



WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2020



Weekly Report of 09 May, 2020

It's over. The lockdown, this long series of days when time stood still, that seemed never to end, has finally been lifted. Unfortunately, not everything went well. This was true here at La Cassinazza as well: an old friend and colleague is no longer with us.

In the meantime, flowers bloomed, migratory birds came and left, while others stayed, the trees put on leaves, and butterflies, bees, and all the other insects emerged. I left La Cassinazza when it was still winter, and now that I am finally back, it is practically summer. I missed everything in between. An entire season went by during which nature was left entirely on its own. Spring migration is nearly over. Among waders, there were a handful each of Ruff, Little Ringed Plover, and Greenshank, plus about 30-40 Wood Sandpipers. I had to work hard to dig out the last few Willow Warblers, Bonelli's Warblers, and Common Redstarts. The weather is conducive to migrating Honey Buzzards, and indeed we are seeing them frequently.

The vast majority of the birds that are here now will remain to breed. In fact, some are already done: Long-tailed Tits and hen Mallards have chicks in tow. Sadly, the Black-winged Stilts do not seem intentioned to nest at La Cassinazza this year either.

After a period in April when butterflies were quite numerous – or so I'm told – they are now rather scarce. The only ones in evidence are Large Coppers (*Lycaena dispar*), the males of which are like flames appearing out of the green grass.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2020



Weekly Report of 16 May, 2020

The weather was unsettled throughout the week. The wind and the moisture-laden air prevented the swarms of midges - technically known as chironomids – from gaining elevation, and in turn these swarms brought down hundreds of Barn Swallows, House Martins, and Sand Martins to within a few meters of the ground, where they could feast on the flying insects. After yet another rain shower, a large flock of Swifts high in the sky gathered into a ball so dense that it looked like a swarm of bees.

Spring migration is well and truly over, and our attention is squarely focused on breeding birds. The three White Stork nests contain chicks between four and five weeks of age. They should be large enough to have survived the terrible storm that raged during the night between Thursday and Friday.

The small Common Tern colony is buzzing with courting and mating birds, and a couple of pairs seem to have already laid eggs. The Hobbies are mating as well, after having attracted everyone's attention with their piercing calls. Subtlety is not their forte.

On my strolls around the property I found active nests of Woodpigeon, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green Woodpecker, Blackbird, Coot, Great Tit, and Starling; those of the last two species were all in nest boxes. Many other species are advertising their intention to nest with their songs.

The Squacco Heron is a regular sight in summer at La Cassinazza, but it is far from common. This one just caught a minnow, and it seems to be swelling with pride and vanity at its success.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2020



Weekly Report of 23 May, 2020

After a spell of unsettled weather, the summer heat is upon us. There is an explosion of plant life and the scent of honeysuckle wafts through the air.

I will focus on nesting birds today, and accentuate the positive; I'd rather not dwell on the birds that are missing. A few species seem to be undergoing a timid recovery, at least locally. The Tree Sparrow, whose dramatic population decline I bewailed in the past, can now reliably be found here: they once preferred woodlands and hedgerows, but are now nesting in the vicinity of man, in cavities in farmhouses and among the large branches at the base of White Stork nests. Barn Swallows are also nesting just above the entrance door of the house and spend their days contentedly gliding overhead – although to be honest, there is one less of them around after a Hobby swooped by and picked it off, only to pass it off to its mate in flight, calling loudly throughout.

A pair of Garganey had reawakened by hopes that this species will finally breed at La Cassinazza, but they have since gone missing. A Black Tern appeared over the lake, and the Common Terns – who have failed to defend their nests from the Hooded Crow – immediately put up a barrage and drove it away at once.

The Spotted Flycatcher, which seemed to have disappeared a few years ago, is once again nesting in the garden.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2020



Weekly Report of 30 May, 2020

By now, the White Storks chicks are big enough to stand up inside the nest, and they are visible from the ground. This year's three active nests hold at least seven chicks; their maiden flight is still several weeks away, though. On the other hand, juvenile Night Herons and Grey Herons have already fledged from the heronry located a few kilometers away, and are now flying to La Cassinazza in search of food.

Once again, the small Common Tern colony ran into some problems: the first clutch was entirely predated by Hooded Crows. Common Terns will often lay a second clutch, and indeed they are doing exactly that. Today, there were already three nests with eggs, and we decided to help them out by implementing an aggressive anti-predation strategy. Time will tell if it works. By spending so much time checking on the Common Terns, we chanced into the arrival of a half-dozen Whiskered Terns, the first record of this species at La Cassinazza in at least four years.

Several pairs of Great Spotted Woodpeckers have occupied nest boxes. This species is perfectly able to excavate its own cavity, both in dead wood and in living trees, but it will happily save itself the trouble if someone else has already done the work.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2020



Weekly Report of 06 June, 2020

Life in the reedbed largely takes place away from our prying eyes, especially during the breeding season, when the birds that live there – which are already elusive by nature – become even more cautious. Keeping our ears open and being able to identify songs and calls is vital if we want to keep up with them.

The most frequent song is undoubtedly that of the Marsh Warbler; Reed and Great Reed Warblers are much less common, since the habitat at La Cassinazza is less than ideal. The piercing song of the Cetti's Warbler also rings out commonly; this species has bounced back fully from the population crash caused by harsh winter that had nearly wiped out the local population in 2009 and 2010.

The Water Rail is the most elusive of all: while it is vocal and relatively conspicuous in winter, it would be impossible to detect as a breeder if it wasn't for an occasional call or two.

The Little Bittern's calls, which sound a bit like a barking dog, are often heard here, and we occasionally see them flying over the reedbed. Once in a great while, they will sit in the open just long enough to be photographed.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2020



Weekly Report of 13 June, 2020

The Spotted Flycatcher pair has built its nest on a small ledge on a wall. A short distance away, a Little Owl has found a home in a cavity under the roof. The two neighbours are often at odds. Every time the owl sticks its head out, the two flycatchers, in spite of their much smaller size, fling themselves at it and force it to flee.

For over a month a Starling roost has been forming at La Cassinazza, and it increases its size every day as more and more newly-fledged juveniles add to the numbers, which are becoming staggering, in the tens of thousands. On several occasions I scanned the masses of Starlings for a Rosy Starling or two, since this rarity has been reported from various sites in Lombardy over the last two weeks. Needless to say, it was all for naught.

The breeding season continues to unfold, and the Moorhen chicks are now out and about. They normally leave the nest about a month later than Coot chicks, whose habitat they share.

Tree Sparrow juveniles have also fledged. It seems that after several years of population declines, this species is finally starting a timid comeback.





WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2020



Weekly Report of 20 June, 2020

As the season wears on, small flocks of Teal and Green Sandpipers are beginning to reappear, the first signs of post-breeding migration.

A careful check of the White Stork nests this week brought some good news: there were actually four chicks in a nest where I had originally only counted two; evidently, not all were visible from below the last time around. This year, then, a total of nine White Stork chicks hatched from three active nests.

Even better news concerns the Common Terns. I took their second brood to heart and watched over it with the tenaciousness and jealousy of a hen caring for her chicks. Right now, there are seven active nests with 17 eggs, which were laid at the beginning of the month and are out of reach for the Hooded Crows. Now that they feel safe, the terns harass anything that flies through their territory: a poor Cormorants trying to fish is attacked every time it pokes its head out from under the water. They have even become aggressive towards me when I approach to check in on them. Ingrates.

Other newly-hatched birds this week included Little Bittern chicks. Although it will be a while yet before they can fly, they are already wandering out of the nest and climbing reed stalks and bushes. They emerge from the vegetation to enjoy a little sun, but as soon as they realize I'm watching them they dive right back in.

There is one species that breeds at La Cassinazza, but does not exactly nest here: it is the Cuckoo, which lays its eggs in other birds' nests. It sings and observes other birds from an elevated perch, usually a tree top, but a power line will also do.

