

# Newsletter

August 2018



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### Welcome

We all know that the countryside is under threat from development; this even applies to Hambrook Marshes, where the Parkway station proposal was resurrected a few days ago (see “What’s happening on the marshes” below), so it is more important than ever that we do all we can to protect our very special little oasis.

The vegetation is greening up, but summer is on the wane, and hints of autumn are appearing in the form of ripening berries and some yellowing foliage. Drake mallard are in their sombre eclipse plumage as we enter this softer season, so get your boots on and enjoy its mellowness.

### What’s happening on the marshes?

#### **Canterbury Parkway station**

You may have read last week about the latest incarnation of the Canterbury Parkway concept. First proposed in the 1980s, this is a scheme to build a third Canterbury railway station at the point where the Canterbury East and Canterbury West lines cross immediately beyond the north east boundary of Hambrook Marshes. Last week our MP, Rosie Duffield, discussed the proposal with Network Rail, who seem to be receptive to the idea being moved up their agenda, though planning approval and funding are not currently available. At this stage we have very little idea of what the plan would

involve: Network Rail apparently own sufficient land for the core infra-structure (platforms, signalling and so on) but the car park would have to be either on Whitehall Meadow (the council-owned nature reserve between Hambrook and Toddlers' Cove) or on land acquired for the purpose, and there is little indication of how the new station would be accessed, although Simon Cook, the council leader said it would involve new roads and a bridge over Toddlers' Cove, Whitehall allotments or Victoria playing field. Unless or until detailed plans are submitted, the trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes cannot comment meaningfully on the proposal and its impact on the Marshes, but we are already faced with the prospect of a park and ride extension and A2 slip-road being built on scrub across the river from Hambrook, which will inevitably detract from the rural atmosphere, and if the Parkway idea ever gets developed the Marshes would be squeezed from two sides.

**Other news**

Last month's newsletter explained that the straps across each end of the boardwalk were put there for the safety of the cattle, one of which had skidded on the recycled plastic walkway and been unable to get up. If you've been that way recently you'll know that we have now installed simple swing gates (right) which should prove less of an encumbrance for cyclists or parents with buggies. However, as the cattle have now been moved to Tonford Field, the new system has yet to be fully tested by the cows, but we're hopeful that it will do the trick.

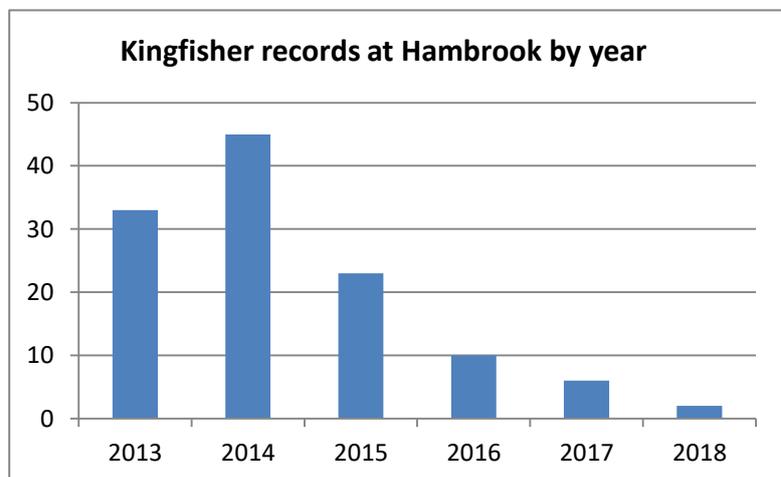


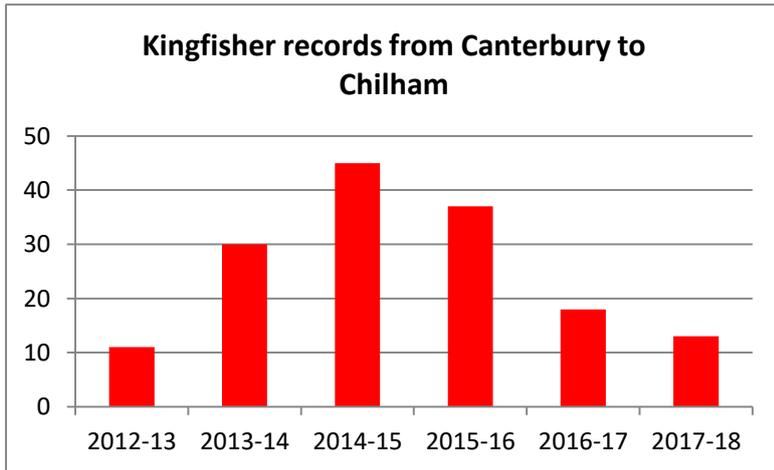
Still on the subject of cattle, when the beasts were moved early in the month they were also given a bale of hay as supplementary feed. The exceptionally dry weather meant that the grass was no longer growing, leading to some concern that the animals might be struggling to find enough to eat. So, although they appeared to be reasonably well-nourished, the extra rations may help them to mature more quickly.

**Wildlife Report**

**Disappearing kingfishers**

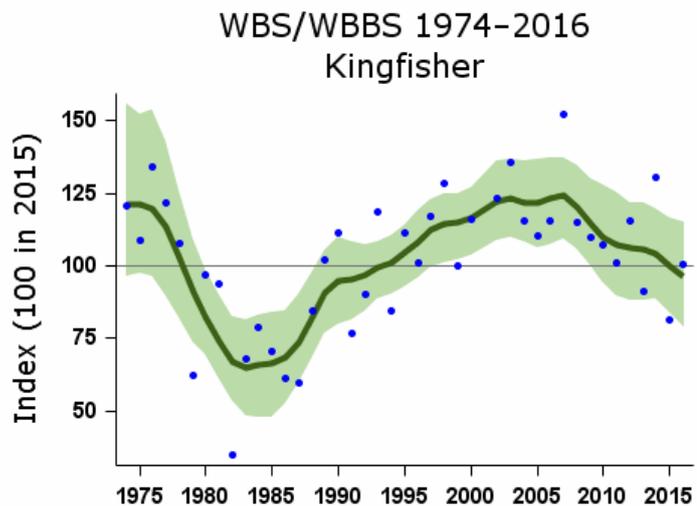
The kingfisher is an iconic figure of any river scene, the electric blue bolt of the cliché zipping over the water, but in the past couple of years it has ceased to be a feature of our stretch of the Stour. The graph (right) clearly shows their declining fortunes at Hambrook since they nested in a side stream in 2014. So my





record of two of these wonderfully exotic birds on 19<sup>th</sup> certainly raised my spirits as they were the first I'd found on the Marshes since 7<sup>th</sup> January. Why they should have abandoned this seemingly enticing section of river is unclear, but the pattern has been the same at the lakes upstream to Chilham, as the second graph (left) demonstrates. The cold snap in March won't have helped, but doesn't begin to

explain the four-year decline. The third graph (right) - and I promise that's the last one for this newsletter! - is taken from the website of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), which is the national organisation monitoring the health of bird populations, using data drawn mainly from an army of volunteer surveyors. Unfortunately, the data only goes up to 2016, but does seem to suggest that the national population is falling once more, following a recovery from severe winters in the late 1970s and early 1980s (the blue dots are the data for each year; the solid line is the smoothed trend, evening out some of the year-to-year irregularities; and the grey shaded area surrounding the solid line is a statistical device indicating the reliability of the figures, or confidence limits – the broader the shading, the less reliable they are).



House martins were still hunting over the Marshes occasionally, with eleven there on 27<sup>th</sup>, but numbers will dwindle as we move through September and the birds head down to Africa.

### Bumblebees

Alastair Noble of the University of the Third Age (U3A) has set up a fixed route (transect) running through Hambrook Marshes so that volunteers can walk the route monthly each summer, counting and identifying the number of bees seen. Already the group has recorded six common species, with the possibility of a seventh, the moss carder, which is much scarcer. Photographs of this tentatively identified bee were sent off to the experts, who weren't sure either!

### Moth trapping

Should you have been out on the Marshes after dark on 2<sup>nd</sup> you might have been puzzled by a bright white light beaming out of the scrub field, but it was nothing supernatural, simply a moth-trapping evening to gauge what species were present. The special bulb, powered by a small generator, gives out light with a higher proportion of ultra-violet than normal lightbulbs, and as moths are more attuned to this frequency, it can be a powerful tool in attracting moths to one spot

for identification. Much to the annoyance of the two observers, it was a brilliant evening for clouds of small non-biting flies, but rather uneventful for moths, although two of particular interest were recorded. One was the gem (right), which is a common



moth of continental Europe, but well able to cross expanses of water, and so occurs as a vagrant in southern England. The other was the pretty chalk carpet (left), which is found mainly in southern England and East Anglia. Being such a delightful little insect, it is no surprise that “pretty” is actually part of its official name, not my description of it. Also, as its name suggests, it is primarily a moth of chalky soils, where the

caterpillars’ foodplant, traveller’s joy, grows. In previous newsletters I have occasionally mentioned the discovery of plants, such as salad burnet, that are confined to chalk, and have suggested that their occurrence here is due to being imported with chalk spoil to infill the quarries after Bretts had finished excavating gravel in the 1970s.



Traveller’s joy is another plant that is characteristic of calcareous soil and it, too, occurs at Hambrook. Sprawling untidily over trees and bushes on the old railway embankment, it comes to life in later summer when the unspectacular flowers turn into delightful clusters of feathery fruits that catch the sunlight (right). In this case the explanation for

the presence of a chalk-lover on the deep alluvial soils that have accumulated in the valley is down to Victorian railway mania. When the South Eastern Railway company decided to build a link from Canterbury to Folkestone, one of the engineering requirements was an embankment and bridge to get the line across Hambrook Marshes. The embankment was created using chalky spoil, probably from further down the line where it had to burrow through the North Downs, and hence the presence of a band of chalk running across the Marshes. The unsuccessful railway line is long-gone, but the chalk remains, and thick woody climbing stems or lianas of traveller’s joy can be seen festooning the embankment scrub. So, the capture of one small moth has transported us back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Irish navvies laboured with pick and shovel to build the national railway network that powered our industrial pre-eminence.



A pretty little plant that is flowering now is the common toadflax (left). It is generally to be found on disturbed ground, and can be abundant along road verges, but to my knowledge there is just a single clump of it beside the tarmac path alongside the boardwalk field.

*Photo of kingfisher on page 1 courtesy of Dave Smith*

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