



Newsletter

August 2016



Welcome

Recognition comes in many guises, but Hambrook Marshes has just received the accolade of having a Pokémon Go creature materialise by the river. This new craze has passed me by (I don't have a smartphone), but apparently Goldeen, Poliwhag and Magikarp (see below) are all creatures that have an affinity with water, and now a Goldeen has actually been captured at Hambrook this week. To an older generation Pokémon Go may seem a frivolous time-waster, but if it gets young people out into the countryside, it may be no bad thing.



Goldeen



Poliwhag



Magikarp

Recent developments

Hay-making

Most of the Marshes are grazed by cattle each summer, but one field (between the park-and-ride footbridge and the A2) is managed as a hay meadow. This means that the vegetation is allowed to grow and flower, before being cut in late summer, resulting in a completely different habitat of tall vegetation that harbours grasshoppers, butterflies, bees and many other invertebrates that are not to be found in the fields grazed by cattle. But it does still need some form of management as, left to itself, it would gradually be invaded by willow, wild rose, bramble and other woody vegetation which, in the course of a few years would convert the field into scrub, and eventually woodland. To counteract this trend we aim to cut the meadow annually, an activity that had lapsed for several years. Cutting alone will keep the woody growth in check, but leaving the cut vegetation in situ would tend to smother new plant growth and lead to a build-up of nutrients in the soil, enabling a few of the most vigorous species to thrive, to the detriment of the wide diversity of weaker plants that contribute so much to a hayfield ecosystem. So, during the month all the vegetation in this middle field was cut for hay, baled, and most of it removed. A few bales had to be left behind in one



corner; these will gradually rot down, and may provide habitat for slow worms that enjoy the warmth generated by the decomposing vegetation. Four separate operations are involved in haymaking: first the vegetation is cut (above left); then a day or two later the hay is turned (tedded) to help dry it (above right), after which it can be rowed up (below left), ready for baling (below right), and being taken off-site. Because it was several years since a hay crop had been taken off, a dense mat of dead vegetation had developed, but this should gradually get broken up if we are able to continue haymaking year after year, and the hope is that in time this field will gradually become more flower-rich.



Railway fence renewed

Network Rail contractors have been replacing the fence separating Tonford Field (the most westerly field on the Marshes) from the railway line. This fence is the property of Network Rail, who have an obligation to maintain it for public safety (keeping people and livestock from straying onto the line) and the work is being carried out at no cost to LHM. One short stretch straddling a deep ditch has yet to be renewed while the workforce awaits instructions as to the best way of plugging this final gap in the railway line's defences. This work has no impact whatsoever on users of the Marshes.

Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership

In May and June we reported on the removal of the final three cattle grids. We are extremely grateful to the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) for arranging the funding of this work by Kent County Council. KSCP also liaised with the contractors and attended site meetings, all at no cost to us. So, thanks to KSCP for enabling the removal of these unnecessary hazards.

KSCP organise several volunteer work parties on the Marshes each year. The next one is on Thursday 29th September. If you would like to get involved, please contact KSCP on 03000 410900 or kentishstour@kent.gov.uk.

Litter-picking

Many thanks to our stalwart litter-pickers who help keep Hambrook Marshes free of unsightly rubbish. We believe the situation is finally improving, and that this is due to the principle that people are less likely to drop their litter if there isn't already some lying around. We are most grateful to you all.

Wildlife Report

On average, rainfall in the Canterbury area is fairly evenly distributed through the year, with about 45-55mm falling in each month from February to September, rising to 75-85mm monthly between October and January. However, life is not average, and these uniform figures conceal some amazing variations. Between August last year and April this spring, rainfall was 31% above average, starting off with a bang in August when nearly three times the expected rainfall was recorded, leading to extensive flooding on the Marshes. What a difference a year makes! With just 8.6mm, this July was the driest I have known in 34 years of monitoring, and August, with 19.8mm, wasn't a great improvement (the theatrical storm in the early hours of 26th produced a meagre 6mm).



Consequently, the countryside is not looking its best: at Hambrook, normally damp or wet areas have dried up completely, the fields have turned to straw and blackberries are withering on their stems. Knock-on effects for wildlife are numerous, and wetland birds such as mallard, moorhen and heron have been virtually non-existent. It was therefore pleasing to see a grey wagtail (left) on 15th, my first for two months.

The same day, a flock of seventy starlings (right) gathered on wires across the Marsh, a mixture of adults and juveniles, but unlike in some previous years there have been no regular congregations of post-breeding birds in the fields, darting around the cattle's feet, pouncing on insects disturbed by their movements.



While examining the new fencing along the railway line (see page 3, first item), I took the opportunity to see what was growing in the railway ditch, just beyond the fence, as I hadn't walked this part of



the Marsh boundary before. It was good to see several

impressive clumps of great water dock. The clues to its identification are in the name – “great” because the leaves are positively enormous, “water” because it likes to have its feet in slow-moving water. Looking at the photo on the left you can understand that it might just as easily have been named the banana plant!

Robin's pincushion (right) is presumably so-called because it is roundish and pink to red, so fancifully imagined to resemble a robin's breast, while pin-cushions (how many young people even know what those are nowadays?) are also round and soft. These pincushions are galls, like oak apples, and are similarly produced by a specific small gall wasp, which lays its egg in the leaf bud of a wild rose. Chemicals secreted by the egg stimulate the host plant to develop abnormal tissue, the shape, size, texture and colour all



being specific to the insect in question. This has the effect of sealing off the intruder from the rest of the plant, while at the same time providing a nutritious cocoon in which the larva can develop. This particular robin's pincushion was unusually large, growing on a rose atop the old railway embankment. It is thought that stressed plants tend to produce bigger than average galls, and this individual rose was doubtless severely drought-stressed. These galls are wonderfully complex structures, and the close-up picture on the next page shows the feathery tissue wreathed in early-morning dew. Compared to the workaday spherical knob of an oak marble gall, the robin's pincushion has a remarkably intricate architecture, and we are left wondering what its purpose might be.

A feature absent from Hambrook is a lake, so we don't get the wildfowl that occur on the string of former gravel pits between here and Chilham. Once you have an area of open water to observe, you never know what unusual or exotic birds might turn up. On a visit to Chilham Lake a week ago I was rather pleased to see a pair of black swans (below). An Australian species, it has occurred wild in the UK since the late 18th century, having escaped from wildfowl collections, or been deliberately introduced. There are now scattered birds throughout England, and even into Scotland, but it is not



yet clear whether there is a self-sustaining population. Black swans are inclined to wander, so you could possibly see one on the river or perhaps on Tonford Lake, the nearest water body to Hambrook.



Mammals are very poorly recorded at Hambrook, but we know that there are water voles along the riverbank, and there is likely to be a healthy small mammal population (voles, mice and shrews) in the hay meadow. If there is indeed a healthy population of small, furry prey, it is equally reasonable to assume that predators have been attracted in, so the sighting of a stoat by the contractor cutting the hay meadow this month should not come as too great a surprise. Stoats and weasels are notoriously difficult to observe, most often glimpsed as they dash across a path, so it was pleasing to have confirmation of the presence of this small but fierce carnivore.

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith