

Newsletter

December 2016



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

A happy and enjoyable New Year to you all. Our communal new year's resolution could be to cherish our remaining wildlife areas, and to recognise places like Hambrook Marshes for the vital role they play, not only in protecting our disappearing wildlife, but in bringing joy to so many, peace to the disturbed and calm to the anguished. It is now well-established that hospital patients with a view of greenery from their beds recover more quickly than those exposed to soul-destroying brick and concrete, so we owe it to society's well-being to care for what is left of our diminishing countryside.

Recent Developments

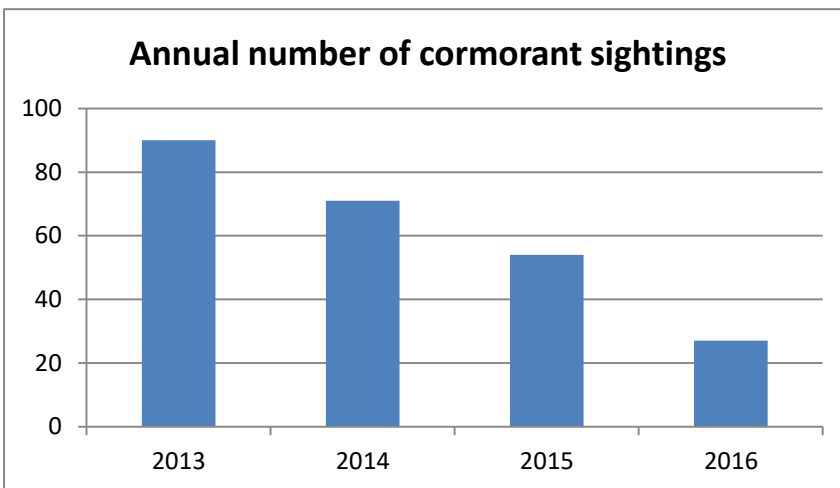
The title of this section of the newsletter is rather a misnomer this month, as I am writing about a non-development – the lack of flooding on Hambrook Marshes. By its nature, this low-lying land beside the Stour floods naturally each winter, through a combination of heavy rainfall that the soil cannot absorb and drain away quickly enough, and by the river bursting its banks. So far this winter neither of these triggers has been activated for long enough to transform the Marshes for any significant length of time. Why? Although November was wet, we have just enjoyed the second

driest December in the 35 years that I have been recording at Canterbury. We also had a ten-week drought from July to mid-September, which would mean that the water table in the valley in the lead-up to autumn would have been lower than usual, and the ground therefore better able to soak up what little rain fell.

The good news is that the paths are mostly dry underfoot; the bad news is that, as will be detailed in the Wildlife Report below, our usual aquatic birds, such as moorhen and mallard, are spending very little time on the marshes.

Wildlife Report

It has been disappointingly quiet so far this winter owing, in part, to the dry conditions outlined above. So there have been very few mallard feeding on the Marshes, and the teal seem to have disappeared. Snipe numbers had been holding up in the one area that was still wet in the Tonford field but later in the month, when food was locked away beneath ice, the birds were swept off the



Marshes, or perhaps into smaller, more dispersed pockets of unfrozen mud where they were harder to find and count. More mysteriously the meadow pipit flock that has been a feature of the willow maze field in recent years has faded away, and even goldfinches have been extremely hard to find. I have been intrigued by another declining bird - the cormorant (below).

This large, rather sinister bird is all you could ask for to convince the nay-sayers that birds are evolved from dinosaurs. Occasional individuals land on the river for a few minutes (I've even watched one swimming through Westgate Gardens, where the water was so clear I could actually view its underwater pursuits of panicking fish), but mostly they are just flying over, generally heading upstream. The bar chart (above) clearly demonstrates the declining frequency with which I've been recording the cormorant. There are many possible explanations for this: it could simply be that the birds have changed their habits slightly and now fly over later in the day, after I've closed my notebook and put away binoculars at the end of an early morning visit.



Other changes in their behaviour could mean that they are spending more time downstream at Stodmarsh and the lower Stour valley. If the birds have had a poor breeding season, the population now will be lower than usual - breeding in Kent is largely confined to Stodmarsh (where up to 114 pairs have nested in recent years) and Dungeness. Numbers seen at Hambrook are therefore going to be very dependent on how strong the Stodmarsh colony is. Additionally, the winter population in Kent is swollen by immigration from other parts of the country and from abroad. Continental birds belong to a different sub-species, and are recognisable by a greater degree of white streaking on the side of the neck (visible in two of the birds in the photo on the previous page), although British birds can display some whiteness as well. It may be that fewer birds have been moving into southern England from Europe during the recent milder winters so, as is so often the case, there is no clear-cut explanation for the observed decline of the cormorant at Hambrook!

The good news is that the number of moorhens (right) is increasing, with some now coming off the river to graze on the grass close to the path, where I recorded 14 on 19th. The total number of little grebes on the Hambrook stretch of river has crept up to five, and they were joined by three mute swans on 9th (below). And I am delighted to report that the pair of stonechats is still present. These birds always strike me as irrepressibly chirpy, though recent mornings when the ground was covered in frost must have meant lean times for these birds, which perch on dead stalks of vegetation, then pounce on any insect they detect below.



The title photo on page 1 is of frosted rose hips on the disused railway embankment.

All bird photos are courtesy of Dave Smith.