



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

November 2014

November Bird Report

I need hardly remind you that this was a very wet month, with nearly double the average rainfall, just three dry days, and only a little below the highest November rainfall I've recorded, which was in 2003. To put it all in perspective, I should add that the wettest month I've known in 32 years was October

2000, when there was an incredible 272mm of rain (just a measly 164mm this month). In October, although there was less rain, it was wet most days, and this all contrived to make the autumn seem unremittingly gloomy. Consequently, paths are now under water in places and the fields have become very soggy, although not yet properly flooded. In contrast, Whitehall Meadow, the council-managed field between Toddlers' Cove and Hambrook, was completely submerged on 11th, when it hosted 321 black-headed gulls, 18 herring gulls and 6 common gulls. Conditions also



favoured the mallard, with a peak count at the end of the month of 51 in the fields, as opposed to on the river. So far, I've only seen single little grebes (above) on the river, whereas in previous years numbers have started to build up by now. Heavy rainfall hasn't helped my survey of this elusive species as the now turbulent river Stour is no longer suitable for a bird that feeds underwater, and any grebes in



the area are more likely to be skulking in overgrown ditches where they are all but impossible to detect. The tufted duck (left) population on the adjoining Tonford Lake has also failed to swell in the way I would have expected: numbers did increase to 12 earlier in the month, but are now down to just two. The low numbers of these two waterbird species may well be related to the mildness of the autumn so far, with birds choosing to move shorter distances from their summer quarters.

One or two chiffchaffs were still present on 16th, but that may now be it until early spring. As usual, there was a little overlap of summer and winter visitors, with a few Scandinavian redwings first appearing on 11th, along with some song thrushes and blackbirds which had also probably made the arduous crossing of the North Sea.



You may have been puzzled by the sight of a few almost white thistles between the cycle path and the river, close to the A2 road bridge (if you look closely at the photo on the left you can just about make out the bridge at the top of the picture, with its signature “GUFF” graffito). This blanching is due to a loss of chlorophyll, a process known as chlorosis, much as you would see if you kept the thistles in the dark for a while, but in this case the paleness is caused by a bacterial infection, and it is an interesting story with a local connection. The bacterium responsible is native to north America, where it has been patented as a potential biological control agent for thistles – infected plants cease to photosynthesise, and so die eventually. This disease wasn’t known in the UK until 2003 when – and here comes the local connection – it was first identified at Canterbury by Dr John Fletcher. It is thought that mowing actually helps spread the disease, and I have seen Kentish fields full of white creeping thistles.

Bird photos by courtesy of Dave Smith