



Newsletter

July 2017



Welcome

In the grander scheme of things, Hambrook Marshes isn't a large site; its modest 50 acres are rather dwarfed by, for example, the 2,300-acre RSPB reserve at Minsmere in Suffolk or, spreading our net wider, the 3,600,000 acres of the Serengeti National Park, but that doesn't mean to say our Marshes have nothing to contribute to the world of conservation. We already know that Hambrook is greatly valued by local people and visitors as an easily accessible green lung where they can unwind for an hour or two, but we are gradually establishing that the Marshes also hold significant wildlife interest. In recent years, for example, the wintering flock of snipe has numbered up to 52, making it one of the largest in Kent. Not everyone can get that excited about grasses, but in June whorl-grass (*Catabrosa aquatica*) was discovered in a ditch at Hambrook; known only from seven other sites in Kent, all but one of them along the Stour valley, this not particularly flamboyant plant helps make Hambrook an important place for the survival of wetland wildlife. Most recently of all, a student has found evidence of water vole on the Marshes (one of our readers also reported seeing one last year). He has been checking for their presence here since the spring, adopting a low-tech version of the camera traps increasingly favoured to prove the presence of shy, nocturnal or rare animals. The simple device consists of a small raft moored in a ditch, with a short wooden tunnel for inquisitive voles to scuttle through, leaving their characteristic footprints on a smooth, damp mat of clay. It has been estimated that the UK water vole population has declined by 90% since the 1970s, and that there are now only about 750,000 in the UK. This may sound like quite a healthy number, but each animal only weighs about five ounces, so their population is equivalent to about 1700 humans

having the whole country to themselves (55 square miles each!). If those humans decided on a simultaneous beach holiday, they could each claim a lonely 6.5 mile stretch, so no more arguments about who gets to use the sun lounger. We know that water voles have returned to the Stour further downstream, so Hambrook Marshes are doing their bit to ensure that there is a corridor of suitable habitat for these endearing creatures to roam over.

What's happening on the marshes?

July was another routine month, with no major habitat management undertaken – litter was picked, the cattle continued to munch their way through the grass, and path verges were mown. One interesting development concerned the future of our osier bed, shown in winter in the photo below



(the osiers make up a corner of young willows across the hay field from the footbridge to the park and ride). This was created by the previous owners (Kent Enterprise Trust) as a way of recreating one of the former rural craft industries of lowland wetland sites, the whippy stems being harvested every year for basket-weaving. This business fell into sharp decline in the 20th century as plastic and metal assumed the role previously occupied by wickerwork, and the osier beds were abandoned. Recent years have seen something of a revival of the basketry craft, but today's workers are finding it increasingly difficult to source their raw material. For the past two years our osiers have been harvested by a weaver from Essex, but the stems weren't thick enough for his needs, and the long journey made the work uneconomic, so he had to give up, leaving us to look for a new contractor. The site was recently viewed by a couple from Rye – closer than Essex, but still not on our doorstep. To give you an idea of the dearth of suitable osier whips for basketry, this year they have bought their supplies from a firm on the Somerset Levels, and last year they imported the material from Belgium! The dense regrowth made it impossible for them to judge how much of the site was suitable for their purposes, but they hope to return in November when the leaves are off for a better assessment. With any luck, they will opt to get their willow from us in future.

Wildlife Report

We have revelled in some glorious weather in the past couple of months, but where are the birds that we used to associate with languorous days, lazing in a butterfly-filled field as house martins, swallows and swifts twittered and swooped around contented herds of cattle. I sense a romantic nostalgia creeping in to what I have just written, but it is a fact that those three species of aerial

feeders have all declined in the UK in recent years. In the past the Stour valley would have been a haven for these birds, as part of it is still managed in traditional fashion, with livestock out in the fields all summer, their manure a breeding ground for the insects that swallows depend on. The habitat is still here, but the birds aren't. My first sightings of swift and swallow over Hambrook weren't until 9th July, with house martin a week later, and very little has been seen of them since. Most of the problem appears to lie in their African winter quarters, where droughts and the more intensive farming practices required to feed a burgeoning human population, are combining to create an impoverished feeding arena for what we like to think of as "our" birds.



There were welcome records of several birds that hadn't been seen much recently, including kingfisher, goldcrest (the first since January) and greenfinch (first since last August), and a turtle dove purred away comfortably on 16th not far from our boundary. A tufted duck (left) planed down onto the river on 27th, my only summer record this year. Is there a pair nesting nearby, or was this simply a lone non-breeder? The only other bird record of note was of nine feral (town) pigeons feeding in the hay field. A few are regularly to be seen hanging around the

bridge where the Canterbury East and West railway lines cross, like a gang of bored youths, but I don't usually see more than the occasional one or two feeding at Hambrook. Last month I wrote about the small starling flock often to be seen accompanying the cattle; well, they excelled themselves in July, when up to 300 were consorting with the heifers.

Slime moulds are not the most attractive of fungi, and this species (right) renders itself even less endearing with its common name of dog's vomit. They used to be thought of as fungi, but are now classed in a group of their own, as they are primitive organisms capable of living independently, but tending to aggregate into the slightly disgusting lumps that have started oozing out of some large logs at Hambrook.



This month's surprise discovery was of a very depauperate specimen of marjoram. In case you're wondering if that is the same plant as the herb, the answer's yes, confirmed by its Latin specific name of *origanum*. Can it be a coincidence that it is growing very close to an equally miserable specimen of salad burnet, which I wrote about in May. Both are restricted to chalk grassland, and I suggested earlier that the salad

burnet had been imported with chalk spoil used to backfill the Bretts quarries that once scarred Hambrook. Now, with the discovery of this second downland species I can picture the two plants having been scooped up in one enormous shovelful by a digger excavating a cutting for the A2, the

plants then travelling side by side in a lorry, finally to be dumped ignominiously together at Hambrook, and left to struggle on for years in their unaccustomed new surroundings. The marjoram photo here (above left) is not, I regret, of the Hambrook plant, which is a miserable little, non-flowering specimen.

It was a joy to see a marbled white in a rough corner of grassland that is being allowed to gradually turn into scrub. These butterflies are characteristic of downland grassland, but are not confined to the chalk, and small numbers turn up on acidic soil sites away from the Downs, though it is never quite clear if these are simply wandering individuals, or ones that are happily breeding there. I shall keep an eye on that



area next year to see if any more of these attractive butterflies turn up.



The dragonfly list has expanded slowly this year, the latest addition being the large and handsome emperor (left, a female egg-laying) the male being a striking mid-blue.

Finally, nature regularly throws up mutations, the raw material on which evolution can work. Much of the time the changes are not obvious, or are fatal, but here's a more blatant example of nature's caprice, a reedmace (or bulrush) flowerhead (right) that has developed as three shortened and fused heads. If, for some reason, this odd-looking plant proved to be more successful than its more conventional brethren, the world might gradually be taken over by the triple-headed reedmace!



Page 1 heading photo of July sunrise over Canterbury, viewed from Hambrook Marshes

Tufted duck photo courtesy of Dave Smith

Marbled white and emperor dragonfly photos courtesy of Glynn Crocker

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