



Newsletter

November 2020



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

Support Hambrook Marshes while shopping at the Co-op

Love Hambrook Marshes has been selected as a local cause for the Co-op's Local Community Fund. If you are a Co-op member, please select LHM as your local cause for the next twelve months, so that every time you shop at a Co-op store the Fund will make a donation to support our work. Make LHM your local cause by clicking [here](#).



Photographic competition result

The winner of our first photographic competition, with the theme of autumn, was Ralph Lombart, whose reward is to see his winning photo (below) all over the Internet – on our website, and Facebook page, and now in your newsletter. Congratulations, Ralph, for your photo of the marshes viewed through the archway of the railway bridge. Unfortunately, the willow in the foreground no longer exists; a large bough was ripped off in one of the recent storms, leading the council, in its wisdom, to fell the whole tree (the bridge marks the boundary of Hambrook Marshes, so the willow was on council-owned land).



What's happening on the Marshes?

Vegetation was cleared from both flights of steps up to the viewpoint. Encroaching bramble, nettles and scrub are regularly cut back on each side of the steps through the summer, but once a year it is necessary to dig out grass, dandelions and other plants that have rooted in the stony surface and are threatening to hide the step risers, making it harder to walk up safely. The photos on the right show before and after views.



You may well have wondered what the big, black, metal pipe across the river is for. It was installed in the 19th century as part of a Victorian water supply system. A pumping station in Wincheap (since demolished to make way for the Dunelm store) lifted water out of the aquifer and pushed it uphill to the white concrete water tower close to Kent College. By peering through a telescope, a workman at the pumping station could see when a float reached the top of the tower, telling him that it was nearly full. The pipe is presumed to be owned by South East Water, who are responsible for the provision of fresh water in our area, and in October they evidently decided that it wasn't safe. So, where it crosses a minor stream on the marshes they installed sturdy rubber spikes to deter anyone from walking across on the pipe. Then, in November, they went to town on the pipe where it crosses the river. What was already a monstrosity (small photo below), spoiling views up the river, has now been turned into a real eyesore by the addition of shiny metal grids, and topped with something resembling a Neptunian triple trident (main photo below). We believe the pipe has actually been decommissioned, so it may be



possible to arrange with South East Water for this blot on the landscape to be dismantled. This would involve bringing in heavy machinery and a great deal of expense, but watch this space.

A contractor has installed a new set of fenceposts around Tonford field (right). The old posts were only five years old but were of a substandard specification, which has led to a large number of them rotting badly at the base and then starting to collapse. The original barbed wire and netting is still in good condition, so has been retained. The new posts have been hammered in halfway between the original ones, which haven't yet been removed, so there are now twice as many posts as you would normally get in a length of fencing, and from certain angles it looks like a veritable forest



(right)! We will probably remove the old posts eventually, but that will be a long job, as there are three or four large staples to be pulled out of each one, and we will then be left with the task of disposing of several hundred posts!



Wildlife Report

Undoubtedly the highlight of the month for me was seeing a pair of stonechats in Tonford field on 22nd. This delightful little bird (right) used to be a semi-regular winter visitor, but the areas it favoured depended on what management was being carried out. Its feeding strategy is to perch atop a sturdy stem, such as a dock, that is going to remain upright through the winter, and pounce onto insects in the grass below, so, in years when the hay field was mown, all the potential perches were destroyed, and the birds were less likely to be present. Interestingly, as it was a mild morning, there were quite a few hatches of flies, and the stonechats abandoned their perch-to-ground approach, instead adopting aerial sallies, just as flycatchers do. Last winter I had only one record of a single bird on almost the same date (25th November). Stonechats are usually very faithful to a partner and are almost invariably seen in pairs, so the presence of the two this time gives me a little hope that they may now be resident although, that said, I failed to find them on 30th. At this time of year stonechat plumage is less bright, but their spring finery doesn't come as a result of a moult. If you look closely at the photo, you'll see that the cock bird's black head is covered with a dusting of grey. Over the course of the winter these pale tips to the facial feathers get abraded, revealing the glossy, jet-black breeding plumage beneath, all without a single feather being shed!



The other interest for me was the sighting of four little grebes on the Stour immediately downstream from the Canterbury East railway bridge. This is one of their favoured stretches of the river, but scanning the water on previous visits had failed to detect these notoriously secretive birds, which normally arrive here in October. These birds only just squeezed into the last day of the month!



Up to four jays (left) were present on the old embankment in the first half of the month. Their particular claim to fame is as creators of oakwoods; in autumn they collect acorns from beneath oaks, then fly hundreds of yards to open land, where they promptly bury them, intending to retrieve their booty during the lean winter months. However,

despite an excellent spatial memory, jays fail to recover all of the acorns, some of which then sprout

and can eventually turn abandoned fields into oakwood. There are no mature oaks on Hambrook, but there are several saplings developing on the old embankment, undoubtedly owing their existence to forgetful jays.

The wintering flock of snipe built up to 27, but has since dropped back to just 16, a low count for this time of year, possibly due to the birds being dispersed more widely around the county during the mild weather. Other winter birds included seven meadow pipits, 23 redwings, and 100 black-headed gulls splashing around in shallow flooding on Tonford field on 17th.

Six cormorants flying over on 4th was my best count since January, when a flock of 18 proved to be my highest ever count.

A very fuzzy photo that appeared on Facebook the other week was just about identifiable as a helmeted guinea fowl, and I have since had two sightings of it in gardens on the other side of the river. There used to be guinea fowls in the donkey field, but I haven't seen them for quite a while, and it seems likely that this was the origin of the current bird. An African species, related to gamebirds such as pheasants, the guinea fowl is often kept as a pet or for its meat.

Apparently this bird has been roaming the riverside gardens for a couple of years, sustained by a diet of seeds and porridge oats that the residents put out for it.



A squirrel has once again been putting in an appearance on the old embankment, and Simon Pettman managed to get this photo of it gorging on hawthorn berries, a shot that belies its common name for, although largely grey, there can be quite a yellow or orange tinge to their fur, particularly in summer. Even so, it shouldn't be confused with our native red squirrel, absent from Kent since the late 1950s, which is a smaller species with a proportionately longer tail, and whose pelage is generally more rufous.



*Jay and stonechat photos courtesy of Dave Smith
Grey squirrel photo courtesy of Simon Pettman*

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