



Newsletter

January 2022



24th January - Not every morning can be crystal clear!

Welcome

Over Christmas I watched the original 1961 film of West Side Story, and then a week ago I saw Steven Spielberg's 2021 version. This isn't the place to evaluate the two strikingly similar films (though, for what it's worth, I think I preferred the earlier one), but rather to remark on the fact that, so far as I can recall, I didn't get to see a single tree, or even a weed, in the entire five or six hours. To my mind, a life without access to greenery would be a form of torture, but it is something that many people living in the centres of our conurbations are wearily familiar with. The London mayor, Sadiq Khan, is seeking to address the problem, last year announcing £6 million of investment into London's green areas, with part of that money going towards an attempt to bring open spaces to within a ten-minute walk of all Londoners. Canterbury residents can count themselves lucky to have Westgate Gardens, Toddlers Cove, Tannery Field, Bingley Island and Hambrook Marshes within easy reach of the High Street.

I'm writing this on World Wetlands Day (2nd February), serving as another reminder of the importance of places like Hambrook Marshes that can support wintering populations of snipe, breeding mallard and dragonflies, as well as a wealth of other marsh-loving wildlife.

What's happening on the Marshes?

The willow weavers returned for their annual harvest of osier wands that they can then use in their basketry work. We are pleased to be supporting this traditional cottage industry, but the problem with annual cutting is that the willow never gets the chance to develop into a wildlife habitat. So, as usual, the weavers left a band of willow at the back of the plot untouched, but that is now outgrowing its usefulness as scrub, and we intend coppicing it this month.



Willow bed volunteers needed

We will be cutting willow on both 19th and 20th February, and would love some help. The main task will be clearing away coppice material that has already been felled by chainsaw. We also hope to carry out some major management on the willow maze (see below). Meet at 10am or later on either day at the osier bed, which can be reached by crossing the hay field on the path leading away from the B & M and park and ride footbridge. Cross the stream on the concrete culvert, and then head straight for the fence in front of you. We'll be working at the back of the bed that was recently cut by a group of willow weavers. Reed warblers and reed buntings ceased breeding there when the weavers resumed annual harvesting of most of the area. Our aim now is to recreate short-rotation coppice on the area that the weavers don't cut, in a bid to get these wetland birds nesting here once more. If we've had a lot of rain, the ground could be quite wet, so bring good work boots or wellies, plus gloves, food and drink. If you'd like to join the team on either 19th or 20th, please email Paul at lovehambrook.landmanager@gmail.com. In the event of bad weather, phone Paul on 07885 867580 to see if the task is still going ahead.

Willow maze management

We're not getting rid of the maze, but it has become increasingly difficult to maintain, and in places the willow "walls" are now quite gappy. We are therefore proposing to cut the willows down to ground level, and allow the stumps to resprout. The fresh regrowth will then be woven into new walls, which will be kept lower than before to simplify future management. It will take until 2023 for the maze to be in full working order once more, but we hope it will bring pleasure to visitors for many years to come. The left-hand photo below shows that in 2016 it was still manageable, although already getting a bit too tall, but by 2021 (right-hand photo) it was really getting out of hand and was becoming an impenetrable jungle. So please don't be surprised when, in the coming weeks, the maze "disappears"; this will only be temporary!

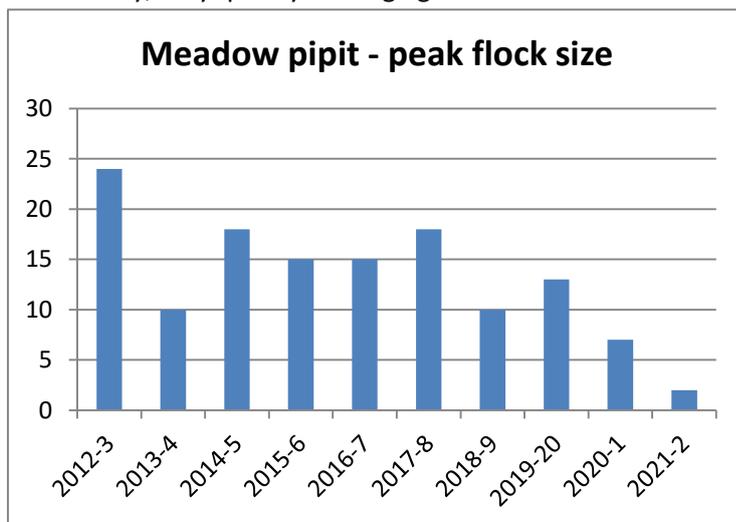


Wildlife Report

After a five-month residency on the embankment, “our” parakeet is spreading its wings a little, and is now more likely to be heard on the far side of the river. If it fails to pair up with another wandering bird this spring, I suspect that it will move off to try its luck elsewhere. Arguably, we shouldn’t really be welcoming such an obvious alien onto our semi-natural marshland, but I had grown fond of its company and will miss the harsh shrieker if it does disappear.

Another blatantly exotic bird that can be found on the marsh is a helmeted guinea fowl, more often than not in gardens on the Thanington side of the river, but early one morning in January I disturbed it from high up in a willow on the Hambrook side, where I suspect it had been roosting overnight.

It hasn’t been the most exciting of winters for birds on the marshes: the snipe flock is smaller than usual, and by the end of the month had dwindled to just 14. Interestingly, though, on 3rd they were joined by a jack snipe, which is considerably smaller, and with a much shorter bill. “Jack” may just indicate a diminutive, but the name could also originate from an earlier belief that jack snipes were male common snipes, the female of the latter species being referred to as a jill snipe. The common snipe breeds in marshy areas of the UK, though now very scarce in Kent, but the jack snipe is purely a winter visitor to this country from its breeding grounds in northern Europe. Its status here is poorly known as it is such a secretive bird, tending to sit tight when approached, but if flushed flying off silently, very quickly landing again in dense cover.



off dramatically, with just the occasional single or couple now being seen. Quite why this should have happened is unclear, but it appears to be a bird that could soon cease to be a regular visitor to the marshes.

One reason for the generally uninspiring birdwatching has been the fairly dry weather over the past six months, with rainfall 22% below the average. In consequence, flooding episodes have not been severe or long-lasting, so I was pleased to see a roost of 70 black-headed, five common, and four herring gulls in Tonford field on 18th when there was some standing water for a few days.

Another disappointment has been the shortage of meadow pipits; as the bar chart shows, this small, streaky bird (below) which, like the snipe, is just a winter visitor to Hambrook Marshes, used to be seen in a flock of about 15, but numbers have dropped



Birds are not automatons, reacting in fixed ways to any given circumstance; rather, they have a culture, in the form of traditions that may be handed down from generation to generation, but

which can just as easily die out. A simple example of this was the habit that moorhens had developed of coming off the river to feed amongst the short bankside grass in winter, with up to eight or ten birds using the stretch between the railway bridge and the old embankment. The habit then disappeared for a couple of years, only to re-emerge this winter. They are probably not actually grazing on the grass, but pecking at other vegetation, such as clover and, being omnivorous, picking off any invertebrates they come across.



Thirteen magpies were feeding on the Boardwalk field one morning, and a joyful sound was the drumming of a great spotted woodpecker on 30th; can spring really be just around the corner? – probably not!

Photo credits: Dave Smith for meadow pipit and moorhen

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