

# Newsletter

January 2017



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### Welcome

A country walk can be distinctly dispiriting these days: some public footpaths have melted into the undergrowth and become totally unusable, while others are being deliberately blocked off. A fishing syndicate between Shalmsford Street and Chilham has recently locked the public footpath at both ends of the section that passes one of their lakes. When I remonstrated with the manager on the far side of the seven-foot high gate and fence, to say that he couldn't block a right of way, his immediate response was "I don't care". I have reported the matter to KCC, but their rights of way department has suffered enormous cutbacks, so I am not overly hopeful that the owners will be forced to reopen the route. Other recent instances I have come up against include being told I can't park on a rural road verge that happens to be in front of somebody's house, and being herded down a narrow footpath that had been rendered unpleasant by the erection of barbed wire fences on both sides; adding insult to injury, a sign in the large back garden bordering the path read "You are not authorised to take photos here". There is an insidious, creeping privatisation of the countryside, and I can imagine how the poet, John Clare, felt when he railed uselessly against the enclosure of his beloved Northamptonshire commons. One of the joys of visiting Hambrook Marshes is the simple freedom to wander along the river or explore the old Elham Valley railway embankment. A principal aim of the trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes is to maintain the area as an open space for the enjoyment of all; long may it remain a peaceful haven for locals and visitors alike.

Many thanks to Dave Hanna for his lovely photo at the top of this page. If you have any pictures taken on Hambrook Marshes that you would like to share, please send them to us. We are always keen to have contributions from our readers.

## Recent Developments

Work is progressing on the management plan for the site. One area on which we would like to be better informed is its recent history: in particular, how extensive were Bretts' diggings? Staff at Bretts head office were very pleasant when I visited them recently but, as they no longer own the land, they have destroyed all their records, and so weren't able to help. Canterbury Council commissions periodic aerial surveys of its administrative area, but apparently doesn't hold any photos for the relevant period when excavation was underway (believed to be late 1970s to mid-1980s, and in any case the officer wasn't sure if such records could be made available to us. So, I am putting out another plea for help with establishing what happened where at Hambrook Marshes. If you think you can help, or know someone who may be able to assist, please do get in touch via [lovehambrook@gmail.com](mailto:lovehambrook@gmail.com). Thank you.

## Wildlife Report

The hard frosts were not to the snipes' liking and, with all the wet areas frozen hard for days on end, they departed in search of softer mud, though a trickle of birds returned later in the month. Wintry weather brings with it a number of severe tests for wildlife. There are far fewer hours of daylight in which to seek nourishment, yet more food is needed if the individuals are to generate enough heat to see them through the long night. A strategy adopted by some birds is to roost communally in



winter: this may be largely for security, on the principle of safety in numbers, but birds that are huddled together also lose less heat. Two species that make use of this technique have been very much to the fore this month. The first is the magpie (left), which has become much scarcer on Hambrook over the past four years, but which, just a short walk downstream, has established a communal roost in some ivy-covered trees on Bingley Island (on the opposite side of the river to Toddlers' Cove), where on 20<sup>th</sup> I

counted a grand total of 63 magpies gradually gathering as the light faded. Another, more famously communal rooster is the starling. It has even earned a name – murmuration - for the aerial

manoeuvres of flocks in the evening sky as they prepare to dive down to their chosen roost spot. So I was delighted to discover that a roost has developed in Canterbury this winter. I first became aware of it when I saw flocks of starlings heading up the Stour valley and over Hambrook at dawn. I decided to attempt tracking their movements back to their roost site, and soon discovered that their overnight accommodation was a short line of mature Cupressus leylandii just a few hundred yards down-river from the main Sainsbury's supermarket. The photo on the right shows them wheeling



near the Kingsbrook Park apartments, a display which lasts over half an hour. At times the flock is dispersed, as in the above photo, though still with remarkably well-defined edges, but periodically the birds make sharp manoeuvres that compress the flock into the swirling, smoke-like patterns for which murmurations are famous. To my mind, the pattern in the photo below, which was present for just one frozen moment in time, actually resembles a bird, facing right, with one wing raised (behind the lamp post). The big question on most people's mind is invariably "Why do they do it?" The short answer is that we don't really know. There may be safety in numbers, but such large flocks inevitably draw the attention of predators such as sparrowhawks, and there is the risk of diseases being passed on when so many birds are packed into such a confined space; huddling together may, however, give them a little protection from the worst of the cold nights. The birds are also flying in from miles around, burning up valuable energy that is in short supply, and reducing the length of time during which they are free to feed. But what is most interesting is the time they spend wheeling over the roost site, again using up energy, apparently to no purpose. Are they in some way managing to pass on information about feeding areas, in much the same way that we now know that the bees' waggle dances, performed at the entrance to the hive, provide details of how far away, and in what direction, good food sources are to be found? The whole phenomenon of the



murmuration is wrapped in mystery that in no way detracts from the sheer enjoyment to be had in watching the display. At present each morning and evening groups of starlings can be seen flying along Hambrook Marshes, sometimes in tens or hundreds, but on one occasion seemingly the whole roost of perhaps five thousand birds hurried down the valley, seemingly

anxious to reach the roost before the main flock entered it.

Some mammals hibernate (bats and dormice) but others struggle through the winter as best they can. A flush of fresh molehills (right) close to the riverbank is proof of this, and the frost-free molehill (below, on next page) demonstrates that this particular animal had been active since the previous night's hard frost. Interestingly, virtually all the hillocks are in the narrow band between the path and river. This area can be expected to support the densest population of earthworms, thanks to the nutrient-rich silt deposited during the river's annual overtopping of its banks. However, it is a high-risk strategy for the moles, as there is the ever-present possibility of their tunnels being flooded. As is so often the case in evolution, there are benefits and drawbacks e.g. the energetic cost of migration and its associated hazards balanced against the promise of more abundant food in the country the birds are flying to. In this instance it seems that a plentiful food supply has outweighed the risks from flooding.



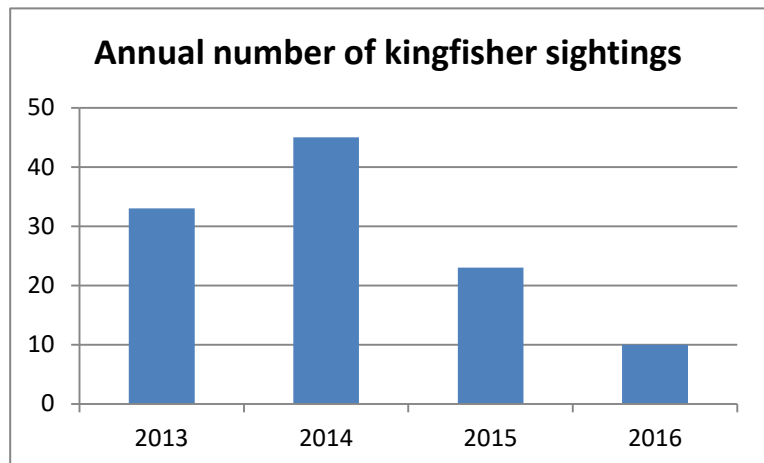


Having commented on the dearth of cormorants in the last newsletter, there seems to have been a minor upsurge in January, with five flying upriver on two occasions, and one swimming on the Stour.

Continuing dry weather meant there still weren't any significant areas of shallow water for mallard to dabble in, and most days I failed to see any duck on the Marshes; teal, which had become a scarce but regular addition to the marshes, were reduced to one sighting of a single bird. Although very much wetland birds, moorhens don't really need extensive

patches of flooding, and seem to be perfectly happy pottering about on the river, or venturing out onto the grassy strip between the river and the path, where I counted 24 on 29<sup>th</sup>. Interestingly, nearly all those birds were in the section between the Canterbury East station bridge and the old Elham Valley railway embankment, the next stretch up to the A2 bridge holding very little attraction for them. Given the frequency with which the birds are pecking at the ground, it seems as though they are actually eating the short grass, but in fact they are probably concentrating on seeds and insects.

Coots are cousins of moorhens but are much more restricted to lakes and other areas of moderately deep water, so it was a welcome surprise to see one on the river on 29<sup>th</sup>. The kingfisher is another bird for which water is an absolute requirement, but sadly this gorgeous bird features less frequently on my bird list these days. The bar chart (right) clearly shows the drop-off, the peak in 2014 coinciding with a pair nesting alongside the Marshes.



It is always a pleasure to see long-tailed tits swinging their way through the scrub, seemingly pivoting on their ridiculously long tail feathers, so a flock of ten on 29<sup>th</sup> was quite a treat. My records of feral (town) pigeons (left) tend to be restricted to the railway bridge over the Ashford line, best seen from the boardwalk, but in recent weeks a pair have been nestled atop a concrete pillar supporting the A2 as it launches itself across the Stour. The connection with the bridge above is a little narrower than the pillar itself, so there is a

flat, circular platform immediately below the concrete underside of the deck; dry and out of reach of curious humans, this is a potential nest-site for these adaptable birds, which are descendants of domestic pigeons that were originally reared for a supply of meat from their squabs (well-grown but flightless chicks) and which in turn originated from wild rock doves. True rock doves still occur on the west coasts of Scotland and Ireland, but elsewhere the birds to be found on cliffs around the country, including at Dover, are an indeterminate mixture of the ancestral species and feral pigeons.



I can go for quite extended periods without seeing a heron on the marsh, so was interested to see these two photos sent in by Elizabeth Brown. The first photo (left) sets the scene in Stranger's Lane (opposite Thanington church). She was most surprised to see a heron perched right at the top of the conifer that is visible in the distant centre of the photo. The bird, which can be seen in all its glory in the photo below, lacks the white forehead of a full adult, but its yellowish bill suggests it is coming into breeding plumage (immature birds have greyish

bills). A heron perching atop a tree somehow looks incongruous, as we are used to seeing them as hunched sentries at the edge of ditches, but they do nest in trees, so woodland is not, in fact, such an alien habitat for the species. This sensible bird eventually flew off in the direction of Hambrook Marshes.



Photo credits:

*Frosted willows photo on page 1 courtesy of Dave Hanna*

*Two heron photos courtesy of Elizabeth Brown*

*First starling murmuration photo courtesy of Michael Walter*

*Second starling murmuration photo courtesy of Wendy Kennett*

*Maggie and feral pigeon photos courtesy of Dave Smith*