

# Newsletter

February 2018



## Welcome

Well, we can't say we didn't get plenty of warning about the Arctic blast! Unfortunately, I couldn't cycle down to the Marshes until late morning, by which time most of the wonderful snow tracery on the tree branches had been blown away, and yet I was too early to enjoy a clear blue sky with the sun working its magic on the scene; that was for people to marvel at the following day when, regrettably, I was unable to visit. What struck me most forcibly on 27<sup>th</sup> though, was that already, by 11 o'clock, the white blanket was far from pristine, and that in excess of a hundred intrepid walkers had braved the wind from the steppes. This set me thinking about what a treasured asset the marsh is for local people, prepared to venture out when the wind chill factor is approaching double figures, and you might expect all sane folk to be ensconced indoors with a hot drink. I believe it all goes to show that we have an incredibly strong primordial urge to get out in pioneering spirit and revel in the countryside, no matter what the weather may throw at us.

## What's happening on the marshes?

A student from the University of Kent at Canterbury is setting up a Kent project on little owls, a species that has declined by 65% in the past 25 years. This involves erecting numerous suitable nest boxes and, as this diminutive owl has been recorded around the edge of Hambrook, the student was keen to put up boxes here. So, on a wet morning I showed him round the site, and he concluded that there was scope for the erection of two boxes, which he intended putting up the following

weekend. Unfortunately, work on installing boxes at other sites in Kent took longer than expected, and he didn't have time to do the work at Hambrook, so we remain deprived of little owl boxes for the time being.

There was a spate of campers alongside the river during the month. Notices were pinned to tents, and the occupants were asked to leave; whether or not it was as a result of our requests, three of the campers did move on fairly soon, but a fourth one, in a small, bright blue tent, has obstinately remained on site. A visit by the City Council's enforcement unit made no impression, and we became concerned for the young man's welfare during the recent icy weather. He has been seen by someone from the council's homelessness unit and by a worker from Catching Lives, a Canterbury-based homelessness charity, but the man has so far refused all offers of help, and so is still coping with the frost and snow. There seems to be nothing more that we can do.

Each year we receive a grant from Natural England, the government's conservation advisers, and had arranged for their grants officer to visit us for a walk around the site, so that we could gain a greater insight into what habitat management can and cannot be carried out within the constraints of the grant. Unfortunately, the date coincided with the arrival of snow and travel chaos, so we had to cancel the meeting. A better understanding of the grant system may enable us to plan projects that will improve the marshes for wildlife – digging out shallow areas of water, making some of the fields wetter and so on.

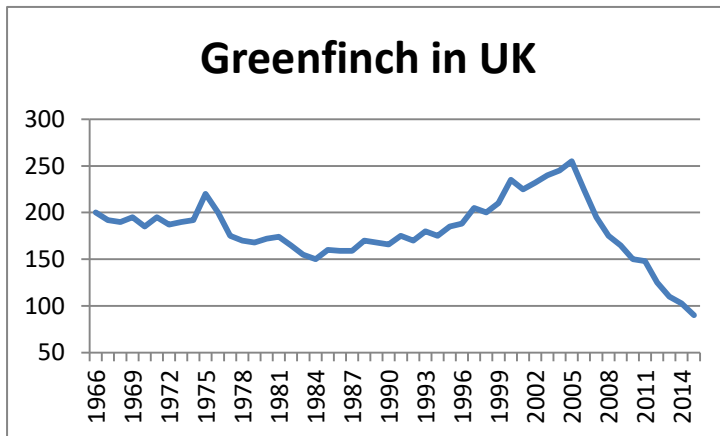
## Wildlife Report



The month began with magpies nest-building and ended with several centimetres of snow and temperatures down to -6°C. During a brief visit on 27<sup>th</sup> I had hoped that I might see a few lapwings sitting out the blizzard on Tonford field, but was disappointed not to record any signs of hard weather movements apart from four fieldfares flying over.

It is sometimes claimed that only humans are geometrically-minded – thinking and acting in straight lines – but the photo (left) suggests that moles can be quite Euclidean, and this individual seems to have taken delight in the precision of his boring direction. However, closer inspection reveals that the animal had been burrowing alongside a straight path on the marsh; the soil beneath the path would be more compacted and stonier, so the mole may simply have been using these features as its cue when digging such a uniform tunnel.

Two mute swans briefly returned to our stretch of the Stour after a three-month absence, but have disappeared again. 24 black-headed gulls were resting on Tonford Lake on 13<sup>th</sup>.



Otherwise, bird interest has revolved around the smaller species, with a flock of 30 goldfinches flying over on 13<sup>th</sup>, the same day that 18 meadow pipits perched prettily on the barbed wire and posts of a short stretch of fencing. Just off Hambrook on 25<sup>th</sup> nine linnets were calling, along with a solitary greenfinch. Some months ago I mentioned the decline of the greenfinch in recent years, and the graph (left) illustrates this appallingly clearly. The cause is a protozoan

disease, trichomonosis, which is prevalent amongst pigeons and other groups, but seems to have hit greenfinches particularly hard. It creates difficulty in swallowing, causing individuals to regurgitate food that is then eaten by other birds, which in turn become infected. Colonial birds like the greenfinch are therefore at greater risk than more solitary species such as the robin. The advice is to clean the areas around feeding stations regularly, disinfect feeders with a 5% solution of bleach, and to move feeders around the garden in order to lessen a buildup of the parasite in any one spot.



Fieldfares (above) flew over Hambrook on 27<sup>th</sup>, and were feeding on the Marshes on 3<sup>rd</sup> March. Not normally seen here, their presence was part of the phenomenon of cold weather movements undertaken by many species in response to severe weather. More about this in the next newsletter!

*Fieldfare photo courtesy of Dave Smith.  
Banner photo on page 1 is of snow accumulating around  
The base of reedmace stems beside the boardwalk*

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