



Newsletter

October 2016



Welcome

After the prolonged dry period from July to September, a reasonable amount of rain in the first half of October appeared to signal the end of the drought, but with virtually no more since 17th October I'm afraid that Hambrook Marshes is failing to live up to its name, and most of the ground remains obdurately hard. Consequently, the wildlife interest has tended to focus on areas of embankment scrub rather than wildfowl and waders. See pages 2-3 for the wildlife report.

Recent Developments

Mowing path verges

Regular visitors will know that we now mow the path verges several times a year, most recently this month. This management has a number of benefits: it helps keep the nettles in check, so we no longer have tall plants flopping across the path, and it also has the effect of widening the path, making it easier, for example, for people to get around a large group of walkers. The view of, and access to, the river was also improved, and the nettles' ability to invade the pasture was reduced, cattle being about as fond of nettles as we are. Finally, the "out of sight, out of mind" mentality that still clings to some people meant that a huge amount of rubbish accumulated in the tall vegetation, only to be exposed as the vegetation died down in winter; that is no longer a problem.

Cutting rushes

In the July newsletter I reported that we had made a start on controlling rushes in the fields, which involved labour-intensive cutting with a hand-held brushcutter. This month we've gone up a gear, using a tractor-mounted mower, which meant that far more rushes could be dealt with much faster. Previously, the cuttings were raked up and disposed of by volunteers, but in the latest mowing all the cut material (straw-coloured in the photo on the right) has been left in situ.



Where the rushes are thickest, this means that quite a dense layer of stems remains, which may kill off the underlying grasses if the mat doesn't rot down sufficiently quickly: we'll be keeping a weather-eye on exactly what happens. We certainly don't want to get rid of all the rushes, as they make secluded nesting sites for mallard and moorhens, and of course cutting doesn't eradicate them anyway – they'll all be springing up again next year!



Horseriding

When we removed the final three cattle grids earlier in the year, we were aware that this could potentially lead to horseriders gaining access to the marshes. Those fears were realised this month when a local resident took this photo of four riders (left) from the opposite side of the river. This could well be a one-off, especially as internal kissing gates and a cattle grid at Tonford bridge severely limit the riders'

options. Given the fairly narrow width of the paths, horseriding simply isn't compatible with walkers and cyclists, several of whom had to veer onto the grass to avoid the horses. If you do ever see any horseriders on Hambrook, we'd be very pleased to hear from you.

Wildlife Report

It is still far too dry everywhere for many wetland birds to be making use of the Marshes, but the first snipe had arrived for the winter by 4th, building up to 26 mid-month. Two teal, a new species last winter, appeared on 17th, with four present a week later. A little egret put in fleeting appearances on 10th and 26th, my first records since late May, so this may be a sign that the Marshes are beginning to look more appealing to these wading birds. However, a single mute swan (right) on the river,





also my first for five months, evidently didn't like what it saw and hasn't put in another appearance.

Nearby, Tonford Lake at last began to attract a few water birds – four tufted ducks, a great crested grebe and one coot; not a dazzling total for such a good-sized body of water.

Now that the cattle have been moved off Tonford field, the vegetation has had a chance to recover, and celery-leaved buttercup (the yellow-flowered plant in the foreground of the photo (left) was able to flower profusely. Much scarcer than the more familiar species of buttercup, its smaller

flowers also mean that it is easier to overlook, and it is far more dependent on very damp ground, often thriving in areas that have been churned up by cattle, which is exactly where it occurs at Hambrook.

Most of the bird action has been on dry land, the disused railway embankment scrub once again proving its worth by attracting a group of nine long-tailed tits (right), arguably our most endearing small bird. Nearby, a flock of thirty goldfinches (below), my highest ever count at Hambrook, were feeding industriously on alder seed on 10th. Long-tailed tits may be the cutest, but goldfinches



are a source of endless pleasure, with their bright colours, companionable nature, and musical twittering.



Species flying over included skylark, buzzard, kestrel and a redpoll, this last bird a very occasional winter visitor to Hambrook. More to be expected were the drab little meadow pipits that descend on the Marshes each winter, though the most I have seen

so far are eight. Up to two Cetti's warblers were periodically exploding into song just off the Marshes.

The month has been characterised by soothingly mild weather, and punctuated by some beautifully sunny days, so it was no surprise to see occasional butterflies, such as red admirals (right). This species is increasingly managing to overwinter in England, having previously been known purely as a summer migrant from Europe.



*All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith
Red admiral photo courtesy of Glynn Crocker
Horsereiding photo courtesy of Dave Hanna*