



# Newsletter

July 2022



*Purple loosestrife in scrubby field alongside the A2*

## Welcome

While some people are enjoying the hot weather, that shouldn't stop us being alarmed by the way the climate is changing, turning countries around the world into furnaces. Global warming scepticism is no longer really an issue, as it is now hard to deny that change is taking place. Whether it is caused by human activity or natural cyclical phenomena is, in a sense, irrelevant; we can argue pointlessly about that while the planet burns, or agree to make changes to the way we live that will stand a chance of reducing the risk that we all fry sometime this century. I don't know how accurate my thermometer is, but on 19<sup>th</sup> July, when a new UK record of 40.3°C was set, I noted a decidedly uncomfortable 40.2° in Rough Common.

To compound the problem, rainfall locally has been below average in eleven out of the past thirteen months, with a total of 512mm, compared to an expected 759mm, a drop of 32%. Hambrook Marshes is now a misnomer – the ponds and most of the ditches have dried up, though fortunately there is still some water for the cattle, which are now subsisting on a diet that is effectively hay, rather than lush grass. Most wildlife can probably cope if this summer's extremes are a one-off, but if we get the same or worse next summer, and on into the future, I can't be confident that plants and animals adapted to a more temperate climate will be able to survive.

# What's happening on the Marshes?

As already indicated on page 1, the Marshes are now severely heat-stressed. The scene has changed from vibrant green to bleached-bone ash-grey, with few flowers to alleviate the sense of foreboding. The willow cuttings that were established in the winter as an extension to the osier bed have survived so far, but are struggling, their poorly-formed root systems barely able to find enough water to keep the shoots alive. Fortunately, the trees that were planted in the hay field three seasons ago have survived without any additional watering this year, and are now starting to perform their intended role of partially obscuring the A2 bridge and traffic (right). July isn't the best month for flowers anyway, but the heat has speeded up the season, causing most blooms to wither earlier than usual, meaning that there are few splashes of colour sparkling against the straw-dominated hues of the scorched earth.



Love Hambrook Marshes CIO



**Community Winner 2022 /2023**

The mark of a quality park or green space. Given in recognition of achieving the international standard for spaces managed by the community.

[greenflagaward.org](http://greenflagaward.org)

Lia Níci

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Member of the Executive Committee  
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KEEP BRITAIN TIDY

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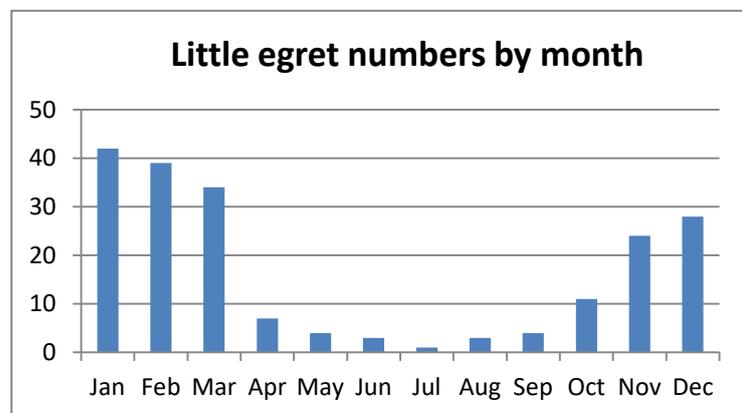
Once again, Hambrook Marshes has gained a coveted Green Flag Award. This is the international quality mark for parks and green spaces, which played a vital role for people through lockdowns as a place to relax, exercise and meet friends and family safely. Jon Winder, chair of LHM, commented: “We are so pleased that the time and effort of our trustees and volunteers has been recognised by the Green Flag Award judges. Although the Marshes appear to be an entirely natural place, a lot of work goes on behind the scenes to ensure they are welcoming, clean and safe”. Keep Britain Tidy’s accreditation manager, Paul Todd, said: “I would like to congratulate everyone involved in making Hambrook Marshes worthy of a Green Flag Award. It is a vital green space for the community in Canterbury.” The scheme, which is managed by environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy under licence from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, recognises and rewards well-managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of green spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.

Work continued on scything stretches of tall riverside nettles (right) so that visitors can enjoy glimpses of the Stour that, directly and indirectly, powers the ecology of the entire valley. Being on a very short list of world chalk streams, it is important that we keep the Stour at the forefront of people's attention whenever visiting Hambrook. Characteristic features of chalk streams are clear, shallow water, a stony bed, and abundant aquatic vegetation, such as water crowfoot.



## Wildlife Report

An unusual sighting was of a little egret on 6<sup>th</sup>. The graph on the right shows that over the past ten years the birds have occurred mainly from November to March, with very few between April and September and, until this latest sighting, none in July. As there are no egret colonies close to Hambrook, it isn't surprising that records should decline steeply in spring and summer, and the bird I saw was possibly a failed breeder.



The black-headed gull is an almost equally scarce visitor in the summer months, so three on the nearby Tonford lake on 6<sup>th</sup> were the first of a trickle that may transform into a torrent of hundreds if the valley floods this winter. Of course, that all depends on whether we get a substantial amount of rain and, just to jolt your memories – rain is a shower of water droplets falling out of the sky – a phenomenon that older readers may have experienced in years gone by.

I have written before about the dearth of swifts, house martins and swallows in recent years, so it is perhaps not surprising that I had to wait until 6<sup>th</sup> July to see my first Hambrook swallow of the year. This is a truly appalling state of affairs; as recently as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the swallow was still abundant in all rural areas, where mixed farming – arable, pasture and meadows – was still the norm, often in small, hedged fields. The trend towards intensively managed monocultures in enormous fields that are heavily sprayed is anathema to these birds, as is the loss of decaying farm buildings that once supplied swallows with an abundance of ledges on which to build their scrappy nests.

I haven't been able to work out the dynamics of our burgeoning collared dove population (right): until 18 months ago it was an extremely rare visitor to Hambrook, but now one or two are seen on the embankment on every visit, and recently I have been observing two pairs, all of which seem



to divide their time between the viewpoint and dense scrub on the far side of the river. It still isn't clear whether either pair is actually nesting in the embankment scrub. The parakeet continues to haunt the embankment area from time to time, and is still unpaired, making this tentative colonisation appear doomed to failure.

Amazingly, it took ten years of weekly visits for me to finally catch up with a fox on Hambrook Marshes in July, though there was plentiful evidence of their presence, in the form of paths through tall grass and the rapid disappearance of any dead birds. Perhaps now I can hope to spot a rabbit, another animal that has eluded me for all this time.

A friend who is very interested in dragonflies reported seeing a probable red-eyed damselfly (right) this month, which would bring the site total to fourteen species. A not uncommon Kent insect, it has a distinctive characteristic, in addition to the eyes (which are really brownish-red), namely a preference for resting on flat leaves, especially water lilies, on the surface of a river or ditch. Further study will undoubtedly reveal more species, and the Hambrook list could easily extend to twenty damsel- and dragon-flies in the coming years.



Few flowers have managed to keep going through the drought and heat, but two that have done rather well are the purple-flowered common mallow (below left) and the large bindweed (below



right). Actually, make that three beneficiaries of the searing weather, as in fact two species of the large-flowered white bindweed occur here. The native hedge bindweed commonly twines its way up fences at Hambrook, but the very similar large bindweed, an American species that is now widespread in the county, also occurs near the Wincheap footbridge. The interloper is generally larger-flowered than our native species, but there is a degree of overlap. Mallow and bindweed are both deep-rooted, which presumably is their salvation in these testing times, when scarce soil dampness is only to be found at depth.

*Photo credits: Dave Smith for collared dove*

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