



# Newsletter

August 2020



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### Welcome

We would like to extend a very warm welcome to our new website volunteer, Lesley Malone. She only recently started work, but has already done an amazing job of reorganising the Love Hambrook Marshes website, providing lots of extra information and generally making it more visitor-friendly. As she points out, it is very much a work in progress, and she would be really pleased to get some feedback from you, telling her what you like, or what you think could be done better, and with suggestions for completely new directions in which the site could go.

We are also delighted to have a newly-appointed trustee, Paul Roberts, who will be in charge of land management. This includes responsibility for dealing with fencing and mowing contractors, our grazier, and the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) work parties, as well as day-to-day minor repairs to gates and other infra-structure. He replaces Jack Goodhew, who is stepping down after nearly three year in post, during which time he oversaw a change of mowing contractor, extensive fencing repairs, installation of sturdy new handrails to the viewpoint, and much else beside. His greatest challenge came in dealing with the aftermath of the two arson attacks in February and March, but he ably organised the initial cleanup of vast quantities of melted plastic by KSCP, followed by bringing in a contractor, who removed the remaining embedded debris and dug out a new water feature alongside the surviving stretch of boardwalk. We are very grateful to Jack for all his hard work over the years (see him in action on page 2). Thank you, Jack.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

We hired a concrete breaker and generator to dig out the four sturdy angle irons that provided major support for the decorative panels on either side of the picnic table. This was in preparation for new, taller angle irons to be installed. These will give the panels greatly enhanced rigidity, but will be hidden by new wooden strips, complete with naturalistic carving, that are being produced by Steve Portchmouth, the creator of the original artwork.



## Wildlife Report

One of the month's highlights was squeezed into the last day of August, when a family party of two mute swan parents and eight full-grown juveniles were busily pulling up weed by Tonford bridge. Although the female may lay up to eleven eggs, the usual clutch size for swans is around six, and losses of small chicks to pike, foxes or other predators are to be expected in the early days, so it is unusual for such a large brood to survive to maturity. The photo (right) is of a smaller, much younger family at Stodmarsh.



It is definitely beginning to feel as though summer's lease is nearly run; consigned to distant memory is the seemingly endless drought, when the motivation to do anything more energetic than raise a glass simply wilted in the overwhelming heat. Warblers are on the move, restlessly fidgeting in the embankment scrub as chiffchaffs, blackcaps and whitethroats feed up in preparation for their long-haul flights to Africa. A worrying sign of the times has been the dearth of swallows and house martins. In years gone by these insectivores would have been a familiar feature of damp, cattle-grazed pastures in a lowland valley such as Hambrook, the cows disturbing swarms of flies as they moved languorously through the lush vegetation. Lush, of course, isn't a very apt description of the parched, straw-coloured grass this summer, but there were still flies in abundance, yet no swooping swallows. My only swallow sighting was in April, and six house martins on 23<sup>rd</sup> August were the first I had seen at Hambrook this year. Numbers of both are declining fast in the south east; while the swallow population had increased prior to the current decline, house martins have been in fairly steady retreat for the past thirty years.

Another sign of the passing season was the unexpected eruption of a ball of white plumes from near the new boardwalk pool – a little egret. Although I have recorded this elegant heron species in all months except July, it is far more likely to be seen between November and March, when they are no longer tied to their breeding sites.

A pair of collared doves (below) have been seen regularly seen around the viewpoint on the old embankment for the past couple of months. I haven't actually found a nest, but it seems likely that they are breeding there. Numbers in the south east peaked in the early 2000s, but are currently in decline. Collared doves are one of the great success stories of the avian world; up until the 1930s their range extended eastwards from Turkey, through India to China, but then something strange happened. From being a sedentary bird, they developed itchy feet and rather abruptly began moving westwards to conquer all of Europe by the 1950s, with vagrants even making it as far as Iceland. It is now one of the commonest birds in the UK, evidently filling a niche that wasn't fully occupied by any other birds. It isn't known what prompted the original dispersal, but it is possible that a genetic mutation spread through the population. The invasion was progressive, so the birds didn't have to make a long-haul flight from Turkey to the UK, but moved westwards in a wave, like water slowly spreading out across a flat surface, but that still involved individuals making flights of 50 miles or more, which they hadn't traditionally done.



Every year the Environment Agency cut some of the submerged vegetation in the Stour in a bid to speed up the flow of floodwater. The cut material floats downstream until caught behind a temporary, floating barrier just beyond the railway bridge by Canterbury East station. A digger with a long arm then reaches into the river to scoop out the raft of vegetation in a colander-style bucket that allows most of the water to drain out. This work has been carried out in recent weeks, and on my last visit no fewer than twenty moorhens were feeding on the floating plant platform, their long toes giving them all the support they needed to walk effortlessly across the flexing mat of vegetation, with no chance of the birds breaking through the layer and disappearing from sight.

*Banner photo on page 1 is of dawn over the A2 bridge*

*Collared dove photo courtesy of Dave Smith*

*Mute swans courtesy of Glynn Crocker*

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