



# Friends of Hambrook Marshes

## March 2015

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### Bird Report

For me the highlight had to be a raven (right) being mercilessly mobbed by two crows on 3<sup>rd</sup>. We are all well acquainted with the remarkable spread of the buzzard from its western refuge into the whole of eastern and south eastern England in recent years. Less well-known is a similar, if lower key, eastward spread of the raven. Like the buzzard, this large member of the crow family was systematically persecuted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on account of its predation of sickly lambs and young gamebirds, making it the sworn



enemy of farmers and gamekeepers. In recent years that pressure has been reduced sufficiently for ravens to produce a small surplus of young birds, which are then able to colonise untenanted areas of countryside. An increasing number of Kentish records over the past twenty years or so was the first indication that something was going on, and pairs have been breeding at Dungeness and Dover for a while now. Prior to the invention of firearms that permitted man to wipe it out from most parts of the UK, the raven was not restricted to remote coastal locations, so it is possible that, although the spread has been slow, birds will eventually be found nesting locally. One raven has indeed been resident in the Canterbury area for the past six weeks or so, quite probably the Hambrook bird, invariably flying in a NW direction towards Graveney Marsh, where perhaps it is feeding on sheep afterbirths. Interestingly, none of the records so far have been of the bird on its return journey, flying in a south-easterly direction towards Canterbury; perhaps it follows a different route back, or travels after dark.

A great crested grebe on Tonford Lake, just west of the reserve on 25<sup>th</sup> was the first I had seen there for a year. Being in full breeding plumage, like the two in the photo (above), it made a truly splendid sight.

Along with the raven, the grebe was also persecuted by the Victorians, though for entirely different reasons, its beautiful plumes being greatly sought after by milliners. A Cetti's warbler was singing its loud song in a ditch beside the Tonford level crossing on 16<sup>th</sup>, and the same day I heard a single call from a coal tit, a common enough species, but one which I hadn't previously recorded at Hambrook, thus taking the species total for the reserve up to 95 species.

It has been an extremely poor winter for fieldfares and redwings, although I have occasionally witnessed a maelstrom of hundreds of birds swirling in and above orchards in east Kent, where they had been feasting on rotting apples. By now, most will have returned to their Scandinavian breeding grounds. Rooks and jackdaws, such a feature of the western field last winter, have also been hard to find. Nearly all the snipe have now left, as have the stonechats and meadow pipits. However, several chiffchaffs have been singing near the reserve since 12<sup>th</sup>, and reed buntings are also back in their damp, scrubby corners, so the losses have been partially balanced by recent arrivals.

In the dimly dull and chilly days of late, it has been pure delight to chance upon a few scattered sweet violets (right) on the disused railway embankment. The commoner violet species are generally a shade of blue, but the sweet violet, predominantly a plant of chalky soils, is often white, seemingly twinkling against the drab browns of bare soil and dead vegetation. This is another indication of the likely provenance of the soil used to build the embankment in the 1880s – chalk dug from the North Downs to create a cutting further along the line.



*Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*