



Friends of Hambrook Marshes

February 2016

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Bird Report

Early in the month the river was still swollen, and it was interesting to watch where the clear water of a slow-moving, minor stream, looking cold black in the early morning light, confronted the turbulent, sediment-laden river near the old embankment. For five yards or so black swirls marked where the stream had entered the weak coffee-coloured river, but was then remorselessly engulfed by the Stour. The Environment Agency has been busy cutting back overhanging willow boughs in a bid to speed the flow of the river at times of flooding, although this will have the effect of causing even worse flooding at the next bottleneck downriver. In practice, this is fairly literally tinkering at the edges, and will benefit no one, but it has removed the dark hiding places below the banks to which the shy little grebes loved to head when a perceived danger loomed. 132 herring gulls were counted on a wet Tonford Field on 2nd, and the same day about 150 black-headed gulls flew up from an even wetter field the other side of the railway line.

Over the course of this relatively dry month any standing water disappeared, although the fields were still extremely soggy underfoot, and much to the liking of a jack snipe on 15th. Slightly smaller than the common snipe, and far scarcer, this species is generally overlooked as, unlike its very similar cousin, it prefers to sit tight when threatened, only taking to the air if about to be trodden on, and then flying low, without calling, a short distance before landing again. The common snipe, by contrast, tends to tower into the air at the first sign of danger, giving its characteristic call, for all the world like the sound made as you pull your wellie out of the mud. More than once I've glanced up in search of a fleeing snipe when all I'd heard was actually my own squelching!

A single coot (right) has been resident on the river for several weeks, and now there is a second bird actually on the reserve, frequenting the ditches and flooded flash in Tonford Field. Coots are incredibly aggressive birds, yet normally insist on living in flocks, where their inherent irritability invariably gets the better of them, so it comes as something of a surprise to find two solitary individuals. The flooded flash in Tonford Field



has also been a rewarding spot for seeking out teal (below) over the past two weeks. Until this month I had only one record of this small duck for the reserve, and that was 18 months ago. It was therefore very

satisfying to find nine there on 23rd, with at least one still present at the end of the month. Unfortunately, my views were all rather distant, as at close range the plumage is a delight, the flanks of the male being an intricate reticulation of fine wavy lines, not unlike the fraud-busting patterns on



bank notes. Another water bird that has been more in evidence of late is the moorhen. They tend to be rather skulking by nature, but the mown, waterside lawns are proving very popular, with up to a dozen pecking away amongst the short vegetation between the Canterbury East bridge and the disused railway embankment, and a reserve count of 23 a week ago was my highest ever score.

Other aquatic species included a pair of great crested grebes on Tonford Lake one morning, raising a flicker of hope that they would nest there again, despite their failure last year. One cormorant and three overflying greylag geese were the first of either species to be seen for three months.

Back on dry land, a chiffchaff was in song once more on 10th, and a reed bunting was wheezing out its feeble ditty on 29th after an eight-month absence, and three stock doves (left) have returned to the trees on the old railway embankment. Unlike the similar

wood pigeon, this is a hole-nester, and a pair is very interested in an old rotting cavity in a poplar that was struck by lightning years ago.

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith