



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

May 2015

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Bird Report



On 5th May there was a small passage of swifts, swallows and house martins, all struggling to fly into a strong headwind. The garden warbler (left) that appeared at the end of April was found twice early in the month, but was now just off the reserve. The first turtle dove (below) of the year was also just beyond the Hambrook boundary, perching on electric wires above an abandoned pear orchard near the Tonford crossing. This beautiful little dove has to be one of my favourite birds. As a child I was puzzled by the biblical phrase

“and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land”; I couldn’t imagine turtles having much to say, and it was many years before I realised that the Song of Solomon author was referring, not to turtles, but to turtle doves migrating through Israel in spring. The beautiful scalloping covering the bird’s back in various shades of brown really does resemble the carapace of a turtle. Where the clumsy wood pigeon has a large white slash on the side of its neck, the much more elegant turtle dove has an intricate band of white and black markings, and its breast has a delicate vinaceous flush. As if its plumage wasn’t gorgeous enough, it also has the most enchanting purring song to lull you asleep on a warm summer’s day.

Sadly, having said what a lovely bird it is, I have to report that its numbers have plummeted in recent years, and it is now rapidly becoming a rarity throughout England. Feeding largely on arable weed seeds, it has suffered greatly from the advent of herbicides that enable farmers to all but eradicate the noisome plants, and I wonder if I shall see any turtle doves at Hambrook in the future.





Also sad to report, the great crested grebes (left) on Tonford Lake must have lost their clutch, as from mid-month the pair were constantly to be seen together when the female should have been incubating. More than likely a predator found the nest and stole the eggs. At this late stage in the breeding season it is normal for failed nesters to abandon their reproductive efforts for the year, but on my latest visit on 3rd June I was delighted to see that the female was beginning to build a new nest right at the back of the lake. This could, of course, just be

displacement activity, what in humans we might refer to as “empty nest syndrome”, so we shall just have to wait and see.

The Tonford field has hosted more birds recently, mainly flocks of up to 16 jackdaws and 28 starlings, while the narrow riverside fringe of nettles and bramble was invaded by house sparrows in search of caterpillars to feed their youngsters.

An unusual addition to the flooded area near the A2 was a coot (right); a regular on Tonford Lake, just west of the reserve, the coot is very rarely seen actually on Hambrook. Surely, the most cantankerous of all birds, the coot will regularly rocket along the water to attack another bird, usually a coot, but moorhens and other blameless species frequently experience the coot’s fearful temper; curiously, though, coots tend to congregate in large flocks in winter, at which time they seem quite capable of tolerating the close proximity of many others of their kind.



A cluster of molehills has appeared at the eastern end of the reserve; I expect they turn up every year, but I don’t seem to recall having noticed them before.

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith