

Hambrook Marshes

Bird Report for April 2014

After a fine promise of spring in late February and March, the elements became more capricious in April, but the breeding season had engaged top gear and ground on relentlessly, with a brood of seven



mallard ducklings appearing on 13th, cuckoo calling on 26th and seven swallows the same day. Whitethroats have returned in good numbers, with three males singing lustily from scrub on the embankment: such a shame they are tone deaf! This is a species that declined dramatically in the late 1960s. It is one of the migrants that overwinters in the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, and a severe drought in 1968 destroyed much of the birds' habitat so that less than a third

of the birds returned in spring 1968, with further declines up to 1974, by which time the population had dropped by about 85%. Its long-term recovery has been slow and painful, even now only present at about a third of its pre-crash strength, but at least you can hope to hear their cheerful song in many scrubby corners these days. Disappointingly, I haven't heard any nightingales nearby this spring. Other "missing" species include mute swan, common sandpiper on passage, or tufted duck and great crested grebe on nearby Tonford Lake.

A grey wagtail is regularly heard underneath the A2 bridge, but I haven't been able to establish whether it is nesting there. These beautifully elegant, long-tailed birds are really more yellow than grey, as the photograph on the right clearly shows. Just downriver, a pair has bred successfully in a gap between stone blocks in the river bank in Westgate Gardens. People walking a few feet away are oblivious to the nest, although the wagtails were nervous of feeding the chicks



when people were around, and found conditions a little trying on the recent bank holiday weekend. A second pair was feeding fledged young recently near Bingley Island, opposite Toddlers' Cove; I believe

they may have nested on the other arm of the river, which flows under the Rheims Way and past the tannery development.

Interestingly, there has been a complete absence of black-headed gulls since 9th March, whereas last year they were recorded into early April, and then again from early May. I'm writing this on 11th May, having been down on the marshes this morning, and failed to see any.

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