



# Newsletter

May 2017



## Welcome

Managing an area for wildlife is never easy, and the trustees have been grappling with many complex issues as they drafted the Hambrook Marshes management plan, one being our approach to non-native species. Himalayan balsam and mandarin duck(right) occur on the Marshes and, as their names suggest, both are alien species. One is an attractive, pink flower whose explosive capsules scatter seed far and wide, enabling thickets to develop along the riverbank, to the exclusion of native species. The other is a staggeringly striking bird whose plumage might have been dreamed up by a designer on acid (I am referring here only to the male bird, the female being soberly dressed in browns). Both occur at Hambrook, and the mandarins successfully brought off four fluffy black ducklings this month. Should we be uprooting one and shooting the other? Little owls, pheasants, red-legged partridges and Canada geese have all been introduced to our national landscape by unthinking or uncaring people, but nobody seems to be seriously proposing a campaign for their eradication, although Canada geese upset some people in the same way that the American grey squirrel does. There is, however, some concern about the spread of the ring-necked parakeet, a striking green, long-tailed bird with a raucous screech that sets people's nerves on edge. A native of Asia, it nests in tree holes and some suspect that it could be implicated in the decline of less aggressive native hole-nesters. These are interesting times for anyone wielding power over wildlife!



## What's happening on the marshes?

Or, in this case, what's not happening? It was intended that the small osier bed established about seven years ago by the previous owners (Kent Enterprise Trust) beside the entrance from Whitehall Road, should be managed by annual cutting. This would be preserving a traditional rural craft by providing willow weavers and hurdle-makers with their raw material. However, the contractor who has been cutting the osier wands for the past two winters has concluded that it is simply not cost-effective for him to continue; the long journey from Essex, combined with the fact that too many of the wands weren't thick enough for his purposes, forced him to this conclusion. As a result, he only cleared a small area earlier this year. The trustees are now discussing how to proceed: one option is to seek another, more local, contractor but, if there is no market for the stems, other options include allowing the area to develop into mature woodland or getting it cut by volunteers and simply stacking or burning the material. Interestingly, as most of the willow is now in its second year of growth, it has been colonised by garden warbler, reed warbler and reed bunting, none of which would have found a home there had all the willow been cut last winter. If we are going to continue cutting, there would therefore be some sense in doing it on a rotation, so that the whole area is not cleared at once. Another possibility would be to extend the osier bed, to ensure that, even when perhaps a third of it has been cut one winter, there is still sufficient uncut willow for wildlife to colonise. All these options are being discussed by the trustees as the management plan is drawn up.

We received a report of a dog attacking one of the heifers this month, but apparently without inflicting any injury.

## Wildlife Report

This has been a rewarding month for visiting Hambrook, both at dawn and on hot afternoons. For some species it seems that the breeding season is already over, and flocks of up to 75 adult and juvenile starlings have been feeding in the field amongst the cattle. Other species aren't quite so advanced: the great spotted woodpecker isn't the first bird that springs to mind when you think of marshland, but a pair is nesting in a black Italian poplar tree on the old embankment, and the hungry piping of the young can be heard some yards away. Even further behind in the breeding stakes is the coot that had been frequenting the river in recent weeks. It was there again on 24<sup>th</sup>, leaving me to wonder if it was a bachelor bird doomed to spend the summer in glorious isolation. But, as I watched, a second coot approached; normally one of the most belligerent of species, these two birds were evidently on good terms, a point reinforced a few moments later when the male mounted the female (I have to assume that is a correct interpretation as, to the human eye, the sexes are identical). Eager to make up for lost time, the female was sitting on a nest of floating vegetation in the river just five days later.

Some other sightings might be placed in the category of "near misses", such as the lesser whitethroat (right) that was singing in tall scrub on the old embankment on 4<sup>th</sup>. Unfortunately, I was then unable to visit the Marshes for three weeks and on my return couldn't establish if the bird had departed or just fallen silent. Closely related to the common whitethroat, which nests on and around the Marshes, the lesser bird needs taller scrub, usually in the form of exuberantly overgrown hedges, and its song, if such it can be called, is a rather dreary, repeated stuttering of the same note. But the excitement was



that this was my first genuine Hambrook record, the few other records being for just off the site in 2013. I am therefore hoping that the bird stayed and managed to attract a mate. A kingfisher on 22<sup>nd</sup> was my first sighting since October, but this also has to go into the near miss category as it seems unlikely that the bird could be nesting on the Marshes when only seen once in eight months.

Migrant birds are always of interest, like the nightingale that could be heard singing from the long-abandoned pear orchard just the other side of the Tonford Lane level crossing on 4<sup>th</sup>, or the cuckoo that flew over, landed in a small tree a few yards away, and then proceeded to “cuckoo” no fewer than 94 times. For all I know, it might be calling still if a second cuckoo hadn’t flown past, causing the first bird to set off in hot pursuit. Three other migrant species – swallow, house martin and swift – haven’t yet crossed my radar, although I have seen them over Westgate Gardens, and a party of up to 21 swifts have taken to screaming over my Rough Common garden.

This is the time of year when house sparrows put in a guest appearance, diving into the nettles bordering the river, or even into the tall grasses of the fields in pursuit of caterpillars for their demanding broods, and on 24<sup>th</sup> I counted at least 21 birds.



Now that spring has advanced, I’m managing to find quite a few flowers that I overlooked in the first year of my plant survey in 2016, and I was delighted to find some fairly good patches of grass vetchling (left), a favourite flower of mine, but one that is easily overlooked. A member of the pea family, it immediately becomes apparent why it is called “grass” when you look at the photo (left), and hence the difficulty of finding the plant in a field of grass. The flower itself isn’t a great help, being quite small, and borne singly or in pairs on beautifully elegant long stalks, but once tracked down, these tiny magenta jewels are pure delight.

Another interesting discovery this week was a tiny clump of salad burnet beside a path near the willow maze. Not the most exciting of plants to look at, it is certainly one of the more intriguing species to have been found so far. Its leaves take the form of a row of paired leaflets, much like on a

rowan or ash tree, and the nondescript, rather globular, yellowish flower sits on the end of a long stalk. So, although not matching the image of a “standard” flower, it doesn’t sound that unusual so far. However, salad burnet is an obligate chalk species - it only ever grows on the chalk, meaning that in Kent its distribution is firmly restricted to the North Downs and the chalk outcrop on Thanet. Few other species, apart from some of the orchids, show such a strong correlation with the surface geology. The Stour valley is filled with silt that has accumulated over thousands of years, and beneath that lies the valuable gravel and sand that Bretts excavated in the 1970s, so why would this chalk-lover, or calcicole, be growing at Hambrook? The answer undoubtedly lies in our knowing that when the gravel seam was exhausted, instead of allowing a lake to develop, Bretts backfilled the hole with chalk rubble from the cuttings being made nearby for the new A2 Canterbury bypass.

Salad burnet seed must have been brought in along with all the waste, and has managed to cling on for forty years.

Finally, water speedwell (below, left and right), a quietly attractive aquatic species related to speedwells that are arable weeds or perhaps found in your lawn, was stumbled upon beside a ditch.



Changing my habits by visiting on some very warm, sunny afternoons paid dividends, with small copper and common blue butterflies on the wing, along with four species of dragonfly (broad-bodied chaser, blue-tailed damselfly, common blue damselfly and azure damselfly). Numbers were quite low, but should increase dramatically as summer progresses.

I was pleased to see a glow worm larva climbing up the brickwork of the old railway bridge abutment last week. Only rarely have I been on the Marshes in the evening, mainly in the unfulfilled hope of hearing an owl, and have yet to see the eerie greenish light of a glow worm at Hambrook. The larva is faintly luminescent, but it is the adult female that people notice on June and July evenings, as she twists her abdomen to point her light organ skywards in the hope of attracting a male. Unlike fireflies, she cannot switch the light on and off, but because the organ is on the underside of her body she can prevent the light attracting unwanted attention if she is not receptive.

But for me, the highlight of the month was being privileged to watch a grass snake (right) swim proficiently across the river. Anyone who thought that snakes didn't like water would have been disabused when, on reaching the far side, it promptly turned round and swam all the way back to inspect the bank immediately beneath my feet – a memorable experience.



*Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*

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