



August 2014 Bird Report of Hambrook Marshes

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Last month I was lamenting the passing of summer, but sadness at this time of year can be tempered by some delightful vignettes of bird activity. Their lives are ruled by daylight hours whereas most of us, apart from farmers and poachers, are governed by the regularity of our watches – we fairly literally operate like clockwork. Birds, however, are up at dawn, immediately resuming their daily search for food, but early morning, even in August, can be quite chilly, and birds naturally seek out the warmest spots. So it was that on a couple of occasions recently, when a little early warmth was seeping into the landscape, a lively congregation of small birds gathered in the scrub on the eastern side of the disused railway embankment, a veritable suntrap sheltered from the wind. In addition to resident tits and robins, there were chiffchaffs, blackcaps and whitethroats, all flitting and weaving in and out of the bushes so fast that counting was impossible (only male blackcaps live up to their name - the bird in the photograph on the right is a female or juvenile, and young birds naturally predominate at this time of year).



If you've walked through Hambrook Marshes recently, you'll have noticed that the path verge has been cut right back to the river bank. This has inevitably led to some loss of late summer habitat for insects and birds fuelling up prior to migration, but has given us better views of river wildlife, including mallard, which are congregating along this stretch of river following a breeding season scattered throughout the valley. The mowing has eradicated some of the Himalayan balsam (left) which, depending on your point of view, is excellent news or a great shame. It all hinges on ethnicity; this balsam is an immigrant, though not strictly illegal, as it was deliberately introduced to our gardens from India in 1837. Having metaphorically leapt over the garden wall, it fairly quickly found itself a niche along our riverbanks, and is now widespread throughout Britain. In Kent it occurs along all the major rivers, having first been recorded here in 1904,



but is commoner in the west of the county. Immigrant wildlife, whether it be grey squirrels, signal crayfish, giant hogweed, rhododendron, ruddy duck, muntjac deer or Himalayan balsam, is regarded by ecologists and purists as an evil contagion, to be extirpated at all costs, and often with good reason. Grey squirrels are generally accepted to have indirectly caused the disappearance of the native reds from most of the country; ruddy ducks were threatening the survival of the endangered European white-headed duck through interbreeding, and giant hogweed has a virulently irritant sap that can cause

painful weals on exposed arms and legs. In the case of Himalayan balsam, its dense cover tends to kill off much of the native streamside (riparian) vegetation. In its favour, though, it is a rather attractive plant, flowering in late summer when there is a general dearth of colour in the countryside, and it undoubtedly does brighten up many of our waterways. Whatever your views on its presence here, you can but marvel at its success in colonising such a large area so quickly. Its seeds lack dandelion-type parachutes, and are not small enough to be borne aloft on the wind, but the plant possesses a wondrous dispersal mechanism. When fully ripe, the slightest touch will cause the seed capsule to explode violently, its walls contracting spirally into four or five segments that fling the seeds in all directions (the photo above shows flowers, ripe capsules and dehisced capsules in tight coils). This mechanism ensures short-distance dispersal along the bank, but seeds falling into the water can then be transported miles until washed up on a muddy spot where they can germinate. Conservationists are attempting to eliminate the plant but, given its prevalence in the UK, such efforts are going to be very protracted, and for those who appreciate the plant for what it adds aesthetically to the landscape, many years of enjoyment still lie ahead.

In nearby Westgate Gardens there was a flurry of consternation among the pigeons recently when a peregrine flashed low through the park. These fast-flying birds of prey traditionally nested on cliffs, like the young bird in the photo opposite, but in recent years there has been a major colonisation of our towns and cities, with 27 pairs breeding in London alone, its high-rise concrete blocks making an eminently acceptable substitute for their ancestral haunts. A pair now frequents the cathedral towers, and breeding has been attempted.



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