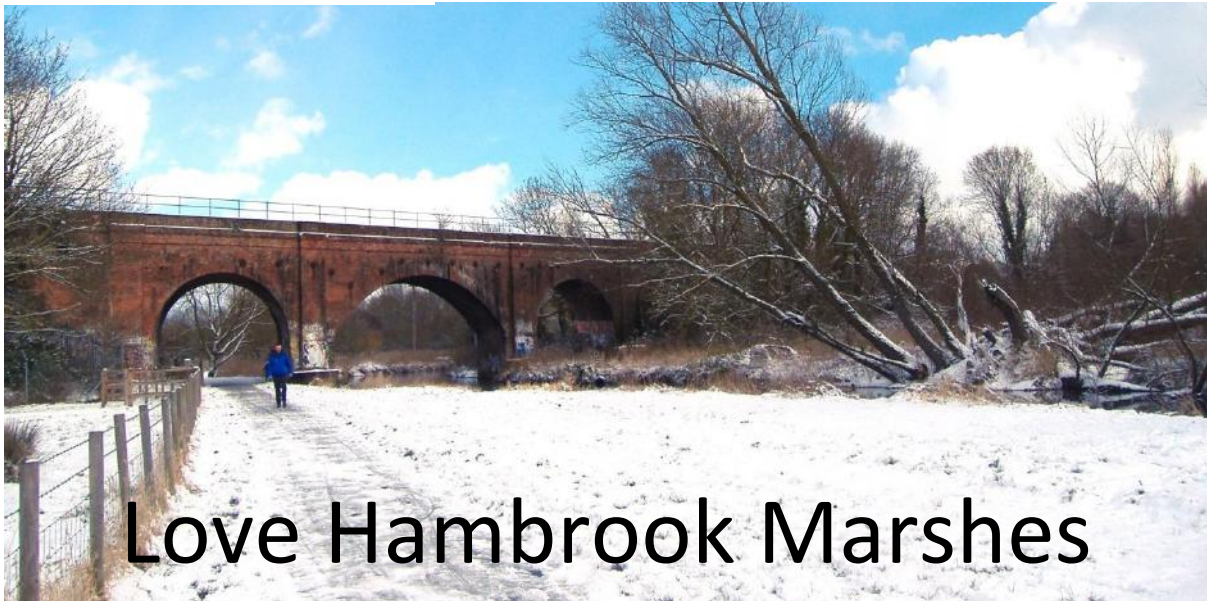


# Newsletter

March 2018



## Welcome

Writing this on a fairly sunny, mild day in early April, the snowy scene above seems a little anachronistic, but it is only five weeks since the “Beast from the East” struck, blanketing Hambrook Marshes in snow for a few days. The Wildlife Report on pages 2-4 describes some of the impacts of that icy blast. After a cold March we have, with any luck, turned a corner, and can hopefully look forward to some pleasant spring weather and flowery meadows in the coming weeks.

## What’s happening on the marshes?

The central field, containing the willow maze opposite the footbridge to the Park and Ride, is being managed as a hay meadow, which involves mowing it every autumn, and removing the cut material to reduce the build-up of nutrients that would favour coarse grasses. It already supports a number of species not found in the other fields that are grazed by cattle, and recently a large amount of yellow rattle seed (right), collected from a meadow in Blean, was spread in several areas. Papery purses encase seed that rattles when mature, so giving the plant its common name. Another feature of the plant is that it is semi-



parasitic: unlike true parasitic plants, which lack chlorophyll and are totally dependent on their hosts for all nourishment, yellow rattle has green leaves, but supplements its ability to generate starches and sugars by latching onto the roots of grasses, and hijacking some of the food being manufactured by the unwilling host. This has the effect of stunting the grass growth, so leaving more space in which the rattle, and other less competitive species, can thrive. This parasitic habit is therefore a very useful tool when creating a meadow, assisting in turning a dull and uniform grass habitat into something much more diverse, alive with colour and bees in summer.

Two approaches were adopted when sowing, with some seed simply being broadcast over the sward after I had raked off some of the overlying thatch to give the seeds a better chance of reaching bare soil; in another area the turf was removed with a spade and seed scattered generously over the bare patch (right). Yellow rattle thrives on damp soil, but it remains to be seen if the ground at Hambrook is too wet for it to germinate.

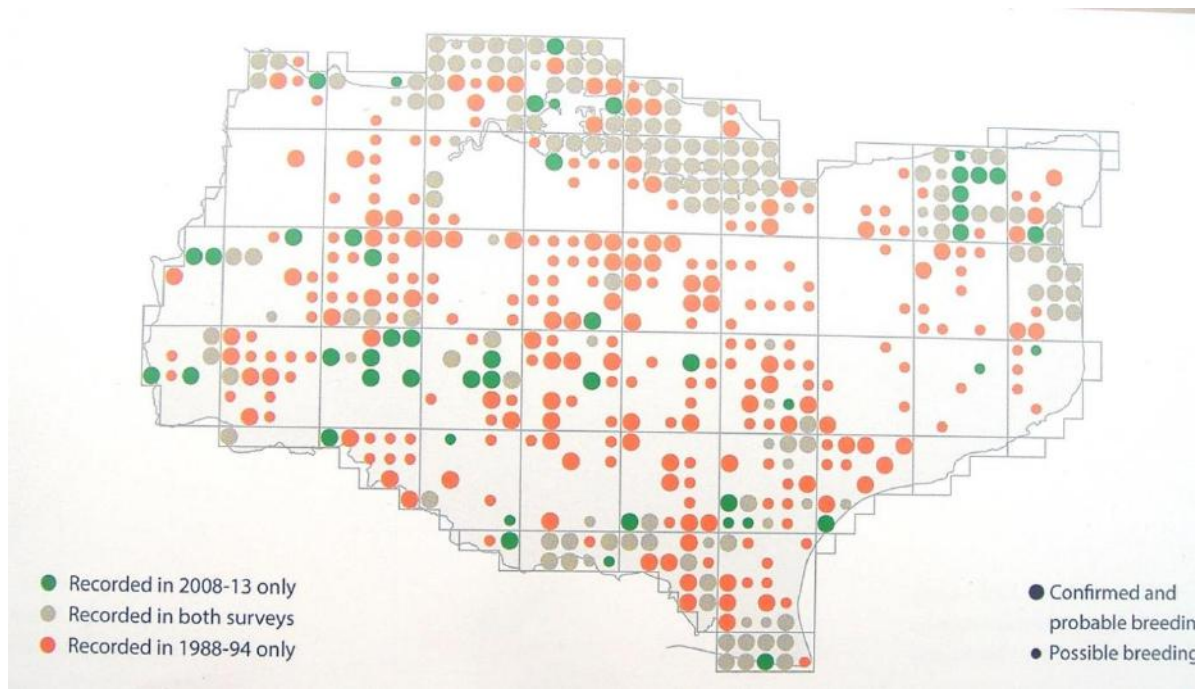


## Wildlife Report

The main feature of the month was a continuation of late February's cold spell, with several notable bird records that were entirely due to the "Beast from the East". The month got off to a very poor start for wildlife with a day of freezing rain: this occurs when snow falls through a warmer layer of air, and melts to rain which, landing on the ground or on vegetation that is below freezing, instantly turns to ice. In this way every surface can become covered in a layer of ice, effectively sealing in any insects that may be present on leaves, twigs and branches. Insectivorous birds then have an extremely hard time of it, especially the smallest species, such as wren and goldcrest which, with a high ratio of surface area to weight, lose heat much faster than do larger birds. A phenomenon associated with unusually cold periods is that of hard weather movements; this is when birds move en masse away from areas that are frozen solid, making food unavailable. Although skylarks are



well-known for these hard weather movements, I didn't record any at Hambrook, but I did see four lapwings (left) feeding in a snowy field immediately southwest of the old railway embankment on 3<sup>rd</sup>. This is another species easily pushed out of its preferred feeding grounds by extreme conditions. Lapwings are in serious decline in England, and have all but disappeared from huge areas of Kent where they bred as recently as 30 years ago.



The map above, taken from the Kent Ornithological Society's recently published Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Kent, illustrates this decline all too clearly: the abundance of orange spots demonstrates that it has been wiped out in central Kent, and it is now largely confined to the North Kent marshes, Thanet and Dungeness as a breeding species (grey and green dots). Incidentally, the atlas from which that map was taken originally retailed at £22.50, but the KOS is now offering copies for just £10 if you would like to buy one, please contact [michaelwalter434@gmail.com](mailto:michaelwalter434@gmail.com) (postage extra, if required).

During the cold snap the areas normally occupied by our wintering flock of snipe were completely frozen and therefore useless as feeding grounds, but on 3<sup>rd</sup> I managed to find five snipe that were eking out an existence along the banks of the ditch running beside the old railway embankment; the flow of water was sufficiently strong to keep ice at bay, and so offered the birds a lifeline. Three teal, which would normally be in the traditional snipe area, were also hanging on in that small ditch. The same day 14 fieldfares and 55 starlings were feeding in Tonford field, another sign of the harsh conditions. A little further downstream, on Bingley Island (opposite Toddlers' Cove) I was startled to flush a woodcock; this is a largish, plump wader that, unlike most other wading birds, has evolved to a life in woodland habitats. When the feeding grounds in which they have been sheltering during the winter freeze rock-hard, they, too, will be on the move, and can turn up anywhere, including in back gardens. During my next visit on 11<sup>th</sup> 23 redwings (right), another Scandinavian thrush that winters with us, were congregating noisily on the old embankment. More sociable than our familiar blackbirds and song thrushes, redwings tend to move around in flocks during the winter months,



exploiting any concentrated food sources, such as windblown apples in orchards. Towards the end of their period in this country they start to get restless, as if their minds are turning towards the approaching breeding season, and flocks will often perch in trees to indulge in a delightful communal chorus of twittering, technically known as sub-song. This fairly subdued but companionable chatter is what I heard drifting from the embankment trees that morning. Exactly what purpose is served by this is unknown, but it may well help the birds to come into breeding condition, and perhaps increase the flock's cohesion in preparation for their flight across the North Sea.

By the end of the month we had reached the usual hybrid period, neither winter nor spring, when there were still up to 37 wintering snipe and five teal, together with flocks of 80 wood pigeons at the edge of the marsh on 20<sup>th</sup>, and 28 magpies on 9<sup>th</sup>, but a reed bunting was singing on 6<sup>th</sup>, after a winter spent elsewhere, a chiffchaff freshly returned from the Mediterranean was pumping out its two, simple, staccato notes on 20<sup>th</sup>, and on 31<sup>st</sup> a pair of mandarin ducks were investigating the willow tree nesthole that they have occupied for at least the previous two years. We may still have many a wintry blast to contend with, but it really is beginning to look as though the sweet breath of spring can be felt on our cold necks.

*All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith.*

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