



Newsletter

November 2021



Welcome

We are very grateful to our local KCC councillor, Mike Sole (seen here on one of our new seats), for providing us with £400 from his KCC Member's grant to provide five rustic benches, which were all installed in November along the Great Stour Way. The benches will give people greater opportunities to stop and enjoy the beauty of our local chalk stream, and we have already received many appreciative comments from our regular visitors. Three of the benches are on their own, but two have been positioned close together in front of the willow maze to encourage families to meet here. Riverside vegetation in front of the benches will be kept short so that views of the river can be enjoyed at all times.



What's happening on the Marshes?

As mentioned on page one, we installed five simple benches early in the month. Having two wheelbarrows on site for that job presented us with a good opportunity to remove all the assorted, heavy lumps of iron that “magnet fishers” have inconsiderately dumped beside the riverside path. This topic came up in last month’s newsletter, when I was bewailing the thoughtlessness of people indulging in this rather mindless hobby of hauling badly corroded iron objects out of the water, using strong magnets on a line.

We also had a bit of fly tipping, but nothing too serious. I had to smile when clearing away litter to come across two empty Polish beer cans, with a large picture of a European bison on the side. Was this the drinker’s nod to Kent Wildlife Trust’s plans to manage West Blean and Thornden Woods with the help of some of these huge beasts next year?



Yesterday morning Keith Oliver, whose house overlooks Hambrook, reported that he had witnessed a swan fly into electricity cables that cross the marsh, and tumble to the ground. When I called in to inspect the damage, it was to find a dead mute swan lying in Tonford Field, close to the power line. The accident happened at 7.30am, when the light would have been poor, but there are some fairly large spheres strung at intervals along the cable, which should have alerted the swan to the hazard. However, the balls are rather widely spaced, so we are hoping that UK Power Networks can be persuaded to attach more markers to prevent a repeat of this upsetting episode. There was a similar fatal incident in November 2017.



Dead swan beneath the power line



Detail of power line with dangling balls

The cattle left mid-month after an uneventful season with our new grazier. In previous years the livestock have been kept in one herd and periodically shuttled between Tonford Field in the south west part of the marshes, and the pasture at the north east end. This year they remained permanently in two small herds at opposite ends of the marshes, and we now need to evaluate the pros and cons of the differing approaches.

Wildlife Report

The weather turned much more wintry towards the end of the month, and a hard frost on 29th may have been responsible for the snipe flock declining from 32 on 12th to just 17 on 29th, although this may be due to birds spreading out across the site in search of unfrozen ground, rather than to a mass exodus. The colder weather also

brought in six pied wagtails (right), a bird not regularly recorded on the marshes, together with a male stonechat – last seen a year and a week ago. This bird appeared to be on its own (stonechats are almost invariably in pairs or family groups), so I am not confident that it will remain for the duration, just as last year's bird was not seen again. Wintering birds have been rather disappointing so far, with only two records of single little grebes on the river in the past two months; in previous years up to seven have been present, often in



the vicinity of the railway bridge leading in to Canterbury East station, and it is beginning to look as though there is a definite downward trend. Also in very short supply are the winter thrushes: a flock of 18 redwing did fly over on 17th, but I have yet to see a single Hambrook fieldfare this winter. Up to ten tufted ducks are now regularly seen on the neighbouring Tonford Lake, and they were accompanied by four little egrets on 2nd; these most elegant of birds are primarily winter visitors to Hambrook, but little has been seen of them so far.



Eight mute swans were present on neighbouring Tonford Lake on 2nd, with a further two on the river (that was before one died crashing into powerlines – see page 2). A squealing water rail (left) was the first for nearly three years – a secretive bird that is far more often heard than seen. About 40 black-headed and a similar number of herring gulls appeared overhead from nowhere on 2nd, having failed to take advantage of the damp fields so far this autumn. Nine jackdaws and three rooks flew over one morning – two species that

are seen far less frequently now, and which rarely stop to feed in Tonford Field these days.

The degree to which species are so supremely adapted to their lifestyle never ceases to amaze me, the thought prompted by the sight of a kestrel hunting over the old railway embankment one morning. Whenever you get a close view of a kestrel through binoculars, it is worth focusing on the

head while registering the background: although the body judders up and down with the frantic wingbeats of the hovering bird, its head remains static in relation to the surroundings, all the better to observe the telltale movements of a vole hidden in vegetation. If the kestrel's head were swinging from side to side, or up and down, it would be far harder to pick up this slender indicator of the bird's next meal. So, as the bird senses its body moving up a little in the air, it must compensate by lowering its head by exactly the same amount.

A chiffchaff, last heard calling on 7th, was the final, tenuous link with summer memories. Small numbers now overwinter in damp valley scrub, or even in gardens, but at Hambrook I seldom hear one beyond November. By the time we get round to February, the occasional bird could just as easily be an early arrival from the Mediterranean rather than one that has eked out a frugal winter existence on the Marshes.

I recently read about dead men's fingers being washed up on a Cumbrian beach. This isn't actually quite as gruesome as it sounds, the fingers being the fleshy, parsnip-like roots of hemlock water dropwort – a member of the carrot family (Umbelliferae). Hemlock, another umbellifer, is renowned as being the poison of choice taken by Socrates in 399BC, but hemlock water dropwort is also poisonous, causing, nausea, vomiting, fever, seizures and hallucinations - hence the lurid country name of dead man's fingers. One wonders how many food-gatherers had to die before it was established that the roots of parsnips are delicious, whereas the similar-smelling hemlock water dropwort roots are deadly. A fairly large white-flowered plant (right), it is common in ditches and along the river bank at Hambrook, but so long as people don't start digging it up, extolling the virtues of "food for free", it is perfectly safe.



Photo credits: Dave Smith for pied wagtail and water rail

The banner heading photo on page 1 is of autumnal field maple leaves

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