



WEEKLY REPORTS SPRING 2021



Weekly Report of 27 March, 2021

Spring is finally upon us. The days have become mild and hen Mallards already have ducklings in tow. The fields are being ploughed for the upcoming farming season, and the tractors are followed by flocks of Cattle Egrets.

Along with many Buzzards, raptor migration overhead also featured a Peregrine and a Goshawk.

The three Cranes and the Shelduck from last week are still around. The former come and go and are only intermittently being seen, but the latter is very fond of its little corner of marshland and just won't budge from there.

Black-winged Stilts numbers are growing by the day, and there are now twenty-five. The peak of Green Sandpiper migration has passed and their numbers are dwindling. Its close relative, the Wood Sandpiper, is still nowhere to be found, even though they surely should be here by now.

Two new waterbirds for the year arrived this week: the first Greenshank and a drake Red-crested Pochard, a gaudy and uncommon duck we had only seen at La Cassinazza on a handful of previous occasions.





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Weekly Report of 03 April, 2021

This beginning of spring is getting out of control: this week, temperatures were absurdly summer-like.

In the space of a few days, the Siskins, Goldcrests, Fieldfares, and Song Thrushes completely disappeared, while the Chaffinches and Teal are almost entirely gone.

There are now over 50 Black-winged Stilts – one of the La Cassinazza's iconic birds – while there are no more than five or six Garganey, a meagre showing for a bird that, in Italian, is named after the month of March. Newly-arrived migrants making their first appearance this year included Night Heron, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Common Tern, Nightingale, and Purple Heron. Also back is the Great Bittern, which had disappeared after a heavy snowfall in late December flattened the reedbed – hopefully it will stay on to breed. Last week's rarities – a Shelduck, a Red-crested Pochard, and three Cranes – are gone, but a Glossy Ibis was ample compensation.

We also saw the year's first odonates: the characteristically early Common Bluetail (*Ischnura elegans*) and a very surprising Common Clubtail (*Gomphus vulgatissimus*), which usually only appears in June.

On sunny afternoons, six or seven butterfly species are on the wing. The most eye-catching ones are the Orange-tips (*Anthocharis cardamines*) gathered around stands of their food plant, the Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*). With the patches of bright golden-orange on its wings after which it is named, a male Orange-tip is one of the most stunning sights of early spring. I'd like to wish you all a happy Easter.





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Weekly Report of 10 April, 2021

I have not yet updated you on our nesting White Storks this year. Only three of the four regular nests are currently occupied. The fourth one, which is located right by the main house at La Cassinazza and which was mysteriously abandoned last year with the eggs still in it, has so far remained empty. A single stork claimed it and tried to attract a partner, but to no avail.

This week saw the departure of the last of the Wrens and the arrival of the season's first Common Swift, Yellow Wagtail, and Great Reed Warbler; among passerines, Blackcaps and Willow Warblers were particularly conspicuous.

The Little Grebes are back and on territory, while a pair of Black Kites has been very vocal the past few days, and may yet find a suitable nesting site at La Cassinazza.

Waders are mostly nocturnal migrants. On clear, windless days, the impoundments can be dotted with them at sunset and entirely empty at dawn the next day, and viceversa. Black-winged Stilts peaked at over a hundred individuals before their numbers gradually began to drop, and the decrease in Green Sandpipers is more than made up for by the arrival of dozens of Wood Sandpipers, and by about ten each of Little Ringed Plover, Spotted Redshank, and Ruff. Common Snipe and Lapwings round out the wader contingent.



There have been just over twenty or so Greenshanks around, but their loud calls make them very conspicuous.



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Weekly Report of 17 April, 2021

Wader migration is at its best right now. The numbers for each species fluctuate daily. The commonest is the Wood Sandpiper, with about one hundred individuals most days, with the Black-winged Stilt a close second, and followed, in descending order, by the Ruff, Common Snipe, Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, and finally the Little Ringed Plover. Some, such as the Greenshanks, can linger at La Cassinazza for days, while others put down briefly before resuming their journey. These carbon black Spotted Redshanks in breeding plumage are in the latter category. They are in a great hurry to reach their breeding grounds: here today, gone tomorrow. Duck numbers are at a low ebb, with only a few Mallards, while the Teal have left altogether. Migration brought us a mere 15 Garganey. At times, large flocks of Barn Swallows and House Martins thronged the sky; among them, the year's first Alpine Swift put in an appearance. Lots of Blackcaps and Willow Warblers are still moving through, along with several Yellow Wagtails and the first real influx of long-distance trans-Saharan migrants: Sedge Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, and Wood Warbler.

Black-winged Stilts have been at La Cassinazza for three weeks now, but as of yet we have seen no signs of breeding attempts. The time should be now, even though temperatures remain low (in spite of a couple of excessively warm days). In fact, a number of other local breeders, such as the Barn Swallow and Common Tern, also seem to be biding their time as they await better conditions.





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Weekly Report of 24 April, 2021

The song of the Nightingales – still in relatively low numbers – together with those of the Cuckoo and the year's first Golden Oriole, have brought a strong touch of summer to the soundscape of the last few days. The loud cries of the Hobby, another recently-arrived breeder – complete the picture, and one could be forgiven for thinking summer is already here. As some species arrive, others leave, and we have not heard or seen a single Robin for several days now.

After over one month of incubation, the eggs in the three White Stork nests have hatched. We can't see the chicks from the ground, but the adults' behaviour leaves no doubt. The Common Terns are back in their small local colony on La Cassinazza's main lake, and several pairs have already claimed a nesting platform on which they will soon lay eggs.

This week, the most conspicuous inhabitant of the impoundments is the Ruff, with numbers increasing every day and peaking at 250 today. Nearly all are still in their dull winter plumage. Only one male was resplendent in full breeding plumage, which in his case featured a chestnut body and a deep black ruff; sadly, he only spent a single morning here.





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Weekly Report of 01 May, 2021

I should admit that I slacked off a little this week. With life's necessities getting in the way, on top of several rainy days, I was not in the field as much as I would have liked. Still, I was able to note quite a few new arrivals for the year: Pied Flycatcher, Spotted Flycatcher, Bonelli's Warbler, Sand Martin, Bee-eater, Turtle Dove, Squacco Heron, and Little Bittern. Sadly, the Black-winged Stilts are again showing no interest in nesting at La Cassinazza this year. Their numbers are dropping with every passing week from a high of over a hundred early in April, and the birds that are still here would already be on eggs by now if they were nesting. Instead, we have seen nothing of the kind: no mating or courtship behaviour, let alone nest construction. It's hard to explain why the stilts persist in refusing to nest at La Cassinazza, whose habitat has remained unchanged since the days it hosted a thriving colony, with dozens of nests.

On the other hand, the Common Tern colony seems to be doing fine: a few new individuals have arrived, and there are now about ten pairs carving up territories. The males court the females by bringing them fish, mating has started, and perhaps a few eggs have been laid already.

Little Egrets are with us all year and we often take them for granted. At this time of year, they are in high breeding plumage, with long and soft ornamental plumes making them truly spectacular.





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Weekly Report of 08 May, 2021

Waterbird migration came to an end during the first week of May. The last Shovelers and Garganey left, while single pairs of Tufted Duck, Shelduck, and Gadwall all put in brief appearances as they hurried their way north. The same was true for waders: the last to leave the scene were the Greenshanks, a species that was much more numerous than usual this spring.

Songbirds had a few surprises in store, with several Bonelli's Warblers still moving through and at least two Grasshopper Warblers, which remained invisible, but whose distinctive songs gave them away. Speaking of songs, both Reed and Marsh Warblers arrived at the same time and can be heard from the reedbed. The season's first Honey Buzzard was also logged.

A new winged guest has settled in at La Cassinazza: Ring-necked Parakeets are now an everyday sight, and are often chased away by the local Starlings. Presumably, the parakeets are looking for cavities in which to nest, and the Starlings already breeding there do not appreciate the intrusion.



Good numbers of Bee-eaters streamed overhead this week. Only a few put down at La Cassinazza, where they usually perch on top of the tallest trees. They are featuring in our photo of the week for the very first time.



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Weekly Report of 15 May, 2021

With the exception of a few inevitable laggards – a Bonelli's Warbler, a Chiffchaff, two or three Garganey, a few Greenshank – spring migration is essentially over. We are seeing more and more newly-fledged juveniles, with Starlings particularly well represented. An annual cycle has come to an end.

Leaf out proceeded rapidly and the vegetation is now an impenetrable green wall, but the birds it conceals are betrayed by their songs: Golden Orioles, Cuckoos, Blackcaps, Cetti's Warblers, Chaffinches, the Blackbirds belting out their loud songs and the Spotted Flycatchers with their barely audible calls.

The reedbed is recovering from the damage it sustained in the winter, and Reed Warblers, Marsh Warblers, and Great Reed Warblers have once again taken possession of it.

So far, five nests in the Common Tern colony have eggs: three have a full clutch of three eggs, while the remaining two only have a single egg each.

The frequent thunderstorms caused large flocks of Swallows to skim the water for flying insects. A pair is building its nest just above the entrance door to the house. Every morning at dawn, the male sings to charm its mate. By the looks of it, it works quite well.





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Weekly Report of 22 May, 2021

Now that spring migration is essentially over, and birds are beginning the most delicate part of their lifecycle – the breeding season, when each individual tries to be as elusive as possible – our attention has shifted to insects. The most significant sighting of the week was the season's first Black Hairstreak (*Satyrrium pruni*), a rare, tiny, and very inconspicuous species, with a short flight period, and that tends to always remain in the canopy of its host tree. It is thus very difficult to find, unless one knows exactly which tree it inhabits. Due to its rarity, it is a protected species worthy of study, and indeed a university student is now beginning field work for his thesis at La Cassinazza.

As I was saying, birds are now in the middle of their breeding season, and one of the most important breeders at La Cassinazza is the Common Tern. Our small colony appears to be in excellent health this year, with 8 pairs now incubating, and at least two more pairs I expect will lay eggs soon. All of the nests have been kept safe from predators. I will keep you apprised of all developments in the coming weeks.

Since early April, La Cassinazza has hosted a pair of Black Kites. We often see them together, calling loudly to mark their territory, and I hope to find their nest soon, concealed in the canopy.





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Weekly Report of 29 May, 2021

The weather quickly turned summer-like. Butterflies, which were quite scarce until a week ago, have become abundant, although they are nearly all Peacocks (*Aglais io*). They emerged en masse, in their hundreds, and they are everywhere. A single flowering privet bush can host dozens.

One of the Common Tern nests is already hosting chicks; the first egg was laid on May 4 and it hatched on the 27th. Meanwhile, there are still pairs that are laying eggs. Compared to last year, when the first brood was predated by Hooded Crows – due to the lockdown, it became impossible to adopt protective measures – hatching is now taking place a month in advance.



The Red Fox is heading back to its den – where it likely has pups to feed – with a bountiful feast: an entire Roe Deer leg. It almost certainly has not killed it itself, and the Roe Deer probably died from an accident or from natural causes. Or was it dispatched by a much larger predator?



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Weekly Report of 05 June, 2021

It is only the beginning of June, spring migration has just come to an end, and yet there are already birds heading south: several Green Sandpipers put in an appearance this week. The last spring migrants had passed through in late April, and these early-returning individuals undoubtedly failed to breed, either because they were unable to fully complete their northbound voyage – due to illness or weakness – or simply because they could not find a partner.

Two new breeding species have colonized La Cassinazza, one that we have confirmed, and another that we strongly suspect is nesting. The former is the Ring-necked Parakeet, an introduced tropical species that is common in the cities of Milan and Pavia and is now spreading through the countryside. A pair has taken possession of an old Green Woodpecker cavity, and I wonder how they manage to fit their long tails in there.

Additionally, there are two pairs of European Bee-eater that we have been seeing for

several weeks along the property's boundary. I suspect they have excavated their nesting cavities somewhere on the banks of a ditch, but I have not yet been able to find them.

Over the last two weeks, we have seen Honey Buzzards on several occasions, while today saw the appearance of three Black Terns, a species that is far from regular here.





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Weekly Report of 12 June, 2021

There comes a day every summer when, as the dawn breaks, one realizes that a sudden and dramatic change has taken place: the Nightingales have stopped singing. What had been a clamorous choir has now been reduced to a few isolated and sporadic voices.

And it's not just the Nightingales. During these endless early summer days, long hours of quiet somnolence are the norm for much of the bird community.

The Common Tern colony, which is hatching most of its eggs these days, occasionally re-awakens our interest. The presence of the Common Terns evidently attracts other closely-related species to La Cassinazza: last week we saw several Black Terns, while this week two Whiskered Terns dropped in. This is quite an uncommon visitor here, with barely ten records over the last twenty years.

The cool spring delayed the peak of flowering and of insect activity, but things are really starting to pick up now. Creeping Thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) are irresistibly attractive to butterflies, bees, and bumblebees, and even to some small, colorful, and iridescent cuckoo wasps, such as this *Stilbum cyanurum*.





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Weekly Report of 19 June, 2021

This week, we once again saw how La Cassinazza's main lake, with its Common Tern breeding colony, also attracts other tern species. This time it was a Caspian Tern, which repeatedly put in brief appearances. It flew over the lake, immediately came under attack by the Common Terns, and continued on its way.

Speaking of breeding birds, here is an update on the nesting pairs of White Storks on the property. Only three pairs nested this year; the pair whose nest had failed during incubation last year did not attempt to breed. Two of the nests now host four chicks each; the third nest, at Cascina Darsena, only hosts two, after a third chick was seen on the ground beneath it.

In recent days, the local plants have begun to crawl with Japanese Beetles (*Popillia japonica*), an invasive bug much feared by farmers and first recorded here in 2019. Last year they only became evident in mid-July, but they seem to have emerged earlier this year. Hopefully this is not a prelude to a massive invasion.

Now that the heavy summer heat is upon us, there are not many birds left singing. The most conspicuous one is the Marsh Warbler: as it sings from the green ocean of reeds, it is much more easily heard than seen.

