



# Newsletter

March 2022



*Hybrid poplars on the old railway embankment*

## Welcome

Young people often don't get a very good press, so it was really encouraging to see the enthusiasm with which a group of young students planted hundreds of willow cuttings for us last week (see page 2 for the full story). I was reminded of another occasion when I was struggling to haul a supermarket trolley out of the river and up a steep slope beside the footbridge near the park and ride. When a group of young lads came past and saw me flailing around, I was ready for some sarcastic comments, but instead they grabbed hold of the rope and easily dragged the trolley onto the path. Not done, they then said they would wheel it back to Morrisons for me. I was so grateful, and it proved once again that there really are many extremely nice young people around.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

Following one postponement due to Storm Eunice, we finally did the willow coppicing at the back of the osier bed on 5-6<sup>th</sup> March, helped by about ten volunteers, to whom we are extremely grateful. Some of the willow was burnt on a fire that was a welcome antidote to a cutting wind, but quite a lot of the branches were stacked against the fence at the back of the plot, where they can provide nesting habitat for a number of birds while quietly rotting away. Short, straight sections of stem were selected for future use as stakes in the willow maze project (see next page).



Having finished that task, we had time to carry out Phase 1 of the willow maze regeneration project. This was far and away the easiest bit, as it just involved cutting the willow walls down to ground level, and hauling it all away to be burnt by volunteers from the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) four days later. The first photo (left) shows an early stage in the process (the tunnel effect produced by the out-of-control growth can be seen at the back of the shot). In the second photo (below), you can just about make out the layout of the maze, and clearly visible in the background are the huge stacks of former willow walls. With all the above-ground material gone, it was much easier to map the maze layout, and identify which gaps were part of the plan, and which had been made by children struggling to escape the maze's clutches. Later in the year, willow stakes from the recent coppice work will be hammered into the ground at roughly

three-foot intervals so that the new regrowth can be woven around them. If all goes to plan, this will result in a sturdier hedge which it will be harder for anyone to force their way through. The idea is to keep the regrowth at no more than about four feet in height (still plenty tall enough for small children to get lost inside), which will then facilitate regular maintenance work on the willow walls.



Two weeks after we had coppiced the willow, a group of twenty foreign students from Canterbury College spent the day planting willow cuttings outside the dilapidated fence that had until then marked the limit of the osier bed. Making use of the offcuts from the earlier coppicing, they pushed numerous stems into the ground; in places the soil was soft enough for this to be achieved by hand, but elsewhere holes were punched using a lump hammer and iron pipe, so that the cutting could be slid in. The waving fronds gave the pleasing impression of an instant forest (below), an illusion that we promptly had to destroy by cutting each stem down to just a few inches. This was done to increase the cuttings' likelihood of survival; the buds will burst into leaf before the new root system has developed, so initially the new shoots' requirement for water, and the roots' ability to supply it, will be out of kilter. By cutting the stems down close to the ground, only three or four shoots will remain on the stubby stem, making it much more likely that the root to shoot ratio will be in balance. This planting was very much experimental; depending on the proportion of stems that "strike" successfully, we will have a better idea of how best to continue the work next winter. Another concern is that the planting took place mainly outside the fence, so the cuttings will be at the mercy of the cattle, which may trample some stems and eat the succulent new shoots. All will be revealed when the cattle come back this month! And in anticipation of the livestock's return, KSCP carried out some minor fence repairs.



## Wildlife Report

Winter has not yet departed, as the weather straddling March and April amply demonstrated. Another jack snipe was flushed on 11<sup>th</sup>, and up to 17 common snipe were still present on 26<sup>th</sup>. Possibly the last redwing of the winter was seen on 17<sup>th</sup>, and three tufted duck remained on Tonford lake on 26<sup>th</sup>.

But spring signs are in the ascendancy, with chiffchaff singing every morning and the first blackcap on 24<sup>th</sup>. There has been a little reed bunting activity since late February, raising hopes that at least one pair will nest, and on 26<sup>th</sup> two red kites (right) drifted over, heading languidly for Canterbury! These birds are the terrestrial equivalent of albatrosses; with their long wings and flexing tail they are able to ride the air currents with minimal flapping, enabling them to cover vast distances with little energy expended. Now nesting in Kent, it is surely just a matter of time before the breeding population builds up in the county, though many of the birds seen here in spring are believed to be migrants returning to Europe.



After a bleak three-month period devoid of kingfisher records, they are now more in evidence, which I like to think is a good sign that a pair will nest on or close to the Hambrook stretch of the river.

I know they aren't everyone's favourite bird, but I was saddened to see that our lonely parakeet has deserted us after a six-month holiday on the Marshes.

Lesser celandines (below right) are flowering in wetter areas, along with a few ghostly lady's smock, and snake's head fritillaries (below left) are also now in bloom. I've only found seven fritillaries at the original planting site in the Boardwalk Field, but a healthier 65 in the hay meadow. However, this is well down on the 154 counted in 2021, and may be partly to do with the fact that only part of the area in which they were planted back in 2019 was mown in the autumn.



*Photo credits: Dave Smith for red kite*

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