



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

November 2015

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Bird Report

This month's theme has been the continuing mild weather, interspersed with just the occasional frosty morning, which has had an impact on bird species and numbers. Tufted duck usually first appear on Tonford Lake in mid- or late-October, but I didn't see any there until 15th November this year. Mild conditions may also partially account for the late arrival of our regular stonechat on 23rd. These delightful, robin-like birds have wintered on the central field (the section between the A2 embankment and the path from Staples Bridge to the level crossing) each year since I started monitoring the site in 2012. The attraction of that patch for these birds was the fact that it hadn't been grazed or mown for several years. Consequently, the rank grass also supported a good sprinkling of taller vegetation, such as docks, thistles and teasel, their dead stems at this time of year acting as perfect perches from which the stonechats could survey the ground below, and then drop down onto an unsuspecting insect. This autumn's mowing has removed all the perches over a large part of the field, so it may be this habitat change, rather than the mild weather, which has led to the poor showing of stonechats. Despite the balmy conditions, I haven't heard a chiffchaff since 15th, so winter must be on its way, and a further sign of this was a couple of common gulls (right) in a nearby field on 23rd. On looking at the photo you might be forgiven for thinking it was just a herring gull, but it is considerably smaller, has a more slender beak and has an altogether softer appearance than the herring gull's rather evil demeanour. On land, you can see that it has greenish legs, unlike the flesh-coloured ones of the larger bird, and in flight its wingtips look more rounded.



65 greylag geese (below) flew up the



valley in three V-shaped skeins on 23rd. They have regular feeding grounds in the lower Stour valley around Stodmarsh, but also upriver in the Shalmsford Street area, so there is a degree of commuting between the two sites, though I hadn't seen it on this scale before.

I had another sighting of the elusive water rail on 23rd, and the same day a pair of mute swans graced the river.

Redpolls are seldom recorded at



Hambrook, but one flew over on 9th. These are small, delicate finches, not dissimilar to the siskins that I highlighted in the September newsletter and, like them, have a penchant for alder seeds. Another minor novelty was the appearance of a pair of pied wagtails (below), generally a moderately widespread species of town and countryside, but at Hambrook it tends to be the rather more elegant, longer-tailed grey wagtail that I come across, perhaps not so surprising, given its preference for flowing water. Interestingly, the latest Birds of Conservation Concern (BoCC) report was issued on 3rd December. This survey, produced at roughly six-yearly intervals by a group of seven conservation organisation that includes the RSPB and National Trust, uses the traffic light system to describe the status of many UK species. The Green List contains species whose status has remained healthy or improved since the previous audit, Amber birds have suffered a limited decline, and Red List species are in more serious trouble. The criteria used for assessment vary from species to species, but Amber birds are generally those that have suffered a decline of at least 25% in either range or population since 1969, while Red-listed species have decreased by at least 50% in range or numbers over the same period. Ominously, this latest report (BoCC 4) has moved the grey wagtail from Amber to Red listing, thanks to a population decline of more than 50% since 1969. The new Kent Breeding Bird Atlas, published in September, indicates that its range is actually expanding along the Stour valley, and in a number of other locations around the county, but there appear to have been losses in the west of the county. Nationally, the grey wagtail heartland is in the hillier west and north of Britain, but it is there that the declines have been greatest, whereas in the much more sparsely wagtail-populated lowlands of the Midlands, East Anglia and the South East, there have been some limited increases.

Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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