

# Hambrook Marshes

## Bird Report for February 2014

Flooding was the main feature of the first half of the month, and on 2<sup>nd</sup>, for the first time since I started regular visits in 2012, virtually the entire reserve was under water, which was too deep for me to negotiate in my wellies; a mere two days later most of the water had, seemingly miraculously, vanished, only to return with a vengeance on 10<sup>th</sup>, and worsening on 15<sup>th</sup> when, once again, the whole reserve disappeared, though this time I was just about able to walk the paths in wellingtons, although for one stretch this could only be achieved on tiptoes! I had a slightly surreal encounter with a nine-inch trout that swam across the cycle path immediately in front of me! Two days later, however, the waters were subsiding once more, and the excitement was over.

But what effect did all this very unusual upheaval have on the birdlife? Interestingly, as already commented on last month, some birds benefitted enormously, while others dispersed. Numbers of mallard had already tailed off somewhat during the less severe January floods, and this month they all but disappeared, presumably moving further afield to areas of shallower flooding, which suits their dabbling feeding style better. I could still find one little grebe but the great crested grebe on Tonford Lake moved off during the month. Our little egret became more of a fixture, sometimes joined by a second bird, and one even turned up in Westgate Gardens. Two lapwings rested one day when they could find a few square inches of moderately firm ground, and two or three snipe were happy in the soggy areas.



*Male stonechat regurgitating a fly -  
Dave Smith*

The greatest impact of the flooding was on the number of roosting gulls, producing a grand spectacle with record-breaking flocks of our two common species - 447 black-headed and 196 herring gulls, plus 20 common and two lesser black-backed gulls. Also of interest was a record count of 26 magpies on 17<sup>th</sup> in the western field, presumably gorging on a wealth of drowned invertebrates.

Flooding aside, there were a few other records of interest, such as an overflying buzzard, the first I had seen on the reserve for a year, and the welcome return of reed buntings in preparation for another breeding season. My greatest astonishment was on hearing a chiffchaff singing on 10<sup>th</sup> February. Increasing numbers of these migrants are in fact now overwintering in England, but even so I would not normally expect to hear one burst into song until around mid-March, and this abnormal behaviour is no doubt linked to the exceptionally mild winter. It looks as if the handsome male stonechat has moved off to nest elsewhere.

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