriole sets upon a Sparrowhawk, discover a flower we had never seen before and a butterfly – another new species for La Cassinazza – that disappeared without letting me photograph and identify it: it was a Nymphalid, and while I suspect I know its identity, I'll never be sure. Overall, we saw 16 butterfly and 9 dragonfly species today, with the year's first Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*), Clouded Yellow (*Colias crocea*), Painted Lady (*Cynthia cardui*), Short-tailed Blue (*Everes argiades*), Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*), Bath White (*Pieris edusa*), Azure Bluet (*Agrion puella*), Blue Emperor (*Anax imperator*) and Small Redeye (*Erythromma viridulum*).

Hiding in the grass are some veritable jewels, such as this Mint Leaf Beetle (*Chrysolina herbacea*), a bright green bug with an emerald shine that no photograph can do justice to. This species likes sunny wetland areas and, as its name indicates, it lives on mint leaves, especially those of Apple Mint (*Mentha suaveolens*) and Water Mint (*Mentha aquatica*). Also, it is stunning.

