



Newsletter

October 2022



Autumnal hybrid poplar leaves on the old railway embankment

Welcome

The clocks have gone back, winter's coming and the house is cold because we've dialled back the heating, or not switched it on even. What is there to be cheerful about? The temptation is to stay indoors (if it's warm enough there) and ignore what's going on outside, but the advice of Linda Geddes, author of *Chasing the Sun*, is to have a light snack: that doesn't mean treating yourself to some low-carb comfort food, but getting outside in the daylight. Bright light helps activate the part of the brain that keeps us alert and helps stave off mid-winter depression, severe cases of which are known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Inside an office the brightness is likely to be of the order of 80-250 lux (the units in which light is measured), but outdoors on a gloomy day that figure will rise to 2000-2500 lux, while on a sunny day in winter it can be as high as a massive 80,000 lux. So, time spent outdoors, even in dull weather, will help to lift your mood and make you feel more positive. Obviously, the longer you are outside, the greater the benefit, but apparently even 10-15 minutes in the open air can help. So, if you haven't been down to Hambrook recently, what better reason could you ask for than to be cheered up by a bracing walk?

What's happening on the Marshes?

The drought in England may last well into next year: so warns the National Drought Group (NDG), which is made up of government agencies, water companies, farming and environmental groups. Rainfall returned to normal in September, but this was not enough to kick-start the process of recharging aquifers and reservoirs. Consistently above average rainfall is needed throughout the winter to bring England out of drought, a scenario that is deemed unlikely to occur. In Canterbury, October's rainfall was 66% of the long-term mean, offering little comfort.

How will this affect Hambrook Marshes? I have been visiting the Marshes regularly for ten years, and they are far drier than I have ever known them in October. Ditches that should be brimful of water are just muddy tracts, and there are no soggy areas to attract in duck, gulls or snipe. The five-year management plan for the Marshes will be due for review in 2023, and the trustees will have to consider various options for its future. Can new watery life be breathed into the area, returning it to the marshy haven that most of us can recall, and which featured so heavily in the paintings of Thomas Sidney Cooper; or should we consider managing it as dry grassland, scrub or woodland? The wetland ecology of the site is breaking down, and may collapse altogether if the climate emergency heralds a succession of heatwaves as severe as this year's.

Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) volunteers spent one day raking up hay in the meadow and pulling reedmace (better known as bulrushes) out of a pond in the boardwalk field. Reedmace is an aggressive pioneer of shallow, open water, and within a very few years can completely choke it, leaving nowhere for dragonflies to lay their eggs or for more delicate plants such as water speedwell to get a look-in. In the photo on the right, none of the clear water was visible before the volunteers got to work. At the back of the pond a dense block of reedmace has been left to provide cover for moorhens and other wildlife.



Most of the cattle left the Marshes at the end of the month, with just eight remaining in the boardwalk field for the time being.

Wildlife Report

A blackcap on 3rd provided what may well be the last link with summer, memories of which are now being pushed out by the first winter snipe on 12th, and the first little grebe on the river on 24th. It's all downhill now if, like me, you are not a lover of the bleak months.

The parakeet squawks out his presence on nearly every morning visit, but is still without a companion, and a family of four swans (one adult and three fawn juveniles) after an absence of four months. Even more welcome was the return of a grey wagtail, which I hadn't seen on the river since March. Pheasants can be relied upon to give me a near-heart attack by exploding out of dense

vegetation a few feet ahead of me, and this cardiac-arrester on the embankment was also my first record since June.

I was thrilled to see three stonechats in the Tonford Field on 3rd, having been limited to just two isolated records of single birds last winter. The record was doubly interesting because these colourful little birds are almost invariably seen in pairs, but these two males and one female were staying together, although there did appear to be some tension between the males. The following week I failed to find them in that field, but the week after that all three (presumably the same birds) were flitting around in the boardwalk field, at the other end of the Marshes, and commuting between the two sides of the river. So, once again, I will hope that this means we are going to have at least one pair with us for the rest of the winter, and if they can do me the favour of deciding which field they wish to stay in, that will help me enormously in tracking them down! The bird in the photo (right) is a male in breeding plumage, whereas at this time of year they are in slightly more muted, though still colourful, winter apparel.



I occasionally see a buzzard over the Marshes, but on 3rd I was greeted with the sight of not one, but two, actually landing in a tree on the embankment.



Oaks are well-known for producing a range of galls, such as oak apples, spangle galls, artichoke galls and marble galls, that appear like outsized warts on leaves, buds and catkins. These galls are indigenous to the UK and were all extremely familiar to our forebears, who lived much closer to nature than their modern closeted descendants, but in the 1960s an interloper from the continent put in its first appearance, rapidly spreading across the mainland:

the knopper gall (above). Many galls are caused by a tiny species of wasp, and the knopper wasp lays its eggs in young acorn buds, releasing a chemical that prompts the oak to form aberrant tissue to cocoon the egg. The acorn fails to develop, its place being taken by a deformed object like a medieval mace. Amazingly, given the rarity of oak on Hambrook, and the absence of any mature specimens, the knopper wasp has found its way onto the Marshes, and for the first time I have found its calling card galls there. Like other gall-forming insects, the knopper wasp has a curious life cycle, with sexual and asexual generations within the space of a year. The adults emerging next spring from the galls I found will all be females, which will then lay their eggs in the catkin buds of a different species of tree – the Turkey oak. Those inconspicuous galls will give rise to male and female wasps in the summer, and it is those females that will “infect” acorn buds of the pedunculate oak to give rise to the much more obvious knopper galls. Turkey oak is widely, but thinly, distributed, mainly across southern England and, although I don’t know of any on the Marshes, there

is bound to be the odd one in the general area. As you might expect from its name, the Turkey oak is not native to this country, first being introduced as an ornamental tree around 1735, and now mostly found in parks, gardens and other suburban settings. So, given the wasp's life cycle, its colonisation of the UK wasn't possible before Turkey oak planting began here in the 18th century. My impression is that the females must be quite good flyers, as the galls can often be found in places where there don't appear to be any Turkey oaks. Incidentally, the gall's odd name is thought to derive from the German word Knoppe, meaning a type of helmet worn in the 17th century.

Finally, to round off this summary, I saw a squirrel on the embankment on 12th.

Photo credits: Dave Smith for stonechat

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