



# Newsletter

November 2022



## Love Hambrook Marshes

### Welcome

James Bevan, chief executive of the Environment Agency, which is responsible for the management of the country's waterways, has signalled that he would like to see a relaxation of the water framework directive, the law that provides a legal requirement for 75% of English rivers to be in good health by 2027. This is one of 570 laws listed for removal or amendment by December next year under the Retained EU Law bill. Bevan's claim is that the current legislation is too complex and could be misleading about the real state of health of our water bodies. Currently, no rivers pass the tests for both ecological and chemical health. Meanwhile, the Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (Defra), has weighed in with its annual report, published at the end of October, revealing that no progress had been made in the past year on improving river water quality, with only 16% deemed to be in good ecological health, the same as in 2016.

Part of the problem is that the water companies are allowed to discharge untreated sewage into rivers when treatment works are overwhelmed by storm water. So, while that couldn't be used as an excuse during the long months of drought this year, last month was the wettest November in the 41 years that I have been recording, with five days of heavy rain. It wasn't in fact the wettest month ever, as that accolade goes to October 2000 (273mm compared to a piffling 186mm this November).

## What's happening on the Marshes?

Unfortunately, the contractor who cut the meadow wasn't able to remove all the hay, so we have now raked up the soggy remainder into fifty miniature haystacks (right), and then barrowed them into an adjoining field where they can be allowed to quietly rot down.

The last eight cattle were taken off in November, and there will be no further grazing until next April.



We seem to be fighting an endless, unwinnable battle with campers, some of whom stay for protracted periods. When they do finally depart, they invariably leave behind their tents, bedding and other assorted rubbish. The most recent example of this was on the north embankment of the old railway line, where some long-term campers bequeathed us a trailer-load of unusable items that had to be taken to the dump. The photo on the left shows the pile of waterlogged sleeping bags, blankets and other abandoned belongings that we had to dispose of.

## Wildlife Report

The highlight of the month was undoubtedly the return of squelchy conditions, meaning that the Marshes are no longer in contravention of the Trade Descriptions Act. Flooding on 17<sup>th</sup> led to 31 black-headed gulls and 17 mallard making use of the shallow water in Tonford field, and the following day the river was close to overtopping its banks in places. However, high water levels are extremely transitory, and six days later there was no standing water to be seen - and no birds either! Despite the wetter conditions, mud-loving snipe have been scarce, with a peak so far of just 15; the mild start to winter no doubt has something to do with this, enabling more birds to delay moving out of their summer quarters further north. The same reason may account for the low numbers of some other species: just three little grebes were present on the river on 1<sup>st</sup>, only two tufted ducks have appeared on Tonford Lake, meadow pipits have been scarce, though with eight on 24<sup>th</sup>, and I have only had two records of redwings so far. Colder weather already creeping in during the first few days of December may change the status of some of these species.

A single stonechat put in appearances on two of my visits, giving the impression that it is on its own and that the pair it consorted with earlier have either moved elsewhere or are tucked away in an unseen corner of the Marshes.

I don't often see flocks of tits on Hambrook, but at least 12 blue tits flew through on 30<sup>th</sup>, and I may well have missed the first part of the passage.



Herring gulls are finally reappearing after a total absence of nine weeks; I was beginning to wonder if the local birds had been wiped out by avian flu, which is hitting seabirds hardest of all, but they may have just altered their behaviour for a while, perhaps attracted to a new food source that didn't require them to fly over Hambrook. At this time of year the adults have variable amounts of dark streaking on their heads (left) that soils the summer purity of their snow-white plumage.

With the exception of the male great bustard, which has been reintroduced to Salisbury Plain, our familiar mute swan is the heaviest flying bird native to the UK. While it is a proficient flyer (its near relatives, the whooper and Bewick's swans, migrate across the North Sea from Iceland and northern Europe), its sheer bulk means that getting airborne is quite an effort, especially if launching itself off water, which gives the bird a less firm surface to push up against. So, when a family group of four swans decided to take flight from the Stour recently, they gained height very ponderously, and I had to duck to avoid a collision as they veered off across the footpath at scalp-grazing height.



The month got off to a very windy start, leaving the paths strewn with willow twigs and branches. Several species of willow grow on the Marshes, but one of the commoner ones is crack willow, with long, slender leaves. Having seen how much debris has been deposited on the ground (left), you will appreciate how the tree came by its name – its stems are remarkably brittle, cracking off almost at will. Willow branches have a remarkable propensity for re-rooting if they land on wet enough ground, and so this inherent weakness in their stems can help to propagate the species on marshland, in the process forming a clone of trees with identical genetic makeup.

*Photo credits: Dave Smith for mute swan*

Registered charity no. 1156473