



# Friends of Hambrook Marshes

## April 2015

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### Bird Report



In the mist of a cold April dawn it was almost possible to believe that I had stumbled into a remote corner of the West Country, and for an hour before the mist rolled away, bringing the road and railway lines into focus, I was entranced by the magical sensation of having been transported back in time

to the slower pace of rural life in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. I am so grateful that the trustees' purchase has ensured continued public access to this lovely green oasis on Canterbury's doorstep.

Although we seem to have returned once more to winter, we did enjoy some warm spells this month, and these were appreciated by the summer migrants that began to trickle in. My first reserve swallow and blackcap were on 13<sup>th</sup>, cuckoo and whitethroat on 22<sup>nd</sup>, reed and garden warblers on 28<sup>th</sup>. Lesser black-backed gulls (right, being attacked by a black-headed gull whose chick it has just stolen) are also primarily summer visitors, and two-three were regular this month, with a pair often to be seen perched on the pipe "bridge". Indeed, so predictable was their presence on the iron structure that you might have been forgiven for wondering if they were stuffed. Gulls tend to get a rather poor press, but a lesser black-backed gull's plumage takes some beating – the slate-grey wings in startling contrast to the sleek whiteness of the head and breast, all set off by bright yellow legs, red-tipped yellow beak and a yellow iris that heightens an already imperiously malevolent glare. Reed buntings, though resident in the UK, are almost exclusively summer visitors to Hambrook; this year their tuneless song could be heard as males dutifully defended territories in February and March, but then seemingly losing interest and becoming much harder to find this month.



One excitement was seeing a little grebe in breeding plumage on 5<sup>th</sup>. Why should that be so amazing? Well, each winter a small population of these shy birds can be glimpsed hugging the emergent vegetation at the river's edge, and at that time of year their plumage reflects the dullness of the weather, being a very nondescript brownish above and dirty buff below. But come spring they disappear to breeding areas elsewhere in England, taking their newly-blooming spring plumage of chestnut neck and cheeks with them. The fact that this bird, in all its finery, had not yet moved on, made me wonder if it would stay to nest, but I'm sorry to say that I have been unable to locate it in the past three weeks so the likelihood is that it, too, has obeyed the instinct to return to last summer's haunts. I'm sure it is the same story for the late snipe seen on 22<sup>nd</sup>. Formerly a not too uncommon breeding species in Kent, its status has changed markedly over the past fifty years, and the snipe is now an extremely scarce nester, so the few individuals dawdling at Hambrook earlier in the month will doubtless be many miles away now.

Some of April's interest was to be glimpsed just off the reserve, on Tonford Lake. The single great crested grebe seen there in March was soon joined by a second, and the pair were inseparable for three weeks, leading me to wonder if they would ever get down to the business of breeding, but I was not to be disappointed, as the female eventually built her nest amongst dense vegetation at the edge of the lake, and since then the male has been leading a solitary life, only occasionally joined by the female for short periods. More drama on that lake came when I watched a cormorant that had just managed to catch an eel, battling to swallow the enormous fish. Cormorant gullets are very flexible and designed to cope with fairly enormous prey, but the eel had a naturally strong survival instinct, and did not intend to end its days in a vat of gastric juice if that could be avoided. As often as the cormorant appeared to have succeeded in swallowing the eel, so the desperate creature would writhe its way back up the bird's throat. This must have been extremely uncomfortable for the cormorant, which attempted to lubricate its gullet with copious gulps of water until, finally, the predator triumphed and, looking far more comfortable now, cruised serenely across the lake, the tell-tale bulge in its neck gone for ever.



After a winter devoid of bird flocks on the Tonford field, up to 17 jackdaws have been present several times recently, along with 28 starlings. Other less usual reserve records have included two linnets, a Cetti's warbler, buzzard and bullfinch (left).

Sadly, I was only able to find four flowering snake's head

fritillaries (right) in the eastern field this year, compared to 22 last year and 29 in 2013. It's possible that the tractor used for installing the new fence there in March rolled over a few, but I can't believe it would have accounted for as many as twenty, given that they were so widely scattered. A more likely reason is that the cattle grazing there last spring ate most of the plants. The fritillary is essentially a plant of damp hay meadows; by the time the hay crop is cut the fritillaries have died back and so do not suffer any check to their growth, but if the plants are chewed off by animals in spring, the chlorophyll powerhouse



that produces the energy for growth and overwinter survival is destroyed, and they may not be capable of recovery. Another possibility is that soil conditions simply aren't suitable for this species, and that it was doomed to die out eventually.

*Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*