



A Year in Birds

by Dave Bird

My Birding Area

When I came to Germany in March 1994, I didn't really have any idea what to expect. Learning to speak a new language and adapting to a family life were all new to me. Slowly but surely many unknown areas around where I lived started to build a picture about the bird life in my hometown of Halle an der Saale.

Hopefully you have heard of the city of Leipzig, a larger city located in the mid-east of Germany. Halle is not far away, about 40km to the west of Leipzig. It's a relatively flat area, dry and very warm in the summer and sometimes very cold in the winter, annual temperatures ranging from -25°C to $+35^{\circ}\text{C}$.

Having explored just a few of the many local spots for birdlife, I began investigating an area, which was a former open cast mine up to 1989. During the following years these old mines were flooded becoming two lakes called Rassnitz and Wallendorf. I also discovered a gravel pit called Burgliebenau. Both lakes and the gravel pit became my local patch. Between the lakes a marsh had developed, trees and bushes were also planted creating a variety of habitats in one compact area.

One thing to mention about this area is the size, it's big! Walking it, you'd be there all day and longer so the only way to get around really, is by bike. Today with bike carriers fitted to your car this isn't really an issue anymore.

Seasons of Birds

I'd like to give you an overview of the birds you can see during each seasons around my local patch.

Spring Birding

For me this is the best time of year. After a long cold winter the first signs of Spring begin to show towards the end of March when Lapwings and Skylarks are on the move. At this time, the marsh between the lakes really comes into its own.

It's a real joy, a wonderful place to watch birds, sometimes I just can't believe what fantastic days I've had there (days that may be coming to an end soon as the site is being drained!). You arrive early at the car park in Rassnitz and open the door. At once a full concert of birdsong from Nightingale, Blackcap, Whitethroat, Grasshopper Warbler, Serin, Wryneck, Golden Oriole and Icterine Warbler greets you. Getting out and moving towards the lake you hear Great Reed Warblers and Barred Warblers as they sing from bushy habitat and there are Red-backed Shrikes here and there.

Nearer to and on the marsh are Marsh Harriers, breeding Cranes trumpeting, booming Bitterns and White Storks feeding. With the right water conditions it's great for waders too. Scarcer species such as Temminck's Sandpiper are regular in small numbers, as are Avocets, and many

commoner species too, such as 100s of Wood Sandpipers at times.

Rarities that I've seen include Broad-billed Sandpiper, Sociable Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, Great Snipe, Glossy Ibis, Black-winged Stilts, Red-necked Phalaropes and with a bit of luck White-winged Black and Whiskered Terns, cracking birds in summer plumage.

Passerines can sometimes include Red-throated Pipit and Grey-headed Wagtail. At the gravel pit Bluethroats are holding territory and Garganey, Pintail and Shovelers are sometimes seen in good numbers. In Spring, everyday brings something new.

Summer Birding

It can be very hot during the Summer months so the best time to go birding is early, very early. Even so, morning temperatures can start at 20°C or more, and later on can quickly rise into the 30s.

During the summer Marsh Sandpipers are occasional, and on one occasion I saw two together, also a family of Black-winged Stilts stayed for 6 weeks (2 adults and 4 young). Unfortunately the marsh often dries up, but Hobbies will still hunt for dragonflies and newly colonised henories have young. Raccoons have predated all the old tree nesting colonies!

Bushy areas hold breeding Barred Warblers, now and again a River Warbler has held territory. On one cycle tour I counted over 70 Red-backed Shrikes including both adults and young.

On the lakes numbers of ducks start to increase. New to the area is Red-crested Pochard, which has bred during some years. Occasional Honey Buzzards fly overhead, as do Black Storks from about August on.

Autumn Birding

In Autumn, the gravel pit at Burgliebenau can be an exciting place to check for waders. The headline acts are Marsh and Broad-billed Sandpipers but good numbers of other species are present also, including Sanderling, Turnstone and Godwits.

I never forget to check out any reedy areas as over the last 5 years 3 Aquatic Warblers have occurred, the first records of this rare warbler for my local patch. There are also occasional records of Spotted and Little Crakes.

Plate 1. Typical Winter scene at Rassnitz



Red-crested Pochards numbers have exceeded 500 on occasion and a Ferruginous Duck or two have may turn up from time to time.

Both Red-necked and Black-necked Grebes have bred in recent years. By the Autumn Bee-eaters have dispersed from the breeding colonies and up to 100 may sometimes be seen feeding in the vicinity.

As the days turn cooler its time for Cranes to steal the limelight as 100s or even 1000s can be heard trumpeting as they make their way to new resting and feeding areas.

Northern geese arrive in their 1000s at this time, each year to a different location but we've counted 20,000 at times. Bean and Russian White-fronted Geese are the common species. Pink-footed, Barnacle and Brent Geese are scarce. On one occasion I observed 2 Snow Geese but I am still looking out for Lesser White-fronted Goose.

In the reed-beds Bearded Tits numbers build up before they get ready to depart and the last of the Penduline Tits soon are on their way to warmer climes also.

Winter Birding

Due to the size of the lakes they can attract 3 species of diver, Great Northern Diver being the rarest. Black-throated and Red-throated Divers are more or less annual with anything from 1 to 4 present at a time.

Velvet and Common Scoters can also be seen. Smew is regular, counts in the 20s are the normal.

In the last 2 years I've had the good fortune to see a 3rd winter Iceland Gull (first county record) and an adult Glaucous Gull (ca. the 3rd or 4th record for the county). Other gulls include Yellow-legged, which are regular and Caspian Gull can sometimes be present in the 100s. Unfortunately changes at the local waste disposal centre have reduced the numbers of large gulls in the last few years.

Around or over the lakes White-tailed Sea Eagle, Rough-legged Buzzard and Great Grey Shrike are regular with the first and last being breeding birds also.

Over-wintering geese may be found in the surrounding fields, normally they roost on the lakes, creating a fantastic spectacle especially when they leave the roost in the morning.

Patch Birding

I hope I've given you an insight into my 'birding world' of the past few years. I've spent so many enjoyable hours there with my family but more often alone. One thing that I really enjoy about my local patch, is that you can find your own birds there as there are not many other birdwatchers. One thing that especially saddens me is that young birdwatchers are rare, even very rare! Like with so many other hobbies the younger generation are missing.

The birds mentioned in the short report are all birds that I've seen and found myself. There has been no need to travel long distances.

Around my local patch are forests filled with 6 European woodpeckers, the largest breeding concentration of Bee-eaters in Germany (ca. 300 pairs locally), small forest owls within 90 minutes. All in all it's excellent birding. In fact, in the last 20 years I reckon I've twitched further afield just four times, maximum distance 50km, for 2 White-billed Divers, a Great black-headed Gull and a Franklin's Gull. You can discover the birds yourself.

I'm certain there are many great birding places I don't know about but I'm happy here doing my local patch.

My Motto

One of my favourite sayings is from the book '*Lord of the Rings*' by JRR Tolkien.

Remember what Bilbo Baggins used to say, '*It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to*'. I'd like to adapt it for my own circumstances just a bit to say '*you never know what you are going to find when you are out on the road*'.

Pictures

There follows pictures of some of the birds that I have observed around my local patch at various times during the year.

All photos are from the area and are digiscoped.



Plate 2. Red-backed Shrike



Plate 3 (top). Red-throated Pipit
Plate 4 (middle). Great Reed Warbler
Plate 5 (bottom). Garganey

Plate 6 (top). Bluethroat
Plate 7 (middle). Barred Warbler
Plate 8 (bottom). Little Bittern



Plate 9 (top). Spotted Crake
Plate 10 (middle). Aquatic Warbler
Plate 11 (bottom). Smew and Coot

Plate 12 (top). Pectoral Sandpiper
Plate 13 (middle). Red-crested Pochard
Plate 14 (bottom). Whopper Swan