



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

January 2015

Bird Report

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After all the excitement of last winter's flooding, recent months have been rather quiet birdwise. Tonford Field is quite wet, attracting as many as 27 snipe to feed in the splashy areas, and a single lapwing called in one day. Up to 31 black-headed gulls have been feeding on the fields, which only happens when there is some standing water. The picture (left) shows an adult in typical winter plumage, lacking the brown hood, and with just

an indistinct grey smudge behind the eye. I also had my first sighting of a lesser black-backed gull this winter, or perhaps I should say the first of the summer, as this is a partial migrant, with many birds heading down the French coast into southern Europe each autumn, not returning until the following spring.

Interestingly, the shy water rail has been popping up at a number of locations, such as the ditch by the Tonford level crossing (where I've had amazingly close views), the sinuous ditch in the middle of Tonford field, the wet area immediately south west of the A2 embankment, and the flooded marsh around the boardwalk. Additionally, Whitehall Meadow (next to Toddlers' Cove) has recently supported two individuals – one in its usual corner next to the railway bridge, and another at the opposite end near the overgrown ditch on the boundary with Toddlers' Cove.

A new species for the reserve this month was gadwall (right), a duck fairly closely related to the mallard. First seen at the back of Whitehall



Meadow, the following week it was consorting with mallard on the river alongside Hambrook. At first glance you might think that it isn't a very exciting bird and, admittedly, the female is rather drab, but the male has a wonderfully intricate reticulated patterning on its breast and flanks, a jet-black stern, and in flight the white area visible in the photo expands to become a broad wing patch or speculum (comparable to the white-edged blue speculum of the mallard) with a rather lovely splash of russet beside it.

Another waterbird, but just off the reserve at Tonford Lake, was the coot, which has been scarce to the point of absence for much of the winter, so I was pleased to see five there on 25th.

180 jackdaws flew over on 8th, and two buzzards were circling languidly just north west of the reserve towards the end of the month. These were the first I'd seen on the marshes for over a year.



Green woodpeckers crop up on the reserve from time to time, but the one clinging to a telegraph pole on 18th seemed a somewhat incongruous sight, though since these poles are simply conifer trunks that have been debarked and then stuck back in the soil, I shouldn't be so surprised.

Last month I reported on the presence of a second pair of delightful stonechats (left). The original pair is still present on the ungrazed central field, but recently I have only been able to locate a lone female on Tonford field. These little jewels are extremely companionable, so when you have found one, it is usually a matter of moments to locate its mate; the fact that I haven't been able to spot the male in Tonford field recently suggests that it may have died or possibly moved away to fresh pastures. Winter is a particularly severe trial for small insectivorous birds like the stonechat, so the first explanation seems the more likely, with the bird falling prey, perhaps to a sparrowhawk, or simply not finding enough food and starving to death.

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith