

## Hambrook Marshes

### Bird Report for May 2014

At least one pair of mandarin ducks is present just downstream from the reserve, but so far have been far less conspicuous than last year, although quite how I could use the phrase “less conspicuous” about such a ridiculously flamboyant creature as the drake (see photo on right) is hard to credit. I’ll let you know over the next couple of months if I see any more of these stunning birds and, most importantly, whether there are any indications of



nesting. One possibility for the future would be the erection of some large nestboxes in trees close to the river, in the hope of enticing these truly gorgeous birds to nest on the reserve.

Two species of heron occur on the marshes; in the past month I have seen more of the larger grey heron, and rather less of its more diminutive white cousin, the little egret. At this time last year, my weekly visits were enlivened by a number of species that were seen or heard just off the reserve, so it is with regret that I have to report not recording turtle dove, lesser whitethroat or nightingale this year, although cuckoo was heard nearby several times. All except the lesser whitethroat are in severe decline nationally, so their disappearance from the Hambrook area is further worrying evidence of this downward trend.

Still on the subject of dismal news, I have seen pitifully few swallows and swifts so far over the marshes, and not a single house martin. The damp, grazed pasture and adjoining river should provide ideal feeding conditions for these aerial hunters, so their absence is truly dispiriting.



Starlings appear to have had a reasonable breeding season locally, but mixed flocks of adults and young have shunned the reserve this year. One unexpected songster, though, was a garden warbler, the archetypal “little brown job” (see photo on left), with a fairly melodious, but not terribly inspiring song. Its regular singing on the old railway embankment for several

weeks was an indication that it had failed to get a mate, which is not altogether surprising, given that its normally preferred habitat is much denser, young scrub. Perhaps in desperation, it has now moved off to the embankment of the Faversham line in search of a mate, a rather forlorn wish so late in the season.

To end on another gloomy note: you may have noticed that many ash trees in Kent do not appear to be healthy this year; it would seem that they are succumbing to ash dieback, which was first heralded in 2012, then was rather forgotten about in 2013, but which has struck with a vengeance in 2014. Mature trees are worst affected, but most appear to have been weakened rather than killed outright, and it remains to be seen whether they recover over the next couple of years or succumb to this fungal disease. Fortunately, there are very few ash trees on the reserve, so even if they all died, it would not have much impact locally, which is more than can be said about the ashwoods on the Downs. A tree that could be confused with ash, but which has rather larger leaves, is the walnut. Not native to this country, it has been cultivated here for hundreds of years, but when the odd ones crop up in the wider countryside it is always intriguing to speculate how they came to be there. A fairly large specimen can be seen on the old railway embankment, and a much smaller one beside the river; both could have been planted, but rooks are particularly partial to the fruit, and it is always conceivable that a bird dropped some nuts years ago.

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*Bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith*