

Weekly Report of 22 March, 2014

After almost two weeks of warm, spring-like weather, our first survey after the spring equinox was humid and rainy.

The main sightings of interest concerned waders, Green Sandpipers foremost among them: our estimate of 80 birds today is an all-time high count for La Cassinazza. Wood Sandpipers, on the other hand, are just beginning their migration. There were 40 Black-winged Stilts today and almost as many Ruff. The 20 Little Ringed Plovers we saw today may not seem like much, but this is actually a very good count for this species. Lapwings, Snipe, and a single Spotted Redshank rounded out the checklists. Turning to waterfowl, Mallards are now nesting and birds are scattered throughout, Teal numbers have crashed, Shovelers amounted to 20 (Friday's count; today there were less), while Garganey remain in the single digits .

Passerines remain disappointing: in spite of arrivals Swallows, Common Redstart, Willow Warbler, and Firecrest, numbers are truly dismal, and it took a concerted effort to put together a list that ultimately was rather lengthy.

Of our two pairs of White Storks, one seems to be incubating eggs already, while the other continues to fiddle about with courtship displays and such.

Finally, a Red Kite was seen on Friday.



Adult Cormorants are now in full finery, with their jet-black plumage and white napes and thighs, but they are about to head off to their breeding colonies. Soon, only the non-breeding, greyish immatures will be left.



WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 29 March, 2014

The willow flowers have now fallen and given way to the great variety to those of trees in the genus *Prunus*; the delicate scent of Bird Cherry (*Prunus padus*) flowers is one of the characteristic sensations of early spring.

The diversity of butterflies is another sign of the season: today we saw at least nine species. These included the Large Tortoiseshell (*Nymphalis polychloros*) and the Orange Tip (*Anthocaris cardamines*), both species whose flight season is restricted to spring.

Not much seems to have changed regarding migratory birds this week: a dozen or so Garganey arrived and wader diversity remains good, although species composition and numbers are more or less the same as they were last week, with the addition of a Marsh Sandpiper.

Passerine migrants, on the other hand, are lagging behind. We did find one of each of a couple of new arrivals – Yellow Wagtail and Sedge Warbler – but the only songbird migrant that seemed to be around in numbers was the Willow Warbler, which we even managed to photograph.

The White Stork pair at La Cassinazza is going through a rough patch: there are in fact three storks, and the presence of the intruder is the source of much squabbling. Gossip around the pair is starting to flow freely: the most

benevolent theory holds that one bird is an inconsolable widow and the other two are suitors fighting for her attention. In any event, one individual has clearly claimed the nest as its own, and chases away any perceived invader.

Hen Mallards can already be seen with ducklings in tow.

In addition to the Marsh Harrier, other species of note included a Red Kite (most likely a different bird from last week's) and a Spotted Crake.





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 05 April, 2014

The quarrel between storks came to an end this week with the arrival of a fourth individual. This made it possible for two different pairs to form, and they are now carrying material to two nests located within 20 meters of one another, without so much as a squabble. Meanwhile, the pair breeding at Cascina Darsena, which stayed out of the hostilities, is already incubating eggs.

A Tree Pipit, the first new arrival we noted today, was also the 100th species for this year's list. By day's end, at least seven more new arrivals lengthened the list: Nightingale, Hobby, Little Crane, Greenshank, the first pair of Common Terns, a pair of Stock Doves, and an Osprey, roughly in this order. Other interesting sightings today included a Red Kite – for the third week running – and a Peregrine of the form that breeds in the Arctic tundra, white below and silvery above. Black-winged Stilt numbers are increasing steadily and some are already beginning courtship. Many Starlings, Great Tits, Blue Tits, and at least one Great Spotted Woodpecker are breeding in the nestboxes, while a pair of Green Woodpeckers excavated its own cavity in the trunk of a willow tree.

We saw the year's first odonates: true to form, the Blue-tailed Damselfly (*Ischnura elegans*) was the first to emerge.

At this time of year, both Willow Warblers – migrants on their way back from their wintering quarters in the heart of Africa – and Chiffchaffs – which only winter as far south as the Mediterranean basin – are present at La Cassinazza. Telling them apart is not always easy, even for the experts. Last week's photo depicted a Willow Warbler; today, it is the Chiffchaff's turn.





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 12 April, 2014

With the all-too-high temperatures of this warm spring, plant species are flowering in quick succession. This week it was the hawthorn's turn, whose white flowers stand out in the hedgerows and are immediately recognized by their characteristic scent. In addition to good numbers and diversity of waders – more or less the same as in the last two weeks – we turned up a nice variety of unusual species (again a Little Crake, a Black Kite, a Montagu's Harrier, and even a Red-legged Partridge, although we seriously doubt that the latter is of natural origin) and newly-arrived migrants (Common Swift, Purple Heron, Cuckoo, Pied Flycatcher). All in all, we put together a rather lengthy checklist, albeit somewhat bereft of passerines: perhaps the settled weather is allowing them to overshoot us as they head north to their breeding grounds. Two pairs of Black-winged Stilts are already collecting stems of vegetation to build their rudimentary nests, while the new pair of White Storks (our third!) appears to need more time to learn the art of building a decent nest: so far they've made a big mess of it, and there are more twigs on the ground beneath their nesting tree than on the nest itself. We discovered a remarkably well-hidden Blackbird nest with four eggs, while last week's Long-tailed Tit nest was much more visible and has been predated. A number of Common Terns – about twenty – have arrived, and they have already taken up territories and are defending the floating platforms on the lake. A Black Tern that happened by felt their collective wrath. Finally, we had the first seasonal records of several species of butterflies: Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*), Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*), Small White (*Pieris rapae*) and Southern Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus malvoides*).





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



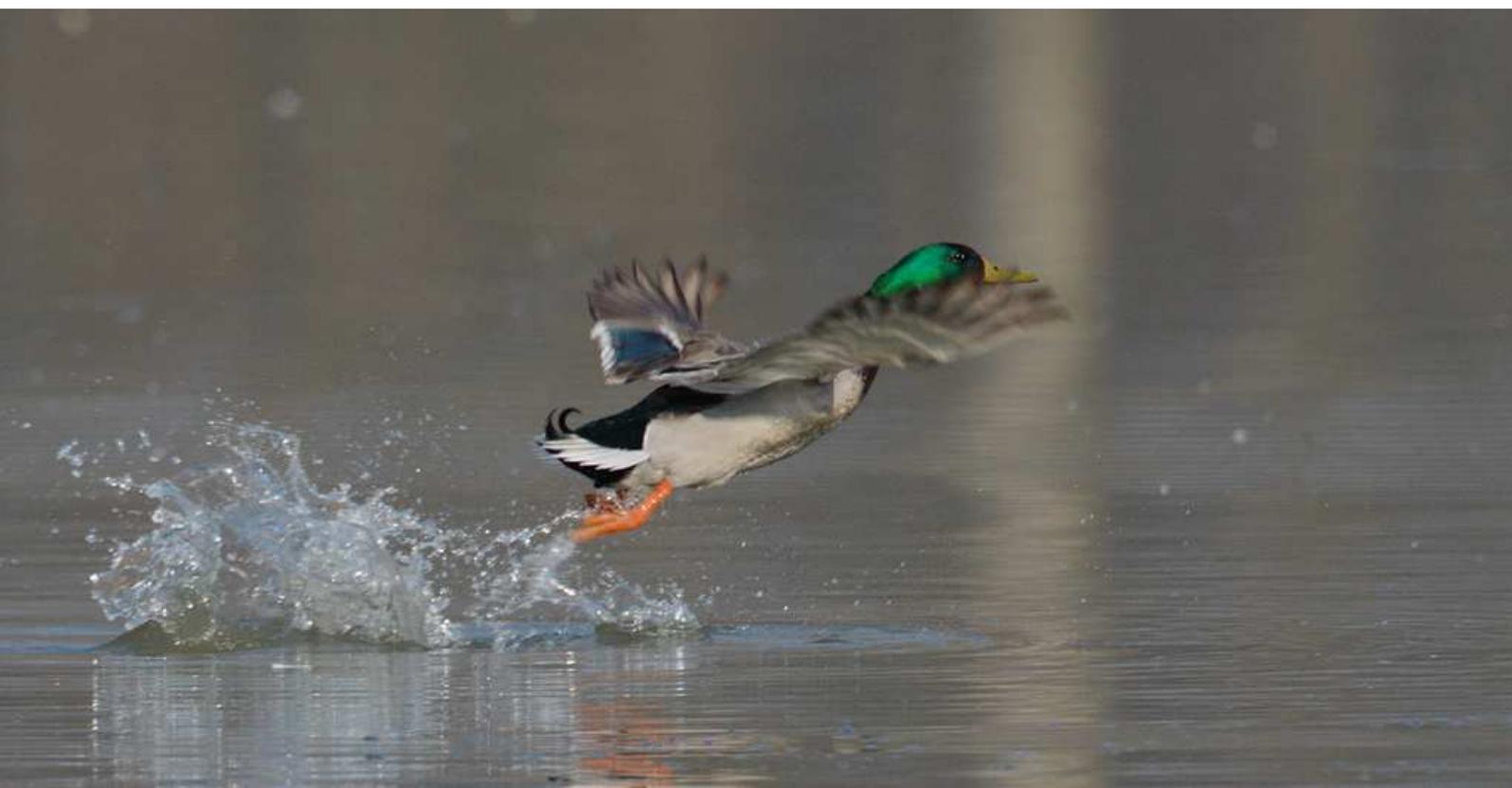
Weekly Report of 19 April, 2014

With a sudden about-face, April's weather brought winter back for a day, with rain, wind, and cold temperatures. In between downpours, we only had a few sightings of interest, and missed numerous expected species. La Cassinazza was very quiet in this bad weather: the only birds that were singing were Blackcaps, Nightingales, and Cetti's Warblers, along with a lone Cuckoo. The White Storks were quiet as well, crouched upon their respective nests, seemingly incubating. Although they did get wet, a few days of rain won't do any real harm to the eggs.

In any event, it does not seem like the rain will do much damage. The Black-winged Stilts have not laid eggs yet, and most have temporarily left; they will be back once the flooding subsides. A Coot sat on a nest under the driving rain, but its plumage is waterproof and it did not seem particularly worried. A few Blue Tit nests have already hatched, but the chicks are nice and dry in their nestboxes.

Swallows fly low in poor weather; according to folk tales, they are heralding the imminent rain, but in fact they are merely chasing after their insect prey, which are forced down by the wind and precipitation. Together with the Swallows were many House Martins and a few Sand Martins. Ducks are almost absent, and we did not see a single Teal for the first time in many months. Today's lucky encounter was with a Bonelli's Warbler, which would have remained undetected had it not been singing: as is this species' custom, it was high in the canopy.

During this migration season, we found uncommon species on every outing, and they attracted the lion's share of our attention. Perhaps because of this, I'd like to start a series of images dedicated to La Cassinazza's most common species. The photos themselves, however, are anything but ordinary.





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 26 April, 2014

The typically fickle spring weather means that periods of rain alternating with sunshine, and birds and insects have to adapt. The fine weather that comes after thunderstorms encourages migrants to take advantage of the high pressure and fly northwards without stopping. This is why there weren't many of them around this Saturday, despite the fact that this should be the period of peak migration. Nevertheless, birds were passing by high overhead, as testified by our sighting of two Black Storks. All three White Stork pairs are incubating. Generally, each pair has three or four chicks; once they fledge and migrate southwards, they will spend their first year of life in Africa and only return to Europe in their second spring. They will settle somewhere not too close to where they were born; this is a rather common mechanism among animals, and helps prevent inbreeding and related genetic problems .

The numbers of local breeders are increasing: there are already twelve pairs of Common Terns on the lake, while several Black-winged Stilts are already on eggs. *mentre alcuni cavalieri d'Italia già sono in atteggiamento di cova.* Flowers are blooming according to schedules that date back thousands of years: the Hawthorn is followed by the Guelder Rose (*Viburnum opulus*) with its lush white clusters. Butterflies and dragonflies are still thin on the ground, due in part to the sudden drop in temperatures of the last few days.



Today's photo is dedicated to the Whinchat, one of the few migrants that decided to stop and rest today in spite of the high pressure. On its way back from Africa where it spent the winter, this species breaks its journey on the Po Plain before arriving in the Alpine pastures where it breeds.



WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 03 May, 2014

Nearly every bird species that could be expected at La Cassinazza has now been recorded here, and adding a new one is an increasingly unlikely event. Today, however, it happened again when I heard the reeling song of a Grasshopper Warbler from a tangle of bushes and rank grass. I had been looking for this migrant for years at La Cassinazza, and I am sure they have passed through before, their highly elusive behaviour allowing them to escape notice. They are not rare birds, but they are so skulking during migration that seeing them is nigh on impossible, and indeed the vast majority of records refer to birds captured during mist-netting operations. Today's discovery was thus very rewarding. Two more newly-arrived guests – Quail and Great Reed Warbler – were also identified by voice, while the Bee-eaters high overhead were first heard, then seen.

The eggs in one of the White Stork nests have already hatched. The chicks are barely visible, and they seem to be no more than ten days old. The other two pairs laid eggs later, and hatching is expected after mid-month.

Black-winged Stilts and Common Terns are also incubating. The two colonies have seven active nests each, but there are surely more on the way. Black-winged Stilts in particular are present in high numbers – at least 50 individuals – and quite a few of the pairs that have formed have yet to lay eggs.





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 10 May, 2014

In the animal world, the transition between spring and summer is marked by the end of migration and the appearance of the newly-born. The Pied Flycatcher is the last of the migrants, while in the ploughed fields Lapwing chicks have hatched, and at La Cassinazza we are seeing Magpie fledglings, looking bizarre with their stubby tails. Even stranger are Coot chicks, black with orange heads. A pair of Greylag Geese has also hatched chicks: the father defends them strenuously and faces me menacingly if I happen to pass by. All of the Common Tern nests have been lost, either to a weather event or to a predator, in spite of the fact that the terns are quite aggressive and able to defend themselves. Today I first saw them take a swipe at a passing flock of Bee-eaters, and then gang up on a Great Crested Grebe: two terns took turns attacking it and trying to force it underwater! And if there are no predators or intruders nearby, they hone their skills by furiously fighting among themselves. Just as aggressive – brave if not foolhardy – was a Golden Oriole that launched itself at a Sparrowhawk.

Today's new arrival was a Squacco Heron, but I saved the best news for last: at Cascina Cadenazza two White Storks were mating and were beginning to build a nest. This means there are four pairs in the area, although it may be too late in the season for this last one to nest successfully.

The poplars are dispersing their seeds, each one wrapped in a cocoon of cotton-like fibers, which much like snow turned the roads and everything else white.





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 17 May, 2014

Early in the morning, the air was uncommonly clear, and the perfect visibility made even the farthest Alpine peaks seem close enough to touch. Later on, as the sun warmed up the air, the morning turned into a quiet summer day.

From now on, most of our birdwatching will focus on breeding birds and their successes and failures.

In the Black-winged Stilt colony there are at least 16 active nests: when the incubating birds stand up, four large eggs can be seen in each nest.

The chicks of the first pair of White Stork are already as large as chickens, and have begun standing on their feet; I counted three, perhaps four. The second pair may also have hatched eggs in the last few days, at least based on how the adults seem intent on watching the contents of their nest.

Deep in the reedbed, far from prying eyes, several Purple Herons are furtively moving about – perhaps they're nesting there?

The reedbed also conceals a male and female Marsh Harrier; the female only flushed after a Honey Buzzard flew over low, and towards evening the male rose up high in the sky giving high-pitched calls, then spiraled down at breakneck speed to disappear in the reeds, presumably in the vicinity of a nest.

Among today's butterflies were several male Large Coppers (*Lycaena dispar*), a species of conservation interest that is also spectacularly colorful.



Dog rose and privet are in full flower, but the dominant scent is that of honeysuckle. The species in today's photo is a common one: the ordinary Collared Dove.

Weekly Report of 24 May, 2014

Marsh Warblers are always very late migrants, and the last of the breeders to arrive. There was a sudden influx of them this week, and they immediately settled into the reedbed and began singing with gusto. They are so absorbed with their singing that they perch on top of the reeds, momentarily abandoning their shy and elusive habits and becoming easy to see. In addition to their cacophony, the reedbed rings out with the songs of several Great Reed Warblers and a single Reed Warbler. From deep within the reedbed come the grunting calls of a Water Rail, a sure sign that it is breeding at La Cassinazza. Numbers of Turtle Doves and Squacco Herons also seem to have increased significantly compared to a week ago. Sadly, in spite of it being late in the season, we have not yet seen a single Wryneck, Spotted Flycatcher, or Melodious Warblers, a trio of species that were all regular breeders until a few years ago before undergoing a drastic population decline, at least at the local level.

The Black-winged Stilt colony now has a couple of extra nests; meanwhile, the earliest clutches have probably hatched by now, and indeed a few of the older nests are nowhere to be seen. The chicks, however, are hiding in the dense vegetation and remained undetected.

Among the butterflies, we saw the year's first Lesser Purple Emperors (*Apatura ilia*), with their marvelous iridescent wings, and Painted Ladies (*Vanessa cardui*), a migrant from Africa.



The photo of the day is dedicated to the tree frogs that we constantly hear but hardly ever see, since they blend in so well with their surroundings. It is worth underlining that the frogs here are Italian Tree Frogs (*Hyla intermedia*), which are endemic to peninsular Italy and Sicily.

Weekly Report of 31 May, 2014

I have good news and bad news. The good news is that one of the recently-flooded rice fields at Cascina Darsena now hosts a small colony of Black-winged Stilts. For the time being, this new colony comprises seven nests, in addition to the eighteen active nests at La Cassinazza. The bad news is that the Common Terns, after the inexplicable destruction of all their nests, seem to have abandoned the colony. There is but one pair, and it does not seem to have laid eggs. We are all wondering who the culprit is, and how to go about solving the mystery.

Otherwise, everything is going as expected. In the first White Stork nest, the chicks are now old enough to be exercising their wings; we cannot see the contents of the other two nests, but at least one of them should already have chicks.

Green Woodpeckers have nearly fledged their young: the cavity nest we are watching still has chicks inside, but they should now be large enough to fly. Today's photograph, which depicts the adult male entering the nest, was taken with a motion-sensor camera, and thus without a photographer nearby who could have disturbed the birds.

We finally found at least one Spotted Flycatcher, which is not entirely absent as a breeder after all; several Garganey, two Teal, and a few Green Woodpeckers are summering in the area, but they will not breed.

Today's rarity was a Lesser Kestrel.





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 07 June, 2014

A Cuckoo flies low above the reedbed, then alights and disappears in the reeds; after a couple of minutes it re-emerges and flies away. It must have found the nest of some other bird where it will have laid an egg. Indeed, the reedbed rings out with the songs of Great Reed Warblers, Reed Warblers, several Cetti's Warblers, and most of all a great many Marsh Warblers. This year the reedbed is once again full of songbirds and Cuckoos are spoiled for choice. Considering the pair of Marsh Harriers, and the Purple Herons, Water Rails, and Little Bitterns that are all also breeding there, the reedbed is once again bursting with life and sound. What a difference from the dreadful silence of last year, when a disastrous spring caused widespread breeding failure.



The new observation tower, which allows us to look down on the reedbed, has made it easier to observe the thriving life therein.

There's no doubt that the weather this year was much more favourable for everyone, as shown by the Mallard chicks that are to be found in nearly every ditch and pond. It was a good year for the Lapwings in the rice fields, too, with over 80 adults and juveniles counted today.

Several Shovelers have now joined the small group of 4 Teal and 6 Garganey that are set to spend the summer here.

It was the first day of proper summer heat and we began to see a good variety of insects, including 18 species of butterfly and the year's first sightings of two locally-uncommon odonates, the Common Clubtail (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*) and the Small Bluetail (*Ischnura pumilio*), in addition to the widespread Blue Emperor (*Anax imperator*).

The photo of the day could only have been of a Marsh Warbler.



WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 14 June, 2014

Today was a sweltering break between last night's downpour and this evening's thunderstorm. All was calm, quiet, and silent.

The only records of note were the first seasonal records of two odonates, the Small Red-eyed Damselfly (*Erythromma viridulum*) and the Brilliant Emerald (*Somatochlora metallica*).

Now is the time to check up on our local breeders.

The Black-winged Stilts are having a fairly good season, and numerous chicks between the ages of 0 and 20 days are in evidence: indeed, a few hatched this very morning. This does not mean that all 20 clutches that were laid at La Cassinazza were successful; a few were certainly lost, as evidenced by the 5-6 new nests that appeared in recent days and that evidently represent replacement clutches. The small colony in the rice fields at Cascina Darsena has also suffered a setback; only 5 or 6 of the 10 nests we counted last week are still active. Life in the wild is never easy, and even if only half of the pairs in the colony breed successfully, the season will have been a good one.

Turning to our White Storks, the first pair has four strapping juveniles almost ready to leave the nest; on the other hand, the third pair, which built a nest at La Cassinazza earlier this spring, was unsuccessful and move to Cascina Cadenazza, where we initially believed it to be a fourth pair. The second pair – the 'original' Cassinazza pair – is still on the nest, but we cannot see or even hear any chicks, which should have hatched by now. We still haven't figured out what's going on.

This year, Squacco Herons are more in evidence than usual. A couple of individuals are predictably using the same perches time and time again, and we managed to obtain some good photos using the camera trap trick.





WEEKLY REPORT SPRING 2014



Weekly Report of 21 June, 2014

Today was officially the first day of summer.

With exquisite timing, we also saw the first evident signs of fall migration, a flock of about 30 Green Sandpipers.

Breeding birds have largely stopped courtship and territorial songs, and this is a very quiet time of year: Nightingales and Blackcaps are much less vocal, while the birds in the reedbed have gone almost entirely silent. The only exception is the Cetti's Warbler, which keeps on singing year-round anyway. Although its local population is recovering nicely, it has not yet gone back to the healthy numbers of old.

On the other hand, Little Bitterns and Water Rails are quite vociferous (though we can hardly call their vocalizations songs); perhaps they are getting ready for a second brood.

For some reason, in spite of the warm and settled weather, butterflies and dragonflies were scarce. The weather during the week, with heavy thunderstorms and strong winds, surely has something to do with this.

The Little Egret in the photo was fishing for minnows and frogs when suddenly – perhaps because of something it saw or merely to get more comfortable – it ruffled its feathers; the sun behind to its back wonderfully lit up its fluffy plumage and long scapular feathers: the aigrettes for which it is named.

