

Newsletter

September 2018



Welcome

Seeing the Marshes coated in frost for my early-morning visit on 25th was a timely reminder that the sun is at last losing its grip after a glorious summer, but twelve hours of sunshine and a temperature of 22° the following day forced me to reconsider. Quite what impact this year's extreme weather has had on wildlife, from "The beast from the East" to "The mother of all heatwaves" is hard to ascertain, but my advice is to make the most of the warmth while it lasts.

What's happening on the marshes?

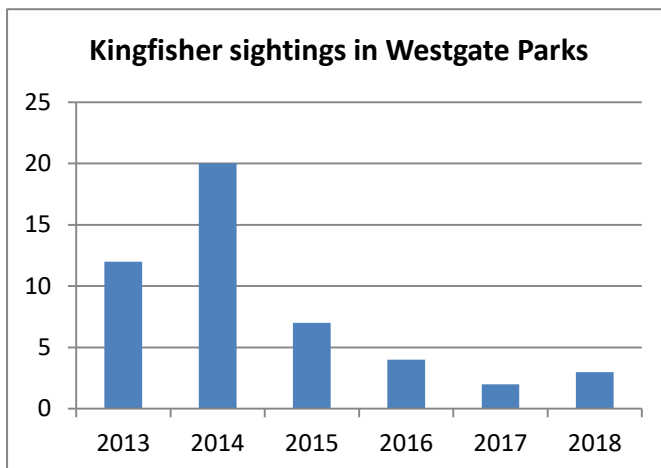
After a parched summer, the Marshes are slowly returning to a more normal state, particularly following 20mm of rain on 23rd, rendering parts of Tonford Field plashy once more in anticipation of the arrival of overwintering snipe (see below).

The hay meadow (opposite the footbridge to Wincheap) was mown, but unfortunately most of the hay bales were burned by vandals before the contractor had a chance to remove them.

This year has been fairly quiet on the graffiti front so it was annoying, but not too disheartening, to have to clean up two of the information boards and the floor of one pond-dipping platform. As with litter, our policy is to discourage further problems by cleaning up as quickly as possible.

Wildlife Report

My first record of little grebes on the river each autumn can be any time from about mid-September to early November, so sightings on 19th and 25th this year were not so unusual, but there remains the enigmatic discovery of one in June; could that individual have been lurking locally the whole summer? They are notoriously shy birds, diving at the least sign of danger, and only surfacing when out of sight amongst emergent vegetation at the river's edge, so it is perfectly possible that I have overlooked a bird in recent weeks.



A single kingfisher sighting in each of the past two months may not be a great deal to get excited about, but its virtual demise has not been restricted to Hambrook.



In Westgate Parks, immediately downstream, the same sad story can be told (see graph on left), but all three of this year's sightings there have been in September, so it is possible that one or more birds, probably youngsters setting up territory for the first time, have

arrived very recently. Fingers are crossed that this exquisite bird becomes a regular feature of our stretch of the river once more.

The summer lacuna for interesting bird records continued into September, but the first tentative signs of approaching winter were marked by the arrival of single snipe and an overflying meadow pipit. One other record of note was of seven feral pigeons (right), that much-despised species, reviled for defacing statues and buildings, yet not credited with the part it plays in clearing up the edible debris left behind by wasteful, messy humans. Completely overlooked by many birdwatchers, its only value to them being to boost their "year list" by an



additional one species, the feral pigeon has an interesting history, strongly intertwined with that of the humans who domesticated wild rock doves for their own purposes. First bred for meat and eggs, the birds provided medieval people with a little much-needed fresh protein in winter, and by encouraging the birds to nest in specially-build dovecotes it was possible to harvest eggs and young birds (squabs) with little effort. Their other strategic use in pre-radio days was as long-distance bearers of messages, the so-called carrier pigeons. In a recent pub quiz I was amazed to discover that the Dickin medal for gallantry awarded by the PDSA to animals in war service, and considered equivalent to the Victoria Cross, had been given to more pigeons than to any other animal!

Also of note was the return of the squirrel to the old railway embankment, and the discovery of two new plants, one a native, the other a definite alien. The unexpected foreigner was a single sunflower beside the river path; not the startling eight-foot wonder with flowers the size of dinner



plates that children lovingly tend as a school project, but a miserable, non-flowering specimen no more than a foot high, most likely growing from a seed dropped by a bird that had visited a garden feeder. The native plant was interesting in its own way, though also equally diminutive and unremarkable in appearance. Pellitory-of-the-wall (left) is so-named for obvious reasons – walls are its principal habitat, the attraction being the lime in the mortar. This particular scrawny specimen was beside the steps up to the viewing point, so perhaps it was originally growing on the nearby brick abutment of the former Elham Valley railway bridge. But why pellitory? The word can be traced back to middle English, Anglo-French and medieval Latin, and then to ancient Latin, where it becomes “pyrethrum”, a camomile-like plant in a completely different family (pellitory is a nettle, camomile a daisy), so I am still

little the wiser as to the origin of the word.

Photos of kingfisher and feral pigeon courtesy of Dave Smith

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