



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

January 2016

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Bird Report

Wet weather early in the month led to limited flooding and, as the Stour inched over its banks by the Canterbury East bridge, gently nudged two mute swans onto the reserve. Twenty mallard were noisily dabbling through the waterlogged vegetation that day, their beaks opening and closing rapidly just below the water surface as they filtered out floating seeds. Nine days of ground frosts mid-month persuaded a small group of lapwings to briefly take up residence at the back of Tonford Field, with a maximum count of 11 on 21st. These attractive waders are dependable bellwethers for colder conditions: in the mild winters of the past two years I recorded only the odd one or two, but during a frosty spell in January 2013 up to 25 were present, again in Tonford Field. This illustrates the value of asking the public to stay out of that part of the reserve, as just one person walking through with a dog would have put the birds to flight, forcing them to use up vital energy that was needed to get them through the freezing weather, and resulting in their settling in a less-disturbed part of the valley. Encouraged by the wetter state of Tonford Field during the cold snap, 20 snipe congregated there on 11th, rapidly tailing away to just one at the month's end.

The winter didn't last long though, and a mild, sunny day on 24th prompted a tree creeper (right) into song in the alders behind the boardwalk, whilst a nearby great spotted woodpecker wakened the dead with his drumming. Not many people are familiar with the tree creeper, and even fewer would recognise its rather plaintive but sweet little song, a quiet descending scale rounded off with a jumbled flourish. Although essentially a woodland bird, it is not particularly fussy and will happily take up residence in a small clump of trees if there is another wooded cluster within easy flying distance, and it is quite possible that a pair will stay to nest in those alders. Their whole life is tied to tree trunks, their feeding strategy being to fly to the base of a tree, and then gradually work their way up, probing the cracks in bark for insects with their long, narrow, slightly decurved beaks. Their breeding season requirements are very modest - just a loose flap of bark behind which they can squeeze their nest and, as alder is a short-lived tree, it is more than likely that the wet woodland near the boardwalk can supply a dead stem that suits them.



Highlight of the month was a peregrine (right) passing rapidly overhead on 3rd, and possibly the same bird seen over Whitehall Meadow later in the morning.



Somewhat surprisingly, given their residence on the cathedral heights, this is only my second record for the site. On an altogether different scale, but just as exciting in its own way, was a bullfinch (left) seen in the old embankment scrub on the same day. This secretive bird is an absolute gem, especially the male, with its flaming rose-magenta breast, slaty-grey back, black crown and tell-tale dazzling white beacon of a rump as it flees the scene.

Bird photos by Dave Smith