



Newsletter

July 2018



Welcome

Has the drought broken? The 26mm of rain we've had since 20th July has certainly freshened things up, but we still have a long way to go to make up the shortfall of the past two months, and it will be a while before the cattle have much in the way of new growth to enjoy. Meanwhile, they are having to make do with dry vegetation which is little more than straw in places, and which is far less nutritious than the greener leaves that are normally still present at this stage in summer. We have now opened a gate to allow the cattle onto the old embankment, where they are greedily consuming fresh grass and tree foliage. Their growth is likely to suffer, but at least they still have access to fresh water from several ditches.



What's happening on the marshes?

Lyme disease

You may have seen on Facebook or in the local paper that a woman caught Lyme disease, possibly while on Hambrook Marshes, a month ago. This is a potentially nasty, bacterial disease spread by ticks which have previously fed on a wild animal, most often deer, but other vectors include mice and even birds. Left untreated it can lead to a wide range of problems, from stiff joints, severe headaches and tiredness to heart palpitations, tingling and memory loss. Many people are first alerted to having been bitten by an infected tick when they develop a “bullseye” rash (a central red patch surrounded by a red ring), but in about a third of cases this early warning doesn't appear. If treated promptly with antibiotics, the infection can be killed off, but the danger is that by the time symptoms emerge it will be too late for treatment to be effective, not helped by the fact that the range of symptoms reported by patients makes it very hard for GPs to diagnose the disease. To avoid being at risk of infection the recommendation is that when out in the countryside you should have your arms and legs covered, and tuck your trousers into your socks. Avoid walking through long grass, and inspect your body carefully after a day out in the countryside, with special emphasis on moist folds in the skin. If you find a tick, carefully pull it out with tweezers, or using a small plastic gadget like a miniature two-pronged fork, sliding it under the tick, which can then be gently prised off the skin. It is easy to over-emphasise the likelihood of infection (infected ticks have been found in town parks), but the reality is that only about 3000 people catch the disease in the UK each year; put another way, you would have a one in two hundred chance of getting Lyme disease if you lived to be a hundred. But if you are unlucky enough to catch the disease, it can be extremely unpleasant, especially in view of the likelihood of misdiagnosis, so it really does make sense to take the simple precautions outlined above.

Boardwalk straps

If you've taken the back path across the boardwalk in July you'll know that a thick strap had been fixed across each end (since replaced by an experimental self-closing bar). This is not designed to keep the public out, and you are welcome to step over to continue your walk, but it is a short-term measure to avoid the repetition of an unfortunate incident when a young heifer slipped on the boardwalk and then, unable to get any purchase on the fairly smooth surface of recycled plastic slats with its



hooves, was left lying there helpless until a trustee and the farmer managed to manhandle it off the boardwalk. We are hoping to come up with a long-term solution that will be less of an encumbrance to visitors while being effective in preventing cattle from getting onto the boardwalk.

Campers' rubbish

A huge quantity of campers' rubbish (right), some of it quite unsavoury, has been removed by trustees. Thanks to the drought, it was possible to drive a 4WD vehicle across what would normally still be soft ground at this stage in the summer, thus saving us an enormous amount of time in carting the material off-site.



Storm damage

Strong winds are unusual in summer but storm-force gusts on 29th, associated with the temporary breakdown of the heatwave, brought a willow crashing into the river. The Environment Agency has already cut it up, as they are always keen to dispose of any blockage that would slow down the passage of floodwater. However, current thinking is tending towards the view that natural or artificial obstructions that impede water flow are actually effective in reducing the likelihood of flooding further downstream, as they prevent exceptionally large volumes of water from flowing into vulnerable built-up areas in a single uncontrollable pulse; hence the present interest in introducing beavers to watercourses, such as in the Forest of Dean, as their dam-building efforts tend to reduce flow rates.

A large limb from one of the hybrid black Italian poplars on the old railway embankment was another casualty of the same storm, and has also been cleared away. Those trees form a distinctive landmark on Hambrook's skyline, but are much younger than their size would suggest. Presumably planted after the Elham Valley line was closed in 1947, that means the trees are no more than 70 years old, but this hybrid has been selected for its rapid growth, and originally supplied material for the match industry as its wood burnt slowly, which is exactly what you want in a match. Huge plantations owned by Bryant and May (remember them?) in East Anglia have succumbed to the rise of the cigarette lighter, and remaining trees are now used mainly to supply the low-grade timber market for pallets.

Replacement handrails

At the end of the month contractors installed new handrails alongside both flights of steps leading up to the top of the old railway embankment. This was to replace the original wooden railings that were totally destroyed by vandals (see April newsletter). Although the replacement posts and rails are also wooden, they are much sturdier than the originals, far more securely fixed in the ground, and would represent quite a challenge to anyone bent on destroying them. Let's hope that



they survive for many years. The money spent paying contractors to do this work could have been far more usefully deployed to carry out conservation management or projects that would have made the Marshes pleasanter for visitors.

Wildlife Report

Signs of summer included flocks of black-headed and herring gulls circling overhead in a feeding frenzy as they caught as many as possible of the flying ants that, at some covert signal, had erupted into synchronised mating flight. Next day the ants had gone, and so had the gulls, leaving the stage vacant for swifts (right) and house martins (far right) to pursue a bounty of midges and other insects too tiny for gulls to bother with. It was



sheer joy to watch up to seven swifts, now high in their search for prey, now low as their bills sheared through the surface of the river, picking up valuable moisture without the need to land. At times they were so close I could hear their wings scything through the air; I hesitate to call this a summer sight, as the swifts have already gone; come the end of July the migratory imperative pulls them back southwards after barely three months in this country, and sadly they are returning in diminishing numbers each spring. House martins will be with us for a while longer but they, too, have ceased to be a common species in our area, so it was a relief to see twenty of them consorting with the swifts at the end of the month, their twittering flight pattern lacking the steely, swash-buckling verve of the acrobatic swifts.



Another sign that the season is turning towards autumn was the appearance of a green sandpiper (left) at a wet ditch on 24th. This is a wader that appears in England on passage between breeding grounds in northern Europe and wintering areas in Africa, though a few do overwinter in southern England. This particular individual may have been a failed breeder cutting its losses and returning to Africa early rather than linger on its nesting territory when it is too late to have a second nesting

attempt. "Summer's lease hath all too short a date" as Shakespeare wisely observed.

Also of note were a couple of kestrels (right), not seen close up, but probably young birds rather than a pair, and up to sixty starlings feeding in Tonford Field while the cattle were there. Sadly, a dead mute swan was discovered in that field, possibly having collided with nearby electricity cables, an earlier fatality in the same field having occurred in November last year.





Chain link fencing seems to have been invented for the purpose of allowing the white-flowered great bindweed to grow up it, as can be well seen on the railway fencing near the boardwalk. This attractive, but somewhat pernicious weed can swamp out less robust plants, but a smaller, related plant, the field bindweed, though also a pest if it becomes entrenched in garden borders, is a less aggressive plant that also occurs at Hambrook, though much scarcer than the great bindweed. Its flowers can range from pure white to a pattern of white and

pink segments radiating out from the centre. The photo (above) shows a less extreme version of this stripey pattern, making the plant so attractive that a naïve gardener might be rashly tempted to cultivate it.

Banner photo on page 1 is of hemlock water dropwort

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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