

Hambrook Marshes

Bird Report for January 2014

Early in the month the river burst its banks, and there was fairly extensive flooding, though this was nothing compared to what happened on 2nd February, when virtually the whole reserve was under water (more of that in my next report). As a result, numbers of roosting and feeding black-headed gulls built up to a record 314 on 5th. By mid-month most of the water had drained away, but the fields remained very soggy, which suited a heron after an absence of several weeks, and also three snipe. But, with the river still fast-flowing and muddy, little grebes remained elusive, with just the occasional one or two recorded.

Last winter woodpigeons were frequently feeding in the fields, twenty or thirty together, whereas in recent weeks I have often seen just one or two. There have also been fewer rooks and jackdaws feeding here than last month, but it was good to see a flock of 70 starlings in the field beside Tonford Bridge.

Smaller birds have generally been rather scarce, with fewer meadow pipits wintering this year, my highest count being just ten, compared to 24 last winter. I'm delighted to report that the little gem of a male stonechat is still present, frequenting the taller vegetation near the A2 bridge, in the field that wasn't grazed or mown last summer. I find it quite difficult to locate though, and imagine it must spend some of its time further back, behind the railway line, but when he does put in an appearance, balancing atop a tall dock stem, surveying the ground beneath for prey to pounce on, the sight is unmistakable. Another encouraging record was of two reed buntings on the 5th, the first I'd seen since July, and, who knows, possibly an early sign that winter is losing its grip.

Shakespeare wrote that "summer's lease hath all too short a date...." but it is beginning to seem as though much the same can be said of this winter. Bird numbers tend to be affected by cold snaps, and the absence of any periods of prolonged icy weather meant that some species have been extremely scarce so, although up to 50 fieldfares have been seen nearby or flying over, none actually paused to feed on the reserve, and redwings were equally scarce – a maximum of seven, compared to 74 in colder weather this time last year.

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