



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 25 March, 2017

Around these parts, early winter fog is expected; in spring, though, it is definitely out of the ordinary. But it did not last long.

As soon as the fog cleared, the day gave us a number of excellent sightings, both in terms of variety and rarity. It began with the three Black Storks that have been seen locally over the last few days. Almost at the same time we saw a Marsh Sandpiper, a species we had not seen here in two years, followed by the first Bluethroat for La Cassinazza in five years.

The Glossy Ibis we found last Saturday spent the entire week here.

An Osprey, a Little Crake, and a Common Redshank, all regular migrants, were nevertheless of interest.

And the year's first Swallow was noted with the due enthusiasm.

The list of birds we saw today was quite lengthy.

The local landscape is dotted with the white blossoms of several *Prunus* species and by the small splashes of colour of the butterflies, a variety of which put on an appearance today.

There seems to be an unusually heavy passage of Spotted Crakes this spring, both at La Cassinazza and elsewhere: we often hear their calls, and in spite of their wariness, we have been seeing them with ease. Armed with a good dose of patience, we can even photograph them.





WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 01 April, 2017

The landscape has changed quite a bit, and green is now the dominant colour. Over the last few days, temperatures have been more summer-like than spring-like, and vegetation has exploded, with leaf-out taking place very rapidly. As if to underscore the early spring, the first odonate of the year – a Blue-tailed Damselfly (*Ischnura elegans*) – put in its first appearance, about 8-10 days ahead of schedule.

White Storks are already incubating in the three nests that were present last year. This week's surprise was the appearance of a fourth pair, which occupied an abandoned nest and is busily re-building it. Having as many as four White Stork nests in the immediate area would be quite a coup.

Once again, the list of new arrivals was rather lengthy. Some were of common species we expect every year: Night Heron, Greenshank, Common Tern, and Common Redstart. Others were more unusual, such as a Dunlin, the Glossy Ibis now at La Cassinazza for the third week in a row, and the Jackdaws that appear to be setting up shop in a barn. Others still were downright rare: three Pallid Swifts and a Tawny Pipit.



We saw about ten butterfly species today, many for the first time this season.

The Green-veined White (*Pieris napi*) is a typical butterfly of spring: it appears in March and is gone by May.



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 08 April, 2017

Robins and Wrens, two quintessential winter species, have all left. Neither migrants nor summer breeders have replaced them, however. Migration seems to be running late this year.

It wasn't until today that we heard the first Nightingales, which should have arrived a week or more ago. And we are not hearing the songs of other birds either, or the calls of Swallows and House Martins and the cries of Common Swifts. On the other hand, we could hear the low, powerful booming of the Great Bittern, a clear sign of its intent to breed at La Cassinazza. This does not happen every year, and is a great thrill for us when it does.

And there might be more good news in store: two pairs of Marsh Harriers are flying over the reedbed. One is certainly the local breeding pair, and while the other might just be passing through, the reedbed is certainly big enough for both.

In addition to the Nightingales, new arrivals this week included Hoopoe and Purple Heron, and while a handful of Little Egrets remained with us through the winter, today there were dozens. Ruff numbers also increased noticeably, and they are also well behind schedule, as they usually peak in mid-March.

The new pair of White Storks seems well pleased with its nest. It spends most of its time there, courting and mating.





WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 15 April, 2017

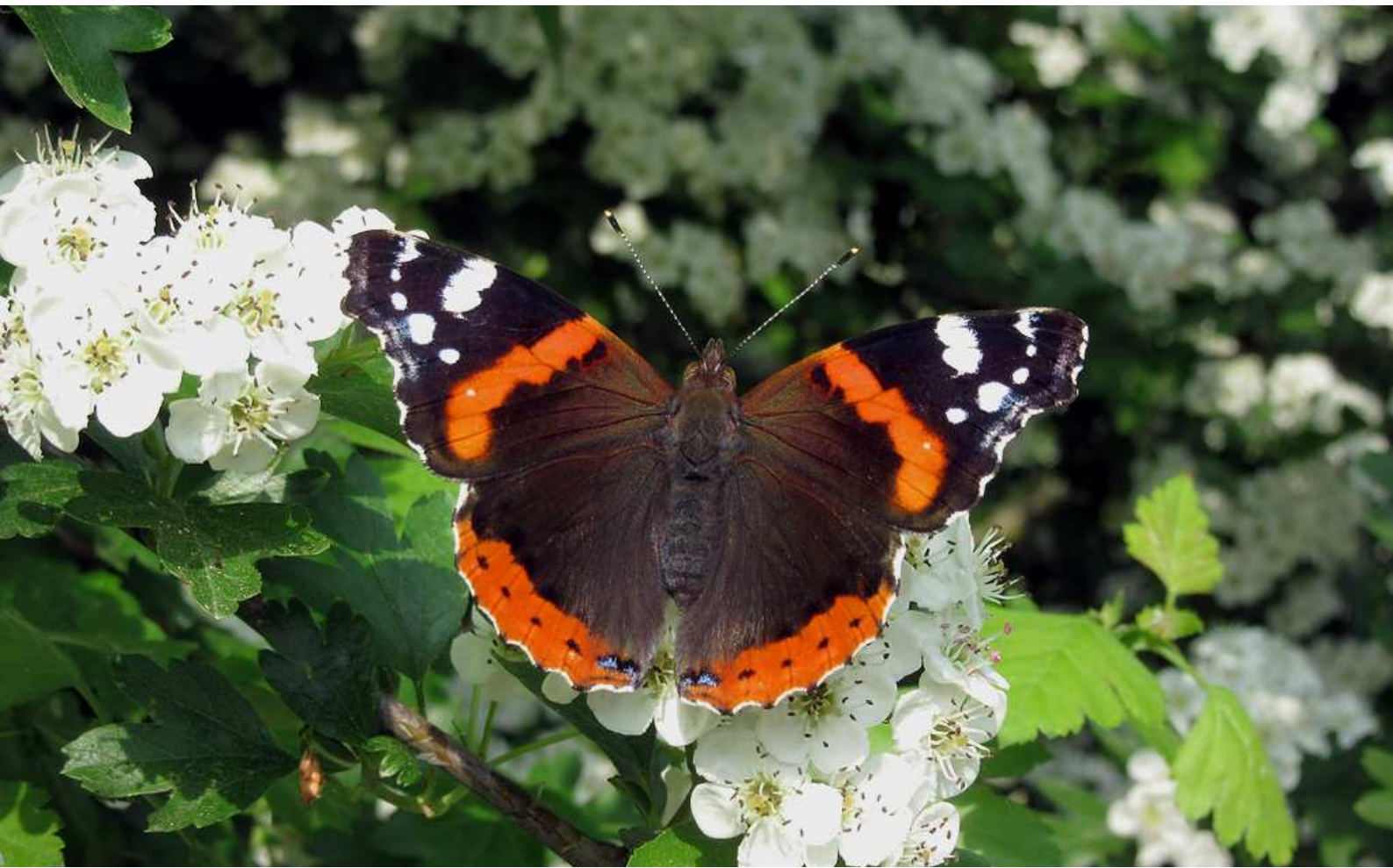
Now that the Cuckoos are here, La Cassinazza's soundscape has changed: their songs, together with those of the Nightingales, immediately bring summer to mind. There were precious few other songs, though: one each of Great Reed and Reed Warbler, singing tentatively, just a few brief snatches at a time. From the reedbed comes the low booming of the Great Bittern, together with an even more unusual song, that of the Spotted Crake, for the third week running.

The Ruff have mostly departed, and there are hardly any left; they have been replaced by Wood Sandpipers, now in triple digits.

The week's new arrivals included Squacco Heron, Common Sandpiper, and House Martins high overhead.

The Black-winged Stilts have laid their first eggs – we counted at least seven nests – and all four White Stork pairs are incubating. The bare earth in the ploughed fields helps set off the dozen or more Lapwings crouched on their nests. The Common Terns on the lake are taking possession of the floating platforms, and the Blue Tits in the nest boxes are already feeding chicks. The breeding season is definitely upon us.

Also making their first appearances for the year were two dragonfly species – White-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum albistylum*) and Blue Featherleg (*Platycnemis pennipes*) and two butterflies – Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*) and Small Copper (*Lycaena phleas*). The hawthorns are in full bloom and spectacular, they fill the air with their scent and attract countless insects.



Weekly Report of 22 April, 2017

Our birdwatching started out with a bang today, beginning with a Bonelli's Warbler – a scarce migrant – then followed by the year's first Hobby and Whinchat, with two Black Storks soon thereafter. Bird activity quickly dropped off, though: it was clear that there had been no other arrivals, not even the many common species we expected would be here by now, but which remain missing.

The waterbirds did not give us much joy, either: all the Ruff and Garganey are gone, the Teal disappeared two weeks ago, and the numbers of all other species dropped noticeably. Finally, and most disappointingly, there are only two or three Black-winged Stilt nests remaining. The others were presumably destroyed during this week's strong winds: even the smallest waves are enough to submerge the eggs.

The photos that accompany these reports usually portray brightly-coloured birds, graceful butterflies, and elegant dragonflies. But the natural world also contains an endless array of other creatures, often unknown, and not necessarily attractive. Some are downright bizarre, like this beetle. Its scientific name is *Onthophagus* (which says a lot about its deplorable eating habits) *taurus* (a reference to its outsized bull-like horns).





WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 29 April, 2017

The first twenty days of April felt like early summer, but suddenly the wind, rain, and cold temperatures came back. Perhaps as a cause of this, the conditions that had blocked migration throughout Italy came to an end. This was obvious at La Cassinazza, where a holiday allowed us an extra weekday visit. The total checklist for these two outings came to a rather impressive 84 species.

Equally impressive was the list of new arrivals, which included Black Tern, Common Swift, Tree Pipit, Northern Wheatear, Common Whitethroat, Wood Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Golden Oriole, Sedge Warbler, Bee-eater, Turtle Dove, and Sand Martin.

The terrible weather took its toll: all of the Black-winged Stilt nests were destroyed, and the colony has partly disbanded. Hopefully it is still early enough for them to start from scratch. The rains also flooded the fields where the Lapwings are nesting, and a good half of the nests were lost.

On the other hand, two pairs of Jackdaws seem to be nesting successfully at Cascina Darsena. It is the first time this species nests here.

The Great Bittern's deep booming continues to sound from the reedbed, as it has for several weeks, testifying to its breeding here.

And there can be no doubt about the successful breeding of the three Wild Boar sows we observed today: they had at least 20 piglets in tow.



The Whinchat is an uncommon migrant at La Cassinazza. Males in spring sport a bright, contrasty plumage, and they are everything but elusive: if they are around, they cannot go unnoticed.



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 06 May, 2017

Bad weather, rain, and worst of all low temperatures plagued us the entire week. The Black-winged Stilts seem to have taken it especially hard: not only did they fail to lay any replacement clutches, but most of the adults left La Cassinazza altogether.

The Lapwings, on the other hand, did the exact opposite: the pairs that lost their eggs over the last few weeks laid new ones and the others continued to incubate; we counted at least 17-18 nests. The Common Tern colony also seems to have withstood the inclement weather: there are about a dozen active nests. Judging from the behaviour of the adults, we think the White Stork pairs have all hatched their eggs.

Migration did not bring us many new birds, with the exception of the year's first Spotted Flycatchers. Other migrants were thin on the ground, and variety was low: Common Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Bee-eater, Hoopoe, and Sand Martin. Heavy rain in the afternoon put a stop to our birdwatching.

Today's photo continues my attempts to highlight our lesser-known fauna, those insects that interest me so much (and I realize I may be the only one). The Marmalade Hoverfly (*Episyrphus balteatus*) belongs to the family Syrphidae; in other words, it is essentially a fly. Although its black and yellow colours mimic those of far more dangerous insects, it is actually harmless. Adults feed on flowers and are important pollinators, while the carnivorous larvae eat large numbers of aphids. This species is thus especially useful, as it is both a pollinator and keeps populations of harmful insects in check.





WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 13 May, 2017

"There are still three typical summer species we have not yet seen this year; perhaps we'll find them today": this is what we were saying this morning before beginning our survey. Right on cue, all three species appeared: Marsh Warbler, Little Bittern, and Honey Buzzard. The first two regularly breed at La Cassinazza and were heard singing, while the Honey Buzzard was a passage migrant high overhead. Apart from them, however, there were essentially no other migrants, either among the songbirds or the waterbirds.

The only White Stork nest that had not hatched eggs last week – the one on a poplar tree at La Cassinazza – seems to have done so now.

The Common Terns on the main impoundments should be about to end the incubation stage. On the other hand, it seems that the Black-winged Stilts have given up on nesting at La Cassinazza this year: the colony was abandoned and only a handful of individuals are still around.

The weather might finally have settled, and with the warm day I expected to finally see good numbers of butterflies, dragonflies, and other insects. But it was not to be: insect numbers seem low across the board. Three weeks of rain and adverse weather must have killed most of the adults and prevented the larvae from fully developing. We will have to wait for new populations to emerge. In spite of this, we were able to find a few new butterflies for the year, the most notable of which was the Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*).

The Squacco Heron is one of our summer visitors. It breeds in the heronry at Villarasca along with several other species, of which it is the least common: no more than a handful a day are typically seen at La Cassinazza.





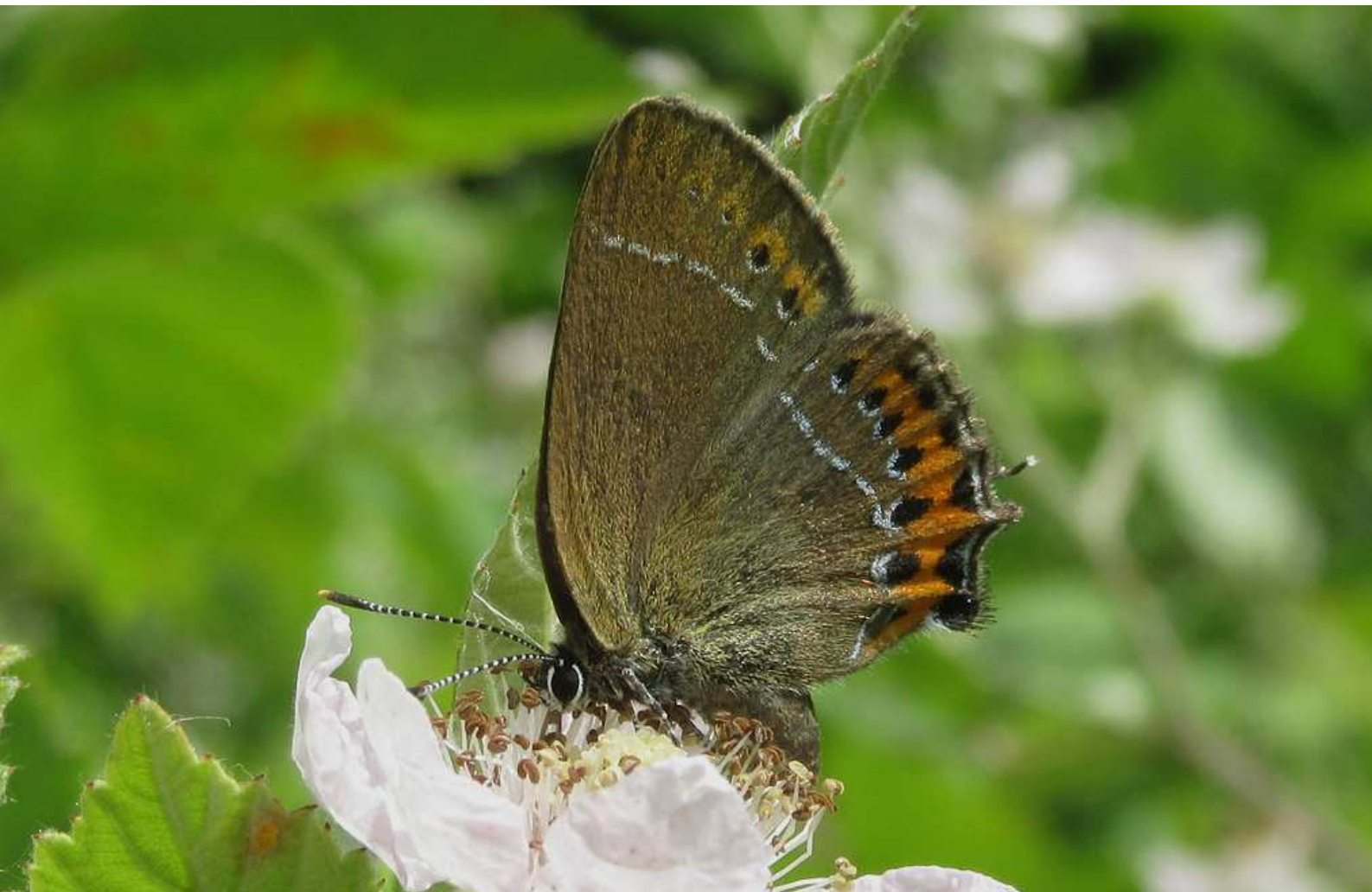
WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 20 May, 2017

By the second half of May, migration is just about over, and birdwatching becomes repetitive. Our focus shifts to monitoring the nesting birds, which do their best to stay out of sight during this delicate time. And they are very good at it. The Great Bittern, for instance, lurks in the reedbed, but it was heard booming at night. Hiding is not an option for some others. The White Stork chicks are starting to peer over the edge of their nests, and we will soon be able to count them from ground level. Many of the Common Tern nests on the main impoundments now have chicks; there are two for each brood, and the largest look about a week old. It was nice to see our efforts repaid after we prepared the nesting platforms, put them out on the lake, and kept them clean.

This is the right time of year to look at insects. They have not yet reached peak abundance, but we already made a most pleasing re-discovery today: the very rare Black Hairstreak (*Satyrrium pruni*), a colony of which we had discovered at La Cassinazza last year. Today we found two individuals on some blackberry blossoms, not 50 meters from the heart of the small colony. To have found it again this year is proof that its occurrence was not a random event and that this species, which has very specific habitat requirements, is now a stable presence. This is a major achievement, and a much-appreciated reward for all that has been done to restore La Cassinazza's natural habitats.





WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 27 May, 2017

In late May, it is not unusual to have a short heat wave, which luckily tends to fizzle out quickly. As temperatures soared to nearly 30 degrees, the birds stopped singing early, and even insect activity slowed down in the afternoon.

This is one of the reasons why today's checklist was quite a bit shorter than usual, barely registering at three pages. The most conspicuous absence is that of the Black-winged Stilts: we did not see a single individual today, even though this is when the local breeding colony normally reaches peak activity levels, with newly-hatched chicks. The stormy weather at the end of April put an end to their nesting attempts, and they moved elsewhere, perhaps to try a second time.

The Common Tern chicks are growing up without a hitch, and they will soon be ready to fledge. This year, the colony managed to avoid the egg predation that wiped it out in the previous two years; we have still not managed to figure out who the culprit was.

Jackdaws successfully nested at Cascina Darsena and the juveniles have already fledged. This is a first for us, and our local patch now has a new breeding species. We have been trying to photograph them for weeks, but Jackdaws are smart and what's more, they are extremely wary. They seem to be intent on going about their business, flying from rooftops to utility poles, but they always keep an eye on people and their movements. There is just no getting close to them.





WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 03 June, 2017

The insistent, incessant cries of a juvenile Long-eared Owl told us that yet another species has nested at La Cassinazza. We did not actually see it, because of its nocturnal habits and since its nest is presumably located in a particularly thick patch of woods that we almost never enter. In fact, the last time one of us went through the trouble of bushwhacking his way in, what flew out but a Long-eared Owl? Evidently they like the place. Young Long-eared Owls leave the nest long before they are able to fly. For young Common Terns, however, the ability to fly is essential for leaving the nest, as it is out in the open water. Most of the young in the local colony have already fledged; there is only one nest left with chicks, and a late-breeding pair of adults is still incubating. Based on their behaviour, we suspect that Purple Herons are also nesting in some inaccessible spot in the middle of the reedbed.

The presence of several Green Sandpipers and a Ruff begs the question: are they late spring migrants or early fall ones?

Two species making their first appearance for the year, right on schedule, are the Purple Emperor (*Apatura ilia*), a butterfly, and the Common Clubtail (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*), a dragonfly.

Most of the birds are now busy with the nesting season, and not many are singing. The Marsh Warbler, our latest-arriving breeder, is a notable exception.





WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017

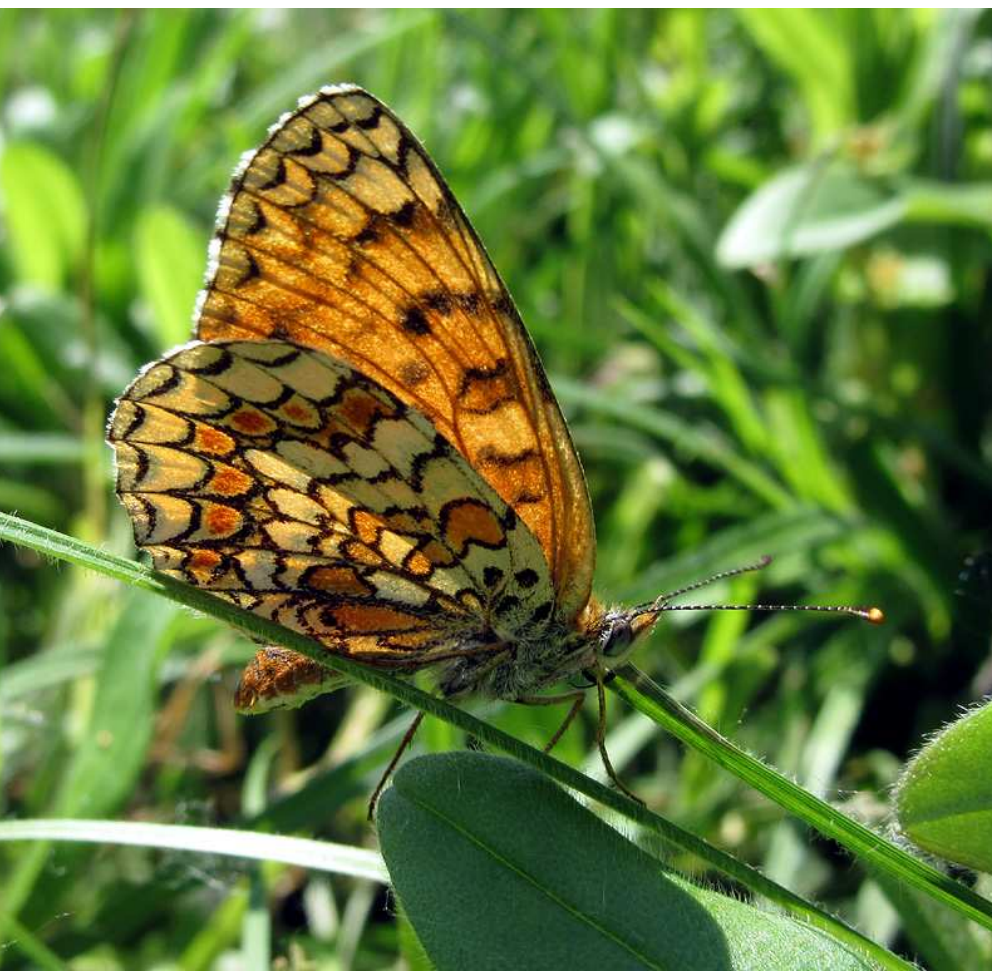


Weekly Report of 10 June, 2017

The weather remained sunny and warm all week long, and at La Cassinazza the breeding season is proceeding without a hitch.

The first juvenile Purple Herons and Night Herons, fresh out of the nest, were among the day's highlights. As usual, we were unable to figure out where the Purple Herons nested, while we know that the Night Herons breed in the heronry at Villarasca, just a couple of km from La Cassinazza. The Villarasca heronry also hosts our local Spoonbill pair, who quickly transferred their juveniles back to La Cassinazza. Only two juveniles fledged this year, a rather lackluster breeding success. It is likely that the storms of late April and early May led to the loss of the other chicks.

Speaking of local breeders, or at least of probable ones, we watched a Honey Buzzard perform its nuptial flight, which culminates in a wing-clapping display. This behaviour is only observed near the nesting site. In our case, the breeding territory appears to be in a woodlot that is still part of La Cassinazza, but that we never visit, since it is cut off from the main estate by a road and a fence. Perhaps it is best this way, because the shy and wary Honey Buzzard – an easy bird to overlook in spite of its size – is very sensitive to disturbance when breeding, and may abandon the nest if approached too closely. We will keep an eye on it from afar: it would be a new nesting species for La Cassinazza, and a highly prized one.



Butterfly numbers are still rather low, but diversity at least is beginning to improve: we found 17 species today. The Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea phoebe*) was one of the most colorful ones.



WEEKLY REPORTS WINTER 2017



Weekly Report of 17 June, 2017

The current tropical heat wave isn't exactly ideal birdwatching weather: it was already oppressively hot just a couple of hours after sunrise. And this time of year is traditionally about as dull as it gets in terms of noteworthy sightings. Contrary to our expectations, however, several of today's sightings raised interesting questions.

For example, seeing a female Honey Buzzard after watching a male perform a display flight last week strengthens our suspicions that a pair is nesting nearby. A Spotted Redshank in pristine breeding plumage, with jet-black underparts and a coral-red bill, should have been in the tundra by now: was it a straggler or an early fall migrant? And where did the adult Peregrine we saw nest? Perhaps it is from the small urban population that breeds on Milan's skyscrapers. What about the three drake Pochards that were swimming on the lake? Where do they come from? And finally, after all the local Common Tern juveniles have fledged, there are now four, perhaps five new nests with incubating adults. Surely, this is a second brood by adults that lost their first clutch. But where? Perhaps on a gravel bar on the Ticino river.

The Lapwings that breed in the farm fields had a bit of a rough patch when the weather took a turn for the worst right when they were incubating, but ultimately many pairs managed to breed successfully. The adults are now aggressively protecting their young and loudly take on any and all intruders.

