



Newsletter

May 2018



Welcome

The photo above is a reminder of how the month began: after an almost unprecedented 58mm (2.3") of rain on 30th April, Hambrook Marshes duly flooded, albeit fairly briefly. We shouldn't be that amazed, or even surprised, the clue being in the site's name. The Marshes lie in the Stour floodplain, and for thousands of years the river has periodically inundated the surrounding low-lying land. Floodwater brings with it a burden of nutrient-rich soil, which settles out of the water as a fine silt layer – it was the Nile's annual flooding that made agriculture possible in Egypt. In the absence of extensive pumped-drainage schemes, flooding and the associated high water table make the valley more suited to pasture than arable – hence the numerous bucolic scenes depicted by the local Victorian artist, Thomas Sidney Cooper, of cows lying in the shade of a gnarled tree or wallowing in the shallow river. By overtopping its banks, the river is slowing the rate at which floodwater goes downstream, and in its small way Hambrook Marshes reduces the risk of Canterbury flooding. This is a lesson that is only now being learnt by a new generation of water engineers, after hundreds of years of rivers being deepened, straightened and cleared of any obstructions, which simply allowed a greater volume of water to threaten towns at the first bottleneck downstream. Thankfully, river management is becoming more benign, and the Stour still retains elements of a natural drainage system. So, next time you feel frustrated by your inability to use the flooded riverside walk, rejoice instead in the spectacle of untrammelled nature doing what it has always done, long before humans attempted to impose order on a turbulent environment.

What's happening on the marshes?

I've already mentioned the flooding at the start of the month, which temporarily put some of the paths under 6" or more of water. Our new sluice has seen rather little action since it was installed, its function being to permit water above a specified level to drain into the river, but with the river so high the system was operating in reverse, with river water gushing up the pipe and into Tonford Field, some of it then finding its way onto the riverside path, so adding to the woes of passers-by not fortunate or prudent enough to be wearing wellingtons.

We have started experimenting with different mowing regimes between the river and the main path. For the past two years the policy has been to mow from the path right up to the river edge on a monthly basis. This has the benefit of reducing the dominance of nettles, but led to the creation of a somewhat manicured, park-like appearance. Mowing this year is still being done monthly, but the cutter blades are set higher, so the impact is less severe, and mowing is restricted to a strip alongside the path and another beside the river, the grass in between these two strips being allowed to grow on. This enables cow parsley and other plants to flower, so adding to the appeal of the riverside walk. Further adjustments may be made as we assess the results.

Young heifers started returning to Hambrook, and by the end of the month there were 34 beasts contentedly chewing their way through the thick growth of grass that had been encouraged by continuously damp soil.

Wildlife Report

It's been a fairly quiet month; bird migration has ended and half the bird population melted away as females unobtrusively incubated their clutches in secret places. An exception to this period of relative calm was provided by some of the ducks: a female mallard had her time cut out shepherding a brood of 11 ducklings on 7th, and a week later "our" female mandarin duck (an extremely pale individual about which I have written before) had the equally difficult task of

protecting her brood of tiny but frenetic chicks (the photo on the right was taken when the mother still had ten offspring, but they were whizzing about so fast that I failed to get more than six of them in the photo!). With an amazing turn of speed, these bundles of undiluted energy zipped across the water, actually becoming airborne when they dementedly lunged upwards after some insect, real or imagined. Just four days later the adult's supervisory



duties had decreased, as her family had declined to six chicks. How sad! Well, not really, as ducks have evolved to produce precocial young that leave the nest within hours of hatching, their fluffy down making them extremely buoyant in the water. The disadvantage of this system is that the chicks are very vulnerable to predation, and the females compensate for this by laying a large clutch. A quick back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that if the adults survived for three breeding

seasons, and successfully raised ten young every year, a single pair would have increased to about half a million birds after just seven years, and we would be up to our necks in mandarin ducks. Fortunately, this doesn't happen, but the price paid for having a world that is not overrun with ducks is the sight of endearing balls of fluff being picked off by pike, foxes, gulls and other predators.



The first reed warbler (left) returning from its African winter quarters was heard in the osier bed on 1st; a coot was in the main ditch on 15th; and up to three mute swans were frequenting the river in the second half of the month.

A busy flock of fifty starlings (right) were feeding feverishly in one of the fields used by the cattle, where there are likely to be more soil-inhabiting invertebrates. Birds constantly joining and leaving the flock imparted a sense of urgency to the occasion, hastening back to hungry broods huddled under loose tiles in roofs or holes in outbuildings.

The month ended with another sighting of the squirrel that I first noted in September last year, as before on the old railway embankment.



Photos of reed warbler and starling courtesy of Dave Smith.

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