



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

Michael Walter

October 2014 Bird Report

The weather never ceases to amaze and, despite a drearily wet fortnight, we also enjoyed some unseasonably warm weather, with temperatures in the low 20s, and I was more than a little heartened to see a common darter dragonfly (right, photo by Glynn Crocker) on the wing at 8am on 27th October.



One sign of impending winter is the reappearance of black-headed gulls; so far the ground has remained too dry, despite all the rain, for these birds to be drawn down to earth (the picture changed dramatically in November - more of that in the next newsletter), but up to 97 birds have been seen flying over. There has, however, been enough soft and waterlogged ground to regularly attract up to eleven snipe to feed in the fields, and as many as eighty mallard have been present on wetter ground just the other side of the Ashford railway line. Further signs of looming harsher weather came with the return of one coot and a couple of tufted ducks to Tonford Lake, also just off the reserve. For the past two winters a lone stonechat has been present sporadically in the middle field, where there are plenty of tall, dead stems for it to perch on, so I was delighted to see that this winter he has returned with a female partner, who is much drabber than her mate. These delightful little birds, that are related to robins, are best searched for by scanning the field through binoculars, looking out for an unexpected silhouette atop a dead dock, thistle or teasel flowerhead.

When I began my regular visits to the marshes in September 2012 I inherited a bird list of 59 species from Kent Enterprise Trust, the previous owners of the reserve. Since then I have been gradually adding new names to that list, from the unexpected jack snipe and outlandish mandarin duck to the rather more mundane skylark and meadow pipit (right, photo by Dave Smith). All are grist to the statistical mill, and just a month later the total had passed seventy, but inevitably the rate of accretion tailed off, and it was another six months before the eighty milestone was reached. Then, having soared to a heady 89 in just five months in 2013, the total stuck stubbornly at that figure for nearly a year. I am therefore delighted to announce that this month I have added three very disparate new species to the reserve list – a duck, a hawk and a bunting. First up was a teal on 6th, then a goshawk on 12th and finally a yellowhammer on 27th. The teal is a small duck, largely a winter visitor in southern England, though breeding extensively in Scotland. The yellowhammer is well-known to most, so it was a little surprising that it took so long for me to clock up my first bird, but it is mainly associated with arable land, and the one that flew over was probably heading for ploughed fields behind Thanington. Most interesting, though, was the goshawk, a largish raptor that disappeared from the UK in the late



nineteenth century, thanks to zealous persecution by gamekeepers. It was still present on continental Europe but, being a fairly sedentary species, the chances of colonisation from abroad seemed remote, and the bird was thought destined to be consigned to the book of UK extinctions. But it did in fact retain a presence in this country, kept as a falconer's bird, one that was notoriously difficult to train; in the 1960s and 1970s it is thought that some birds either escaped or were perhaps released by their frustrated owners, and slowly a wild population has built up once more, its headquarters being in the extensive Welsh conifer forests. There are also small established populations in parts of Scotland and northern England, while nearer to home there are a few pairs in the New Forest and East Anglia, but possibly none resident in Kent yet. The current estimate is that there could be 435 pairs in the UK. The increasing goshawk population may give some solace to those who despise grey squirrels (tree rats) and sparrowhawks, as both these predators of small birds, their eggs and young in turn fall prey to the bigger and stronger goshawk. With the bird list standing at 92, I now feel confident that one hundred is achievable, but that magical figure may yet be several years away.

Also of interest was a young mute swan on the river, not seen for some months, and a flypast by a flock of 15 greylag geese (above left, photo by Dave Smith).