



# Friends of Hambrook Marshes

## September 2014

*Michael Walter*

### September Bird Report

Once the buttercups have died down in early summer, the fields are not particularly colourful, and few flowering plants are to be found, so I was more than a little curious when my eye was caught by the mauve of two flowers of the field scabious (looking past its best on the right). This plant is more or less restricted to dry downland in Kent, so a wet valley field is one of the last places you would expect to find it, but we mustn't forget that in the 1960s and 70s this whole area was massively disturbed by Brett's gravel-digging operations, and it is quite possible that the plant was introduced inadvertently with material brought onto the site or on vehicle wheels. Another possibility is that it was deliberately planted as part of the landscaping activity that took place once the machinery had fallen silent. Either way, this is a species well outside its comfort zone, and likely to disappear eventually, throttled by more vigorous grasses that can thrive in these conditions.



Mute swans have been remarkably scarce in the past year, so this month's single sighting was most welcome. Up to 22 mallard have been dabbling in the wet area of Tonford Field, near the A2; five snipe (on left) are now regularly present in parts of the same field, and a sprinkling of meadow pipits, no more than seven at a time, have been another sign of the changing seasons. A flock of thirteen long-tailed tits made for a delightfully attractive distraction one morning.

Interestingly, there were two records of the skulking water rail this month. One was just the wrong side of the reserve boundary, by the Tonford railway crossing - not seen, just recognised by the pig-like squeal that these normally secretive birds utter. The second record was on the north east side of the Canterbury East railway bridge and so, yet again, on the wrong side of the

boundary. Interestingly, the bird was feeding out in the open, in exactly the same muddy corner as a water rail that turned up early in 2013, and yet it could not have been the same bird as this one was a juvenile (lacking the adult's orange beak and vertical black bars on its flanks – the bird in the photo, right, is an adult): all very curious. Is it likely that a pair has bred here, undetected, for the past two years, the adults passing on to their youngster some information on the best feeding areas? It certainly is possible, but as I had no evidence whatsoever of birds remaining for the breeding season in either 2013 or this year, it is perhaps more likely down to chance, and the realisation that suitable water rail habitat will inevitably be occupied by the birds from time to time.



I keep a short list of birds that I have yet to record at Hambrook, but which I would expect to turn up here occasionally, if not regularly. On that list was hobby, a relative of the kestrel, but which overwinters in Africa. Hobbies are especially partial to dragonflies, so are often to be found in wetland areas where these insects occur, and are present further up and down the Stour valley. However, until last week I had never seen one on any of my summer visits; this may not be quite so surprising as it sounds as I normally walk round the marshes soon after dawn, summer and winter. At that time of day there are far fewer people around to disturb the birds, and at five o'clock on a summer's morning I can pretty well expect to have the place to myself. However, at that early hour the warmth-loving dragonflies are not airborne, so nor are the hobbies. It may therefore be no coincidence that I finally caught up with a Hambrook hobby on one of my rare afternoon visits when the air was warm and dragonflies were active. The bird I watched for a few minutes was probably en route to its winter quarters, feeding up prior to its long journey south. I could see it athletically

twisting and turning in pursuit of insects, catching them in its talons, then bringing the foot with its clutched prey up to its beak to strip off the worthless dragonfly wings prior to feasting on the bodies –

all these deft manoeuvres being performed with easy grace high in the sky. It was a wonderful privilege to watch this skilful bird at work.



*Perched heron – David Lewis*

What at first sight might be mistaken for a heron with extraordinarily long legs (photo on left) was in fact a bird perching on a post in the marsh. The curious sight was captured this month by David Lewis, one of the Love Hambrook Marshes trustees. Intriguingly, I had seen a heron perched on the same, or nearby, post just a couple of days earlier, suggesting that one individual had suddenly discovered the thrill that this commanding viewpoint, with its new perspective, provided. Stationed several feet off the ground, it was in no position to catch any prey and, as herons have few natural enemies to be on the lookout for, it is hard to see why it should have adopted this rather top-heavy balancing feat, but perhaps it was just bored!

*All bird photos except the heron are courtesy of Dave Smith*