



# Friends of Hambrook Marshes

## July 2015

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### Bird Report

Passing the wet area at the east end of Tonford field (near the A2 embankment) one morning I unexpectedly heard a loud squealing, not unlike a pig, and I immediately knew that there was a water rail hidden somewhere in the depths of dense vegetation. I've written about these secretive birds before, referring to them as winter visitors to Hambrook; but a bird calling in July is suggestive of breeding. However, I haven't seen or heard anything since, so the status of water rail on the marsh has to remain uncertain.



Up to 120 starlings (left) were present in Tonford Field in the first half of month, milling around the cattle and keeping pace with them, pouncing on any insects disturbed by the larger animals' movements. Cattle egrets in southern Europe and Asia operate in much the same fashion, though perhaps more elegantly. Periodically the starlings appeared to be seized by a sudden dread, flying up to the nearby electricity cables, pausing to

take stock for a minute or two, then peeling off in groups to return to the profitable feeding at the cows' hooves.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> a single siskin (below) flew over. This may sound like a seemingly insignificant record but, although we are familiar with this delightful little finch as a winter visitor, it doesn't normally breed in Kent. But this was July, so what are we to make of that? Just as a single squeal of a water rail could not be said to constitute proof, or even evidence, of breeding, so a siskin flying over my head in summer did not indicate that a pair had bred locally. However, back in June friends in Blean told me that they'd been seeing siskins coming to their bird feeders. Eventually, one of my friends saw a pair of siskins accompanied by a much drabber juvenile, which is as close as we are likely to get to confirmation that the species had indeed



bred in the area. They nest fairly widely in western and northern Britain, favouring extensive areas of conifer plantations, and in recent years have colonised some southern conifer woods, notably in the New Forest and the East Anglian pine forests, and with a few reports from Kent. Given the presence of conifers in nearby Clowes Wood and other parts of the Blean complex, it is therefore not so surprising that they should turn up at Hambrook,

*Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*