



Newsletter

December 2017



Welcome

The trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes have established two key principles, which are the cornerstones to everything we do on the marshes: access for all and management for wildlife. To those ends, we have kept open all the pre-existing paths – none of them public rights of way – and aimed to maintain the high water levels that benefit wetland animals and plants. However, these two objectives can make uneasy bedfellows: so, for example, recent rain meant that the boardwalk field has finally become fairly waterlogged, and a couple of snipe were probing the soft ground when a woman with her dog walked right across the field, flushing the birds as she went. As we don't request that people keep to the path, she was doing nothing wrong but, because most visitors don't go off-piste, the central part of that field is normally left undisturbed. We therefore either have to accept that birds are not a top priority in that field – the whole of Tonford Field, the largest unit on the Marshes, is, after all, set aside as a people-free area – or we have to put up notices, and perhaps fences, to keep people away from sensitive areas. To further complicate the picture, another of the trustees' principles is that there should be a presumption against adding infra-structure: we want the area to have a natural feel to it, which means not putting up signs or fences unless absolutely essential.

Five people responded to our appeal for new trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes, and are currently being interviewed. We hope to announce the appointments shortly, but whoever joins us will regularly be confronted with issues such as finding the right balance between access and wildlife, as outlined above.

What's happening on the marshes?

Development in headless swan saga

Last month we reported the discovery of a headless and neckless swan. It was assumed that it had hit a nearby overhead electricity cable, although that would not normally result in decapitation. Interestingly, just a few days later there were reports that no fewer than six headless swans had been found in south London (Birchmere Park and Southmere Lake); park staff were wondering if a deviant person was deliberately carrying out these barbaric acts for pleasure or as part of some satanic ritual. Is it possible that someone locally has the same warped attitude to wildlife? I'm not sure that the Stour swans are actually tame enough to be caught by hand, so that rather suggests the bird would have been shot first and then recovered. Whatever the cause of this swan's death, it is a great shame to see our largest bird meeting such an unpleasant end.

Vandalism

After a relatively quiet period during the summer and autumn, the Marshes have once more been targeted by vandals. This time their attention was turned to a couple of kissing gates at the Whitehall Road entrance. Damage to one gate was quite severe, but fortunately repairable.

Wildlife Report

I'm distinctly relieved to report that Hambrook is no longer a marsh in name only (and so in breach of the Trade Descriptions Act!) as, by the end of the month, there were pools in all the fields and the ground felt and sounded distinctly squelchy underfoot. Birds were quick to respond, with a flock of 80 black-headed gulls (below) resting and feeding in one field in the dying hours of 2017. Even more amazingly, one of the birds was virtually in summer plumage, with an almost complete brown hood. The snipe flock had built up from just one in mid-November to 27 on 24th December, and 40 a week later. Moorhens are also more in evidence, with 15 feeding on the grass verge beside the river, the



best count since last February, and on the nearby Tonford Lake the tufted duck flock increased to 14, its highest level this winter. So, all in all, it was very satisfying to witness the area reverting to what it ought to look like at this time of year.

I was also delighted to hear a water rail (right) squawking from a boundary ditch twice this month. As it is such a skulking, secretive bird, it is always tempting to be satisfied with the pig-like squeal as sufficient proof of the bird's presence, but on the second occasion I decided to investigate further, and was rewarded with the sight of the slender, rather diminutive rail padding its way along a vegetation-clogged ditch, oblivious to my existence. If you are lucky enough to get a half-decent view, its relationship to moorhens is immediately evident, from the jerky manner of its gait to the white-backed tail that is nervously flicked up periodically, but there the resemblance ends, as the water rail has quite a long, reddish bill, brown back and blue-grey front with black and white vertical striping on its flanks; a rather mysterious bird, well-repaying the effort of tracking it down.



Magpie numbers have declined in recent years, the counts of up to 26 in 2013 and 2014 not being matched since, so the sight of 13 of these much-maligned but very handsome birds on 18th made an interesting change.



and miserable specimens of holm oak (above), its leaves looking remarkably like diminutive holly: indeed, its Latin name is *Quercus ilex*, *Quercus* referring to the genus or larger grouping of all oaks, while the specific name, *ilex*, matches the generic name for hollies! Not an attractive tree to my eye, this introduction from the eastern Mediterranean is salt-tolerant and so has become well-established around the Kent coast. Growing right next to the holm oaks is another evergreen – privet (right). This shrub is a native, growing best on chalk, but the

At this time of year botanists tend to go into hibernation, as there are virtually no plants in flower, and many have disappeared without trace, the presence of their seeds in the soil being their only tenuous assurance for the perpetuation of the species. There are, however, a few evergreen species to be looked for, most notably ivy on the old railway embankment, a late-flowering climber that has now produced its crop of black berries. Nearby, where the path goes through a gap in the embankment, you may find a few rather small



privet beloved of suburban gardeners is a different species, originating from Japan, with fairly rounded foliage, whereas the one in the photo can be seen to possess quite long, spear-like leaves.

*Photos of water rail and black-headed gull courtesy of Dave Smith
Banner photo on page 1 is of frosted ivy on the old railway embankment*

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