



# Newsletter

August 2021



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### Welcome

There is currently an exhibition of paintings by local artists in the small front gallery of the Beaney library, on the left as you go in the main entrance. Amongst them is this view of Hambrook Marshes, as seen from the old railway embankment, looking upstream towards Chartham. The artist, S Mitchison, says that art has led her to “the local natural places in Canterbury”. It is really encouraging to know that people are actively seeking out the wilder places on the outskirts of Canterbury for art and therapy, and we are so fortunate that Hambrook Marshes can provide inspiration, whether in a dramatic view, getting delightfully close to a dragonfly, or simply breathing in the fresh air.



## What's happening on the Marshes?

On 8<sup>th</sup> August Nicola Jarvis-Claxton (right, in the grey-green top) gave a series of short classes on willow weaving to an attentive audience. The sessions took place close to the site's osier bed, which is harvested each winter by a group of local willow weavers. Pol Bailey commented: "it was a lovely workshop; my grandson and I loved it, and he was very proud of his dragonfly." Too often nowadays adults and children alike neglect to retain their primordial links with the countryside that nurtures them, and it was really rewarding to see these eager students twisting the pliable willow between their fingers to create their own miniature works of art. Fun doesn't have to come from consumerism and computer games.



We have to wearily accept the need to periodically remove tags from the information boards, and paint over ones that have been sprayed over any available vertical surface, but the taggers' latest fad seems to be leaving their mark on the riverside path (left), the worry being that this particular craze will catch on and we'll end up with multiple tags along the path, visible signs of the turf warfare being waged between rival taggers. Wire-brushing doesn't make much impact so, in an escalation of tagging hostilities, we will be forced to bring out a more powerful weapon – an electric drill – to see if that works any better. Failing that, we may be reduced to just letting the almost ceaseless footfall do the work for us, and keep our fingers crossed that more tags don't appear.

With welcome help from some volunteers, ragwort was pulled in the fields; it's a shame we have to do this, as ragwort is an excellent nectar plant for a variety of insects, and who hasn't marvelled at the scary orange and black hooped caterpillars of the cinnabar moth, happily sustained by a diet of alkaloids that would be lethal to mammals? The problem is that we can't interest any contractors in cutting and removing a hay crop if it contains substantial quantities of ragwort, which could be harmful when fed to livestock. We are, however, looking into ways in which we can adjust the management programme so that we can have ragwort growing on the marshes, while still being able to take a hay crop each year.

260m of tall riverside vegetation, mainly nettles and bindweed, were scythed to enable visitors to gain views of the river, which rather disappears from view in the summer months. As we are so proud of our chalk stream, an internationally rare habitat, it seems a shame that it should be invisible at a time when the greatest number of visitors are treading the riverside path. One result of this work has been the exposure of some extensive stands of watercress growing at the river's edge (see "Wildlife Report" below for more about this plant).



The Marshes may be owned by Love Hambrook Marshes Charitable Incorporated Organisation (what a mouthful!), but the trustees are still unable to prevent various unauthorised activities, such as the annoying tagging mentioned above. There have also been two instances this year of someone cutting down trees: first a willow beside Tonford footbridge and, more recently, another willow on the river bank opposite the houses in Grays Way was crudely cut down (left). We can only hazard a guess that the culprit either wanted to improve the view from his house, or simply dislikes having trees on the marshes. Fortunately,

willows thrive on being cut, and so this one will soon send out a vigorous cluster of new shoots to hide the indignity.

## Wildlife Report

Scything along the riverbank has revealed some extensive beds of watercress (right, and see *What's happening on the Marshes?*, above). A number of plants at Hambrook have showy umbrella-like discs of white flowers that belong to the carrot family (Umbelliferae). Superficially, watercress looks a little like some of these, with its little clusters of white flowers, but it is in the unrelated cabbage family (Cruciferae). Watercress is rich in vitamins, calcium, potassium and iron, so a really healthy food, but it isn't advisable to harvest it



from the wild. Although the waters of the Stour are celebrated for being crystal-clear, they can occasionally be polluted by sewage run-off, leading to the risk of catching various bacterial diseases, such as E. coli, and with sheep grazing just upstream from Hambrook, there is the added risk of becoming infected with an animal illness (zoonotic disease), such as chlamydiosis. It's best to stick to bought watercress that has been grown in water of controlled purity.

One odd addition to the plant list was a single millet plant (right) growing on a bonfire site on the embankment, presumably introduced by a bird that had been feeding on mixed seeds in someone's garden.

With less than summery temperatures, a definite hint of autumn hung in the air, a feeling accentuated by the sight of 31 goldfinches swirling up from a patch of thistle seed-heads. Another sign of the changing mood was a lively mix of birds in the embankment scrub on 20<sup>th</sup>. No longer focused on rearing a family, they were now single-mindedly feeding up prior to migrating south to Africa – chiffchaffs, whitethroats, garden warblers and blackcaps, together with a small troop of blue and great tits. But there was still plenty of seasonal activity, with a range of dragonflies seeming to cope reasonably well in the



absence of their beloved sunshine: one of the commoner species in late summer is the migrant hawker, a mid-sized dragonfly that habitually hunts at a greater height than most other species; or the brown hawker, a large, powerful flier readily identified by its smoky brown wings. But the greatest surprise for me was the discovery of a golden-ringed dragonfly (left) on 11<sup>th</sup>, just downstream in Tannery Field (where there is that rather splendid, ribby metal bull sculpture. The golden-ringed dragonfly occurs in the far south west of Kent, in the general area of Tenterden, Hawkhurst and

Tonbridge Wells but is not, so far as I am aware, known from this end of the county. Whether it was just a lone vagrant that has failed to leave its mark or a coloniser that will one day turn up at Hambrook, remains to be seen.

At what is generally rather a quiet time of year for birds, there were a surprising number of less usual records, including two herons on 3<sup>rd</sup>, and a little egret, the first I had seen since January. On 27<sup>th</sup> around 65 herring gulls were swarming overhead, all apparently coming from the Wincheap retail estate, where they nest on the conveniently flat roofs. A large bird of prey flying over can provoke this sort of reaction, but I was unable to see anything out of the ordinary, and the reason for this eruption of activity remains obscure.

A nuthatch calling from the old embankment on 20<sup>th</sup> was my first Hambrook record of this woodland species – the habitat provided by this exceedingly narrow strip of trees being decidedly sub-optimal and, unsurprisingly, I haven't found it since then. Equally unexpected was hearing the raucous calls of a ring-necked parakeet in the same area on 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. Despite searching, I failed to actually see the bird – although their bright green plumage is very striking, parakeets do blend in remarkably well with tree foliage, and their habit of remaining near the tops of trees only adds to the difficulties. As with the nuthatch, I haven't heard it again, so it may well have just been passing through. The history of the ring-necked parakeet in this country is wreathed in exotic mystery - it has been

claimed that the first birds were brought back to Europe from India by Alexander the Great around 324BC. As far back as 1855 it was reported to be nesting successfully in Norfolk, while in the 1930s a small group frequented gardens bordering Epping Forest, but then it seems the parakeet died out in England, until 1969 when a family party seen near Rochester may have been the vanguard of a fairly formidable colonisation that has seen them become firmly entrenched on Thanet and in southern London. Where the new arrivals came from is anyone's guess; one suggestion was that they were brought in by returning sailors, while a more bizarre claim is that they were released by Jimi Hendrix (right), though I have no idea what the basis is for that assertion. Whether you love the bright colours, hate its raucous calls, or are concerned that it may be depriving native species of their rightful nest holes, it looks as though this alien species is here to stay – I've seen them from my Rough Common garden, as well as in Paris



and Seville. Their distribution seems to be curiously static as, having made a success of colonising London and Thanet, they appear largely unable or unwilling to fill in the gaps, and there is little sign of them getting established around Canterbury. Having recorded a parakeet twice in six days, I haven't heard its rasping call for the past fortnight and so, like the nuthatch mentioned on p4, it may well have been merely visiting and, not finding enough to interest it at Hambrook, soon moved on.

*Parakeet photo courtesy of Dave Smith*

Registered charity no. 1156473