



Newsletter

January 2021



Welcome

Yes, marshes are supposed to be wet, especially at this time of year, but I could sense the frustration of people who had come out for their lockdown exercise ill-equipped for wading through several inches of water. With more than twice the expected monthly rainfall this has, by a narrow margin, been the wettest January since I began recording in Rough Common in 1983. Hambrook has certainly been far less busy these past few weeks – a combination, no doubt, of long stretches of path being underwater (and all routes bypassing those pools becoming extremely boggy), coupled with the endlessly dull, cold and wet weather. Elsewhere locally there are increasing signs of impending spring, be it snowdrops and daffodil spikes in our gardens, or dangling hazel catkins in the woods and hedgerows, and I heard my first singing blackbird in my garden on 4th February, an early date. Down on the marshes, though, it still feels distinctly wintry.

Result of the winter photographic competition

Congratulations to Francesco Stancato, whose atmospheric shot is the winning entry in the winter edition of our quarterly photography competition! Thanks to everyone who entered, and be ready to get some spring photos for our next competition in early April. You can see more of Francesco's photography at <https://www.facebook.com/Francescostancatoofficial> or else at <https://www.instagram.com/francescostancatoofficial/>.



What's happening on the Marshes?



Trustee Paul Roberts manfully tackled a blocked culvert (left), protected by nothing more substantial than a pair of wellies, in the process recovering numerous logs, branches and a fairly large plastic bucket



from the area where the otter tracks (see page 3) were found. An attempt was made to drain water off two stretches of the Great Stour Way, but the water level in the river was very nearly as high as the path, so the floodwater was extremely slow to lose itself in the Stour. Still, I thought to myself, things will improve over the next couple of days as the river level drops, little realising that we were to be blessed with a further 40mm of rain (more than 1½") over the next three days, leaving the paths deeper in water than when ditching was embarked upon!

Wildlife Report

In what has otherwise been rather a quiet month, the great excitement came right at the start with the discovery of otter prints in mud beside a small stream. The photo on the right, taken by Dave Hanna, who lives by the river, has been shown to two experts (a member of the Environment Agency and a mammalian ecologist), who both confirmed the prints' identity. There are hundreds of dog footprints all over the Marshes, but they only show four toeprints, usually grouped with the middle two at the front, and the outer two set rather further back. By contrast, some of the prints in the photo show five clear toes and, while the toe imprints are not in a line, the outer ones aren't set back as far as they would be in a dog. In a good print you can also make out the webbing between the toes, but I'm not sure I can convince myself of that in this photo.



After that little frisson it was back to a tale of varied disappointments: snipe, which in the past two years have been in the 40s, 50s or 60s in January, were reduced to just two on 26th. Initially I tried to explain this away by saying it was too mild and the birds hadn't dispersed so far from their breeding grounds; then, when it turned colder, I reasoned that the ice cover was preventing them from feeding and they'd moved away from the site in search of softer ground. Both explanations can't be right, surely! And the fields were certainly damp enough – can the ground ever be too wet for snipe, I wonder? The shallow flooding did draw in a few mallard and larger numbers of black-headed gulls – 49 on 7th and 75 on 15th, but nothing overly dramatic. Another disappointment was my continuing failure to relocate the pair of stonechats that I encountered more than two months ago.

Things were looking up a bit on neighbouring Tonford Lake, where 18 tufted duck were present on 26th, along with up to four coot, which have a habit of not colonising the lake until late winter. One or two little egrets are regularly gracing the margins, along with a heron.

On 13th I watched as 28 magpies congregated in willows on the far side of the river as the light ebbed. Presumably gathering prior to going to communal roost, they then puzzled me by splitting up, and I never did find out if they reassembled one last time before nightfall.

Also of interest were six stock doves (I normally only see two or three together on the old railway embankment), the return of the handsome cock pheasant, and a single greylag goose (right) flying over.



Banner photo on page 1 is the silhouette of a cormorant that often perches at the top of a riverside tree close to the railway bridge into Canterbury East station.

Greylag goose photo courtesy of Dave Smith

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