

Newsletter

October 2017



Welcome

At times, especially early in the morning, when the roads are quiet and few trains are trundling through the valley, it is possible to lose yourself in the tranquillity of the Marshes, and imagine that you are in the depths of the countryside. Alas, the bubble of any such cherished illusions was certainly burst this month, starting with the disfigurement caused by a burnt-out motorbike beside the footbridge over to Wincheap. The focus of anti-social activity then moved a short distance to the A2 bridge, where the river was blighted by no fewer than six supermarket trolleys that had been dumped in the water at about the same time that the eyesore of a huge mass of household rubbish was deposited on the far bank; the culmination of all this was an awful car crash the next day. These events are dealt with in "What's happening on the marshes?" on page 2. You may therefore be wondering if all of the above seems to make a mockery of the "Welcome" title to this section: for the trustees it is a very high priority that the Marshes should be a welcoming place to everyone, of all ages, but it can be an uphill struggle at times. Our policy on rubbish of all descriptions is to remove it from the site as swiftly as possible, but the one in a billion chance of a car crashing onto the riverside path was an event totally outside our control, although thankfully the emergency services and clean-up gang did a good job of returning the Marshes to normal as quickly as they could. We know that many of you will have seen some of the depressing sights listed here, but hope they haven't dented your love of the area, and that you do indeed still feel that Hambrook Marshes is a place that welcomes you.

Talk and Open Meeting about Hambrook Marshes

A final reminder about the free evening meeting on Monday 13th November. Our giant kingfisher that dived into the Westgate Parks Scarecrow Trail early in the month (see below) will be on display, in case you missed it first time round. Here are the details:

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 on the Marshes, and the work carried out to maintain its conservation value, 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.

What's happening on the marshes?



The Five-Stour Fisherman

On 7th October the Friends of Westgate Parks held their third Scarecrow Trail, with over seventy entries of all shapes and sizes dotted around the Westgate Gardens and Toddlers' Cove. This year, for the first time, the trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes entered our very own scarecrow. An outsized kingfisher seemed an appropriate symbol for us to adopt (though one visitor was heard to remark "That's not a scarecrow!"), and we named it *The Five-Stour Fisherman*. This was an opportunity to familiarise the public with our name, though in retrospect we could have improved the impact by setting up a small notice explaining who we are and what we do. If the trail is repeated next year and we have the energy to start all over again with the construction of another scarecrow, we'll certainly make sure that we don't miss out on that extra little bit of publicity.

Hay making

Unfortunately, this didn't go quite to plan; our contractor was unable to fit the work in with a period of dry weather, so in the end he just mowed most of the area and had to leave the cut grass lying.

Cattle

All the cows were taken off by our grazier this month. They have certainly grown markedly in the six months that they've been here and were no longer the small, gangly youths that arrived in April.

Rubbish

As already mentioned in the Welcome section, this was a bad month for rubbish, with six trolleys dumped under the A2 bridge, a horrible mass of rubbish abandoned under the bridge on the far side of the river (not part of the Marshes, so beyond our direct control), and a burnt-out motorbike near the footbridge to the Park and Ride area. Fortunately, a number of phonecalls to SERCO and the council's Streetscene Enforcement team, plus shaming the council on the Facebook Grotspots site resulted in all the eyesores being dealt with eventually. Volunteers on a Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership workday cleared the trolleys for us.

Car crash

You may have read about the extraordinary incident on 9th October when a car went out of control on the A2, crashed through the safety barrier on the road bridge and landed on the riverside path. Miraculously, neither driver nor passenger were seriously injured, apparently, though it was well over an hour before the fire brigade were able to free the passenger from the car, which had crashed onto its side. An air ambulance landed in Tonford Field (below right) close to the accident; as luck would have it, the cattle had been moved to another field a few days earlier – it is anybody's guess as to what they would have made of this shiny machine appearing out of the sky and parking itself on their home ground. The severity of the impact had caused the engine to separate from the vehicle, and the surrounding area was covered with oil and car parts, large and small. Later in the day the car was winched up onto the road for disposal, while a team cleared away the mess and mopped up the bulk of the oil. The Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership had a scheduled work party three days later, and were able to repair the fences that had been cut to allow access for the fire brigade and paramedics.



The end of the world?

I can't end this section without a mention of the end of the world on 17th October – the day the light turned yellow and the sun a dull red. This phenomenon, apparently due to a combination of Saharan sand and debris from the Portuguese wildfires being whisked up into the atmosphere by Hurricane Ophelia, should act as a salutary reminder to us that we aren't in control of the weather, let alone the climate. The name Ophelia may conjure up images of a languid pre-Raphaelite maiden draped in gauze and floating gently

downriver, but the reality is that the energy bound up in our weather systems dwarfs anything we can do. We can't yet be certain that the increasing ferocity and number of hurricanes in recent years is due to a human-induced rise in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but the "end of the world" scenario played out three weeks ago should warn us of what we may be unleashing.

Wildlife Report

Signs of winter included the first three tufted duck on Tonford Lake on 10th, redwings and song thrushes on 18th; 65 black-headed gulls flying over on 23rd; three lesser redpolls (below) on 23rd; two siskins and five goldcrests on 29th. Also on 29th, a single skylark (right) flying over was another sure

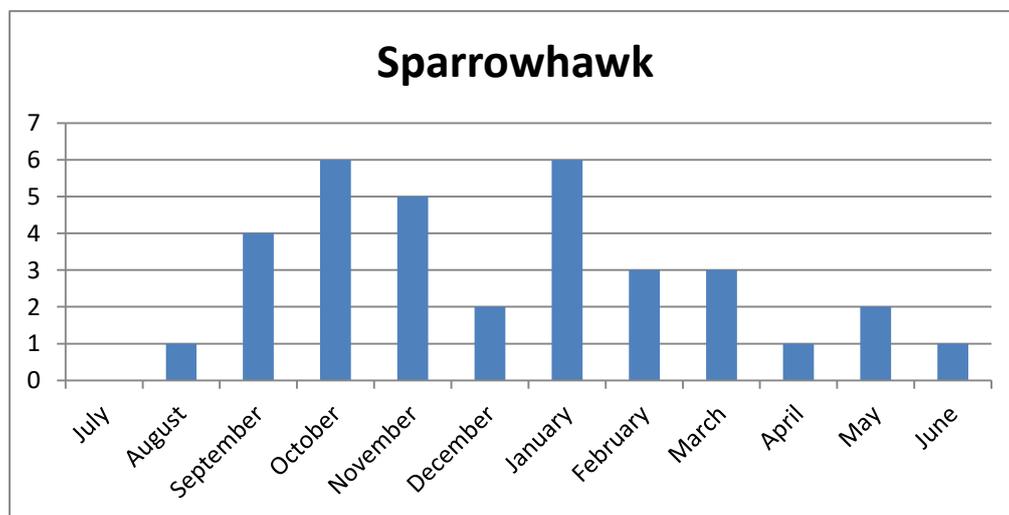


indication that summer has departed, although it is a puzzle that I have recorded so few – just 22 in the past five years (I've seen more flying over my garden in Rough Common during the same period).



In September I reported on the presence of four swans on the river; this month there have been up to nine, although the nucleus remains a group of four sub-adults. These are birds that have shed their dowdy coffee-coloured feathers and are now resplendent in dazzling white, but their beaks have yet to assume the vivid orange of birds that have reached breeding age.

Sparrowhawks aren't regular visitors to the Marshes, but there is a definite pattern to their appearances, as shown clearly in the bar chart below. Sightings are mainly in the winter (though with an anomalous dip in December), with very few during the period April to August. So the one I saw this month, the first since January, fits into this pattern. Along with many of our so-called native birds, the sparrowhawk population is boosted in winter by birds from Scandinavia and beyond, hoping to escape the rigours of a continental winter.



Birds adopt a variety of strategies for avoiding predators: some water birds literally dive for cover, while others take to the air in a desperate bid to outfly avian predators, but some opt to lie low, relying on camouflage for their protection. But what happens if the predator sees the crouching bird, or stumbles upon it by chance? The bird must hold its nerve for as long as possible, but there comes a point when it judges that if the fox or other predator comes one step closer the game will be up; it is forced to abandon its hiding place and erupt into flight. That is precisely what a handsome cock pheasant did when I walked across the old embankment the other day. I hadn't spotted the bird, but it felt I was too close for comfort, and it simply exploded into the air, which is very bad for the heart –mine, that is!

While clearing up minor debris from the car crash, I noticed a new, but perhaps not that exciting, plant - small nettle. A much less common relative of the stinging nettle, it also stings, but has smaller leaves, which are more clustered, and tight bunches of tiny green flowers, unlike the catkins of the more familiar nettle. It prefers lighter, drier soil, and the ground just there is probably the only suitable spot for it on the Marshes. It is in the rain shadow of the A2 bridge, and the cattle use it as a dunging area, giving rise over the years to a completely different soil structure.



Claire Aldis spotted these two koi carp (left) in the Whitehall stream recently, presumably dumped by someone bored with looking after them. I haven't been able to spot them, but they may by now have moved into the Stour or further back into the ditch system. History tells us that it is always a bad idea to release non-native species into the wild, but the common carp, which originated in Asia, has been domesticated for hundreds of years, reared in ponds by monks for consumption on Fridays when they weren't allowed meat. It is now thought that koi may be a separate species, rather than a variety of common carp. They are bottom-feeders, stirring up mud in lakes or slow-flowing rivers, so are unlikely to thrive in the stony Stour. Thanks to Claire for allowing me to publish her photo.

Photos of birds are all courtesy of Dave Smith

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