



Newsletter

April 2021



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

Well, now it's official: this has been a very strange month – the frostiest, sunniest and driest April since records began! Summer and winter can, to a degree, be fixed by the temperature, but the spring season seems to defy meteorological definition. The spring equinox is on 21st March, and the met office defines spring as beginning on 1st March, but I'm still waiting for it to arrive. For me, spring is when I'm no longer wrapped up in a coat every day, and when I start seeing swallows and hearing cuckoos. OK, so I have seen the occasional swallow, but cuckoos have eluded me so far, and I find that extremely sad. The English cuckoo population has declined by about 71% since 1995. As recently as 2001 it was placed on the Birds of Conservation Concern Green list, indicating that its population was stable; in 2007 it was moved to the Amber list, due to a decline of more than 25%, and then in 2015 it was Red-listed because of a fall in the breeding population exceeding 50%. The future looks far from rosy for this iconic bird, which has joined the ranks of many other once common species that now appear to be heading for extinction in this country – most notably the turtle dove, which has declined by 93%.

What's happening on the Marshes?

April was a month for good and bad graffiti. A large number of tags were painted over, and an offensive, racist comment that had been carved into the picnic table was sanded off, but looking on the brighter side, the Love Hambrook Marshes logo, with the addition of "Welcome to", now appears on the path at the main entrances to the Marshes (right). One of the common misapprehensions many visitors labour under is an assumption that the Marshes are owned and managed by the council. People are often most surprised to discover that it is owned by a charity and looked after by a small band of volunteers. The hope is that the splendid new signage will help correct that false impression, while adding to the sense of entering into somewhere a little bit special.



The first 11 cattle belonging to our new grazier made their inaugural appearance towards the end of the month.

A burnt-out motorbike appeared on the riverside path on 30th. As it was under the railway bridge leading into Canterbury East station, it was just beyond the LHM boundary and on Canterbury Council-owned land, so we can only hope that this eyesore is removed promptly.

Someone (presumably the Environment Agency or Tonford Fly Fishing Club) has put up two signs, one stating that there is a closed season for coarse fishing from 15th March to 15th June, the other pointing out the need to obtain a rod licence and tickets from the fisheries management group. Written in English, Polish, Romanian, Lithuanian, Slovenian and Bulgarian, I think you have a hint there as to who are believed to be the main culprits! In case none of those languages are appropriate, there are some helpful symbols, one of which appears to show an angler fishing a small bomb out of the water.



Wildlife Report

Perhaps the greatest joy of this month was to see a very welcome increase in our population of snake's head fritillaries. The original planting in the boardwalk field about ten years has been on its knees for some time, numbers hovering between two and five for the past six springs; this year, I'm delighted to report, I found ten, admittedly not a huge count, given the thousands of bulbs that were originally planted but perhaps, just perhaps, it represents the start of a fragile recovery. Far more robust figures came from the hay field, where 400 bulbs were planted in



Frost-rimmed fritillary at dawn

autumn 2019; last year I found 26 flowers, plus a further 36 non-flowering stems, but this April

there were 154 flowering stems. I have very deliberately written "flowering stems" because at least 21 stems bore two flowers, but I counted these as one flowering plant. I don't recall seeing these double-headed plants in the wild, and can't be sure of the precise provenance of the purchased bulbs, leaving open the possibility that they aren't quite as 'native' as they were claimed to be. The charming fairy lantern flowers looked remarkably fragile nodding in the breeze, yet survived the frequent April frosts with little apparent impact on their beauty.



After that little bit of fritillary excitement, the rest of the month has been rather subdued. The pair of great crested grebes appear to have abandoned Tonford lake, and nothing has been seen of the reed buntings. The first returning whitethroat (left) was singing on 25th, the same day that an overstaying fieldfare was seen high up in one of the embankment poplars – the former fresh from a winter in Africa, the latter contemplating a return to breeding grounds in Scandinavia. Lesser black-backed gulls are largely summer visitors here, so the arrival of two on 19th was a further welcome sign that spring is coming, even though the thermometer indicates to the contrary.

Also of interest was a pair of bullfinches, the first since November, and four greylag geese flying over.

Little egret and whitethroat photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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