



WEEKLY REPORTS SUMMER 2018



Weekly Report of 23 June, 2018

The first fall migrants typically appear after mid-June: the first such influx brought us about 20 Green Sandpipers and several Wood Sandpipers. A few of the former were already present last week.

At the same time, our local breeders are continuing with their activities: the young Jackdaws have fledged, as have the Marsh Warblers, and judging by how many were seen darting along the canals, so have the Kingfishers.

The Common Tern colony has grown, with several new pairs now having laid eggs, while the juveniles from the first clutch are now almost fully grown, and a few are already on the wing.

The local Honey Buzzards piqued our curiosity: we ran into them a number of times today. And these were not birds passing by high overhead; on the contrary, they furtively move through the woods, from one tree to another, and we occasionally see them on the ground as well. I suspect they have a nest hidden somewhere in some dense corner of the woods. Another bird that is certainly nesting is the Little Ringed Plovers: for many weeks a pair has been present on one of the small islands on the lake, but it is too far away for us to check whether any eggs or chicks are there as well.



We also saw several uncommon species: an Alpine Swift and a Black Stork high overhead, while the Pygmy Cormorant spent the entire day on the lake, fishing or resting with the Cormorants. While this image of it is not technically perfect, it is our first photograph of this species at La Cassinazza and is a good introduction. I have a feeling this bird will become a regular here and we will have plenty of chances to get better pictures in the future.



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Weekly Report of 30 June, 2018

Now that June has come to an end, bird song activity has reached a nadir, with the exception of the tireless Blackcaps. The acoustic space vacated by the birds has been occupied by the cicadas, their songs clearly telling us we are now in mid-summer – as if the afternoon heat was not enough. With the first heat wave of the season, the poplar trees have begun to drop some leaves, making for a more open canopy.

What little bird movement there is this season brought us a baker's dozen Black-winged Stilts – both adults and fresh juveniles – and several Teal.

The two species we are most closely watching these days – the Honey Buzzard and Pygmy Cormorant – both put in appearances, albeit brief ones.

The young White Storks are vigorously exercising and beating their wings. They seem just about ready to leave the nest, something that the young from the first Common Tern brood have already done.

We found a remarkable variety of butterflies over the course of June: a total of 30 species, although none in particularly high numbers. Of particular note today were Large Chequered Skipper (*Heteropterus morpheus*) and Large Copper (*Lycaena dispar*). The latter keeps faith to its Latin name, showing the disparity between the colourful males, which are small like all Lycaenids, and the females, which are nearly as large as a Cabbage White.





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Weekly Report of 07 July, 2018

A large meadow of alfalfa and clover, both in bloom and with plenty of nectar-rich flowers, is attracting a great many butterflies, and us in turn: we spent a couple of hours watching and photographing them.

A Roe Deer fawn crouching motionless in the shadows was a thrilling and touching encounter.

The juvenile Marsh Harriers – a total of three – have now left the nest and are flying to and fro, perching on low branches, and calling to attract their parents' attention.

They are a veritable riot of life.

This was in contrast with the juvenile White Stork we found dead. It had just recently fledged, but it immediately appeared weak, and was perhaps ill. Fortunately all the other juvenile storks – a total of 12 from four different nests – appear to be in good health.

The Pygmy Cormorant, a recent arrival at La Cassinazza, is still present, always on one of its two or three habitual perches. Last but not least, we had a visit from a rarity: a Red-crested Pochard, a species with only two previous records at La Cassinazza, the last of which was ten years ago.





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Weekly Report of 14 July, 2018

At this time of year, birds are not the main focus of our field surveys. All of their nesting rituals have been completed, their songs have gone silent, and almost all of their young have fledged: today was the turn of the first Purple Heron juveniles. Mallard numbers are down to a few dozen, the lowest of the year. Migration is still far off, with the only evidence of it being a pair of Greenshank and a dozen Teal. Apart from a few Black-winged Stilts and a couple of Green Sandpipers, everything else is routine: even the Pygmy Cormorant, an exciting new arrival a few weeks ago, is now a resident.

Yet there was still much to look at. Butterflies, for instance, were much in evidence today, both in terms of numbers and variety. We identified a total of 24 species, but a few more undoubtedly slipped by unnoticed; on a perfect day, we could probably find 30 or more. A couple of species – Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*) and Knapweed Fritillary (*Melitaea phoebe*) – put in their first appearance of the year. The latter was out in excellent numbers, as was its close relative the Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*) and the tiny Reverdin's Blue (*Plebejus argyrognomon*). At flowering Common Thistles (*Cirsium vulgare*), the dominant butterfly is the Cabbage White, both in terms of numbers and its large size. This is one of our commonest species, and we take it for granted to the extent that a photo of it has never appeared in these reports. Now is a good time to make up for this.





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Weekly Report of 21 July, 2018

It's been months since I last was at La Cassinazza under the rain. I don't mean to be a poet, but I must admit that this morning's downpour, in the dim light, the total silence of nature broken only by the sound of rain, the lush green vegetation dripping with water, all made for a unique charm.

Then, as soon as the rain stopped, a multitude of mosquitoes and other annoying insects soon broke the spell, and made staying outdoors truly exasperating. As a result, today's bird checklist may turn out to be the shortest of the year. I can't say I have much to tell.

The only birds of note were the Purple Herons, both adults and juveniles, which were common and ubiquitous for the first time this year. Every year it's the same: this species manages to be invisible while nesting – there were numerous outings in which we were unable to see a single one – then once the young have left the nest, they suddenly seem to be common.

The White Storks have completed the burdensome task of raising their juveniles; the pair that nested near the main house at La Cassinazza now spends much of its time resting, often perching on the roof. It's not a common sight, at least here in Italy, to have storks perching on one's roof!





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Weekly Report of 28 July, 2018

I was still in my car this morning when I saw a Common Buzzard sitting in the middle of the road. It was only when I drove right up to it that it flew off, dragging something in its talons. That something was too heavy for it, and it could only lift itself up but a foot off the road. Eventually it gave up, and let its prey go: the Feral Pigeon immediately flew off one way while the buzzard went in the opposite direction. I ruined its breakfast.

Apart from this close encounter, the only notable event concerning birds was the arrival of the fall's first Spotted Redshank.

Butterflies keep getting more interesting: over the course of this season, we have seen 37 species at La Cassinazza so far, and they all make their home here, where they live and breed. There were no vagrants to boost this number. The diversity of butterflies is a reliable indicator of the health and variety of the local plant life.

Hares have always been present at La Cassinazza, and a few years ago Cottontail Rabbits arrived and like for many other invasive species, their numbers quickly multiplied. The European Rabbit, on the other hand, is quite scarce, as it is throughout Europe, where populations are ravaged by a disease from which Cottontails are immune. They are rather wary, and for this reason we don't run into them often.





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Weekly Report of 04 August, 2018

Extreme heat reduces animal activity even more than extreme cold does. In spite of this week's temperatures, there were still some sightings of note. Early fall migrant songbirds are arriving: the very first was a Pied Flycatcher, which preceded by only 10 minutes the appearance of the fall's first Common Redstart. A few Garganey are also back, having joined the 20 or so Teal that have been present for at least a month.

On the lake, the last remaining pair of Common Terns is still raising two chicks. They laid their eggs quite late, and this was almost certainly a replacement clutch. The Pygmy Cormorant that seems to have established permanent residency at our lake stands motionless for hours in the hot sun, atop its favourite perch.

The stifling heat influences insect activity as well. The dragonflies seem to be the only ones to like it, judging by the thousands of Broad Scarlets (*Crocothemis erythraea*) and Red-veined Darters (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*) skimming the impoundments.

On the other hand, the butterflies that were much in evidence last week have become less active. Among them, the Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*): it is the largest and most spectacular of our local butterflies.





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Weekly Report of 11 August, 2018

Fall migration is advancing, one step at a time. New arrivals today included Ruff, Common Snipe, Common Sandpiper, Goshawk, and several dozed Sacred Ibis. Whether these were true migrants or – as is likely the case for the latter two – just post-breeding visitors (a fancy way of saying that after nesting, some birds, having nothing better to do, tend to wander widely) doesn't make much of a difference for us.

Some birds were notable for their absence: we know that the Common Swifts are the first to leave, as early as mid-July, while Cuckoo and Turtle Dove disappeared over the last two weeks. Today was the Nightingale's turn: we did not hear a single one.

The very last of the juvenile Common Terns has fledged. Over the next few days, it will leave the area together with its parents, and they might be already gone by next Saturday. The Common Terns nested successfully once again. It is difficult to accurately count the nests, since the first birds laid eggs in mid-April, but others continued until July, with some being replacement clutches for failed nesting attempts. The highest number of pairs incubating eggs at any one time was at least ten, in the second half of May. I think as many as 20 pairs may have nested, a few more than last year, and possibly the largest number ever for La Cassinazza's small colony.





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Weekly Report of 18 August, 2018

In late summer, when throngs of dragonflies skim over the impoundments, the Hobbies come down to hunt them. They dart over the water back and forth, turning on a dime to catch them. Once they have grabbed one, they grasp it in their claws and eat it right away during a brief glide. This can go on for half an hour or more, one dragonfly after another. This is a scene that fascinates me and that I never tire of watching.

Turning to migrants, of note today were a hundred or so Teal with a handful of Garganey in their midst, lots of Reed Warblers – not all of them local breeders – a few Pied Flycatchers and Great Reed Warblers, and a Cuckoo.

The day's surprise came when I went to the lake: the Pygmy Cormorant that has kept a lonely vigil at La Cassinazza since June has finally found some company! There were two on the usual perch: the above-mentioned adult and a juvenile. Where was it born? Where did it come from? And most importantly, how did two individuals of a locally rare species manage to find one another? These are just a few of the questions that flashed through my mind.





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Weekly Report of 25 August, 2018

The weather was terrible today. Thunderstorms and downpours accompanied us throughout the day. While this seems to have brought the summer heat to an end, it also essentially made it impossible for us to birdwatch.

Indeed, I have nothing of note to report for the day, apart from a record-low species total.

The only migratory passerines in evidence were a handful of Pied Flycatchers. And there was no sign of any waders.

The Mallards were the only exception: they are coming back to the area after their numbers bottomed out in July. They are mostly hidden in the rice, which by now has grown rather tall, and it is difficult to estimate their numbers, but they are already in the hundreds. The males are all in eclipse plumage, looking much like the brown females.

The many Golden Orioles that are still around are getting ready to leave, and cluster together in small, noisy groups.

The same behaviour is shown by the Barn Swallows, which are also getting ready to leave. In fact, many of the small flocks flying across the sky may already be winging their way south.



Weekly Report of 01 September, 2018

It was another rainy day, but one in which the rain did not fall too hard. This made it possible for us to note how the songbird migration is in full swing: Pied Flycatchers were the commonest, followed by Reed and Willow Warblers, with smaller numbers of Spotted Flycatcher, Hoopoe, Lesser Whitethroat, and Cuckoo. They are not distributed evenly, but rather in small, mixed-species flocks. In between bird parties, hardly a leaf moved.

Migrant raptors included Black Kite and Honey Buzzard.

On the other hand, waterbirds –waders and ducks – were entirely absent, with the exception of the ubiquitous Mallards.

I don't have any photos of birds or colourful butterflies, and so today I would like to show you one of those insects that interest me so much – and no one else, it appears. This harlequin-coloured bug is the Common Burying Beetle (*Nicrophorus vespillo*), and as its name indicates, it plays an essential role: that of the undertaker. Whenever they find the corpse of some small animal – bird, rodent, or whatever – the male and female join forces to dig out the dirt from underneath it and throw it on top, until the body is completely buried. The female then lays its eggs, so that the young will have plenty of food. Without them, countless corpses would be left to rot in the open. It's a dirty job, but someone's gotta do it!





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Weekly Report of 08 September, 2018

The days are rapidly getting shorter, and the sun rises much later. And today I got going too early, so that my first sighting was of bats chasing insects, followed by a Little Owl returning to its day roost. The first diurnal creatures I saw were the Starlings, which were leaving their roost in their thousands.

Migration remains lively, with Pied Flycatchers accounting for the bulk of migrants, followed by Willow Warblers and the first Garden Warbler and Chiffchaff of the fall. A large flock of Bee-eaters passed overhead.

Waterbirds were limited to a few Common Snipe, Greenshanks, and Green Sandpipers, and a few dozen Lapwings. There are over a hundred Teal now, and Mallard numbers have also noticeably increased.

Three weeks ago, I was surprised to see that a second individual had joined the Pygmy Cormorant that has been here since June; today I was dumbfounded to see four of them, all adults. There must be quite a few more around than we realize, and the presence of the first pioneering individual to reach La Cassinazza has attracted others as well.

There is one creature that is particularly ubiquitous these days: the hairy caterpillars of the Fall Webworm moth (*Hyphantria cunea*) are everywhere. They rain down from the tree, crawl up our arms, and eat and defoliate any and all plants, from poplars to grasses; I even saw a few eating mushrooms. In the silent countryside, we can hear the sound of a million tiny jaws chewing away. Their bristles are somewhat urticating, but some of us actually got some rather big rashes!





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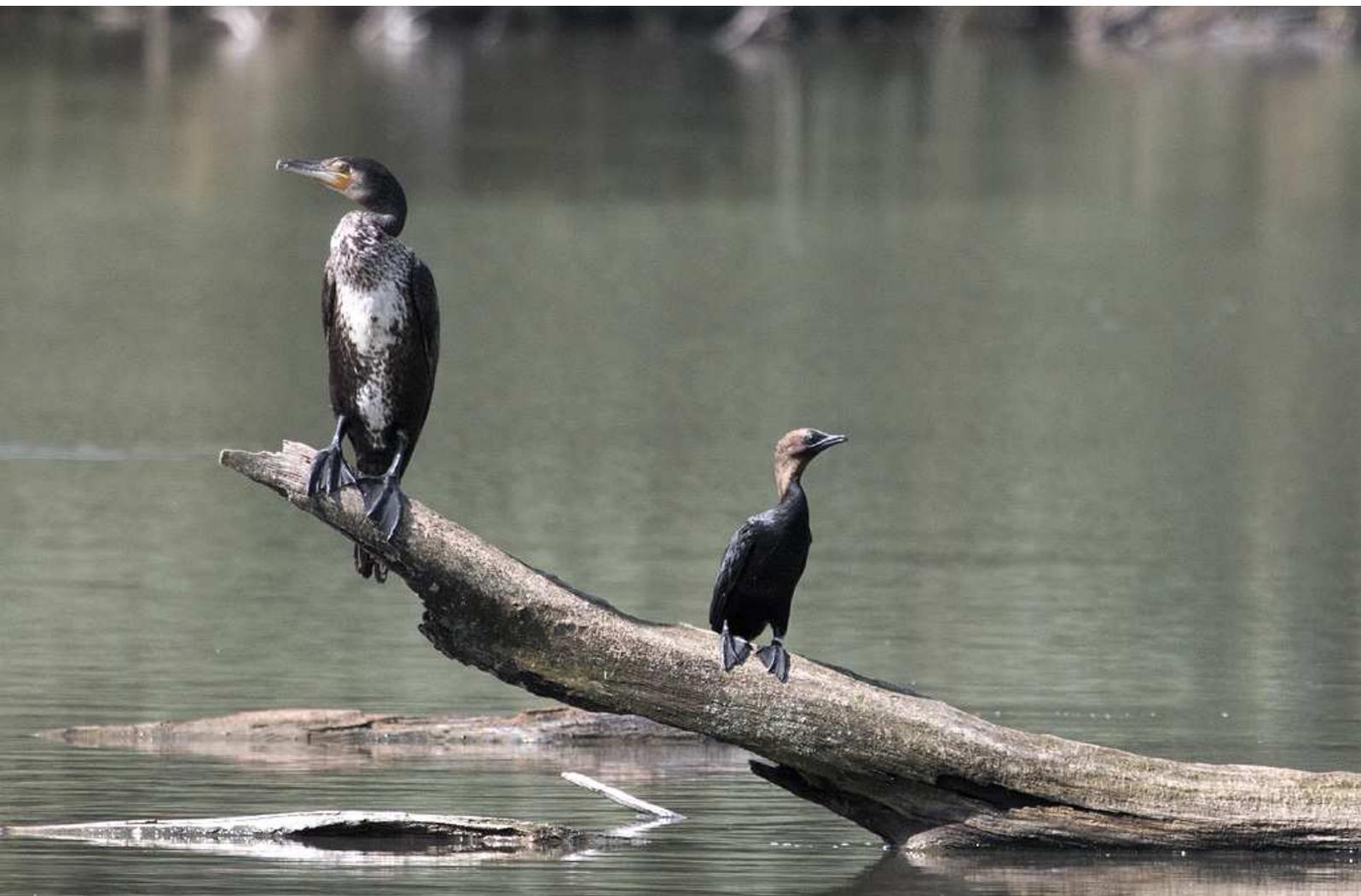
Weekly Report of 15 September, 2018

Birding-wise, the day began with a whimper, with migration seemingly on hold. Indeed, there are always troughs between the waves of migrants, whether due to the wind, the temperature, precipitation, or God knows what.

As the day wore on, however, the rather low numbers of birds – this scarcity was real, and not just perceived – was offset by a decent variety of species, which included Tree Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Robin, Garden Warbler, Alpine Swift, Sand Martin, Wood Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Garganey, and Shoveler, in addition to the expected Reed Warbler, Pied Flycatcher, Willow Warbler, Lapwing, and Teal.

All things considered, it wasn't a bad day at all.

Once again, the Pygmy Cormorants surprised us: today there were five! At this point, since they seem to have settled in for the long haul and the habitat is ideal, it will be interesting to see what they will do this winter: will they leave, and if so will they come back next year? We have already devoted several photos to them in our weekly reports, but they are still new and exciting to us. Today's image showcases the size difference between the Pygmy Cormorant on the right and the Great Cormorant on the left: these two species are certainly aptly named!





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Weekly Report of 22 September, 2018

The ebb and flow of migration is affected by weather systems, which force birds to stop to wait out unfavourable conditions, only to leave en masse once things improve. This is why migrants often arrive in waves, with birdless days followed by major influxes. But the weather has been stubbornly stable this month of September, so that instead of moving in pulses, migration has been a steady trickle. Today was an excellent example of this: while things appeared rather slow, by evening we had amassed a very nice variety of species. The star songbird was a Bluethroat, with the supporting cast including Robin, Tree Pipit, Sand Martin, Reed Warbler, Grey Wagtail, the first Wren of the autumn, Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler, and Pied Flycatcher. Waterbirds included countless Water Rails, and finally some waders: truth be told, their numbers were very low, but the presence of Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, Green, Common, and Wood Sandpipers, Common Snipe, and Lapwing added to the variety. Waterfowl numbers were augmented by some newly-arrived Gadwalls and Shovelers, while the Mallards and Teal found a safe haven at La Cassinazza now that the hunting season has started, and are gathering here in numbers. Today's raptor tally included an Osprey. And it was no surprise to discover that the number of Pygmy Cormorants continues to grow: we saw seven today, four adults and three juveniles. Also nice were a Spoonbill and five Black Storks high overhead.

As its name indicates, the Speckled Wood (*Pararge aegeria*) is a butterfly that lives in woodlands. With its understated colours, it blends in well in the dappled light of the forest.

