



# Newsletter

June 2018



## Welcome

Amazingly, the last newsletter was headed with a photo of the picnic table standing in several inches of water, following torrential rain on 30<sup>th</sup> April. Who would have thought that two months later parts of Hambrook and much of the general countryside would be bleached to a pale straw colour, all the grass above ground having died? The only rain in June was on 7<sup>th</sup>, so at the time of writing on 13<sup>th</sup> July it is 36 days since we received that paltry 2.8mm, making this the driest June since my records began in 1982, the next driest being in 2005 when there were 3.6mm. I have recorded drier months – 0.6mm in April 2007 and none at all in May 1989, but those months are both earlier in the year, when the weather is less hot, and the impact less severe. We don't yet know when the drought will break, or how much greater the effect of the hot and dry spell will become for wildlife.

## What's happening on the marshes?

The vegetation on either side of the Great Stour Way was cut again. As reported in the May newsletter, we are leaving some of the growth uncut this year, and the benefits are already apparent, with cow parsley, hogweed and other plants being able to flower once more, softening the profile of the path's surroundings and adding to the pleasure of a visit.

For the second season, tall vegetation (mainly nettles) along five sections of riverbank was cut so that those stretches of river were actually visible once more, enabling people to catch glimpses of swans, ducklings and other birds using the water.

## Wildlife Report

June is all about detecting signs of successful nesting amongst the birds, with noisy families of blue and great tits feeding in the scrub and trees on the old embankment, while on the river proud mallards chaperoned their broods, although one duck with only two half-grown ducklings demonstrated just how great the attrition rate is for this species, as she had probably hatched ten or more chicks. In May I reported on the mandarin duck with ten tiny ducklings on the river, declining to six by the end of the month, but when last sighted in June the number had been whittled down even further to just four. A single brown mandarin seen on 25<sup>th</sup> may have been an adult female or, quite possibly, a full-grown youngster.



As in 2017, a pair of coot have nested, with two adults and an unknown number of cheeping youngsters present on the boardwalk pond on 19<sup>th</sup>. Nature hasn't been very kind to baby coots (left): virtually bald red heads emphasise their protruding eyes, lending the birds a most unappealing appearance.

Moving down to the category of possible nesters, there were two tufted ducks on Tonford Lake on 11<sup>th</sup>, and a lone great crested grebe was patrolling the water on three dates, but both species may well have been non-breeders. More intriguing was the frequent presence of up to two tree creepers (right) from April to June, leading me to wonder if they could have bred on the old embankment. They like to nest behind loose bark on old trees, and there may have been a suitable site on one of the large black Italian poplars. Finally, and most interesting of all, was the record of a little grebe (below) in full breeding plumage on the river on 6<sup>th</sup>. In previous years this has been strictly a winter visitor, invariably departing sometime between the end of February and early April. Could there be a nesting pair? The fact that I only had one sighting (they can be very secretive), and didn't see a pair doesn't rule out this possibility, but part of their



spring courtship involves the male giving a distinctive trilling song, which I didn't hear, so, sadly, I suspect that this was a solitary bird that has since moved on.



The aerial feeders – swifts, swallows and house martins – remain worryingly scarce. So far this summer I have recorded just four swifts over Hambrook (and not many more in the town), two house martins, and not a single swallow. In the not-so-distant past a damp meadow with grazing

cattle would have been a magnet for swallows; insects that had developed in cow pats and were now being disturbed by the beasts' movements would be elegantly plucked from the air as swallows dipped and darted low over the field: no more, it would seem. Swifts and house martins are already on the British Trust for Ornithology's Amber List (decline of more than 25% in the previous 25 years) and may well be moved onto the Red List (more than 50% decline in the past 25 years), where they would join once-familiar species such as curlew, cuckoo, skylark and nightingale. Swallows have yet to be classified as either red- or amber-listed, but it is surely only a matter of time before they appear there, another nail in the biodiversity coffin and a stark reminder of the damage that we are inflicting on our environment.

Other bird records included three mute swans on the river on two occasions, with lesser whitethroat and Cetti's warbler nearby on 6<sup>th</sup>.

The wet March and April meant that vegetation growth was rampant in the warm May and June. Particularly noticeable has been the abundance of hemlock water dropwort (below left and right) on the river bank and in ditches. Dropworts belong to the umbellifer family, which includes familiar culinary plants such as parsley and carrot, which produce flattened or domed clusters of flowers (below right), known technically as umbels, from the Latin for umbrella!



Another plant to run riot this spring is goosegrass (right), which has been sprawling busily over everything in sight, latching on to other plants with the help of tiny curved bristles on its stems, that give the plant its very rough feel and an alternative name of cleavers. Cleave is a curious word, here meaning to cling, whereas it can also mean to split asunder, the complete opposite, as in to cleave a log with an axe, or a cleft stick (they are derived from two different, but extremely similar, old English words).



Coarse to the touch and smothering all other vegetation, it appears to have no redeeming features – even its white flowers are minuscule – and is totally unloved by all gardeners.

A new plant that I was delighted to stumble upon was a single pyramidal orchid (right). I have written before about a few species that I believe to have been introduced to the site when chalk from the A2 cuttings through the North Downs was used to backfill the quarries left by Bretts's excavations in the 1960s and 1970s. The pyramidal orchid is very much a plant of the chalk downs, so the Stour valley is not the normal haunt of this species, and its presence here is further evidence of accidental introduction of these waifs. It is growing in an area that is designated to develop as scrub, so its future here is not assured.



In July last year I wrote about my sighting of a single marbled white, a butterfly of fairly rank grassland that is particularly numerous on the downs. It was towards the end of the species' flight period, so it wasn't obvious if it had bred at



Hambrook or was a vagrant passing through. This year I decided to hunt for it nearer the start of its normal flight period, and was delighted to find eleven of these rather handsome butterflies in our scrubby field next to the A2. The name is misleading, as they do not belong to the family of white butterflies that are the bane of vegetable gardeners, but are in fact assigned to the family of browns – an equally odd name, as they do not have a hint of brown on them! They do, however, have a series of little eyelets on their underwings (just visible in the photo (left), a feature that is characteristic of the brown family (gatekeepers, meadow browns and the like).

*Tree creeper and little grebe photos courtesy of Dave Smith.  
Marbled white photo courtesy of Sue Morton*

*Banner photo at the top of page 1 is of ox-eye daisies*

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