



## WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2016



### Weekly Report of 26 March, 2016

The weather and the birds made for an excellent day.

The most conspicuous migrants were Little Ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper (both in remarkable numbers: 40 and 90, respectively), Chiffchaff, Water Pipit, and Crane, although the latter were heard only. How we managed not to see a flock of Cranes flying overhead, I'll never know; perhaps they were flying low and hidden behind a line of trees.

The number of Garganey grew to 25, and there are still about 40 to 50 Shoveler around; they are migrating in above-average numbers this year.

First records for the year included Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, and Spotted Crake; the lengthy list of migrants also included a Little Crake, a Black Kite, and two Red Kites.

Here to stay are numerous Night Herons and about 100 Black-winged Stilts; a few of the latter are already beginning to build nests. The breeding season has arrived for many other species as well: the pair of Marsh Harrier is noisily reclaiming its corner of the reedbed, the two Kestrels are wasting no time mating, the two White Stork pairs are already on eggs, but the most precocious species of all are the Long-tailed Tits and Blackbirds, some of which already have young in the nest.

The hen Mallards are also busy incubating, as they crouch on their well-hidden nests. The drakes don't help them in the least: at most, they might loiter nearby, but their only interest is to drive away any other males who may have designs on their mate.





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### Weekly Report of 02 April, 2016

There was a long list of new arrivals this week: Purple Heron, Common Redshank, Pied Flycatcher, Yellow Wagtail, Common Tern, and finally the Nightingales, which immediately began singing. Also new was a third pair of White Storks, which settled in at Cascina Cadenazza and is now bringing branches to an artificial nest that was installed last year.

Among the migrants, Green Sandpipers were particularly in evidence, and even slightly exceeded last Saturday's record total. The commonest migrant songbirds were the Willow Warblers. Other waterbirds of note include Ruff, Little Ringed Plovers, Wood Sandpipers, Garganey, and a few Shoveler. Also seen today were Spotted Crake, Red Kite, and Peregrine Falcon. The Black-winged Stilt colony has reached full occupancy, with 110 individuals and the first nest already constructed; the stilts will soon begin to lay eggs. The Kestrel pair is incubating, while many Mallard ducklings are already out and about.

Now is the time when *Prunus* species are in full bloom: cherry, sour cherry, bird cherry, and dogwood trees, the latter being the first to bloom. In early April, there are few insects to pollinate all these flowers: in addition to the bees, several species of flies also take on this task. The large *Eristalis tenax* is a dead ringer for a bee: it is a typical example of Batesian mimicry, when a species imitates another, more dangerous one in order to appear more threatening. It visits flowers and plays an important role as a pollinator; it is thus a useful and harmless insect. It's a shame its larvae are so disgusting, in terms of their looks and their habitat.





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### Weekly Report of 09 April, 2016

At daybreak, the songs of the Nightingales rang out with fervor; it will be the soundtrack to all of our mornings for many weeks to come.

The migrant of the day was immediately evident: Wood Sandpiper, with at least a hundred individuals present.

The week's new arrivals soon announced themselves: Great Reed Warbler, Cuckoo, Golden Oriole, Common Sandpiper, and a Savi's Warbler singing from the reedbed. The latter is a true rarity at La Cassinazza – it is a species that has never been abundant and over the years its numbers have dropped throughout its range. It likes to remain deep within reedbeds, and as such is elusive and hard to see. Although quite drab and non-descript, it was a great thrill for me to manage to see it and then photograph it. I must have used up all my luck for the day on it though, especially as concerns passerines: over the next few hours I saw practically nothing as songbirds seemed to have vanished into thin air. Waterbirds were in evidence, albeit without particular surprises: Black-winged Stilts continue to increase (there are now 125), while Shoveler, Garganey, and Green Sandpiper numbers are dropping as their migration tails off.



The breeding season has come for many species. The Marsh Harrier pair has suddenly become furtive and skittish: they are most likely incubating eggs. The Great Bittern is equally furtive, and its presence at this time of year suggests it is nesting here. Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers have gone silent and become invisible; they are also incubating. Great Spotted Woodpeckers, on the other hand, are making quite a racket as they excavate the nest boxes to adapt them to their size.



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### Weekly Report of 16 April, 2016

The reeling song of the Savi's Warbler could be heard all day from La Cassinazza's reedbed; it has now been there for over a week and is unlikely to be a passage migrant. La Cassinazza may have gained a new breeding species. In the same reedbed, the Marsh Harriers and the Great Bitterns, almost certainly breeders, are still where we left them last week.

Common Terns have arrived at the lake. There aren't very many of them yet, but several pairs have already staked a claim on the floating platforms and clearly intend to nest there.

With 150 birds, Black-winged Stilt numbers in the colony are higher than ever, and there are already at least 15 active nests.

Wood Sandpipers are also in exceptional numbers: there were almost 200 of these small waders, accompanied by Ruff, Lapwings, Greenshanks, and a scattering of Green Sandpipers, Common Redshanks, Common Snipe, and Little Ringed Plovers. Seeing them forage all together in the same shallow impoundment is a sight to behold.

Other species that appeared for the first time this year included Sedge Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Whinchat, Hobby, Common Swift, Hoopoe, Wryneck, and Black Tern. The last-named species went unrecorded last year.



Great Tits are never mentioned in our reports. A resident species, they are always present in pretty much the same numbers, unlike the closely related Blue Tit whose numbers rise and fall with influxes of migrants. As if that weren't enough - and again, unlike Blue Tits - they are wary and difficult to photograph. We rarely have a chance to talk about them, if it weren't for their song, one of the most characteristic harbingers of spring.



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### Weekly Report of 23 April, 2016

If last week I expressed my wonder at the countless waders on show at La Cassinazza, what can I say about today? The number of Wood Sandpipers skyrocketed to over 500 (yes indeed, we counted them one by one). Quite a few other species were present among the throngs: the usual ones (Ruff, Greenshank, Lapwing, Spotted Redshank, Little Ringed Plover) and some local rarities (Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint). Not to mention the 100+ Black-winged Stilts. Now that the water is back in the Navigli canals that bring water to the city of Milan and to La Cassinazza, the water level in the impoundments has risen by a few centimeters, just enough so that a few of the Black-winged Stilt nests have gone under: there were only ten active nests today. This is no big deal, as there is still plenty of time for pairs to lay eggs, and most of them had not started nesting anyway.

The exceptional numbers and diversity of waders were in stark contrast with the near-total absence of migrant passerines. This does not seem to be just a local phenomenon: unusual weather conditions over the Mediterranean seem to have prevented many songbirds from leaving. This same phenomenon – an unusually prolonged period of strong scirocco winds – may have been responsible for today's sighting of a Vagrant Emperor (*Anax ephippiger*), a migratory dragonfly from Africa.

Whatever the cause, the bushes and hedgerows are heaving with flowers but bereft of birds. The only ones in evidence were local breeders, all in full song: Nightingale, Blue Tit, Great Tit, and Blackcap.

The most notable new arrival was the Squacco Heron, and today's rarity was a Whiskered Tern, the first record for La Cassinazza in three years.



### **Weekly Report of 30 April, 2016**

We were left speechless this morning when we saw the enormous numbers of Wood Sandpipers at La Cassinazza. There were so many of them that we meticulously counted them twice, in the morning and in the afternoon. Both counts matched: there were over 1,000 birds present. This is an incredible number for such a small site; I had never seen so many together, at La Cassinazza or anywhere else. There were an additional 9 wader species with them.

The day had plenty more surprises in store: the newly-arrived Bee-eaters, an unseasonal Stock Dove, a rare Montagu's Harrier, and a very rare Pallid Harrier; both harriers were males. We were particularly pleased with the return of the Little Owl, back on the chimney stack of the main house after an absence of several months. Perhaps the old tenant has died, and a new one has taken its place.

At the White Stork nest at La Darsena, the adults' behaviour strongly suggests that chicks have hatched at least one week ago.

*Eucera longicornis* is a large, solitary bee and an important pollinator. The males are easily identified by their very long antennae – the species is known

as the Long-horned Bee in English – and fly earlier in the season than the females, which they await on their favourite flowers (usually alfalfa and other legumes; the individual in the photo is on *Symphytum officinale*). Long-horned Bees have a curious relationship with the orchid *Ophrys apifera*, whose flowers perfectly imitate the hairy abdomen of a bee: the males are easily fooled by this, and flit from one flower to the next, thinking they are mating with females of their species. Unwittingly – and not without a great deal of disappointment, I imagine – they help disperse the orchids' pollen.





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### Weekly Report of 07 May, 2016

The flooded rice fields were attracting tons of waders, but now they have been drained for farmwork. This – and the fact that it is now time for them to head north without further ado – meant that Wood Sandpiper numbers dropped to a measly hundred or so. Until last year this would have seemed like a remarkable number, but it was a mere shadow of last week's throngs.

A few Black-winged Stilt chicks have already hatched and can be seen out and about; the adults are extremely aggressive towards any potential predator that approaches them, as a Buzzard that flew over the colony found out. All of the stilts rushed towards it and the Buzzard, in spite of being much larger and fiercer, had to beat a hasty retreat, with a bunch of angry stilts in tow.

Turning to passerines, the Marsh Warbler has returned and was quietly singing.

The only migrant of note was a Northern Wheatear, the first record here in five years.

All of the events in the bird world were overshadowed by a fantastic surprise in the form of a butterfly.

We found the very rare and seriously threatened Black Hairstreak (*Satyrium pruni*). In the Po Plain, it has only been recorded from a handful of localities. It lives in stands of *Prunus*, especially Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*). And we didn't just see a single wandering individual: there were several flying around the canopy of a Bird Cherry (*Prunus padus*) both in the morning and afternoon.



There is thus a breeding population at La Cassinazza. This is one of the many outstanding achievements of the habitat restoration efforts at La Cassinazza, where *Prunus* trees of several species were planted in great numbers. Like the other hairstreaks, it is a very elusive species: it remains high in the canopy, does not spend much time on the wing, and only exceptionally drops down near the ground. It was a great stroke of luck just to see it, let alone photograph it.



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### Weekly Report of 14 May, 2016

Stormy weather during the week took a toll on the Black-winged Stilt colony. The tall grass makes it difficult to gauge the extent of the damage: we could glimpse a few chicks and at least one active nest, but others were certainly lost. And the number of adults dropped to only thirty or so.

And while we are on the subject of numbers dropping, two weeks ago there were over 1,000 Wood Sandpipers, last Saturday only 100, and today none at all. They have all left, as have all the other migrant waders.

The only new species to arrive this week was the Melodious Warbler.

I managed to see the newly-hatched White Storks this week for the first time. The ones in the first nest are strong enough to stand on their own legs, while in the other they are still crouched at the bottom of the nest. The third pair let us down: they busied themselves about the nest for a few weeks, but have now disappeared.

After last week's discovery, I spent a lot of time looking for Black Hairstreaks (*Satyrrium pruni*), and found a few in the same hackberry bush as last week. Encouraged by this early success, I scoured every hedgerow and woodlot with *Prunus* species in search of another colony. I was unsuccessful, at least today.

The Cottontail is a species of rabbit that was introduced to Italy for hunting purposes. It was first recorded at La Cassinazza some years ago and has now become quite common. They are not hunted here, and have lost all traces of wariness. Indeed, they are often the ones to approach humans, driven by their natural curiosity.





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### Weekly Report of 21 May, 2016

Summer arrived suddenly. And I'm not just talking about the weather: the natural world itself seemed to slip into a peaceful slumber.

Only the Black-winged Stilts remained active, constantly calling and vocalizing, and generally being extremely protective of their chicks.

A few more sounds broke the silence: Reed and Marsh Warblers sang from the reedbed, and Water Rails were quite noisy as well, testifying to their presence at La Cassinazza during the breeding season, when seeing them becomes nearly impossible.

The only new arrival of note was a pair of Great Crested Grebes on the lake. Perhaps they will stay on to breed, although it seems that in recent years the lake has become unsuitable for their needs.

Summertime is butterfly season. We are at the very beginning, and many common species appeared for the first time this year over the last two weeks: today, for instance, we saw 15 species. I tried to track down the Black Hairstreaks, but could not find them.



As a consolation prize, I found the closely related White-letter Hairstreak (*Satyrium w-album*). It is not as rare and was already known from La Cassinazza, but it shares the habit of remaining high in the canopy.

Getting a good photo of this pair was quite the challenge.



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### Weekly Report of 28 May, 2016

First of all, I need to take back everything I said about the third White Stork pair having abandoned their nest: we know now for a fact that they are incubating eggs. The artificial nest that was built for them is so wide and deep that anything in it – even an adult stork - cannot be seen from below. But in fact, the stork is there, sitting on eggs that were laid later than the other two pairs.

The Spotted Flycatchers are the latest arriving local summer breeders, and we finally saw them today for the first time this year.

Raptors featured prominently today, with eight species seen, just about all of those that can reasonably be expected at this time of year: in addition to Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Buzzard, and Hobby – all of which breed here – we also saw two Black Kites, two Honey Buzzards, and a Peregrine, probably out on hunting forays. Little and Long-eared Owls can also be considered birds of prey, albeit nocturnal ones. The latter is a species that had been missing from La Cassinazza for too long.

The list of herons was also quite long, as it has been for several weeks now, with seven species: Grey Heron, Purple Heron, Cattle Egret, Great White Egret, Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Little Egret, and Night Heron. The only miss was Great Bittern: once again, we don't know whether they are breeding at La Cassinazza this year. Once May rolls around, they seem to disappear, although some of us believe they really are breeding and are just exceptionally elusive.

Hobbies are quick and agile raptors that are able to catch swifts, among the fastest of birds. In order to have as many prey items as possible to feed their chicks, they delay breeding until July. As such, at this time of year they are not yet on the nest, and can be seen soaring and surveying their territories from above.





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### Weekly Report of 04 June, 2016

The rain that fell off and on marred the prime hours for birdwatching; it wasn't until afternoon that the sun came out.

Today's most noteworthy sighting was of six adult Spoonbills: it would be nice to know where they come from, and especially where they are nesting. The same could be said of the two Black Kites that we have seen on various occasions over the last several weeks; they seem to come to La Cassinazza only to hunt. A Peregrine has also been putting in semi-regular appearances. I would not have noticed it today if not for the great ruckus raised by the Black-winged Stilts, which managed to spot it flying by even though it was high overhead. The Black-winged Stilt chicks are growing fast, and a few are already able to fly around. It appears that the third pair of White Storks – the one at Cascina Cadenazza – has also hatched its eggs.

A few migrants are already coming back, in all likelihood failed breeders that will spend the balance of the summer here: a few Green Sandpipers and a Teal were the first to arrive.

The weather – not just today but all week long – was not favourable to insects. Among the very few butterflies I saw today I relocated the Black Hairstreak; discovering this species here was the undisputed highlight of the year.

The Squacco Heron is one of the least common of La Cassinazza's herons, and is my hands-down favourite: the white wings contrasting with the golden body as it takes flight make for a gorgeous sight.



**Weekly Report of 11 June, 2016**

The weather was pretty crazy all week long; fortunately, we were spared the worst today, and even enjoyed a few hours of sunshine.

We did not add any species to the lengthy list of birds observed this year. Little else is around at this time of year apart from the local breeders, which are not exactly eager to show themselves. These extra species included a Black Kite and a pair of Honey Buzzards scoping out La Cassinazza.

The new birds we did see were fledged juveniles: the young Kestrels have left the nest, and a quick tour of Cascina Darsena's rice fields produced many Lapwing chicks, some barely two days old, and others that looked like they had hatched a couple of weeks ago. The young Black-winged Stilts can already fly quite well, and many families have moved to the newly-flooded rice fields. Flocks of Great and Long-tailed Tits contained many fresh juveniles, and newly-fledged Blackbirds, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Green Woodpeckers, Ring-necked Pheasants, Mallards, Night Herons, Grey Herons, Coots, Moorhens, Jays, and Starlings were all out and about.

In other words, La Cassinazza was bursting with new life.

There was lots of new life in the insect world as well, where every week brings with it a slew of new species for the year. Mosquitoes have appeared as well. Fortunately, they have never been a plague at La Cassinazza, but they certainly are a nuisance. They are a part of biodiversity as well, one we could do without...



One of the butterflies that has appeared recently is the Lesser Purple Emperor (*Apatura ilia*), a common species. Thanks to the incredible violet iridescence on their wings, the males are nothing short of spectacular.



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### Weekly Report of 18 June, 2016

The entire week was plagued by monsoon-like evening thunderstorms, and today was no exception. This did have at least one positive side effect: we picked out an Alpine Swift – a new species for the year - from the scores of Common Swifts fleeing the incoming storm.

The other big news today was our sighting of a Black Stork. We spent quite a while pondering whether it could be a local breeder (there are only a handful of pairs in all of Italy!): at this time of year, neither adults nor juveniles should wander too far from the nest. Ageing it, though, proved quite difficult: the brownish – rather than glossy black – plumage indicates a juvenile, but the red legs and bill point towards an adult; other features left us altogether puzzled. Ultimately, the most likely option is that it was neither one nor the other, but rather an immature in its second calendar year that is not yet ready to breed. The truth is, all of our research to age it left us none the wiser.

While searching for butterflies during a brief afternoon sunny spell, we found several Large Chequered Skippers (*Heteropterus morpheus*), which once was much more common. It is always a pleasure to confirm its presence at La Cassinazza.

In spite of their name, Cattle Egrets will associate with any grazing livestock: cattle, sheep, or here at La Cassinazza, horses.

