



# Friends of Hambrook Marshes

## June 2014

### June Bird Report

June is naturally a quiet month – migration is over, birds cease singing and many become more skulking in their behaviour as they start losing feathers in their summer moult. All of which means that this month can be a lean time for reporting, exacerbated this year by my taking two weeks' holiday, so I'm afraid I don't have a great deal to write about.

At this time of year house sparrows tend to cross the river from neighbouring gardens in the search for nutritious grubs to feed to their young, searching mainly in tall grasses and nettlebeds, which are evidently an important resource though largely despised by humans.

In my two visits I failed to see any house martins or swallows and just a single swift. The grazing Highland cattle should be creating ideal conditions for the first two species, which regularly hunt over fields containing livestock, as their dung is a nursery for huge numbers of flies. These three species cause some confusion for the non-birdwatcher, so the photographs below (all by Dave Smith) may help sort out the identification pointers. The most colourful of the three is the swallow (far left), with its blue back, white breast and red face. It tends to hunt lowest of all, often in and around cattle's legs. The house martin (centre) is altogether dumpier and lacks the swallow's tail streamers, but its most obvious feature, not visible in this photo, is a white rump. Their preferred hunting height is generally above the swallows'. Swifts (far right), though often lumped in with swallows and house martins, are not in fact particularly closely related to them, so it is a case of convergent evolution that has led to them adopting a similar shape as an adaptation to the same sort of lifestyle. They fly highest of all, often disappearing from sight altogether, and their streamlined build is extremely well-adapted to a life spent almost entirely on the wing.



The decline of all three species locally and nationally is a cause of great concern; the rustic barns that swallows favour as nest-sites are being replaced by much more practical but less bird-friendly structures, and building renovation is denying swifts many of their traditional nesting crevices. The abundance of aerial insects seems to have diminished greatly (how often do you have to clear your car windscreen of squashed bugs these days?), which may be related to climate change and more intensive farming, but possibly the greatest problems are overseas in the birds' African winter quarters, where a growing population and increasing aridity are putting huge pressures on the habitats where these birds spend over half their lives.

In spring the reserve was awash with colour, and the cattle looked the picture of bucolic bliss grazing up to their bellies in a sea of yellow buttercups. Now, much of this dazzling colour has drained away from the fields, and the focus has switched to the edges of the main path, where a range of tall herbaceous plants can flourish out of reach of the cattle's rasping tongues. Purple is now the dominant theme, with great willowherb, creeping thistle, hardhead and tufted vetch all in flower, along with the mauve of meadow cranesbill (planted by volunteers three years ago) and the deep pink of common mallow, but here and there you can also find the much more delicate pale pink of the scarcer musk mallow, whose leaves are deeply dissected into fine green fingers. Yellow is also edging back in, with meadow pea, ragwort and common fleabane flowers all starting to unfurl, the last being a magnet for gatekeeper butterflies.

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