



# Newsletter

March 2017



## Welcome

With temperatures in double figures all month, and even hitting 20°, it has certainly felt very spring-like at times. It has also been exceptionally dry, with only a third of the expected March rainfall recorded, and making it, by a whisker, the driest March in twenty years. The combination of warmth, fresh winds and lack of rain has ensured that the Marshes were as dry as they are ever likely to be at this time of year. It was therefore no surprise that it has been a rather quiet period for water birds.

## What's happening on the marshes?

Our contractor did his first round of mowing, mainly alongside the river path, in a bid to keep nettles and other tall vegetation at bay, preventing the stems from flopping over the path later in the summer. The edges of the fields were also mown (right) as a pesticide-free way of discouraging nettles, thistles and scrub from encroaching onto the grazing land.

The Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) team came on 31<sup>st</sup>, their main task being to



complete the installation of handrails alongside both sets of steps up to the old embankment viewpoint (below). For some reason the original railings put up by the previous owner only went halfway up the steep slope, so this new work should make it much easier and safer for visitors to climb up and admire the view.



KSCP volunteers also cleared a culvert that someone had thoughtlessly blocked up with soil, concrete blocks and logs.

## Wildlife Report

We're at a seasonal cross-roads in March, with plenty of avian evidence that winter is still here, but also clear signs that spring is pushing out the tired old weather, most strikingly exemplified by the profusion of yellow lesser celandines and other flowers. Winter birds are certainly hanging on, in the shape of six little grebes on the river early in the month, but dwindling to just two by the end. Likewise, a high count of 52 snipe on 12<sup>th</sup> was never going to be bettered, and the most I could find on 28<sup>th</sup> were seven. I was pleased to spot a water rail near the boardwalk, where I had found one last month, but suspect that it will have moved off by now in search of a more extensive area of wetland where it can spend the summer. Finally, while still on the winter theme, five redwings were feeding in scrub on the old embankment on 19<sup>th</sup>, but they, too, have probably left now for breeding grounds in Scandinavia.

And so to the cheerier topic of spring: a single great crested grebe returned to Tonford Lake, but only for a short while, and the lack of a partner suggested that there will be no breeding attempt there this year. I had occasional sightings of lesser black-backed gulls (right), similar in appearance to the much commoner herring gull, but with quite bright yellow legs and darker wings. Unlike their cousin, they are largely migratory, tending to winter down the west African coast. The pair of feral pigeons that I mentioned in a previous newsletter as having taken up residence under the A2



bridge, appear a little half-hearted about their nesting intentions, but a bird is once again sitting on the ledge, and may be incubating a clutch of eggs.



A classic herald of spring, arriving a full month or so before the more familiar cuckoo and swallow, is the chiffchaff (left), brightening often cheerless weather in mid-March with his irrepressible singing from the old railway embankment and trees around the edge of the Marshes. Birdsong epitomises spring for me, so it was lovely to hear the sweet, tinkling song of a tree creeper (right) on 28<sup>th</sup>. Usually more at home in woodland with old trees, these mouse-like birds nevertheless do turn up on the marshes from time to time, or are heard calling from the mature willows just across the river. This particular individual seemed to be making a mockery of the idea that their

ideal habitat is indeed ancient woodland, as it was climbing up a weedy hawthorn stem that was barely the width of the bird.



The solitary coot is still on the river, while another one cropped up from time to time on the Marshes. Two mute swans returned to our stretch of the river for part of the month, and on 19<sup>th</sup> I was treated to the sight of four little egrets, undoubtedly one of our most elegant birds, which are normally seen singly at Hambrook. Geese haven't featured much in recent



months, so the sight of two honking birds flying over one morning lent an air of wilderness to the valley, an image not spoiled by the knowledge that these free spirits are in fact descendants of escapees from wildfowl collections. Finally, still on the subject of alien species, a pair of pheasants (left) put in a rare appearance. Unlike the greylags, which are genuine natives in the north of the UK, the pheasant is very definitely not indigenous to these islands, having been introduced from the Black Sea area over a thousand years ago, possibly even by the Romans, and has been

naturalised in our countryside for at least 500 years, although the ring-necked sub-species (shown in the photo) is a more recent introduction from China and has only become well-established here in the past 250 years.

Lady's smock (right) is characteristic of damp areas, but the dry winter and start to spring doesn't seem to have discouraged it, as my impression is that it has flowered rather more profusely than normal this year, and its delicate pinkish blossom certainly adds a splash of colour to the Marshes, in welcome relief to the hard yellows of celandine and dandelion.



*Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*