



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

December 2015

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Bird Report

December was rather a quiet month, so it was good to welcome back a pair of mute swans to the river which, most unusually, they had to share with a coot on 7th. Finding little grebes on the river, or occasionally in ditches, has proved hard work; two winters ago there could be as many as seven, usually on a short stretch either side of the railway bridge at Canterbury East station. This winter the best I've managed so far is three, and I failed to see any at all in the last two weeks of December.



The news from Tonford Lake is a little more encouraging, with 11 tufted ducks present on 7th, and a great crested grebe (left) reappearing there for the first time since August. It's unfortunate that, of the twelve lakes strung out along the Stour Valley between Canterbury and Chilham, Tonford is the poorest for birds, often deserted in summer, and with no more than a handful through the winter. Even the coot, that ubiquitous denizen of open water, often fails to make a showing. The attraction of disused gravel

pits to waterbirds is dictated by a complicated mixture of aspects, such as water depth, age, lake bed structure, quantity and type of aquatic vegetation; the other lakes evidently have more of the best features present in the right proportions. Swan Lake, the next one along, separated from Tonford Lake by just a few yards of turf, is a considerable improvement, both in terms of numbers and variety.

Up to 21 meadow pipits (right) were around all month in the fields between the A2 and the old railway embankment. Easily overlooked, these small, brownish birds feed demurely amongst the longish grass, even when flushed scarcely drawing attention to themselves as they fly away with a weak "seep" call. 112 black-headed gulls flew upriver on 27th, and the same day a single lesser black-backed gull (below) also flew past, my first since August.



I recorded a single chiffchaff on 15th. This, of itself, is not a particularly unusual record, as quite a substantial population of these small warblers now over-winter in southern England; the real surprise was the fact that it was in full song – not the rather feeble "hooet" call but a full-bloodied "chiff-chaff-chiff-chaff", singing his heart out for all the world as if spring really were here.

Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith