



Newsletter

March 2020



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

We've all heard more than enough about covid-19, so I don't want to labour the subject unnecessarily, but one thing the present lockdown has thrown into sharp relief is the vital importance of Hambrook Marshes to the people of Canterbury for exercise and as an escape from the anxiety that self-isolation is inducing in many. Beyond the misery and imposed discipline lies a world of greenery and wildlife that can be a tremendous solace right now, and the trustees are delighted that the Marshes can remain open for public benefit.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Second pond-dipping platform destroyed by arson

It is with great sadness that we have to report the destruction by arson on 19th March of the small pond-dipping platform in a corner of the field, close to the boardwalk. As in the initial incident on 14th February, the structure was completely destroyed, but on this occasion the attack was in broad daylight, with the fire brigade arriving at 3.30pm. The blaze was extinguished promptly, but the

platform (right) was already totally destroyed. This time we have two witness accounts of youngsters seen in the area, and police have requested sight of CCTV recordings from three locations, so there is the prospect of the police being able to follow up on these leads. If you have any information that might help the police with their enquiries, please click [here](#) to see the police appeal. The two incidents appear to highlight the unsuitability of recycled plastic for structures in unsupervised areas that are open to the public at all times, and this will certainly channel the trustees' thoughts when it comes to deciding what should take their place.



Virtual Concert for the Marshes Sunday 26th April 2020, 7pm

Moved by the loss of the boardwalk, and eager to help protect the treasured marshes and the meadows of Hambrook, musicians, poets and performers from Canterbury and beyond have come together for an unprecedented collaboration this Spring. A series of video performances featuring original and well-known songs, specially chosen and recorded for the campaign, will be broadcast online as a 'virtual concert' at 7pm on Sunday 26th April (link available nearer the time).

The extraordinary line-up will include Josh Magill, Luke Jackson, Andy Howe (The Marrables), Dune, Luke Dodson, Sam Bailey, MelZebra and the Buffalos, Brendan Power, Ben Millbery, Frances Knight, Derek Sellen and Mary Anne Smith - plus more acts to be announced soon.

The audience will be asked to support the Love Hambrook Marshes' urgent efforts to restore access across the boardwalk field by donating to the charity's crowdfunding campaign.

Boardwalk cleared up

On 5th March a valiant team of about a dozen volunteers from the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) spent a whole day in pouring rain (33mm fell on us!) clearing away much of the superficial debris from the boardwalk fire of 14th February. This was primarily sheets of melted plastic from the posts and planks, which were all made of recycled plastic, plus hundreds of bolts that held the whole structure together. In atrocious conditions the material was lugged across the marshy areas in sacks and then transported across firmer ground in wheelbarrows, to be dumped in a skip at the Whitehall Road entrance. By smashing the sheets into smaller pieces with a sledgehammer it was just about possible to fit it all in. We are enormously grateful to KSCP for putting in so much hard work on such a cold, wet day.



Kissing gate repaired

The kissing gate leading into the boardwalk field from the gap in the old railway embankment was vandalised by our cattle last summer. At the time this wasn't a problem, as the fields on either side of the gate are normally treated as one grazing unit, with the cattle free to pass from one to the other. However, the remains of the burnt boardwalk could potentially be hazardous to the cows, and, until the remedial work has been completed, the cows will need to be kept out of the field on their return this month. To achieve this, while still allowing people to walk through the boardwalk field, the kissing gate repair was a priority. What should have been a relatively simple job turned into a bit of a marathon, as the original, damaged post had been concreted in, which made redigging a hole in the same spot a laborious task, but perseverance was rewarded, and the field is now cattle-proof.

Rubbish problems

It's great to see how important the Great Stour Way and Hambrook Marshes are proving to be for people trying to get some daily exercise and fresh air. The downside of this is that the bin by the Wincheap footbridge is getting full very quickly. This is causing a problem as Serco are short-staffed during the lockdown and the bin isn't being emptied nearly as frequently as it needs to be. Understandably, we have been told by the Council that we should not be emptying it under current circumstances. So, to help us and Serco, please take all your rubbish home with you, and if you see the bin overflowing, please report it to Serco at help.canterbury@serco.com (describing it as the bin on the Great Stour Way by the Wincheap footbridge over the Stour). We would really appreciate your assistance as the problem is proving unmanageable for us alone. Thank you.



Wildlife Report

There are signs of summer aplenty, with two chiffchaffs singing on 17th, two reed buntings (not a long-distance migrant, but only a summer visitor to Hambrook) on 1st, and no fewer than four great crested grebes on Tonford Lake on 23rd, although it probably isn't big enough to support two pairs of this elegant waterbird. And talking of elegance, I mustn't omit mention of eight wonderful little egrets around the edge of that lake the same morning. A pair of mandarin ducks (right) were present on the river on 4th, and two flew up the valley a fortnight later, so it looks as though we'll have a breeding pair again along this stretch of the river.



Spring is a time of flux, and some sightings refer to birds that are just passing through. Into this category falls the pair of gadwall (right) seen by a visitor on 26th. Small numbers of these attractive, if rather subdued ducks overwinter on the string of old gravel pits further upriver, but come spring they move away to nest on the North Kent marshes and Thanet. Meanwhile, up to 18 tufted duck were still present on neighbouring Tonford Lake at the month end; they have a more widespread breeding distribution across Kent, and most will be dispersing shortly, though the odd pair or two sometimes nests locally.



Another record of birds on passage was the group of five Mediterranean gulls flying over on 8th. This is a relatively recent colonist of the UK, but is now well-established as a breeding bird on the North Kent Marshes. In winter, birds may wander far inland to feed, so it was surprising that this was my first record of the bird for Hambrook Marshes, and the 102nd species on my list. It is a rather splendid bird which, unlike the so-called black-headed gull, has a hood that really is jet-black, setting off a white eye-ring and bright red bill to

perfection and, as you can see in this photograph (above) of a bird seemingly walking on water, matching red legs. Its distinctive call reminds me of a cat's miaow, not so unlike one of the calls of the much more familiar herring gull.

Other birds of interest included eleven collared doves (right) flying over on 1st; 13 crows congregating in the tall poplars on the old railway embankment on 8th; two mute swans on the river on 17th; and two buzzards overhead on 23rd. A warm day in early spring is a good time to look out for these raptors, as they take advantage of thermals to spiral high up into the sky for a mixture of courtship display to attract a mate and marking out a territory to discourage wandering buzzards from thinking of setting up home locally.



Another welcome sign of spring was the appearance of flowering snake's-head fritillaries. I was only able to locate one from the original planting scheme in the boardwalk field in 2010, but 26 of the bulbs planted in the hay field last autumn put on a delicate display of their lantern-like flowers, and careful searching revealed the presence of at least a further 36 non-flowering plants - as the leaves are remarkably grass-like, these "blind" plants were remarkably hard to spot, and there could well have been more. All this was despite the fact that many of the bulbs remained waterlogged throughout last winter's exceptionally wet weather. If more are planted this autumn it will be worth trying to locate them on slightly higher ground because, although they like damp conditions, they



are not really adapted to life under water. The common colour is purple with paler chequering (left), which gives the petals a fancied resemblance to the scales on a snake's head, while 'fritillary' is also the name of a group of butterflies that have a similar chequered pattern on their wings. Quite a sizeable minority of fritillary flowers are white (right) or even pinkish; these are natural variations that occur in wild populations.



Banner photo at the top of page 1 shows five of the eight little egrets that were present on Tonford Lake on 23rd March.

Mediterranean gull, collared dove, gadwall and mandarin duck photos all courtesy of Dave Smith

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