



Newsletter

August 2022



Love Hambrook Marshes

The river Stour a short distance upstream from Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

River and sea pollution by untreated sewage is suddenly in the news. A survey of 12 English rivers in 2021 found that numbers and variety of species of mayflies, caddis flies and stoneflies had declined since 2016. Coming down to the local level, on 18th August the Kentish Gazette reported that Andy Harvey, a private individual, had been monitoring the river Stour at Fordwich for the pathogen *E. coli*, which can cause a range of symptoms, such as bloody diarrhoea, stomach cramps and vomiting. These bacteria normally live harmlessly in our gut, and are present in faeces, but certain strains are responsible for illness. Andy's results showed an unacceptably high level of *E. coli* contamination. Faecal particles reach the Stour and other rivers when sewage treatment works are overwhelmed by storm water and have to release the untreated water to avoid the risk of a reverse flow up the sewerage system and back into houses. Because the Stour is not registered as a recognised bathing area, the Environment Agency isn't obliged to monitor the water for safety, so we have no records of how contaminated our river and its seemingly crystal-clear water can become at times. We know that there have been discharges into the Stour, most probably from the Horton works, which are only a mile upstream from Hambrook Marshes. So, although the photo heading this newsletter looks positive idyllic, hidden danger may lurk beneath the surface, and we are now looking into the possibility of carrying out our own regular monitoring of the Stour, in which case we will let you know the results.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Willow weaving

As a thank you to our volunteers for their hard work in helping us to look after the marshes, we held the first of two willow-weaving workshops on 20th August with basket-maker [Nicola Jane Claxton](#). It was great fun and also very therapeutic to sit willow-weaving by the river. A big thanks to Nicola for coming all the way from Dartford to teach us. Given our total lack of prior experience, our open-top flower baskets were quite impressive!



Weavers busily at work beside the river, in the shade of a large willow



LHM chairman, Jon Winder, tries his hand



The apprentices' commendable efforts

Riverbank clearance completed

Six stretches, totalling about 240yds, have now been cleared along the riverbank, opening up lovely views that simply disappear during the summer months. It is hard work with a scythe (spoiler alert – there were no Poldark moments), but it seemed to pay off when a couple of women stopped to ask about the task. One was local, and had brought her friend from Bath to enjoy a riverside walk, but had just been telling her that she really needed to come in winter, in order to be able to actually see the river once all the vegetation had died down.

Wildlife Report

We're told that grass is extremely resilient, and that the apparently dead mats of crisp straw that have appeared around the country during the drought will spring back into life once we get regular rainfall again. I'm not quite so sure as, certainly in some of the more heavily used areas, the grass has been worn away completely, leaving bare ground that is now being colonised by opportunist species (otherwise known as weeds), such as shepherd's purse. I can't claim ever to have seen a purse belonging to a shepherd, but presumably in olden days



they were, for some reason, heart-shaped, just like the plant's seed pods (above). Incidentally, the Latin name for this plant is *Capsella bursa-pastoris*, which may sound horribly foreign, but in fact all three elements have insinuated themselves into the English language. *Capsella* is the diminutive of *capsa*, a container, from which we get the capsules that are prescribed for all manner of ailments. *Bursa* is Latin for purse, and has given us finance-related words such as bursar and bursary; and finally, *pastoris* is the genitive case (if you can recall this possessive term from schooldays) of *pastor*, meaning shepherd, giving rise to our modern pastor or priest (the good shepherd) and pasture (land that is grazed by sheep (or other livestock) and so overseen by a shepherd.

In late April and May I regularly saw a pair of great crested grebes on Tonford lake, just upstream from Hambrook, leading me to hope that they would nest but then, with no records for the following ten weeks, I assumed that either their breeding attempt had failed, or that they had decided to go elsewhere. So, you can imagine my surprise when, on 15th August, I saw the adults with two fairly well-grown youngsters (right). Young great crested grebes have the most remarkable striped plumage, unlike that of any other UK bird,



and disturbingly similar to the uniform worn by concentration camp inmates in the Second World War. You would imagine that this acts as camouflage in a reedbed where there is a strong vertical structure to the habitat but, like ducks, the baby grebes take to the water very soon after hatching, so don't linger amongst the wetland vegetation stems. So what is the purpose of this strange patterning?

The tufted duck is familiar as a winter visitor to UK lakes (a small flock appears on Tonford lake every October or November) and, until the mid-19th century, it was just that – a bird that was driven out of its northern European breeding grounds to spend a less inclement few months in England. But, for nearly two hundred years now it has been gradually colonising the country, finally reaching Kent in 1935, where the population is now estimated at 450-550 pairs, and it still appears to be spreading into suitable marshes and river systems. So, while it may no longer be a summer rarity in the county, it was still a delight on 25th to see a female tufted duck with four well-grown ducklings, a small flotilla slowly making its way upriver. Unlike the mallard, it is a diving duck, finding all its food underwater, so I hope they were careful as they plunged beneath the surface of the shallow water. Ominously, a tufted duck, presumably the same female, was on the river on 31st, but without any ducklings in tow. Is it possible that all four young birds could have been predated in the space of six days by a pike or mink? As the birds were quite well-grown, this seems a little unlikely, but what other explanation is there?



A different female with a larger brood. These ducklings are younger than the ones I saw.

The old railway embankment can usually be relied upon to attract migrant warblers, and this month the scrub on its slopes has sometimes been alive with chiffchaffs, blackcaps, garden warbler and whitethroat, all fattening up on berries and insects prior to making the long haul back to the Mediterranean and Africa. Less expected atop the embankment one day was a reed bunting; while their name gives a fair indication of their preferred habitat, the birds do not feel obliged to spend their entire lives in wetlands, and sometimes move into dry, bushy areas.

A treat for me was quite a close, albeit very brief, view of a hobby (right) flashing overhead on 10th. This is one of our migrant raptors, but one that lingers rather longer than most summer visitors, for reasons closely tied up with its diet. On arrival, the adults are feeding mainly on larger aerial insects such as dragonflies, but these don't become abundant until early summer, so the eggs aren't laid until around June, meaning the young hatch in July and fledge in August. There are still plenty of dragonflies around at this time, but now the adults capitalise on another food source – juvenile birds, especially house martins and swallows, but many other species besides. Young birds lack the experience of their parents, and so make relatively easy prey for a hobby. In August these novices are streaming south on their first migration, offering their predators every reason for not being in a hurry to obey the migratory urges themselves.



I'm pleased to say that kingfishers have been more in evidence this month, frequently zipping one way or the other along the river like an electric bolt.

Photo credits: Dave Smith for tufted ducks and hobby

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