



# Newsletter

February 2021



## Welcome

Following the two arson attacks last year, we already knew that someone didn't Love Hambrook Marshes, so it wasn't really necessary for presumably the same person to press the point home yet again. The attack was extremely upsetting for trustees and lovers of the Marshes, but the destruction of the boardwalk does nothing to dent the ethos of LHM. Adversity can make us stronger, and this setback will not deter us from maintaining the area for public enjoyment, while preserving wetland habitats for wildlife. A message from Jon Winder, chair of the LHM trustees:

*We are so grateful for everyone's messages of support following the devastating blaze at Hambrook on Saturday night. As a small group of volunteers, it is particularly depressing for us to deal with mindless destruction like this. We are also very grateful for the generous offers of help. A proper clean-up will need to wait until the ground has dried out sufficiently, but more generally we would greatly welcome any help with looking after the marshes. If you can spare time to help - from half an hour a month helping with inspections to more regular maintenance tasks once Covid allows - please email [lovehambrook@gmail.com](mailto:lovehambrook@gmail.com) with your name, email and phone number and we will be in touch. If you would like to donate towards the clean-up costs and general care of the Marshes, please go to our JustGiving page at [www.justgiving.com/campaign/hambrookmarshes](http://www.justgiving.com/campaign/hambrookmarshes)*

## What's happening on the Marshes?

At about 7am on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February, an LHM trustee, Sian Pettman, and her husband were on the Marshes early to enjoy a dramatic sunrise, but the orange glow that greeted them came from flames in the last stages of destroying the remaining section of the boardwalk. In the early hours of 14<sup>th</sup> February last year an initial attack had destroyed the bulk of the boardwalk, but an unscathed section was retained, and a new pond excavated at the end of it so that visitors would be able to



walk along the boardwalk and then peer down at a variety of pondlife. It is this short section which has just been burnt, but it wasn't a critical piece of the site's infra-structure, so the arsonist achieved absolutely nothing. Much of the melted plastic from the recycled material used in the boardwalk's construction has already been cleared up (left), and as soon as the ground dries out we will bring in machinery to complete the process and return the land to pristine wet grassland.

Our local basket weavers have once more been busy harvesting the one-year-old wands in our osier bed, but covid restrictions meant they were unable to have a major onslaught over one weekend, instead turning out in ones and twos. A strip of older willows at the back of the bed has been retained as longer-term habitat, but will need cutting in the next year or two.



On 1<sup>st</sup> February I saw a couple bending down and peering into the grassland, then moving a short distance and repeating the procedure. They didn't seem to be digging anything up or taking photos so, intrigued, I went over to ask what



their interest was. It turned out that they were very carefully collecting rush stems to make into a Brigid's cross. St Brigid was a patron saint of Ireland, and this was her day. An old tradition was that on St Brigid's Day you would go outside to collect rushes, and make them into a simple cross that was then hung over the doorway to provide protection for the household. I was quite touched to learn that the couple were carefully going from patch to patch in order to avoid taking too many stems from one spot. In fact the hard rush they were collecting is fairly rampant in the damp fields and, as our cattle don't eat it, we're grateful for help from unexpected quarters to reduce its abundance!



Aspects of a snowbound Hambrook Marshes: clockwise from top left, icicle necklace on the railway bridge; snowy teasel head; early Valentine's greeting on the embankment bench; cathedral lit up amidst the gloom; islands of snow caught up around tufts of hard rush; ring walks fingerpost during a snowstorm.

At the time, people quickly started grumbling about the inconvenience – the cold, wet feet, slipping over on ice – and the sorry appearance after hundreds of feet and tyres had destroyed the pristine surface, but looking at those photos now, I can't help feeling slightly nostalgic for that brief week when the weather reverted to type, as remembered from my childhood.



## Wildlife Report

With plenty more rain (and snow!) in the first half of the month, the fields remained very wet, with widespread standing water, encouraging up to 53 mallard, 76 herring gulls, 45 black-headed gulls and four common gulls to dabble or roost there, particularly in Tonford field. Snipe numbers recovered a little, with 14 on 22<sup>nd</sup>, but they have been considerably less common than in previous winters.

The snow on 8<sup>th</sup> was undoubtedly the main feature of the month. It accumulated to a depth of about 10cm, but for the first few hours it was thawing almost as fast as it fell, so if it had been just a degree or two colder we might have woken to a rather more dramatic scene – maybe not up to our bedroom windows, but perhaps twice the depth we actually had to cope with. Further blizzards on 10<sup>th</sup> nicely topped up the losses due to daily minor thaws, and made everywhere look clean and fresh once more. The impact on wildlife, particularly on bird movements, wasn't as marked as I had expected, with just the odd lapwings (right) turning up on the surrounding fields (but none apparently on Hambrook itself). Another species that



usually gets pushed out of its wintering area when snow covers its feeding grounds is the skylark, but I only saw four fly over during the snow week. Hundreds of redwings and much smaller numbers of fieldfares descended on local orchards but not to any extent on Hambrook. So, all in all, the snow didn't seem to have much impact on Hambrook observations, which I am taking to be a good sign, as it could mean that most birds were still managing to find enough food without having to undertake long, tiring journeys. Wren (left) numbers

were unchanged after the big freeze, which was also encouraging, as their small size means they lose heat faster than a bulkier bird, and their strictly insectivorous diet makes for a harder life when everything is coated in snow. Of particular interest was hearing a Cetti's warbler (right) on 8<sup>th</sup> (the first day of the snow) and again on 17<sup>th</sup> when all the snow had thawed. The Cetti's warbler is a relative newcomer to this country, the first UK sighting being as recent as 1961. Formerly a bird of Mediterranean



countries, it spread steadily northwards in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was first reported nesting in the UK (in Kent) in 1973, after which numbers built up rapidly to 108 singing males in the county in 1978. However, as you might expect for a bird from the south, it is not well-adapted to harsh weather, and a couple of particularly severe winters in the mid-1980s nearly wiped them out, reducing the Kent population in the early 1990s to no more than five pairs. Like the wren, it suffers from being strictly insectivorous; so staying put when most other insect-eating birds (swallows, most other species of warbler, nightingale and so on) have migrated south is risky. In mild winters the gamble pays off, with the birds benefiting from not having to face the hazards of migration, and being able to start breeding before the migrants reach this country; but, as we have seen, a run of cold winters very nearly eliminated the population of this pioneering species. A high count of 15 blackbirds on 11<sup>th</sup> was presumably weather-related.



Of more interest now are the first signs of spring, with our few clumps of snowdrops out on the riverbank and the occasional lesser celandine bursting into flower. Two great spotted woodpeckers were drumming on the old embankment on 22<sup>nd</sup>; it is primarily the male who drums, but the birds were too high up for me to attempt the sexing of either bird (the only distinguishing feature is a small red patch on the nape of the male's neck). The reed bunting (left) is primarily a spring visitor to Hambrook, so one singing on 28<sup>th</sup> was another uplifting

sign, as was the simple, two-toned call of a chiffchaff the same day.

If I hadn't looked up on 21<sup>st</sup>, I would have missed the three small objects in the sky, resolving into sparrowhawks with the help of binoculars. This is the time of year when birds of prey indulge in aerial displays but, unfortunately, it proved impossible to keep track of all three birds, so I wasn't able to reconstruct the relationships between the individuals. One bird, presumably an interloper, was chased off peremptorily, but I was then unable to relocate the other two. Hopefully, a pair will breed on the edge of the Marshes, and we'll be seeing more of these single-minded hunters in the coming weeks.



My favourite photo from this month's freeze is of an alder, snapped just as a snowstorm was getting under way. The tree is only yards upstream of the Marshes, on the riverbank and with a view onto Tonford lake. In many ways a rather sad tree, all its upper trunk and canopy having been removed some years ago, and the lower trunk hollow, such that you can actually see right through it, it is nevertheless one of my favourites. Eaten alive by fungi, and emasculated by a chainsaw, it has persevered regardless, repurposing a low surviving side branch to grow upwards to form an entire new canopy –and demonstrating the amazing plasticity of plant life. The snow has rendered the view in shades of grey, producing an effect remarkably like the pen-and-ink drawings in an old Victorian tree book that I bought for a song from a second-hand bookshop.

*Lapwing, wren, Cetti's warbler and reed bunting photos courtesy of Dave Smith*

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