



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

August 2015

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Bird Report



Surely the most significant event of the past few weeks has been the sheer quantity of rain, particularly on 13th (32mm) and 24th (70mm). The month's total, at 162mm, made it the wettest August in my 33 years of recording at Rough Common, and was more than three times the August average. I was therefore quite surprised to see that the river, though lapping the tops of its banks, did not actually flood the reserve at all, though there was standing water in some of the fields and several stretches of path were under several

inches of water, particularly after the second downpour. Even in a cool summer like this year's, the water table sinks quite low, so the ground has the capacity to soak up an enormous quantity of rain before it starts draining into aquifers and rivers. Effects of the deluge on birdlife were therefore far less marked than I had anticipated, though a small, flooded field the other side of the Tonford level crossing supported 52 black-headed gulls, 73 mallard and a green sandpiper on 25th. Another effect of the rain was the presence of a great crested grebe (above) on the river for at least ten days immediately afterwards. This is a species that is sometimes present on the adjacent Tonford Lake, but which I had never previously seen on the river. As these waterbirds hunt exclusively by diving, in summer the river would normally be far too shallow for this method to be adopted but, following the rain, the river was several feet deep, enabling the grebe to fish in it. A skein of 48 greylag geese (right) flying over on 15th was easily the largest flock I had recorded here in nearly three years; their appearance immediately after the rain may have been coincidental, but could have been influenced by an alteration to the pattern of best feeding habitat when fields



in the Stour valley flooded.

Other birds of note were a flock of forty house sparrows, just off the reserve, immediately upstream of the Tonford bridge. They like to hunt for food in the dense, tall vegetation fringing the river, but since the new policy of regularly mowing the sward between the path and river has been adopted, this habitat has been denied to the birds. A spotted flycatcher (left) was hunting on 14th, actually landing on the tarmac path in its pursuit of insects; these are late-



departing summer visitors, so the likelihood is that this was a local bird rather than one that was passing through on its journey south. Another bird of interest was a bullfinch on 9th.

A plant that I which was vervain flowers are long stalks. It grassland and, described last purely as a gravel infilling of the must have whole range



hadn't noticed before, but probably there all along, was (right), whose small blue carried rather elegantly on is characteristic of chalk like the field scabious that I year, is probably present result of the site's history of extraction followed by pits with chalk spoil which contained the seeds of a of downland flowers.

A pygmy shrew found dead on the riverside path may have been a victim of the limited flooding. It is hard to credit that such a tiny body could hold a backbone and all the internal organs that are to be found in mammals, and this exceptionally small creature, its body, minus the tail, little bigger than my thumbnail, must have been a juvenile individual.



The Environment Agency's summer clearance of waterweeds was disrupted this month as the operation depends on a man in a boat cutting the vegetation, and the rise in water level meant it was no longer safe for the work to continue, but work resumed towards the end of August, the severed vegetation floating down as far as the Wincheap railway bridge, where it built up against a boom made of large plastic drums, the massive mats of vegetation then being scooped out of the water by a long-armed digger bucket. This was all

part of EA's national programme of river- and ditch-clearance to reduce flooding risk, following the disastrous flooding on the Somerset Levels in 2014, when there was far less serious, but still damaging floods in and around Canterbury. This work speeds up the rate at which water can move away from the dredged area, but then has the undesired consequence of dumping it more rapidly on communities further downstream, thus increasing the risk of their being flooded!

And to round off the month, on 29th you could have been treated to the spectacle of a steam train passing over the Wincheap railway bridge.

