



# Newsletter

December 2021



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### Welcome

In a second year of national uncertainty, a continuing fear of mixing in crowds, and difficulties in taking foreign holidays, green oases like Hambrook Marshes have once again proved their worth - as reported in the July newsletter, 1451 visitors were recorded during a two-day period that month. Running is becoming increasingly popular, and a route that takes you alongside the river is infinitely more desirable than pounding the pavements of Canterbury. As successive lockdowns eased, more people reverted to traditional activities - shopping, meeting friends in cafes and pubs – but the reconnection with the countryside that was first manifest in April 2020 has been maintained, albeit at a lower level, and the revival of interest in, and love of, wildlife seems set to continue. The trustees of Love Hambrook Marshes hope to see this translating into a greater respect for the countryside, and perhaps more offers of help with practical work on the marshes.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

December was a quiet month, with no contractor or major volunteer activity taking place, but at least the fields began to shimmer with standing water in places, which in turn attracted a few gulls and duck, so the area gradually adopted the mantle of marshland. That, in practical terms, meant that it was becoming a reservoir for excess water, slowing down the rate at which it moved into the river, and thus reducing the risk of serious flooding downstream. We sometimes talk as if floodplains were *designed* to serve this regulatory function, but of course they are nothing of the sort: water will always tend to settle in low-lying areas which, if they are upstream of a city, will make them appear to have a protective role, but of course when we build on flood plains we inevitably suffer the consequences.

## Wildlife Report



*Little grebe - Up periscope!*

With shallow flooding at times, the marshes started attracting in some birds, with peak counts of 53 black-headed gulls, 37 mallard and three herring gulls. After more or less vanishing during an icy spell in November, snipe numbers built up once more to 21, though this is still a low figure for late December. Little grebe (left) numbers also remain stubbornly low, with none seen on the river on some visits, and my best count so far this winter has only been three, one of which was on the Whitehall stream that enters the Stour a short distance upriver from the brick abutment of the old railway crossing.

It is now four months since the parakeet took up residence on the old railway embankment, and it seems to be getting much more used to humans. In the first few weeks it was extremely difficult to catch even a glimpse of the shocking green bird, not helped at the time by the presence of foliage, but now it sits on the bare branches of its favourite poplar, totally ignoring me, so that it is even possible to obtain a passable photo of the alien with my basic compact camera (right). Craning my neck up at the impassive bird, I was reminded of *The Peregrine*, a seminal work by JA Baker, first published back in 1967. The book minutely detailed the author's tracking of that raptor across a winter marsh, until it eventually accepted him as a benign figure in the landscape, allowing a close approach, as though he had achieved some sort of rapport with the cold-eyed bird. I have to admit I haven't had to put in the long, chilling hours that JA Baker committed to, but that doesn't stop me feeling a little of the euphoria he must have experienced on becoming accepted.



News of the death of a mute swan on 1<sup>st</sup> December, after colliding with the electricity cables that are strung across the marsh, just about squeezed into the November newsletter. I wasn't prepared for the discovery five days later that the bird's only surviving memorial was several mats of white feathers and a few clean bones: the swan's body had been very efficiently scavenged, initially probably by a fox or buzzard and later perhaps by gulls, crows and magpies. The remarkable thing is that I never saw any carnivore on the carcass, and I have yet to encounter a fox on the marshes.



*All that remained of a once mighty swan after just five days*



An odd discovery was at the base of a thick ivy stem (left) that had been thoroughly gnawed, leaving on the ground a pile of chippings that can be clearly seen in the photo. Squirrels are prolific gnawers, and I do spot one on the embankment from time to time, but I haven't seen such long chippings produced by a squirrel before. In a fanciful moment it did cross my mind that it could be the work of a beaver, but no other sign of their handiwork was seen, and it struck me as unlikely that a beaver would have waddled up the embankment to get to that single stem. What I find upsetting, though, is that a well-intentioned person has sawn through the ivy stem, in the mistaken belief that this creeper might kill the tree. Ivy is not parasitic, unlike mistletoe, but is simply using the tree for support, and has a wealth of wildlife benefits. In addition to providing concealed nest sites for birds, its early autumn flowers are a welcome source of nectar for a wide variety of bees, wasps, hoverflies and butterflies at a time when few other plants

are in bloom, while the dull mauve-black berries don't appear until mid-winter, when birds may already have polished off the berries of earlier-fruiting trees. To my mind, ivy growing in sunlight (it doesn't flower in the shade) is a boon to wildlife, and should be highly esteemed in the countryside.

*Photo credits: Dave Smith for little grebe*

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