



Newsletter

February 2022



Welcome

The photo above was taken at dawn on the Marshes, but looking west. When enjoying a delightful sunrise or sunset it sometimes pays to turn your back on the sun and see what is happening in the other half of the firmament. The colours will probably be less fiery, but then my preference tends to be for pastel shades.

I stumbled on this archive photo (right) from around 2011 the other day. It shows the installation of the footbridge linking the path from B&M to Hambrook Marshes. We now know that the answer to the question “How many men does it take to put in a new footbridge?” is “Seven to watch and take photos, plus one crane operator to do the work!”. Much of the infra-structure on the Marshes was planned and installed by the previous owners, Kent Enterprise Trust, whom we can thank for the paths, bridges, finger posts, water features and much more. It is a great shame that one of their efforts, the boardwalk, was subject to three arson attacks and no longer exists.



What's happening on the Marshes?

The weekend of 19-20th February should have seen us coppicing the willow in the osier bed; Storm Eunice rather put paid to that idea, but we are going ahead with our plans for the coming weekend, so below, once more, is an outline of what we hope to achieve and how you can lend a hand.

We'll be cutting willow on 5th and 6th March 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, plus a bowsaw or loppers if you have them. If you'd like to join the team on either 5th or 6th, 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.

Volunteers from the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership were back this month, carrying out two useful tasks. One was to cut scrub on the embankment – no mean task on such a steep slope! – the objective being to maintain a mosaic of scrub and herbaceous vegetation on the bank to keep it attractive to invertebrates, reptiles, birds and plants. Left untouched, the hawthorn would cast an ever deeper, suffocating shade that greatly reduced the wildlife interest. In the absence of aurochs, wild horses, elks and wild boar, it falls to us to retain a partially open habitat. KSCP's other useful input was to cut back scrub alongside both sets of steps leading onto the embankment (right). Year by year the hawthorn, dogwood and other species have been encroaching on the long flight of steps, and it had reached the point where our regular trimming back of overhanging branches was no longer sufficient to prevent the bushes from taking over. What was turning into a dark tunnel is once more an airy path with views over the river.



Trees are designed to withstand strong winds; their roots are incredibly strong in tension, enabling them to stand up to the worst storms every winter. Storm Eunice, however, is being characterised as a “once in several decades” event for its unusual severity. Despite that, well over 99% of trees in Kent still withstood the blast, as did all the willows lining the riverbank, but Hambrook didn't fare so well on the old embankment. On the public section of the embankment the only damage suffered was of one

hawthorn falling across the path. It may well be significant that the small tree was heavily burdened with ivy, which would have massively increased impedance of air flow, and so probably contributed to its downfall. On the shorter, northern section of the embankment the impact was far greater, with several poplars and hawthorns thrown down. All of these victims were also heavily bedecked with ivy. As this area is not officially open to the public, we are thinking of leaving the trees in situ, free to rot or resprout at nature's whim.

Wildlife Report

Once again it's that time of year when we can pass from the depths of winter to mild spring weather in the space of a few hours. A wintry look was provided by the splashy fields hosting up to 58 black-headed gulls and 22 mallard, though the gulls' darkening hoods couldn't disguise which season we are heading towards. Other signs of longer days and a strengthening sun were the presence of a chiffchaff on the embankment on 21st and perhaps the same bird singing there on 28th, while a great spotted woodpecker has been drumming in that area for the past couple of weeks. This is also the time of year when snipe numbers decrease, as the birds head back to breeding areas in the UK or abroad; numbers have slipped back from 21 on 12th to 13 on 28th.

"Our" parakeet has definitely abandoned the embankment, and I didn't even hear it squawking on the far side of the river on my visit this morning. A sparrowhawk put in one of its rare appearances, but our other main raptor, the kestrel, has been a regular visitor for the past four months, encouraging us to look into the logistics of installing a nestbox on a pole in a quiet part of the Marshes.

Two birds of note were both seen on 7th. Firstly, I had my second sighting of the winter of a stonechat. From 2013 to 2018 one or more stonechats were a fairly regular feature of the winter months, but this was only my third record in the past three years. A previous sighting in November allowed me to at least entertain the possibility of a pair overwintering, but it was not to be. Although you might imagine that such a small bird could be easily overlooked, its habit of perching atop dead stems of dock, teasel and other plants that are just a few feet tall does make it relatively conspicuous. So this second sighting leaves me to speculate whether a cunning bird has managed to evade me for a full three months, or was it simply a second bird passing through?



The other interesting bird was a water rail (left), which afforded me quite a nice, albeit brief, view as it scuttled along the Whitehall stream; this is the rather small flow, not much more than a ditch really, that is crossed by a short bridge on the riverside path between the embankment and the footbridge to the park and ride. Secretive doesn't really begin to describe this bird, which is far more often heard squealing than actually seen. Belonging to the same family as the moorhen,

which it resembles in general shape, it spends its life amongst rank vegetation in damp areas, and my records are sufficiently sparse for it to be unclear whether this reclusive bird is resident, a winter visitor, or little more than a vagrant.

One or more mistle thrushes have been around in recent weeks. Yes, they really do eat mistletoe berries, but there is a dearth of these parasitic plants in Canterbury and its environs, with none at Hambrook. I know of a single splendid, pendant globe on the outskirts of the city, looking for all the world like a Christmas decoration minus twinkling lights, but the only other ones I've found within a mile or two of the cathedral are a couple in Harbledown plus the most miserable specimen imaginable in the grounds of Tonford Manor (right, top). I pass it every week on my bike ride down to the Marshes, and testament to its small, scrawny stature is the fact that I noticed it for the first time just a month ago. The lime tree on which it is growing looks as though it is not long for this world, but that is definitely not the mistletoe's fault; indeed, it is far more likely that the failing tree is making it hard for the parasitic plant to gain a living. The best places to see mistletoe locally are in and around Chilham (the churchyard there is amazing – see photo on right) and to the south of Faversham. If you know of any mistletoe in or close to the city, please do let me know, as I am mapping its distribution in east Kent. Now, while the trees are still bare, is the time to hunt it down.



Photo credits: Dave Smith for water rail

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