



Newsletter

April 2018



Welcome

One man's fence-cutting vandalism is another man's handy short cut for his dog, but snipping a square hole in the stock fencing around Tonford field was definitely unwelcome. As has been said before, the trustees have twin objectives in managing Hambrook Marshes: we want to maintain and improve access for local people and visitors, so that everyone can enjoy the countryside that lies so close to Canterbury High Street, but we also wish to improve the site's value for wildlife.

Untrammelled access for people and their dogs to all parts of the Marshes would certainly not be beneficial to birds, so we have designated Tonford field as an area that should remain undisturbed. Thus there are no pedestrian gates, stiles or paths through the field, and winter floods attract in flocks of snipe - birds that would fly off as soon as a dog ran by. In spring and summer moorhens and mallard nest on the ground amongst tufts of rushes (a mallard with eleven ducklings was in the field this morning), and these species could also be adversely affected by canine disturbance. We therefore hope that you appreciate the value of having an area that is not open to the public, content to know that, even if you can't see the birds, your exclusion is enabling them to forage and breed undisturbed.

What's happening on the marshes?

Marsh marigolds planted

Twenty-nine marsh marigolds that had been grown from seed collected early last summer from plants beside the river in Westgate Gardens, were planted at various points around the Marshes. All survived and flowered, and should become more conspicuous next year as the plants develop. A good place to look out for them will be at either end of the boardwalk, where this photo (right) was taken, but they have finished flowering for this year and have now receded into the riot of



rampant new greenery. The marsh marigold, also known by the rather appealing name of kingcup, is quite a brash species, providing a welcome splash of colour early in the year when few other plants are flowering. It belongs to the buttercup family and, like the buttercup which is so abundant in some of Hambrook's grazed fields, is distasteful to livestock, so I'm hoping they won't get eaten by the cattle, though I have to accept that some are bound to get fairly badly trampled by the uncaring beasts, thirteen of which arrived at the end of the month, with more young heifers due to be brought in shortly.



Great sheep escape

Excitement this month came on 10th in the form of 112 uninvited sheep that had escaped from the field immediately upriver from Hambrook. The combined efforts of some trustees and volunteers resulted in their being herded back to their rightful field. It was fortunate that we were alerted to the problem in good time as, now that we have got rid of all the cattle grids, no obstacles lay between them, Toddlers' Cove and freedom!

Vandalism

No great harm was done by the errant sheep on this occasion, which is more than can be said of the recent vandalism when the handrails alongside both sets of steps up to the viewing point were ripped out and burnt one evening. We aim to keep the Marshes accessible to all, and the flat terrain

certainly assists people with mobility problems, but many visitors enjoy the opportunity to ascend the steps to get a bird's-eye view of the valley, and they appreciate the help provided by the handrails. It is therefore particularly annoying that anyone could be so thoughtless and uncaring as to deny some of our less physically able visitors the opportunity to take in the view. We therefore hope to replace both handrails shortly, using stouter posts, and possibly recycled plastic rails that are less combustible. Below are two sets of before and after photos, showing newly installed rails on the left and the unsatisfactory situation now on the right.



Wildlife Report

Twenty snipe were still present on 1st, and the last I saw was a flock of 14 on 9th. They, along with all the other winter visitors – little grebe, black-headed gulls, tufted duck, meadow pipit and stonechat – had departed by the end of the month. The vacated area meant that our summer visitors could be ushered in; the March chiffchaffs were joined this month by blackcap and whitethroat on 9th, and a

cuckoo was heard nearby on 26th, though someone else had heard a distant one a fortnight earlier. Lesser black-backed gull, mainly a summer visitor here, was first seen on 1st.



A rook and 27 jackdaws feeding in Tonford Field on 9th were the first I had seen on the ground at Hambrook for a whole year. In 2013 and 2014 it was not unusual to see double figures of both species, and exceptionally up to 100, on that field, so why are they no longer to be sought there? I have a theory about this, and hope to expound on it in a future newsletter.

The most surprising record of the year to date was of a hawfinch (left) flying over on 9th. These are chunky finches with parrot-like bills that can crack open cherry stones to extract the edible kernel. An inhabitant of woods containing its favourite tree seeds, the hawfinch has declined markedly in recent years, and is now a rare bird in Kent, but last autumn there was an influx of continental birds to the UK, and it is quite likely that the bird I saw was on its way back “home” in northern or eastern Europe.

In the Boardwalk field, our snake’s-head fritillaries (right) struggle on, with five seen, the same as last year. Given that Kent Enterprise Trust, the previous owners, had planted 7000 bulbs in 2011, it is evident that conditions in that field are not suitable for these supremely elegant flowers. Once a widespread plant of damp meadows, the fritillary declined enormously in the 20th century as farming practices changed, and it is now more or less confined to a handful of nature reserves. Traditionally it flourished in fields that were managed as hay meadows, so it may be that the introduction of grazing to the Boardwalk field has been the death knell for this charming flower. One option would be to try again, but this time to plant the bulbs in our hay meadow – the triangular field opposite the footbridge to the park and ride – where they wouldn’t suffer the indignity of being chewed.



April roared out with gales and 58.5mm (2.3”) of rain recorded on an abysmal last day of the month, resulting in inevitable flooding at the start of May. More on that in the next newsletter.

Photo of hawfinch courtesy of Dave Smith.

*Banner photo at top of page 1
is of lesser celandine*

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