

# Newsletter

April 2017



## Welcome

Last month I wrote about the dry weather, but April saw even less rain (5mm compared to a long-term average of 48mm). Ditches that normally remain reasonably wet into July are already turning muddy, and a long, hot summer could mean all sorts of repercussions for the marsh's ecology. It has in fact been unusually dry since last July, with only 61% of expected rainfall. There was only one flooding episode, a very minor and brief affair early in the winter, so Hambrook Marshes has been struggling to justify its name. And, while the dry paths certainly make for more convenient walking, it's a shame that the new sluice that featured in the February newsletter hasn't had a chance to prove its worth in keeping one stretch of the riverside walk flood-free.

## What's happening on the marshes?

We have received a report of two lads on the Marshes with air rifles at the end of March. The police were contacted, but, of course, the culprits had dematerialised by the time a PCSO arrived on the scene. Still, it is always worth phoning the police if you see something of this nature, dialling 999 if you consider it an emergency, or 101 for something less urgent.

A start was made on ferrying a fresh herd of cattle onto the Marshes, and by the end of the month thirteen heifers were settling in to their new surroundings. We hope that there will be no repeat of last May's unfortunate incident when someone's dog severely injured one cow.

People sometimes ask why we bother to graze the area. There is no one simple answer, as it is partly a continuation of an age-old tradition of pasturing cattle on rich floodplains, and partly a sustainable way of creating habitat that is suitable for a variety of wildlife. Unlike sheep and horses, which tend to nibble a rough sward into bowling green sterility, cattle feed by wrapping their tongues around the vegetation and then tearing it out, which results in a much more uneven, tussocky sward, which in turn creates more habitat for invertebrates. They also tend to “poach” favoured areas, churning up the ground into muddy patches that can be colonised by new species of



plants and insects. Their dung is another benefit, being an important feeding habitat for the larvae of numerous flies and beetles, and I shall have more to say about that in a future newsletter. Cow pats are more interesting than you might have imagined! But there is another advantage of grazing, which is that it helps prevent the grassland from turning into scrub and, ultimately, woodland. The railway embankment by the bridge leading into Canterbury East station has been colonised by sycamores which scatter their seed bountifully into the Boardwalk Field, and if you look carefully you

can currently see literally thousands of seedlings, each with just four leaves, like the one above. The cattle indiscriminately rip them out, along with the grass, and so stop the seedlings ever achieving their potential.

Two supermarket trolleys (Morrisons and B&M) were recently dumped in the river by the Wincheap footbridge. Lying on the riverbed, they can in fact form an interesting substrate for colonisation by plants and as a refuge for invertebrates, but that doesn't justify the unsightliness caused by mindless dumping. Fortunately, their wire structure makes them relatively easy to hook onto, and one sunny morning I was able to fish them both out in a few minutes without getting my feet wet. Struggling to haul the bigger trolley up a steep nettle bank to the path, I was kindly helped by a young man, whose friend then wheeled it back to B&M for me. After the mindlessness of those who abandoned the trolleys in the first place, it was really gratifying to know that there are still plenty of people willing to lend a hand in keeping the place free of junk.



## Wildlife Report

It may seem more like winter at the time of writing (3<sup>rd</sup> May), but the wildlife emphasis is strongly on summer, and the last two wintering snipe were seen on 11<sup>th</sup>. Summer migrants have been moving in, with blackcap on 2<sup>nd</sup>, whitethroat on 18<sup>th</sup>, reed warbler on 24<sup>th</sup>, and a distant cuckoo the same day. Reed buntings aren't migrants in the popular sense of the word, but they do forsake Hambrook

in late summer, probably to spend the winter on a nearby wetland such as Stodmarsh, and two returned here on 2<sup>nd</sup>.

The warm spell early in the month brought out butterflies, and I recorded peacock, comma, red admiral, small tortoiseshell, brimstone and orange tip at Hambrook. The orange tip is rather a lovely little creature; your attention is drawn to the bright colour on the forewings of the male that give the species its name, but the underwing of both sexes has a wonderful reticulated patterning that gives it an almost perfect camouflage when the orange beacons are folded out of sight as it feeds on cow parsley (below left: the butterfly is in the centre of the photo!), but render it rather conspicuous when resting on plain green vegetation (below right). In stark contrast to the plant



kingdom, it is quite rare for animals to be green: the green hairstreak butterfly has no green pigment, instead owing its coloration to the microscopic architecture of the scales on its wings, causing light to be diffracted (broken up into its constituent colours), while the sloth achieves a greenish tint to its fur by having minute channels in the hairs, which are then colonised by green algae. The orange tip's green patterning is an illusion created through the subtle use of yellow and black pigments rather than green ones.

Last year I reported on the near demise of the snake's head fritillary in the boardwalk field, numbers of this elegant flower having fallen from 29 in 2013 to just two in 2016, so it is with some relief that I counted five this month – not exactly a grand total, but at least a sign that the species may yet survive.



I didn't begin recording plants until last summer, so missed some of the earlier-flowering species, such as alexanders (right, and flowerhead below), a tall umbellifer (a relative of cow parsley) with rather unpleasantly-smelling yellow flowers. It originated in the Mediterranean region, and was introduced to this country by the Romans, who appreciated the edibility of every part of the plant, from root to flower. There are a few plants near where the riverside path passes beneath the A2 bridge.





Another new species for my list was hoary cress, a rather grey plant that occurs in a clump at the viewpoint on the old railway embankment. Whereas alexanders, described in the previous paragraph, is known as an archaeophyte, meaning that it is a long-established non-native species, hoary cress is a neophyte, as it is a recent introduction. Apparently it was brought back to this country in the straw bedding of soldiers who had been engaged in the unsuccessful Walcheren Expedition to the Netherlands in 1809. Entering England through the port of Ramsgate, it fairly quickly

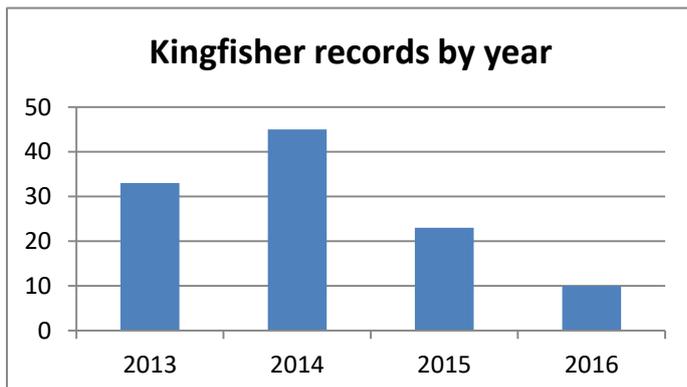
established a foothold in eastern Kent, and I have indeed seen it named as Thanet cress in some older identification guides. It has now spread through much of the country, particularly south east of a line from the Bristol Channel to the Humber, and is commonest on road verges.

The feral pigeon nesting under the A2 bridge looked to be doing some serious incubating this month, after a lot of fussing around, but the presence of an egg outside the nest one day left me doubting the bird's competence.

We don't see that much of mute swans at Hambrook, so the sight of 17 on the adjoining Tonford Lake on 11th made that a red-letter day, and later in the month up to nine were cruising along the river beside the Marshes. Larger species tend to be longer-lived and to defer breeding until they are several years old, and these swans would all have been immature birds, recognisable by still having traces of grey-brown in their plumage or by their beaks not yet having attained the deep orange coloration of an adult's.



Corvids have been notable for their absence this winter, so it was good to see 13 rooks and seven jackdaws early in the month. Another bird that seems to have disappeared is the kingfisher – just as



well we decided not to use this bird on our logo! The graph (left) shows how my records have tailed off since 2014, when a pair nested close to the river. It is now six months since I saw or heard one at Hambrook. The population usually slumps after severe weather, but last winter was generally quite mild, so I don't know why this jewel of a bird should be in such short supply. Downstream, on the

stretch of river as far as Westgate Towers, I used to see kingfishers with some regularity, but there, too, they seem to be a thing of the past. We can only hope that a pair returns to our section of the river soon.



I've been recording at the Marshes weekly since September 2012, so that's about 230 visits but, amazingly, on 11<sup>th</sup> I had my first sighting of a fox. There should be plenty of small mammals for it to catch in the long grass of the ungrazed fields, so I find it a little surprising that foxes shouldn't be hunting the area more regularly. Rabbits are preferred prey, providing a welcome meal, whereas a vole offers little more than a bedtime snack, but perhaps it will be another 230 visits before I see my first Hambrook rabbit!

*Photos of fox and mallard with ducklings courtesy of Dave Smith*

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