



Newsletter

June 2022



Six-spot burnet moth on field scabious

Welcome

The cattle made a belated return to the Marshes this month, and with their arrival came the annual sport of allowing your dog to spook them. There are notices on display in a number of prominent places asking people to keep their pets on a lead while in a field where there are cattle, a request that any responsible dog owner would be happy to comply with, but still a feckless few seem to feel that they have a right to exercise their animals wherever they choose. Regular disturbance could



lead to a number of health issues in the cattle, but fortunately, up to now, it seems likely that no harm has been done. However, what will not be generally realised is that some of the cows are pregnant, and stress at this time could lead to abortion. A cow did miscarry this week, but although it is unlikely that this was due to worrying by dogs, as the cattle were in a field with no public access, it just goes to remind us of the potential for expensive loss to the farmer.

What's happening on the Marshes?

As mentioned above, the cattle finally arrived on the Marshes this month, a delay caused by the need to keep them on the farm for TB testing. Most are currently in Tonford field, but some younger animals are in the boardwalk field. For the moment they are being kept out of the Whitehall Field, in a bid to benefit the orchids (see page 3).

Vegetative growth along the river has been rampant this spring, resulting in the Stour becoming totally screened off from the four benches sited close to the bank. We have therefore cut short stretches of the prolific growth in front of each bench to allow the weary traveller a clear and restful view of the tranquil river once more. The two pairs of before and after shots, below, as seen from two benches, illustrate the transformation quite dramatically.



It looks as though someone received a Swiss army knife as a birthday present, and has now used the saw blade attachment to make a half-hearted attempt at cutting one of the new benches in two. Fortunately, the cut isn't sufficiently deep to compromise the strength of the seat, but presumably the same person had greater success with one of the hand rails on the steps leading up to the embankment (right). The rail was cut right through and has had to be replaced. Our graffiti friends have also decided that the benches make an ideal substrate for their artwork.



Wildlife Report

Last year we were delighted to report the reappearance of five marsh orchids and a single pyramidal orchid (which got picked) in the Whitehall Field. This year I am pleased to say the number of marsh orchids has increased by 20% (OK, that's just one extra plant!) and the pyramidal orchid (right) hasn't been touched. By ensuring the cattle don't graze that field in the first part of the season, we can be fairly certain that these flowers will continue to flourish, and perhaps eventually spread.

Another plant that has benefitted from a change in the management programme is the meadow cranesbill (below). Normally by late June the path verges would have been mown, greatly reducing the display of these rather lovely flowers, but a late cut has meant that there is more



Kent Enterprise Trust, carried out a lot of projects, including the installation of the much-lamented boardwalk.

Last month I was bemoaning the loss of the cuckoo, and I can now confirm that this is the first season that I have failed to hear one from Hambrook Marshes. Another bird that should be a feature of the valley is the swallow (right), darting low across the meadows, feeding on insects disturbed by grazing cattle, but I haven't seen a single one on the Marshes this year (Spoiler alert: I finally recorded my first one on 6th July). While it's lovely to have buzzards overhead and beavers doing their carpentry work in the Stour valley, these recoveries don't make up for the loss of so many other species that are lower down in the food chain, and which ought to be abundant.



colour for all to enjoy. KCC is contracted to keep the riverside path verges clear of tall vegetation, so as not to impede the passage of visitors, and they duly mowed along this busy route in early July but, fortunately, as many of the cranesbills are growing hard up against the fence, it looks as though most of them didn't get destroyed. Though widespread in much of England, it is extremely scarce in Kent and most, if not all, of the county records are of introductions. It is thought that it was probably seeded on the site around 2010 when the then owners,



The parakeet has been present most of the month, though seemingly not spending a great deal of time on the Marshes. It looks as though we may have three pairs of Cetti's warblers strung out along the ditch at the back of the Marshes, bordering the Ashford railway line. Notoriously secretive, they give away their presence by a sudden outburst of loud, unmusical song. Equally abruptly falling silent, the bird slips away unseen, leaving the bystander with the notes echoing around his brain.

There has also been a little more reed bunting activity, with the possibility that two pairs are nesting.

Photo credits: Dave Smith for swallow

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