



Newsletter

June 2021



Welcome

With greatly increased numbers of people using the riverside path since the March 2020 lockdown, safety for all has become a more pressing issue. Click [here](#) to see footage from a cyclist's helmet-mounted camera of his ride along a Scottish canal towpath, then taking a blind bend around a bridge abutment – you may feel the urge to watch from between your fingers when you get to see what happened next. The setup at Hambrook, where cyclists and walkers have to negotiate the corners of the brick abutment of the old Elham Valley line bridge spanning the Stour, is remarkably similar, and it seems like only a matter of time before a similar accident happens here. The new Sustrans signs put up in May are clearer than the old ones, but it seems unlikely that speeding cyclists will take any notice of them (if they even see them). We are hoping to paint 'Slow' signs on the tarmac, but other than that there is little we can do. Ideally, the entire route would be at least half as wide again, in order to accommodate all categories of user safely, but that would be extremely expensive, and in the current economic climate simply isn't going to happen. Then again, would we really even want a ribbon of tarmacked track the width of a rural lane running alongside the river?

What's happening on the Marshes?

Our new grazier now has a full complement of 28 cattle on the marshes, split between Tonford field and the Boardwalk field. Handily, he has also taken on the contract to do all our mowing, although this got off to a slightly wobbly start, first when the ground was too soft for him to bring his tractor on, and then when he discovered that his machine was too big to fit under the A2 bridge! He will therefore have to borrow a smaller tractor to finish off the mowing alongside Tonford field.

Volunteers have made a start on reweaving the willow of the maze. In the space of a year this has become very overgrown, making it difficult for anyone, child or adult, to wander down the narrow aisles, never mind actually getting to the centre.

Volunteers needed for new visitor count

We are planning to conduct a repeat of the original visitor count carried out in August 2015, when 2854 people were logged over a two-day period. This time the count will be on a Wednesday and Sunday to see how weekday figures compare with weekends. We've simplified the procedure, but will still need a number of helpers if it is going to be a success. We're asking people to operate in two-hour shifts between 7am and 7pm on both those days. Full instructions will be sent out to everyone expressing an interest, but basically all that is involved is stationing yourself on the riverside path where it branches off to go over the footbridge into Wincheap (you can bring a folding chair if you prefer to sit down for that length of time, and drag along a friend if you'd like some company). If you have some spare time to help out with gathering this information, please contact michaelwalter434@gmail.com. We're only asking you to cover a single two-hour slot, although you can always volunteer for more, but it would help if you can let Michael know ALL the two-hour slots when you would in fact be available i.e. 7-9am, 9-11am, 11am-1pm, 1-3pm, 3-5pm and 5-7pm on each day. If you would like to help but can only manage one hour, we can arrange for one slot to be split between two volunteers. Many thanks in anticipation. The survey will only go ahead if the weather is dry.



Cattle demanding to be counted during the original survey

Willow-weaving workshops

We're holding a series of three short willow-weaving workshops on Sunday 8th August. Booking will be via Eventbrite, and you will be sent the link once it's live. Places are limited to six per workshop, so you need to get in quickly! There will be a small charge to cover costs, but full details will be circulated separately as they become available.

Photographic competition

The closing date for our summer photographic competition has been extended to 11th July owing to the poor recent weather, so you still have a chance to get your best picture splashed across Facebook, the website and this newsletter. Click [here](#) and scroll down for full details. Essentially what we are looking for are photos that capture some quality of the Marshes in summer. It's a good excuse to get out to Hambrook and enjoy the views and abundance of wildlife that all the wet weather has encouraged. Good luck!

Which amphibians use Hambrook Marshes?

Steve Allain, a PhD student at the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology at the University of Kent, is carrying out research on grass snakes in Norfolk, but earlier this year the pandemic left him grounded in Canterbury, so he kindly offered to do some amphibian survey work for us on Hambrook Marshes during his enforced stay down here. So, even the lowering black clouds of covid contain just a hint of a silver lining. A brief summary of his findings is given below, and a full report will be made available to the trustees later in the year.

As someone who is actively involved in the recording of amphibians, I was shocked to find that in areas around the city where there were ideal habitats, there was a lack of formal amphibian records. The ponds at Hambrook Marshes are one of these sites, so my partner and I set out to find which amphibians are present. We conducted a number of surveys throughout the spring, and saw the occasional common frog, several marsh frogs, and tens of both smooth newts and palmate newts. Our surveys failed to detect any common toads, which appear to be quite rare within the area. All four species were present despite the cold weather and the recent arson attack, which we feared would have polluted the water. The



Female marsh frog

two newt species were the most commonly seen amphibia on our surveys, with them being present in most of the water bodies we surveyed in the Boardwalk Field. This area was investigated due to the presence of deep waterbodies that looked ideal for amphibians.

Steve Allain

Wildlife Report

This had the makings of a rather short report, with just an overflying rook, now a remarkably scarce visitor to Hambrook, and a single black-headed gull on Tonford lake on 13th – after being a feature of the area throughout winter, these gulls desert Hambrook in spring to breed on coastal marshes, so this bird may have been a failed breeder. That would have been it really, but then a few days ago my eyes popped out when I discovered a small group of five southern marsh orchids (right, with a second one in the background) near the entrance from Whitehall Road. As the name suggests, this orchid doesn't occur in the north of England, and is found mainly in the extreme south; despite its name, though, it can sometimes be found in drier places. In Kent it is quite scarce, being recorded from



the lower reaches of the Stour, from just north of Canterbury through to Sandwich, occasionally in the Medway valley and at Dungeness. So, what to make of this discovery? I imagine the orchids have been here undetected all along, but what could be different this year is reduced grazing pressure. The previous grazier used to put all his cattle into the Whitehall and Boardwalk fields on arrival in April, but our new contractor only put six in there, and fairly soon moved them onto the Boardwalk field. Consequently, Whitehall field, where the orchids are, has been grazed much more lightly and, whereas in previous years the young orchids may have been eaten off before they became noticeable, the grazing this year may have been too light to prevent them from flowering. A wider search of the vicinity failed to throw up any more southern marsh orchids, but I did spot a single pyramidal orchid (right), like a bright pink beacon glowing in the dark, it was so obvious. This may have been its undoing, as I was unable to locate it yesterday morning, and fear it has been picked. The flowering of this second orchid species adds substance to my theory about reduced grazing. But where did the orchids come from in the first place? I still haven't been able to lay my hands on maps or aerial photos showing the extent of the gravel digging carried out by Bretts in the 1970s, but my suspicion is that the fairly small area where the two orchid species were found wasn't excavated, and that the orchids may represent the tattered remnant of a much more abundant population that could have thrived on Hambrook Marshes for hundreds of years. That is the romantic, bucolic-tinged explanation anyway. The more prosaic possibility, though still intriguing, is that seeds of these plants were introduced to the site in spoil brought in to backfill the pits once all the gravel had been extracted. I have previously posited this explanation for the anomalous discovery of other plants on the Marshes.



Marsh frog photo courtesy of Steve Allain

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