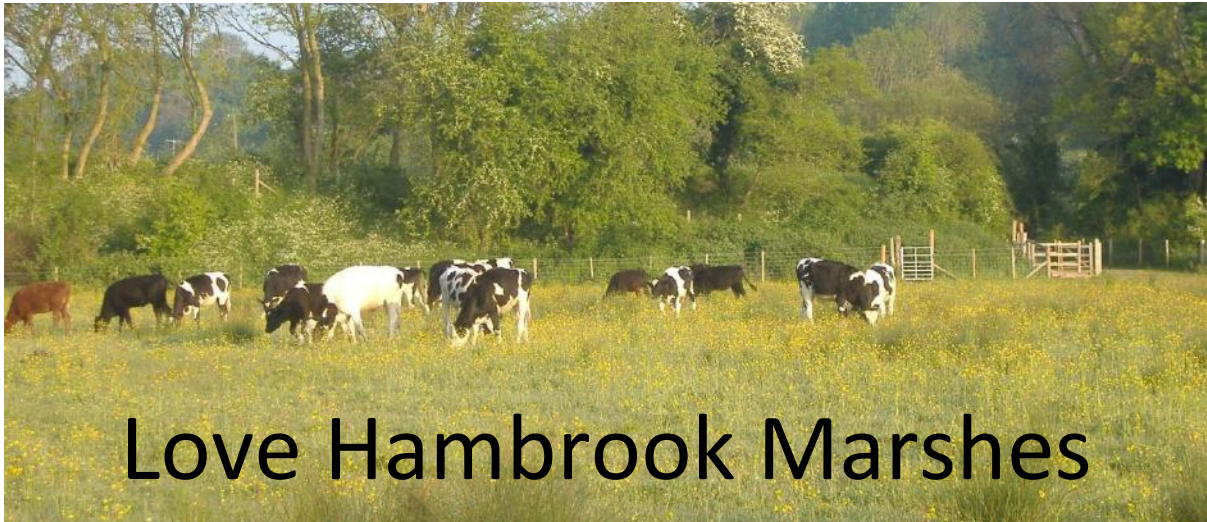


Newsletter

May 2016



Welcome

The Friends of Hambrook Marshes were disbanded at their AGM in April this year, but if you were a Friend you were invited to start receiving a new newsletter produced by the marsh owners, Love Hambrook Marshes. So, for former Friends of Hambrook Marshes this should be the second issue of the Love Hambrook Marshes newsletter that you have received. You may, however, be seeing this for the first time, and wondering why it should have come to you. Back in 2014 some of you supported the Friends, when the marshes were up for sale and we didn't know where their future lay. Others have become involved since the acquisition of the marshes by Love Hambrook Marshes Charitable Incorporated Organisation (LHM), providing advice, grants or moral support.

We hope that you will be interested to read about how the marshes have developed since then, but if you can't spare the time and would prefer to have your name removed from the distribution list, please simply reply to this email and write "Unsubscribe from LHM newsletter" in the title box.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Cow attacked by dog

A most unpleasant and distressing incident occurred at 8.35pm on Saturday 14th May, when someone saw a dog attacking one of the young heifers. He rang the police, but by the time they arrived there was no sign of dog or irresponsible owner. The cow had a badly ripped wound in the



side of its neck, which had to be stitched and the animal put on a course of antibiotics. The vet's bill has left the grazier out of pocket by nearly £500.

If you have any information about this incident, please contact the police by dialling 101 and quoting reference number 14-1250. Also contact the grazier, John Gormley, on 01233 822084 or 07789 933781.

Escaping cattle

Despite all the money spent over the past two years on new fencing, a few of the newly-arrived cattle soon made a bid for freedom, and the grazier was called out twice recently by the public to deal with cows that were roaming where they shouldn't be. Ironically, this coincided with the removal of two cattle grids (see article below), which would have ensured the cows didn't get beyond the marsh boundary. We are fairly confident that the animals have managed to squeeze through an



extra-wide kissing gate, which is designed to be wheelchair-accessible. Reluctantly, therefore, we initially padlocked the gate, which is a weak point in an otherwise very sound system. Shortly afterwards the padlock was removed and some wooden bars fitted within the enclosed space of the kissing gate (see photo above). These leave just enough room for walkers but, unfortunately, it is no longer possible for cyclists to push their bikes through. The gate in question is beside a metal farm gate where the track crosses a small stream, the path leading towards the Whitehall Road level crossing in one direction, and to the riverside path in the other. As the cattle will shortly be moved to the field on the Chartham side of the A2 embankment, we'll soon be able to make the gate bike-friendly once more. In the meantime, however, we are recommending that cyclists stay on the riverside path. We do apologise for any inconvenience this may cause; we will do our best to ensure that this is just a short-term problem, so that the Marsh is once more accessible to all.

The cattle aren't there simply to give the marshes a bucolic air; they are the main agents for the management of the marshes, ensuring that the fields don't scrub over, creating a small-scale mosaic of tussocky grass of various heights, which in turn promotes a wider diversity of invertebrates and plants. When they wade into the ditches they can create an unholy mess, which is just what some wildlife needs – bare mud for some less competitive marshland plants to germinate in and for numerous pioneering insects to call home. Additionally, cow dung provides a valuable micro-habitat for beetle larvae and worms. So we shouldn't think of them as conventional farm animals, mere providers of meat or milk, but rather as essential wet grassland managers.

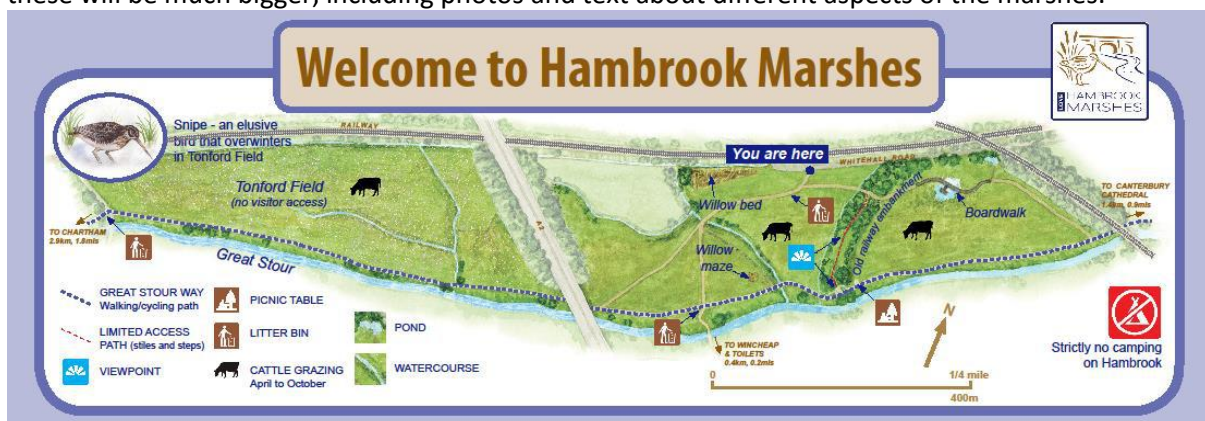
Cattle grids - now you see them, now you don't

A little while before the Trust acquired Hambrook Marshes, Kent Enterprise Trust, the previous owners, removed some of the cattle grids, as they were no longer needed, retaining just three: one by the Tonford footbridge, one by the footbridge leading to B&M and the park-and-ride, and a third next to the railway bridge. The reasoning was that if any cattle did manage to escape from their field, they would at least be prevented from getting off the marsh and perhaps causing havoc in Toddlers' Cove or, worse still, wander onto the main road at Wincheap. However, as reported in the last newsletter, in the two years since LHM took over the site, all the fencing has been greatly improved, and it was thought that there was no longer any risk of livestock getting out (an optimistic misjudgement in light of the piece on page 2 about escaping cattle). The decision was therefore taken to fill in the three surviving cattle grids, and late last week the first two were taken out. The photos below show the one remaining grid at the Wincheap bridge (left), and the tell-tale tarmac patches by Tonford bridge (centre) and the railway bridge (right).



New information boards

The roll-out of new information panels has begun, albeit in a modest fashion. The first of the new-style, colourful signs went up this week – a slim notice at the entrance from Whitehall Road near the level crossing. Being easily the least-used of the marsh's four entrances, it didn't merit the expense of a large sign, so we have restricted ourselves to something that would fit onto a horizontal bar of the kissing gate. It does at least give you a flavour of what the main signs will look like, although these will be much bigger, including photos and text about different aspects of the marshes.



Beavers in Kent



In medieval times the beaver was highly valued for its dense, soft fur but we all know what happened to the goose that laid the golden egg, and with consummate skill humans hunted the animals to extinction in Britain in the 16th century. At the time few, apart from fur-lovers, appear to have shed a tear over its demise, as landowners blamed it for causing flooding and eating all their fish. It is now generally recognised that beavers perform a function that is integral to flood plain management, evening out the flow of water, and reducing the likelihood of flooding further downstream, where the major cities lie. And as for the claims of fish stocks being destroyed..... the beaver is a large member of the rodent family, along with voles and rats, and is a strictly herbivorous beast. Its long, constantly-growing incisors perform the task of gnawing through trunks in order to fell small trees into streams to impede water flow or so that they can eat the foliage.

Some years ago, Kent Wildlife Trust introduced a family group of beavers to their Ham Fen reserve, and what was probably one of those animals escaped and was seen swimming in Pegwell Bay in February 2014. More excitingly, this month a dogwalker filmed what appeared to be a beaver in the Little Stour at Seaton, near Ickham. There are captive animals at Wildwood, near Herne, but none had been reported as having escaped, and although there have been recent, officially sanctioned releases into the wild of small numbers of animals in Devon and Argyll, it is not known where the Seaton beaver could have come from. Wonderful swimmers, they are slow, ungainly plodders on land, so any recolonization would have to be via river systems. Could it be that, like the otter, the beaver will eventually become re-established on the river Stour in Kent?

Wildlife Report

Ash dieback or Chalara disease is no longer news, but it is still affecting our native trees. Caused by a fungus, the disease was first recorded in this country in 2012, on trees brought into a Buckinghamshire nursery from Europe. Since then it has spread rapidly across the country, probably by a combination of wind dispersal of the fungal spores, and the movement of infected saplings from nursery to nursery. Experience so far suggests that mature trees are more resistant and that, though losing some foliage, coupled with the death of some branches, the trees themselves may not be killed. The photos below show the sort of impact ash dieback can typically have on mature trees. The right-hand trees are along the banks of the Marshes, while the left-hand trees are on the disused railway embankment. At a time when they should be in full leaf, parts of the trees are completely bare. As there aren't many ash trees on the marshes, the impact of the disease locally is

going to be extremely low, all the more so as there are no ash saplings, which are far more susceptible. However, even these younger trees are often not killed outright, allowing new shoots to spring from further down the stem. It remains to be seen what the long-term prospects are for ash in this country, but they may not be as dire as the gloomy predictions suggested three years ago. Ornamental varieties are not immune, as can be seen from the weeping ash in the Westgate Gardens, which is now in a rather sorry state.



The best discoveries are always serendipitous: while helping to remove rubbish from the extreme north end of the disused railway embankment, an area I had seldom visited, I was delighted to see that we actually have our very own little patch of Hambrook Marshes bluebells (below left). If you look closely you can see a little white blob which is the rarer whitebell, a simple genetic variant of the normal plant rather than a separate species, and this is shown in detail in the photo below right.





One of the charming points about plants is their ability to grow in all manner of unlikely sites. Ivy-leaved toadflax (left), is a garden escape from rockeries, first recorded in the UK in 1640, and now well-established on walls throughout the country. This little clump was nestled in stone cracks at the edge of the Wincheap

footbridge over the river, where its neat little purplish flowers softened the hardness of concrete and iron. In this generally cold spring it is encouraging to see some of our lovelier plants, such as the flag iris (right) coming into bloom. It isn't very common on the marshes, and the delicate petals soon wither in the late spring warmth of a normal year; this season they are more likely to be shrivelling up in the frosts, so enjoy the display while you can.



Warm and sunny days have been almost as common as the proverbial hen's teeth, but at this time of year it only takes half an hour or so of sunshine to entice the hardier butterflies into flight. A few delightful orange tips (male, below left) were on the wing early in the month. The female, failing to live up to its name, is devoid of any orange, and looks far more like the familiar green-veined and small whites, to which it is related, but when they fold their wings both sexes reveal a wonderful cryptic patterning, demonstrated in the photo, in which it is hard to see where the butterfly ends and the cow parsley flowerhead begins. The female lays her eggs on delicate pink-flowered lady's smock (below right), which grows beside streams and ditches on the marshes.





Another butterfly that has been around this month is the speckled wood (left). Its caterpillars feed on grasses in fairly shady conditions, so it was appropriate that the individual I saw was flying in dappled shade on the old railway embankment.

On 17th I watched a marsh frog (below) propelling itself across a ditch, its strong hind legs pumping away in breast-stroke fashion. Various attempts were made to establish this continental species in England during the 19th century, but the current population probably dates from an

introduction in 1934-5 on the edge of Romney Marsh. Since 1970 the frog has moved north, no doubt assisted by further deliberate introductions, such that it is now well-entrenched on Sheppey and the Hoo Peninsula, and starting to fill the gaps in-between. Occupying much the same habitat as our native frog, it is likely that the two species are competing for the same resources, but the bigger marsh frog could well be the eventual victor. Apart from its greater size it looks quite similar to the common frog, though with a tendency to be greener, but the diagnostic distinguishing feature is its noisy "song", which can be quite deafening when a whole colony breaks into the chorus. They enjoy sunning themselves on ditch banks, but are sensitive to approaching humans, so the first you normally know of their presence is a succession of plops as they dive into the water, which can be most frustrating when you are trying to catch a glimpse of one.



I have to confess to being rather a lazy birdwatcher, relying on hearing birds calling or singing to establish their presence at any location. Given that the males of most species sing persistently in spring to establish and defend their territories, listening is a pretty reliable way of detecting birds at this time of year. I had occasionally heard a male reed bunting squeezing out its rather pathetic squeak of a song this spring, around the ditch bordering the neighbouring field grazed by horses, but then all went quiet, and I assumed it had moved on. So, imagine my surprise on 24th when I resorted to my binoculars and was able to watch a female reed bunting feeding a juvenile. Not only had the birds been on the marshes all this time, but they had bred successfully under my very nose.

Three sub-adult mute swans, with more or less white plumage but rather washed-out beaks, were on the river on 24th, swelling to six on 29th. Intriguingly, a garden warbler has returned to the same spot on the old railway embankment as last year, though its nest is quite possibly in dense vegetation on the other side of the river. It never ceases to amaze me how such a tiny bird can fly all the way to Africa in autumn, then navigate its return journey the following spring to end up within yards of where it was the previous year. We still don't understand exactly how birds achieve these feats of migration, and perhaps we're none the worse for having a little mystery remaining in our lives. Another unexpected bird was a skylark singing over the marsh on 6th, all previous records having been in autumn. It has been another poor year generally for cuckoos locally, but I have been hearing two birds uttering their evocative call occasionally from different directions, and one flew

across the marsh on 29th, then perched in a tree on the old railway embankment and called. But could I see it?



We are familiar with the migrations of swallows, nightingales, cuckoos and perhaps a few other species, but most people don't realise that some of our waders are also great travellers. The common sandpiper (left) winters in Africa, returning north to breed in Europe and Russia. Although they don't nest in southern England, they still have to fly through our region in order to reach their preferred upland streams and lakes in Wales and the north, and their passage takes a few up the Stour each spring. This year I was fortunate enough to have a

dawn encounter with two that were still asleep on wooden decking at the bottom of a garden that borders the river. While I watched they roused themselves and began feeding on the manicured lawn, a most incongruous sight given their penchant for the wilder landscapes of the UK.

A turtle dove (right) purring away on the disused railway embankment on 12th was a wonderful sound of summer – or at least the promise of a summer soon to come. It was my first record of this lovely bird actually on the marshes, and I think it has moved on now. Nearby, that same morning was made infinitely brighter by a pair of bullfinches, which have the rather endearing habit of almost invariably flying around in pairs.



Westgate Parks Project

For news about the Project and the Friends of Westgate Parks, click [here](#).

Photo credits:

John Gormley – injured cow (p 1)

Glynn Crocker – orange tip (p6), speckled wood (p7) and turtle dove (p8)

Dave Smith – common sandpiper (p8)

Other photos by trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes

Registered charity no. 1156473