

Newsletter

September 2017



Welcome

In modern business parlance Hambrook Marshes might be referred to as a community resource – two very overused and rather sterile words that fail to grasp the significance of the site, particularly to local people. The trustees would like to know what you think of the Marshes and our management, but there are few opportunities for residents to voice their opinions and make suggestions. We aim to rectify that by holding an open meeting on 13th November, to which all are invited. If you have an interest in Hambrook Marshes, and the fact that you are reading this suggests that you do, why not come along. For full details see below.

Talk and Open Meeting about Hambrook Marshes

Monday 13th November at 7.30pm

Ashford Road Community Association (ARCA) hall
151 Ashford Road
Thanington Without, Canterbury CT1 3XR

There will be a talk about some of the wildlife to be found there, followed by an open discussion session. Tea and coffee will be provided, and admission is free. Coming out from Canterbury, the entrance to the hall is on the left-hand side, opposite Tonford Lane.

The Five-Stour Fisherman

Since the Westgate Parks project was set up three years ago, Anna Bell, the development officer, has organised a scarecrow trail each October. These have been great fun, with some very inventive entries. This year, for the first time, Love Hambrook Marshes is submitting its own work of art, a seven-foot tall kingfisher, entitled “The Five-Stour Fisherman”. The photo shows a work in progress – still another day to go, so who’s worrying about getting it finished in time?! The trail is in Westgate Gardens and Toddlers Cove from **10am to 4pm on Saturday 7th October**. Maps showing the location of all the entries will be on sale, and the winner will be announced by the Lord Mayor at 3.45pm. So come and join in the fun (I wouldn’t presume to ask you to vote for our entry). Sad to say, kingfisher sightings have been in extremely short supply for a year, a fact commented upon by several of our regular visitors.



What’s happening on the marshes?

Cattle

The cattle have been moved from Tonford Field to the fields on either side of the old embankment, prior to them being taken off the Marshes around the end of October. They had to be driven through the intervening scrub field (see next section), which they had begun trashing when they escaped from Tonford Field last month.

Development of the Scrub Field

The scrub field is the area behind the new fence, installed last year, that runs diagonally from the A2 road bridge to the concreted crossing over the Whitehall stream, and the start of our little willow bed. Until last year it was part of the adjoining field that is managed for hay, being mown each autumn. However, much of it is too wet for the machinery to reach, and our grazer needed an easier way of moving his cattle from the Tonford Field to the Boardwalk Field. Creating the fenceline solved the grazer’s problem, and now meant that we had an ungrazed and unmown



triangle of land to manage as we chose.

With the blessing of Natural England, who grant-aid all the conservation work we carry out on Hambrook, we decided to allow it to scrub over. Most areas of open land in this country, whether arable, pasture, heathland, downland or water meadow will, in the absence of grazing and any interference by man, revert to woodland. Colonising tree and shrub seedlings that would previously have been grazed off by cattle at an early stage, now have a chance to grow. So far, our reversion project has a rather sparse cover of scrub, but hawthorn (four visible in the photo above), field maple, dogwood, alder, willow and wild rose have already crept in, and more will come. We haven't made a final decision about the long-term future of this patch; left to its own devices, the scrub will gradually evolve into mature woodland, a habitat hardly represented at Hambrook, and a pleasing contrast to the wide-open pasture. Alternatively, we could allow the cattle in periodically to limit the amount of scrub regeneration, coupling this with some felling of taller scrub. At present there are some attractive stands of water mint (below) and other wetland flowers, and it would be nice if we could retain this element as part of a scrub-and-meadow mosaic. The precise management route to be followed will be determined in part by the variety of wildlife that colonises the site, and partly by more mundane considerations such as manpower availability and costs. It looks as though natural change will be gradual, but the observant eye should detect, not a transformation, but a distinct shift in character over the next few years.



Campers

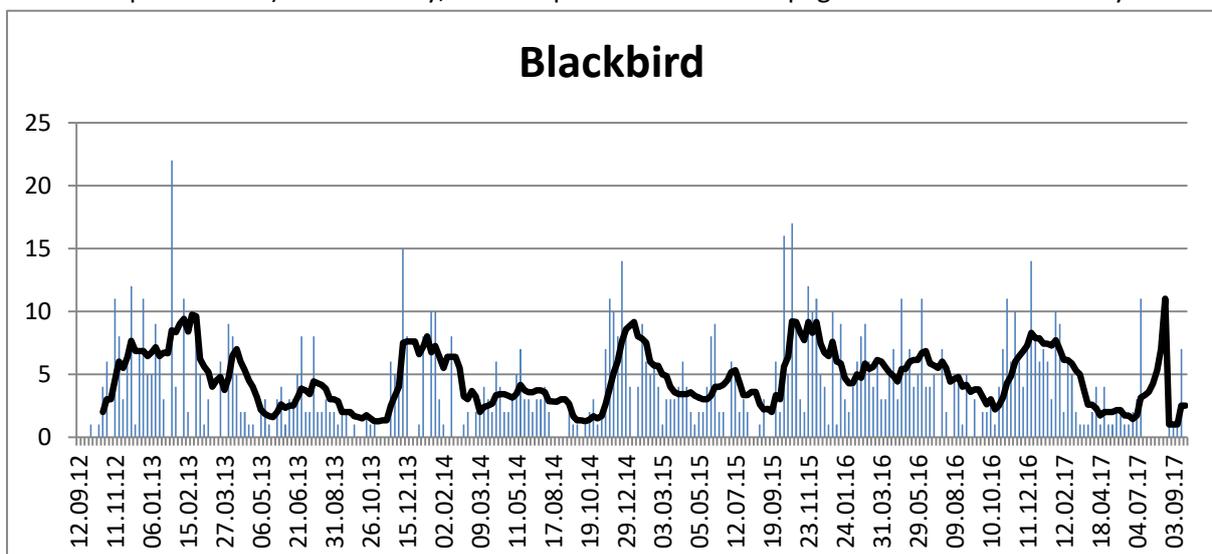
Unfortunately, we have had another thoughtless bunch of campers on the old railway embankment this month, leaving behind two supermarket trolleys, wooden pallets, tent, groundsheet, two chairs, and other assorted rubbish, including, most bizarrely, a litter picker! Cattle are extremely inquisitive creatures, and anything new entrances them, so this trolley (left) was thoroughly licked by an admiring herd!

Wildlife Report

Last month I commented on the passage of warblers, a sure sign that autumn was coming, a theme that has continued into September. A trickle of swallows (below right) and house martins (below left) passed quickly through, and most of the warblers have now gone. Moving against the receding



tide of departing summer visitors are the incoming birds from further north in the UK or across the North Sea and Channel from northern and eastern Europe, and even Russia. Into this category fall the three little grebes that appeared on the river nearby mid-month. Single meadow pipits have flown over in the past couple of weeks; four snipe turned up on 24th; and there has been a small-scale return of blackbirds and song thrushes. Casual observation of the last two species might indicate simply that they are always with us, but a glance at the long-term graph of numbers (below) shows that there is a definite periodicity, with numbers building up towards the end of each year (the thick black line is simply a smoothed trend curve, which helps to make the wilder fluctuations more comprehensible). Incidentally, the two photos on the next page demonstrate how easy it can



be to confuse the two species: male blackbirds are extremely distinctive, but females (below left) are much browner, with faint speckling on the breast, not so very dissimilar to their slightly smaller cousin, the song thrush (below right).



Other bird records included a handsome male pheasant seen twice In the Boardwalk Field – presumably the feckless absentee father of the family reared in Whitehall Meadow this summer. Cetti’s warbler burst into song on 3rd and 17th; ten magpies were present on 17th; up to four mute swans have been on the river, the first since June while a grey wagtail was the first since May.

A single plant of lesser swine cress (right) was found growing on the steps up to the viewpoint on the old railway embankment. This is a very low, nondescript plant with tiny greenish flowers, so not the sort of specimen that artists vie to paint prettily or that poets swoon over. Like so many of our weeds, it is not native to this country, first being found here in 1892, but now thriving in Kent. Our forebears found a myriad uses for all manner of plants – medicinal, nutritional, cloth-making and so on, but a few species seem to have taxed their imagination too severely. Naming it “swine” indicates that it was considered worthless, just as dog’s mercury was supposed fit only for dogs.





An interesting addition to my very meagre mammal list this month was a grey squirrel, seen twice on the old railway embankment. Crossing the adjoining electrified railway line would represent a distinct hazard, but it could easily have arrived along a fairly wooded corridor from Toddlers Cove and beyond. I have seen a squirrel out on marshland, half a mile from the nearest tree, so crossing the odd allotment or playing field would be no barrier to a pioneering squirrel.

Photos of birds and squirrel are all courtesy of Dave Smith

Registered charity no. 1156473