

Weekly Report of 22 June, 2019

The weather front that unleashed torrential rains just a few kilometers to the north gave us instead a pleasant day at La Cassinazza, a welcome break from the torrid temperatures of the last few days and the even more extreme ones to come.

It's time to take stock of the White Storks' breeding season. The lengthy spell of poor weather in May took its toll, and many chicks perished. One nest, which originally had five chicks, now only has two; another one also remains with two out of the original four. The third nest also hosts two chicks, but the fourth nest is hidden in thick foliage and we cannot see its contents, but one chick was found dead beneath the tree. At the very least, then, six White Stork chicks have died, as far as we know.

The Common Tern colony was wiped out by the marauding Hooded Crows: not a single nest appears to be active, and most of the terns have left.

Three Black-winged Stilt nests are probably close to hatching, while a fourth nest has now appeared, where eggs were laid early this week.

Just like a year ago, and almost on the same date, a single Pygmy Cormorant has appeared at La Cassinazza. This species probably uses the site during the post-breeding and wintering period, but they evidently go somewhere else to nest – not too far, as I've been told.

Today's surprise was finding this brilliant jewel beetle (family Buprestidae): a true gem, fully justifying its common name. Its scientific name is *Eurythyrea micans*, whose larvae grow in dead poplar stumps. It once ranged no closer than central and southern Italy, but it has recently expanded its range northwards.





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Weekly Report of 29 June, 2019

In the blazing heat of recent days, La Cassinazza's wetlands are drying up.

The herons are at the end of their breeding season. Many recently-fledged juvenile Little Egrets have moved to La Cassinazza along with their parents, and I must admit that a hundred or so of these snowy-white birds crowding into a single puddle make for quite a sight. Juvenile Cattle Egrets fledged a couple of weeks ago; so far they had limited themselves to a few awkward flights in the fields next to the heronry, but now they are beginning to range farther afield. Juvenile Grey Herons have been around for quite a while, but the Night Herons are only now beginning to fledge.

The Great Crested Grebes on the main pond are swimming with their chicks on their backs. They hatched during the week and are not yet able to swim on their own.

The eggs have hatched in three of the Black-winged Stilt nests, but the chicks remain hidden in the tall grass. Another twenty or so Black-winged Stilts – migrants, most likely - stopped by during the week. Other migrating waders included more Green Sandpipers, a Greenshank, and the day's undoubted highlight, a Marsh Sandpiper. While chatting to a friend the other day I predicted its imminent arrival; it proved me right and in turn I spent a couple of hours trying to photograph it.

For a number of reasons, we have spent more effort on butterflies these last few weeks, and the month of June rewarded us with no less than 31 species, with an additional 11 dragonflies.





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Weekly Report of 06 July, 2019

The impoundments have been almost completely drained, mimicking the seasonal patterns of natural wetlands in the middle of summer. The Black-winged Stilts, which had nested in the very first pools to be drained, immediately moved their chicks to areas with standing water, a journey that involved crossing at least two ditches: no mean feat for fuzzy chicks no bigger than a tennis ball.

The Great Crested Grebe chicks are learning to swim, albeit for a few moments at a time, after which they climb back onto their parents' backs.

Only two of the White Stork juveniles have been brave enough to set off on their maiden flight so far. The others are fully winged, but like overgrown children, they are loth to leave the safety of their respective nests.

The Mallards are in the middle of their annual moult. They have shed most of their flight feathers, and in order to escape, many can only frantically paddle away with what's left of their wings.

Jackdaws have only recently started breeding locally, at Cascina Darsena to be exact. A small colony formed in 2017 and it continues to grow, with at least three breeding pairs this year. Once their young have fledged, the Jackdaw families begin to range more widely, although they never really leave the general area: some days we do not see them at all, but at other times there may be as many as twenty or thirty around.





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Weekly Report of 13 July, 2019

What is particularly striking about this time of year is the lack of birdsong. Not that we have permanent silence: we are constantly hearing brief calls and alarm notes, which are often difficult to identify to species. But the unique, distinctive songs of the Nightingale and the Marsh Warbler, which filled the air in June, are no longer to be heard. Apart from a few Blackcaps, we heard the forlorn song of one Cuckoo, a handful of Golden Orioles, and a couple of strophes from a Cetti's Warbler or two.

The juvenile White Storks have finally fledged in at least three of our four nests. The laggards have a good excuse, though, because in the fourth nest the eggs were laid about two or three weeks behind schedule.

A couple of Pygmy Cormorants were roosting on the main pond. Hopefully, they are the vanguard of much larger numbers that will move to La Cassinazza in fall and winter, as they did last year.

Butterfly diversity is very high for a site in the Po Plain: we saw no fewer than 24 species today, and 36 since the beginning of the year.

The Great Crested Grebe family swims carefree on the waters of the main pond. Its presence - and the survival of the fledged chicks - is due to the removal of the Wels' Catfish, whose voracity had caused this species and the diminutive Little Grebe to abandon the pond. The removal effort, which took place in fall 2017, was laborious and complex, but it was worth it: Great Crested Grebes and Little Grebes have resumed breeding here.





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Weekly Report of 20 July, 2019

In part because of the oppressive heat that gave us little else to do, we spent quite a bit of time today looking for the common Italian Sparrow. It took some effort, but we finally found two birds among twenty or so Tree Sparrows. Think about it: only a few years ago, there were hundreds just in the farmhouse courtyard. This is not the first time I am bemoaning their rapid disappearance. In fact, they have vanished so quickly that it is difficult to believe that the cause could be environmental degradation, especially since the local environment is actually improving: fewer and less harmful pesticides, more habitat. We can definitely rule out this cause for La Cassinazza. What is the problem, then? Based on common sense, my idea was that such a population crash could only have been caused by an epidemic. Indeed, just a few days ago a study was published highlighting a correlation between the decline of House Sparrows in England and avian malaria, a disease borne by mosquitoes, exactly like its human counterpart, but that only affects birds of many species. Italian Sparrows are closely related to House Sparrows, and they are likely susceptible to avian malaria as well. This may very well explain their disappearance, but I am not a scientist and can only report what I see.

The photo of the day could well be called a stolen image: Roe Deer are exceptionally cautious when they go to drink. For millennia – better yet, millions of years – predators have waited for this moment to hunt mammals. Roe Deer do not have predators at La Cassinazza, but their behaviour is ruled by instinct, so that they remain prudent and wary.





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Weekly Report of 27 July, 2019

The reedbed where so many Marsh Warblers were singing on May mornings is now alive with calls and movement: the recently-fledged juveniles are now independent and flit to and fro as they try to learn as fast as possible all of the tricks of the trade that will ensure their survival.

The Hobbies, on the other hand, have not yet completed their breeding cycle: while we did see a fledged juvenile, from elsewhere in the poplar groves we could hear the screams of chicks still in the nest. Hobbies generally breed in July, when they can take advantage of the abundance of inexperienced juvenile passerines, which make for easy prey.

Today's weather was far from ideal: overcast early, followed by thunderstorms and occasional sunshine. Early in the morning, countless Common Blues (*Polyommatus icarus*) rested on dew-covered grass stems in a wildflower meadow. Motionless, they were waiting until they had warmed up enough to begin flying. The males of this tiny butterfly, one of our commonest, have magnificent blue wings as brilliant as the clearest skies.





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Weekly Report of 03 August, 2019

It was a very quiet day: the breeding season is behind us, the impoundments are dry, and there was the heat to reckon with. In early August, there are only the barest hints of migration, and some of these movements are probably better defined as post-breeding dispersal. But this does not mean that today lacked interest: two Honey Buzzards, a Black Kite, a Pygmy Cormorant, and the year's first Black Stork added some excitement.

A few species were notable for their absence: Common Swifts left several weeks ago, we did not record any Cuckoos for the first time in months, and the Turtle Doves might be gone as well.

There were plenty of butterflies. Lycaenids, small species that are hard to spot in the vegetation, accounted for the vast majority; larger butterflies, especially admirals, are almost entirely absent at this time of year.

Odonates, on the other hand, were generally scarce, although diversity was high. We saw ten species, today, including Western Willow Spreadwing (*Lestes viridis*), Ruddy Darter (*Sympetrum sanguineum*), Common Darter (*Sympetrum striolatum*), and Lesser Emperor (*Anax partenope*).



Cattle Egrets are present at La Cassinazza year-round. They are particularly common in fall, when counts can reach the triple digits, while only a handful remain in mid-winter. At all seasons they associate with the horses that freely graze in the meadows.



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Weekly Report of 10 August, 2019

In today's stifling heat and humidity, my enthusiasm for birdwatching rapidly waned. In this weather, having a back-up interest is quite useful.

Wild blackberries proved an excellent distraction: every bramble thicket has them, but depending on exposure, humidity, and countless other factors, they can be more or less juicy or sweet. They must be tasted. All of them. I devoted myself to this task with scientific zeal.

Turning to fauna, for the first time I began exploring the local moths. My UV lamp attracted great numbers, together with a multitude of beetles and much more to boot. And yes, mosquitoes too, sadly.

Among other things, being outside at night allowed me to find a Tawny Owl.

The wings of butterflies and moths are frequently patterned in yellows, reds, and browns. Green is rather rare, even though it blends in very well with the vegetation. This moth, a species in the family Geometridae, learned perfectly how to blend in among young leaves, of which it not only imitates the colour, but even the thin veining. It still needs to work on figuring out where to perch, though: against the bark of a tree, all that work is for nought!





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Weekly Report of 17 August, 2019

Early this week a tremendous wind storm hit La Cassinazza and surrounding areas. Countless plants were blown down or uprooted. Entire tree lines fell like dominoes, including the one that hosted a Cormorant roost, and the tall dead tree in the lake that attracted just about every Osprey that ever passed through La Cassinazza has also been knocked down. Quite a few buildings and other facilities in the local area were also damaged.

The Swallows are gathering in large flocks as they get ready to leave; about a hundred or so were in the skies above La Cassinazza for most of the day. They often perched on power lines, exactly like in those corny images I used to see in my school books. Along with the Swallows, 25-30 Teal and the fall's first Chiffchaff were signs of migration. We had numerous Honey Buzzard sightings, but it is hard to say how many individuals were present, or whether they were migrants.

The list of butterflies recorded at La Cassinazza has grown by one: Lang's Short-tailed Blue (*Leptotes pirithous*) – a small lycaenid – a migrant from Africa that in summer can colonize much of Europe. There is no doubt about the identification (I captured it in my net) but much to my embarrassment I did not manage to photograph it.



The Pygmy Cormorants are back at La Cassinazza. The numbers are still low, but they seem to be repeating the same occurrence pattern as last year, and I am convinced that by next winter we will have several dozen around.



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Weekly Report of 24 August, 2019

Much like the Barn Swallows that have now mostly left were doing last week, today the House Martins were forming large flocks. They are also getting ready to migrate southwards. The Golden Orioles have already done so: for the first time in months, today we heard neither the whistled song of the males nor the harsh mewling of the females.

The birds that have left have been replaced by Pied Flycatchers, which arrived in impressive numbers, and by the first Garden Warblers, Willow Warblers, and Common Snipe of the fall.

In what can only be described as a bizarre appearance, we saw a Scarlet Ibis, which undoubtedly escaped from the same nearby zoo that has been the source of various other exotic species in the past.

Honey Buzzards are also migrating now. Some merely fly over La Cassinazza, while others take the opportunity to stop here. We usually see them in the woodlands, where they are masters at concealing their presence. When disturbed, they fly from tree to tree, and invariably perch on their lower branches, where they are shaded and hidden by the canopy.





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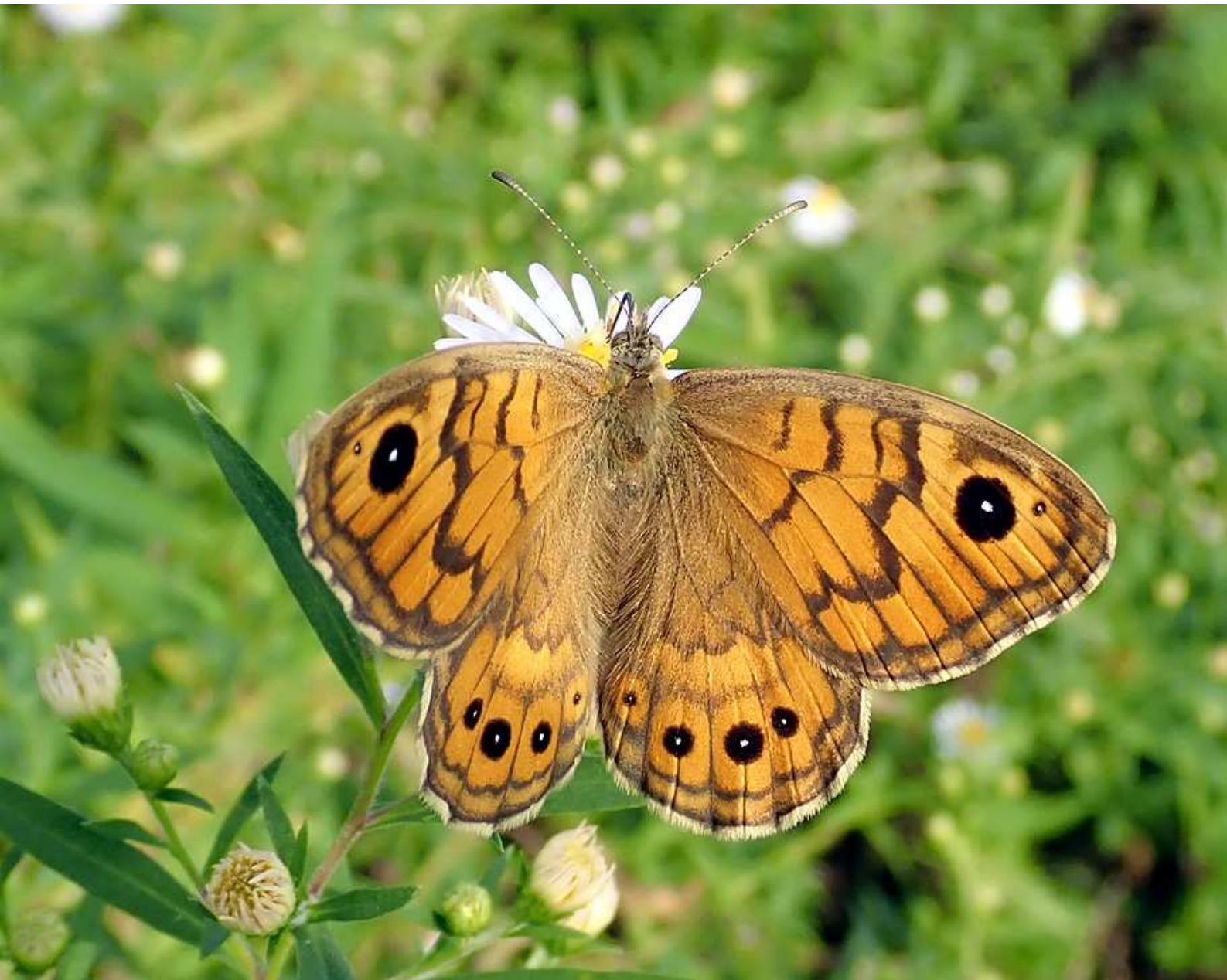


Weekly Report of 31 August, 2019

While local farmers have started to drain their rice fields, La Cassinazza's impoundments are once again filled with water. In the former, many aquatic creatures remain trapped on dry land, providing abundant food for opportunistic species, especially Cattle Egrets, Sacred Ibis, Little Egrets, and even Hooded Crows. In the latter, the new habitat has attracted several hundred Mallards and almost a hundred Teal, with several Garganeys – all still in eclipse plumage – concealed in their midst. A small flock of Wood Sandpipers, the autumn's first, was also taking advantage of newly-flooded areas.

The Honey Buzzard migration continues, with some high in the sky, and a couple perched in the woodlands. Among passerines, Pied Flycatchers remain abundant.

The Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*) is a butterfly that seeks out hot, dry places. This summer must have suited it perfectly.





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Weekly Report of 07 September, 2019

Over the course of the week, the wave of migrant Pied Flycatchers – perhaps I should say the first wave – seemed to have crested. The overnight rain between Thursday and Friday, however, forced down some new migrants and brought us yet more Pied Flycatchers, Reed Warblers, and Sedge Warblers. There was a good variety of waders as well, but in very small numbers, including Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Ruff, Greenshank, Little Ringed Plover, and Lapwing, not to mention the last few Black-winged Stilts still lingering at La Cassinazza.

Common Buzzards are also on the move, and we saw a few small groups of up to six birds migrating overhead.

The Scarlet Ibis is still around, associating with the Sacred Ibis. It's true that these two species share a similar size and structure, but with its fluorescent red plumage it sticks out like a sore thumb among its pied cousins.

Now that the impoundments are filled with water again, thousands of red dragonflies – mostly Scarlet Skimmers (*Crocothemis erythraea*) and Red-veined Darters (*Sympetrum fonscolombii*) – are skimming their surface

Turning my attention to butterflies, after many years of absence I saw a Geranium Bronze (*Cacyreus marshalli*), a small Lycaenid originally from South Africa accidentally introduced to Europe in a shipment of ornamental plants. It was thought too frail to survive our winters. How wrong that proved to be!





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Weekly Report of 14 September, 2019

Waterbird diversity was even higher than last week, especially waders. In addition to those listed in last Saturday's report, we also saw Common Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Little Stint, Common Redshank, and Dunlin, for a total of 13 species. The number of individuals remains low, the only species in double digits being Lapwing (about 80), Common Snipe (about the same number), and Wood Sandpiper (a total of 15). Half or more of the remaining species were only represented by one or two individuals. The waterfowl contingent so far comprises about 500 Mallards, 250 Teal, and 15 newly-arrived Shovelers, but hunting season opens tomorrow and we expect a great many ducks to seek safety at La Cassinazza. Most of them will be Mallards.

Concerning songbirds, a week of high pressure and settled, sunny weather suggested we would not see much active migration. And indeed we didn't.

The one thing today was memorable for was the abundance of mosquitoes, horseflies, and other blood-sucking insects.

Another insect drew my attention: the praying mantis. This is not a particularly scarce species, but I don't think they have ever been as common at La Cassinazza as in these past few weeks. Perhaps this summer was particularly favourable for them.





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Weekly Report of 21 September, 2019

We had several new arrivals this week, all harbingers of winter: Robin, Song Thrush, Grey Wagtail, Gadwall, Peregrine Falcon, and a flock of Siskins. The latter were rather early, and often this is a sign of a good numbers later in the season.

Passage migrants were very scarce: a fly-over Tree Pipit and at least ten White Storks. A few days ago, there had been two Black Storks as well, a juvenile and an adult.

As we expected, a great many Mallards have taken shelter in La Cassinazza's wetlands – we estimated about two thousand – while the number of Teal was much like last week. Last week's Shovelers are gone – evidently they were only passage migrants – and so are the last of the Black-winged Stilts.



Another species that is about to leave is the Purple Heron. We still saw a couple today, but they will soon be gone and we won't see them until next spring. Like many reedbed inhabitants, the Purple Heron is very skilled at evading detection, but in this case, a couple of reeds – dry ones at that – were not enough to conceal it!