



WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 24 March, 2018

With an icy easterly breeze, this morning felt more like mid-winter. And our bird sightings backed this up: they began with a large flock of Bramblings, followed by species such as Siskin, Redwing, Great Bittern, Peregrine, Common Snipe, Meadow Pipit, Water Pipit, Chiffchaff, Reed Bunting, and Coal Tit.

Soon enough, though, spring migrants also appeared: nearly 200 Ruff were particularly in evidence, while 65 Shovelers were probably an all-time record count for La Cassinazza. They were joined by a baker's dozen Garganey and Spotted Redshank, 30 Green Sandpipers, 6 Little Ringed Plovers, a handful of Greenshank and Wood Sandpipers, good numbers of Barn Swallows, the season's first House Martins, and four Alpine Swifts overhead.

The number of Black-winged Stilts remained essentially the same as last week. The Marsh Harriers are setting up breeding territories: two pairs are fighting over the best real estate, while a third adult female suggests there may be another pair yet. As a result, the reedbed has gotten quite noisy. Buzzards, Lapwings, and Woodpigeons are all engaged in their respective versions of nuptial flight, as different as they are spectacular.

Today's rarities were a Black Stork – probably the same as last week- and a Moustached Warbler singing from the reeds bordering the main pond.

At day's end, we had accumulated an even longer species list that last Saturday.



I will finish this account of a special day with a photo of a very ordinary species: the Grey Heron is such a routine presence that we hardly ever mention it, let alone take the time to photograph it.



WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 31 March, 2018

Conditions are very favourable. The Navigli, the system of canals that supplies La Cassinazza with nearly all of its water, are currently being drained for maintenance. As such, water levels at La Cassinazza have dropped, leaving many mudflats exposed. This coincides with the peak of migration for waders, who are finding many new foraging areas. Today waders accounted for the lion's share of our birdwatching, with excellent numbers and great variety. We confirmed one unusual species, and may have glimpsed another, although what would have been a special sighting will remain 'the one that got away'. This is something us birdwatchers are used to.

At least one of the White Stork pairs seems to be on eggs already, since the birds are constantly crouched on the nest. The two Marsh Harrier pairs, instead, are continuing to squabble noisily over control of the reedbed.

New arrivals during the week included yet more Black-winged Stilts, for a total of 65 individuals, and the first Purple Heron of the spring.

Spotted Crakes are never easy to find, but today it took nearly endless patience.



The day's only downside concerned the weather: it was yet another rainy Saturday. The photo of this Spotted Redshank, which was taken today, is far from perfect: distant and in poor light. But I do like the bird's posture and its lively air.



WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 07 April, 2018

Spring migration is at its peak, and a great many new seasonal arrivals made their appearance at La Cassinazza this week.

They included, in random order: Common Sandpiper, Common Swift, Hobby, an Osprey nibbling on a fish while perched atop the tallest tree on the lake, the Common Terns that have already taken possession of their artificial nesting platforms, Common Redstart, several Nightingales we heard singing, Yellow Wagtails and Tree Pipits calling overhead, Lesser Whitethroat, and Wood Warbler. Other migrants that have been present for a few weeks included good numbers of Shovelers, Ruff, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Greenshanks, a Red Kite, and the most exceptional bird of the season, the Greater Spotted Eagle first seen several weeks ago. This morning, it was soaring on a thermal until it disappeared from view. Perhaps it was just beginning its journey back to the forests of eastern Europe.

The numbers of Black-winged Stilts were swollen by new arrivals, and now the colony numbers about 90 individuals. I think that by next week we should see the first nests.

By the end of the day, our species total was one of the highest ever, something only possible on the best migration days.

The Spotted Crake was present once again, although today it was much less elusive than usual.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 14 April, 2018

The weather was terrible all through the week, with torrential rains and even hail. Fortunately, all of this happened before the Black-winged Stilts began to nest, unlike last year, when they laid eggs early and a spell of bad weather in April wiped out the entire colony.

As the stormy weather left us, so did most of La Cassinazza's waterbirds, but a major influx of passerines took their place: evidently, the first clear night after days of rain allowed the former to depart and the latter to arrive. The result was outstanding variety: by the end of the day, we had tallied 84 species, an astonishingly high total considering that several regular species were missing. New arrivals for the season included Bonelli's Warbler, Golden Oriole, House Martin, Cuckoo, Wryneck, Hoopoe, Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, and Subalpine Warbler (only the 6th local record in 18 years!).

Other noteworthy species included, in random order: Wood Warbler, Willow Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Spotted Crake, Black Kite, Hobby, Peregrine, Garganey, Common Redstart, and a handful of species more typical of winter: Meadow Pipit, Song Thrush, Chiffchaff, Hawfinch, Wren... I'll stop here as it would be impossible to list them all.

After all these birds, today's photo is dedicated to a butterfly: the Orange Tip (*Anthocharis cardamines*), one of the earliest to appear in spring. This is a newly-emerged individual and its wings are still closed and not fully extended.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 21 April, 2018

Suddenly, summer is upon us. Once the week of poor weather at mid-month ended, the weather changed drastically: summer literally exploded, bringing with it sun and temperatures that would be just right for mid-June, but that make no sense at all right now.

The change in the bird life was just as drastic: many species left, but only a handful arrived.

Nevertheless, we did have a few seasonal firsts, Great Reed Warbler and Turtle Dove, both in full song. Otherwise, birds seemed few and far between, not to mention silent; as temperatures were already above 20°C early in the morning, the songs we were hearing were those typical of a mid-summer soundtrack: Nightingale, Blackcap, Cuckoo, Golden Oriole, and Cetti's Warbler. Departures were particularly evident among waterbirds: the Garganeys are gone, and we had to work hard to find a pair of Teal, whose numbers dwindled from the hundreds of just one month ago. Black-winged Stilt numbers continue to drop: there were only 25 individuals and no sign of any nests, despite this being the time of year when they should be laying eggs.

A few butterflies are now out and about. We found eight species today, two of which (Short-tailed *Blue Everes argiades* and Painted Lady *Cynthia cardui*) put in their first seasonal appearance, and we also saw the year's first dragonflies.



A Great Bittern was booming tentatively from the reedbed, while above it the two Marsh Harrier pairs are continuing their nuptial displays.



WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 28 April, 2018

Migrants and summer breeders continue to arrive. Over the course of the week, Honey Buzzard, Whinchat, Bee-eater, Squacco Heron, and Little Bittern were all added to this year's list.

Spring migration is beginning to wane, but diversity remains very high. It was nice to see that after the removal of the Wels' Catfish, both Great Crested Grebe and Little Grebe are now once again nesting in the main impoundment, after they had abandoned it for years. All in all, it was a fun day.

There was only one downer: it seems like the Black-winged Stilts have no intention to nest at La Cassinazza. There were only about a dozen today, and not a nest in sight. Last year the colony was abandoned after a wave of cold weather and heavy rain had destroyed their nests. Nothing of the sort happened this year, but it seems they left anyway. Something must have disturbed them or worried them.

There was great variety among insects as well. I won't mention all the tiny beetles, wasps, bees, flies and many more orders that are only waiting for someone to begin paying attention to them. Today we saw 17 butterfly species, with the Orange Tip (*Anthocaris cardamines*) the most numerous among them, and the confirmation of the presence of the Sooty Copper (*Lycaena tityrus*), which had been recorded at La Cassinazza for the first time last year. We saw four dragonfly species, including the Small Bluetail (*Ishnura pumilio*), an uncommon species and one so slender it is difficult to spot among the blades of grass.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 05 May, 2018

We have been birdwatching at La Cassinazza for many years, and by now we have found almost every expected species. Indeed, it has been quite a while since the last time we added a new bird to the list. Until today, that is, when we saw a Red-throated Pipit, a scarce migrant anywhere in Italy, and especially in the Po Plain. Since I already know someone is going to ask, it becomes the 218th bird species to have been recorded at La Cassinazza.

Turning to more ordinary business, this week saw the season's first Pied Flycatcher and Marsh Warbler: the former will continue its northward migration, while the latter will stay on to breed in the area. The White Stork eggs have hatched: their nests are too high for us to see the chicks, but the behaviour of the adults leaves no doubts. Many of the Mallard pairs have also hatched young, and there are plenty of hens about with a dozen or more ducklings in tow. Wild Boars are also reproducing: we have seen a few sows followed by long strings of piglets.

I have one more news in store for this report. A few years ago we were given specimens of certain herbaceous plants worthy of protection. These included the Woolly Yarrow (*Achillea tomentosa*), a rare species in Italy and one that requires hot, dry habitats, which are not easy to find at La Cassinazza. We finally picked a suitable spot, and it is now brightened by the yarrow's yellow flowers, which attract many butterflies: the one in the photo is a Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*).





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 12 May, 2018

I have just realized that I have not yet said anything this year about the small breeding colony of Common Terns at La Cassinazza. Like every year, the first individuals arrived in early April; they tarried for a few weeks, appearing and disappearing, but they eventually took possession of the artificial platforms, where there are now seven or eight pairs on eggs. This is a slightly lower number than in the past, but we are confident that a few more pairs will arrive as the season wears on.

The Spotted Flycatcher, the last of our summer breeders to arrive, is finally here: it once was more numerous, but now the only ones left can reliably be found in the same small woodlot, which is evidently well suited for them.

Two species that are uncommon at La Cassinazza – the Sand Martin and even more so the Red-footed Falcon – made all-too-brief apparitions, flying high overhead.

Even more than the rarities, we were thrilled to see the year's first Black Hairstreak (*Satyrrium pruni*), a rare butterfly that can be seen every year exclusively on the one Hackberry (*Prunus padus*) tree that hosts their colony. Although the stand of Woolly Yarrow (*Achillea tomentosa*) is only a few square meters in extent, its flowers keep attracting a great many butterflies. Today's photo depicts a Reverdin's Blue (*Plebejus argyrognomon*).





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 19 May, 2018

This morning I arrived very early at La Cassinazza; so early that I could still hear a Tawny Owl calling. It was worth it, because all there was to see I saw in the first two hours of the morning. From then on, and until evening, I did not add any new species, and indeed, a few that were active early were neither seen nor heard from again the rest of the day..

From my favourite watchpoint above the reedbed, I was finally able to spot the Purple Heron's nest: right in the middle of a large Pussy Willow bush, so well hidden as to be practically invisible. We have every reason to believe that Purple Herons nest at La Cassinazza every year, but they are very skilled at hiding, and proof is generally hard to come by. Another likely nesting species is the Spoonbill: the sighting of two adults, with their spectacular erect crests, suggest that a new pair has formed after the death this winter of one of the members of the pair that was breeding at the Villarasca heronry.

Early in the morning, passerines belt out their songs, clearly signaling their intention to breed: the commonest are Marsh Warblers, Nightingales, and Cetti's Warblers, with a few Great Reed Warblers, in addition to the Cuckoo that parasitizes them all. Some continue to sing the rest of the day: Golden Orioles, Turtle Doves, and especially Blackcaps, which are always more easily heard than seen.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 26 May, 2018

All day long, including in the sunny afternoon, the Great Bittern was booming with gusto. It had been singing back in April as well, and the fact that it is doing so again in late May suggests it might be getting ready for a second brood. In turn, this shows how the habitat at La Cassinazza is now optimal for this species.

With both Great and Little Bitterns present, today we found all nine species of European herons, with Great White Egret, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, and Night Heron rounding out the list.

All the ducklings we kept running into show that the local Mallards had an excellent breeding season. Coot chicks are nearly fully grown, and we are just beginning to see the chicks of the Moorhens, which nest later. In the hedgerows are newly-fledged Blackcaps, Great Tits, and especially Long-tailed Tits.

Butterflies were oddly thin on the ground today; perhaps this had to do with the weather these last few days. The flowers of the Woolly Yarrow (*Achillea tomentosa*) never fail to attract a few. The flowers' yellow colour really sets off the indigo in the butterflies' wings.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 02 June, 2018

It was a pleasantly summer-like day, with the slightly sour scent of honeysuckle in the air and plenty of butterflies on the wing. Masses of white bramble blossoms and of purple Creeping Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) flowers, which have just started to bloom, attracted many brush-footed butterflies. Particularly common was the Painted Lady (*Cynthia cardui*), a migratory species arriving from Africa and on its way to northern Europe. Two species put in their first appearance of the season: the White-letter Hairstreak (*Satyrium w-album*) and the Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*).

Birdwise, a Booted Eagle hogged the spotlight: it appeared out of nowhere and set the Cattle Egrets and Hooded Crows that were following a tractor fleeing in panic in all directions. It then rapidly gained altitude and disappeared towards the north. Its presence in June is rather astonishing: perhaps it was an immature bird not yet ready to nest and is just wandering through Europe.

Once again, we were treated to a show by a Honey Buzzard. I am convinced that this species will soon breed in one of the estate's woodlots. In fact, since we had the same suspicions last year as well, it may well already have a nest in some remote, well-hidden corner of the property.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 09 June, 2018

It was a day of new arrivals.

In fact, one was a new species for La Cassinazza: our first record of Pygmy Cormorant. This small, long-tailed cormorant lives mostly in the lakes and marshes of Eastern Europe; in recent years, its breeding range in Italy has expanded dramatically from its stronghold in the Po Delta.

Many newborn animals are opening their eyes to the world.

The Great Crested Grebes that finally re-settled the lake are now carrying their young on their backs. The Common Tern chicks, two to a nest, can be seen from the lake's shores, and seem to be between one day and one week old.

A mother Roe Deer stared at me warily: between her legs she was hiding a fawn that was barely a foot tall.

The Kestrel pair nesting in the old barn fledged three juveniles: they fly around to and fro, but most of all they hop on the ground. As clueless as most babies are, they are more curious than wary and are easily approached and photographed.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2018



Weekly Report of 16 June, 2018

My first encounter of the morning was with the juvenile Kestrels: one week after leaving the nest, they have now learned the art of flight and diffidence towards humans. It will serve them well. I then continued my rounds checking up on other nests. The four breeding pairs of White Stork on the property now respectively have four, four, three, and two youngs. The lake hosts numerous Common Tern chicks of various ages, and the very first to hatch have now fledged. The Great Crested Grebe pair is teaching the fine points of fishing to its three young, which are now nearly full-grown, as are the Little Grebe chicks. This shows that they have not been predated. All the work to rid the lake of the largest and most voracious Wels' Catfish has borne fruit: the Little Grebes had abandoned the lake as early as 2002, and eventually the Great Crested Grebes stopped nesting there as well, after their chicks had disappeared one by one yet again. The typical summer weather resulted in a wealth of butterflies – 23 species in total – although all of the smaller ones, such as blues or skippers, were strangely quite scarce. Seasonal firsts included Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*), Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*) and Queen of Spain Fritillary (*Issoria lathonia*); the latter is particularly easy to recognize thanks to the silvery spots on its underwings.

