



Newsletter

February 2017



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

I've received one response to my request for information about the extent of Bretts' excavations at Hambrook Marshes, and am hoping my correspondent can extract some useful details from friends. Meanwhile, it would be greatly appreciated if anyone else could come forward with local knowledge dating back to the late 1970s, when we believe the work was carried out.

We recently received a request for permission to photograph birds in Tonford Field – the field nearest to the Tonford footbridge. Unfortunately, we have had to turn the photographer down as this is the one part of the Marshes which is, in theory, free from disturbance. There are no paths through the field and, as it is fenced all round, dogs don't normally get into it. This field therefore has the potential to become the best part of the Marshes for wildfowl and waders. It already boasts a wintering flock of around 40 snipe, and it would be a shame to jeopardise this improvement by allowing visitors, even with the best intentions, to enter the field.

What's happening on the marshes?

Motorcycling

Unfortunately, we received a report of a motorbike being ridden quite fast along the riverside path on 21st. Now that the cattle grids have been removed, there is easy access to the reserve for cyclists

and parents with buggies, and the only way we could discourage motorcyclists would be to reinstate some form of kissing gates at all the entrances, so making it harder for everybody else to get onto the Marshes. Hopefully, this was just a one-off incident; the sheer number of regular users of the paths should, by itself, act to discourage anti-social bikers, but if you do see anyone riding a motorbike at Hambrook, please report it to the police by phoning 101, and also drop us an email, as that will help us to evaluate the extent of any problem.. The bike in question may well have been a trail bike without number plates, but it is always worth checking to see if it does have a registration number, and then passing it on to us and the police.

Graffiti

Our graffiti-writer struck again this month, defacing three of the information panels (the least seriously damaged sign is shown on the right). Two hazard warning signs were also badly scratched and will need replacing. The good news is that the wipes we use are pretty good at removing the paint, although the process also uses up a lot of elbow grease, which is no longer available in the shops!



Next volunteer task

The Kentish Stour Countryside partnership organises work parties on the Marshes every winter. Most of the small-scale tasks that are suitable for volunteers have now been dealt with, so we haven't needed to ask for their support so far this winter. There will, however, be a task on Thursday 30th March. If you are free to come, please meet at the Whitehall Road entrance by the level crossing at 10am – Whitehall Road is the narrow lane that runs past Toddlers' Cove.

Culvert

The old culvert in Tonford Field – a pipe which goes underneath the riverside path, and so helps prevent the path getting flooded - had become woefully inadequate; too narrow in diameter, and regularly getting blocked by mud, it couldn't stop the nearby stretch of path from flooding every winter. So this month contractors installed a new culvert with an adjustable vertical pipe (visible in the photo on the right) that converts it into a sluice – a device that can be





used to manually control the level of water that can back up. The photo on the left shows the completed arrangement in place, with the vertical pipe visible between two posts. No water will drain from the marsh until it reaches the lip of the pipe, and will then flow safely underneath the path and discharge into the river. Fencing has been installed to prevent cattle from damaging the system. Thanks to the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership for obtaining the funding and organising the whole project.

Wildlife Report

The marshes looked a bit wetter for a while early in the month, resulting in 23 mallard feeding in shallow-flooded areas, where up to seven teal were also present. Possibly attracted out of hiding by the damper conditions, a water rail (right) near the boardwalk was my first sighting since November 2015. Related to the coot and moorhen (note the moorhen-like white on the upturned tail), the water rail is fairly thinly spread in lowland UK, with a population estimated at only 1100 pairs, 250-300 of



which are thought to be in Kent. Being generally extremely secretive and partially nocturnal, they are easily overlooked, and it is quite possible that this particular individual has been present on the Marshes all winter, carefully evading my scanning binoculars. The only other waterbird of note was a single coot (left), first seen in January, on the river. I suspect it was the same bird that I saw hauled out on Bingley Island, trailing a badly injured, useless leg.

The old railway embankment was a hive of activity on 6th, when at least 56 redwings (right) were moving through, foraging in the scrub or down on the ground. These thrushes are winter visitors from Scandinavia and eastern Europe, and will be thinking of heading back across the North Sea in the coming weeks, as will many of the starlings that have been roosting in



Canterbury. These murmurations are largely made up of continental birds escaping the worst of the winter, and I am still seeing small to medium-sized flocks flying up the valley in the morning, with a peak of 1300 on 12th.

After a gap of a month, during which meadow pipits appeared to have abandoned the marshes, five of these somewhat nondescript birds were present in the unfenced field on 28th. On the same day I was pleased to see the usual pair of stonechats (right) in Tonford Field. I have previously described this species' requirement for tall stems amongst the grass for them to perch on, surveying the ground below for unwary insects. Apart from the rushes around the main ditch, much of that field is in fact devoid of these vantage points, so it was perhaps not so surprising to see this pair using the fence wire as lookout points.

Continuing along my way under the A2 bridge, I was then delighted to see a second stonechat, amongst rank vegetation that is developing in the area that was fenced off for the first time last year. How, you may ask, could I be sure it wasn't simply one of the birds that I had just seen, making the short hop across the A2? Well, this was a male, in absolutely immaculate summer finery – the orange, black and white patterns looking extremely smart - whereas the male that I had first encountered, though handsome, retained a vestige of its winter plumage, and was certainly not so striking. A rare visitor to Hambrook is the gorgeous bullfinch, last seen eight months ago; I didn't manage to get a view of it, merely hearing its thin, plaintive "piuu".



The seasons are advancing now – the teal, meadow pipits and stonechats will all soon be gone for another year – and birdsong is once more coming to the fore. On 19th the old railway embankment was enlivened by the unmistakable drumming of a great spotted woodpecker and the much more easily overlooked, weak song of a tree creeper. It takes a little learning, but the quiet, silvery cascade of the tree creeper is a little gem – a musical shiver on a chilly morning.



Winter is not the time to be adding new names to the plant list, but I have just spotted a little clump of snowdrops on the riverbank. They may well have been there for some years, but are not readily visible from the main path, the flowers twinkling through a mat of smothering nettles. The clump may have been planted there, but could equally well have originated from a bulb washed down from further upstream. Its Latin name is *Galanthus nivalis*, which is in fact a mixture of Greek and Latin meaning "milk flower of the snow". But "snowdrop" says it all, more succinctly and charmingly.

Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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