



Newsletter

August 2017



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

George Monbiot, the environmental activist, can usually be relied upon to produce some thought-provoking comments, and in a recent Guardian article he was lamenting the sterility of words and phrases used by conservationists. First to appear in his cross-hairs was “site of special scientific interest”; this neatly categorises an area as being important, with the implication that its value can in some way be measured, but fails abysmally to inspire or to give a sense of the land’s beauty. Monbiot suggests “places of natural wonder” would be a distinct improvement. Even commonly bandied-about words such as “environment” are poor describers of the intricate mosaic of creatures and plants that mesh together to create a self-sustaining corner of our Earth; Monbiot has come up with “living planet” or “natural world” as preferable substitutes. As for some of the anodyne words used to excuse our role in killing off the biosphere that sustains us, he would replace “climate change” with “climate destruction”, while even the seemingly respectable “extinction” is booted out in favour of “ecocide”, placing the blame for the demise of thousands of species accusingly at our feet. Hambrook Marshes can be described as a semi-natural habitat supporting several named lowland wet grassland communities of plants and invertebrates, but that doesn’t even hint at the magic of the place, or the joy to be had from idly watching moorhens furtively measuring out the distance across a mat of floating vegetation with their outsized feet; or trying to keep track of a dragonfly that is darting erratically hither and thither. Perhaps we should heed what George Monbiot has to say and recognise Hambrook for what it really is – a soothing and rewarding place to forget our travails and marvel at the wildlife we have been lucky enough to retain there.

What's happening on the marshes?

Mystery cattle stampede

A very odd and totally unexplained event occurred in the early hours of 6th August. I arrived at 6.30 that morning to find most of the cattle in their regular resting area beneath the A2 bridge, but with three of them on the wrong side of the gate leading into a field that is now being allowed to develop to scrub. The gate, its top bar bent, was open, and the short stretch of fence between the gate and the pathside fencing had been broken down (right), giving the cattle two routes for wandering into the next field. I was able to usher the three trespassers back to rejoin the rest of the herd and then carried out some temporary repairs that I hoped would keep the cattle in until I returned later in the day with some wire to do a better job.



My initial thought was that a joyrider must have driven a vehicle through the gate during the night, but the angle at which the gate was bent, and the way in which the fence was lying proved that any vehicle must have attacked the barrier from inside Tonford Field; but the only access to that field is through the damaged gate, so the driver would have had to smash the gate down from the opposite direction in order to gain entry and, once in, wouldn't need to push it the other way. The fact that there wasn't a trace of tyre marks in the soft ground beneath the bridge effectively excluded this scenario, which seems to leave the cattle themselves as the only possible culprits. Could someone or something have spooked them so badly that they charged at the gate and fence and simply sent it flying? This is quite possible, though the force needed to actually snap the barbed wire in two places would have been enormous – more than I would have thought the cattle could have exerted on it – and none of the heifers appeared to be injured from contact with the wire or heavy metal gate. What happened that night therefore remains a mystery, and we would be very interested to hear from anyone who thinks they may be able to shine some light on this murky saga.

A corollary to this incident was that because I hadn't repaired the gate latch when I rewired the fence, a week later I returned to the Marshes to find that all 27 cattle were grazing contentedly in the forbidden scrub field. They had presumably just rubbed or pushed against the gate, and it had given way. Judging by the amount of grass already consumed, they may have been in that field for more than a day. Fortunately, the animals were reasonably biddable, enabling me to round them up, return them to Tonford Field, and then repair the latch so that the same thing couldn't happen again. The damaged fencing has also been strengthened with barbed wire, but the broken post has still to be replaced, though the good news is that there have been no further breakouts.

Clearing riverside nettles

The jewel in the crown of Hambrook Marshes has to be the river Stour. This is a chalk stream, originating from springs at the base of the North Downs near Lenham (source of the Great Stour) and Postling (source of the East Stour, which joins the Great Stour at Ashford), and displaying all the typical features of chalk streams – wide, shallow, crystal-clear water, and with aquatic vegetation rooted in the stream bed, visible as great waving bands that reach up towards the surface to flower, such as water crowfoot. What is less widely appreciated is how rare such streams are globally - there are about 210 chalk streams in the world, 160 of which occur in England - and how

important it is that we cherish the Stour. But how are we to appreciate this asset if we can't even see it? Every summer for nearly its entire length alongside Hambrook, the river is hidden from view by a tall screen of vegetation, mainly stinging nettles. So, this year we decided to experiment with opening up three short stretches – roughly 20yd, 40yd and 60yd long. As expected, the shortest section was of least value, but the two longer ones have both given visitors a better view of the river. The dead vegetation has turned black, but this isn't too obvious from the path, and the initial positive reactions suggest that this simple project was a success, one that we can hope to repeat in future. Frequent cutting will reduce the strength of the nettles, and may eliminate them altogether, but nature abhors a vacuum, and other vegetation will take their place. This is all to the good, as we don't want to have bare banks that get washed away in winter floods, but some of the new species will grow as tall as the nettles they are replacing, so there will be a continuing need to mow for the indefinite future.



The photos above show the same view before and after mowing. This is looking towards the Canterbury East station bridge, which can just about be made out on the left-hand edge.



The next pair of before and after photos, above, were taken to the west of the A2 road bridge.

In the past the riverbank vegetation would have been kept short by grazing animals, such as still happens immediately upstream of Hambrook (see photo on next page), generating views that were immortalised in many of Sidney Cooper's famous paintings of the area.

We wouldn't wish to eradicate the nettles the entire length of the river, as they form a valued habitat in their own right. It is well-known that the larvae of small tortoiseshell, peacock and red admiral butterflies feed on nettle leaves, but there is a host of other invertebrate life lurking amongst the dense foliage, as witnessed by the house sparrows diving in each spring, feverishly seeking out quick snacks for their very demanding chicks. As you can see from the photo (right), the scene may be bucolic, but the tightly-grazed sward right down to the river's edge isn't going to be a brilliant habitat for many insects.



Wildlife Report

Last month I mentioned seeing an adult tufted duck landing on the river, and idly wondered if it was a lone summering adult or perhaps one of a pair that were nesting nearby. Well, just over two weeks later I received an answer, in the form of a brood of eight well-grown chicks on the river. Where the duck built her nest will never be known, but it is heartening that these shyer birds are able to find a secluded spot to breed in this heavily-used area of amenity land. I have since seen three of them on the river at Toddlers' Cove.

Warblers were congregating in the old railway embankment scrub early in the month, a sure sign that summer is giving way to autumn. Chiffchaffs, blackcaps and the odd whitethroat, mixed in with blue and great tits, formed the bulk of the assemblage, busily gorging on insects and fruit in preparation for their long flight to southern Europe and Africa.

This month's bird highlight was a little owl (right) calling from the centre of a riverside willow just off the Marshes – a new record for Hambrook, and my first owl of any description. Over the years I have paid dusk visits in the hope of seeing the ghostly form of a barn owl floating over the rougher fields, but so far without any success. This new bird brings to 95 the number of species seen on, over or near Hambrook, making the holy grail of a "ton" seem a real possibility. However, since it is 2½ years since my last new species, a coal tit, and an ever-lengthening hiatus can be expected between each discovery, I can't be sure that I'll be around to see the one hundredth bird.





Other notable bird records included an unexpectedly early snipe (left) on 25th, a bird that doesn't normally appear until September or October; an overflying flock of 70 black-headed gulls on 14th was also an early date for such a large number of these birds, which are essentially winter visitors. Seeing more than one or two cormorants at a time has become something of a rarity in recent years, and a group of five proved to be the largest for nearly five years. There are still plenty further down the valley, so it seems likely that they have

simply changed their flightpaths. A little egret seen perched in a tree overhanging the river was my first since April.

With 53 new plants identified this year, the Hambrook list now stands at 218 species, but the number of new finds has dropped rapidly in the last few weeks as the season tailed off. More will undoubtedly be found in 2018, and I look forward to reaching 250 by 2019!

The little egret banner heading on page 1, plus the little owl and snipe photos, are all courtesy of Dave Smith

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