



# Newsletter

December 2022



*Two frosty coots facing off on the picnic table*

## Welcome

This month we endured twelve consecutive nights with an air frost, which seemed very out of the ordinary, as we hadn't suffered such a long stretch of cold weather since 2013. However, frost-bound spells were a not uncommon feature of winter as recently as the 1980s and 1990s; in 1986 we suffered 28 consecutive freezing nights, and in 1985 the mercury slumped to  $-12^{\circ}\text{C}$  one night, whereas in the recent cold period the lowest I recorded was  $-4.1^{\circ}\text{C}$ . So, can we draw any conclusions from these observations? One cold spell doesn't mean that global warming has gone into reverse, any more than a single drought is proof of climate change. Rather, it is the accumulation of data that our policy makers should be paying attention to: even before the bells chimed in 2023, the Met Office announced that 2022 was the warmest year on record (based on data going back to 1659!); all ten of the UK's warmest years have occurred since 2013; eleven of the past twelve months have been warmer than average; nine of the ten hottest days have occurred since 1990. I could go on, but I think the point has been made that long-term trends are for a warming UK, which will have a very real impact on wetland sites like Hambrook Marshes. If these trends continue, the Marshes will regularly dry out in summer, with a resultant shift in invertebrate and plant populations towards something more typical of dry meadows.

# What's happening on the Marshes?

## Protecting Wincheap Meadow in the draft Local Plan 2045

While it looks unlikely that the proposal to expand the Wincheap Park & Ride car park onto the water meadows will go ahead, Canterbury City Council's consultation on its draft Local Plan 2045 provides us with a valuable opportunity to call for the inclusion of the water meadow in the adjoining Wincheap Local Nature Reserve (LNR). It also highlights the need to go through the Local Plan very carefully as the evidence base contains some serious inaccuracies with regard to the water meadow.



*Mole, Ratty et al objecting to the park and ride extension in 2019*

The section on Wincheap Meadow in the Council's **Natural Environment & Open Space Topic Paper** (which forms part of the evidence base for the Local Plan) erroneously refers to Hambrook Marshes as Whitehall Meadows and downplays the importance of Wincheap Meadow in:

- i) enhancing the tranquility and attractiveness of the river setting
- ii) providing a landscape buffer to the Wincheap retail estate
- iii) providing habitat connectivity along the Stour Valley.

More worrying still, it concludes that it would be inappropriate to give Wincheap Water Meadow greater open space protection as "the site is currently designated, with planning permission for a Park and Ride". Although it indicates that it is unlikely that the Park & Ride expansion will go ahead, the statement is very concerning as it shows that the Council has already forgotten that it formally revoked this planning permission two years ago (on 28 October 2020), an oversight which could have very negative consequences in years to come. It has also forgotten that it has already designated a 16m strip along the river of the meadow as part of the Wincheap Local Nature Reserve.

If you would like to call for greater protection of Wincheap Water Meadows, and highlight the inaccuracy of the statement regarding planning permission in the evidence base, the simplest way to do so is to send comments in writing to: [consultations@canterbury.gov.uk](mailto:consultations@canterbury.gov.uk) and put 'Local Plan consultation' in the subject line.

To view the section on Wincheap Meadow in the Natural Environment & Open Space Topic Paper, go to pages 69-72 at : <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10rbSLQGqzY6ZL48ZZDZfv05Be9-HTIY>

To view the revocation of the Council's planning permission to extend the Park and Ride car park onto the water meadow, see: <https://democracy.canterbury.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=1012>

## Wildlife Report

The marshes remained rather quiet throughout the cold snap; before the weather closed in, a small wintering population of up to 14 snipe had been present, but these dispersed when their favoured feeding areas were iced over, either leaving the area altogether, or moving to other parts of the marsh which they don't normally frequent to the same extent, such as the boardwalk field. A jack snipe, the common snipe's smaller cousin, was present on 5<sup>th</sup>. Snow often brings in a few lapwings that have been displaced from areas with deeper snow cover; this month's snowfall was fairly minimal, and I didn't find any lapwings until 27<sup>th</sup>, after the thaw, when I stumbled upon a dead, headless bird that had presumably arrived during the freeze and then starved, died of disease, or succumbed to a predator.

Last month I commented on the scarcity of winter visitors and, despite the cold snap, which I thought might drive some birds onto the marshes, no more than three tufted duck have been seen on Tonford Lake all month, next to no meadow pipits have been present on the fields and only the occasional little grebe appeared on the river. Winter thrushes generally seem to be in short supply, and my only Hambrook record of fieldfare (right) so far has been a flock of nine flying over on 21<sup>st</sup>.



35 black-headed gulls were standing forlornly on the iced-up Tonford Lake on 11<sup>th</sup>, and the same morning I heard a water rail giving its passable impersonation of a squealing pig at the edge of the lake.

Only last month I described the alarming low-level take-off of a family group of four swans. On 21<sup>st</sup> December possibly one of this group found to its cost the perils of not gaining height sufficiently quickly when it crash-landed on the railway embankment by the bridge leading into Canterbury East station. The height of the railway fence precluded any easy route for a potential rescuer, so Network Rail were called, and at about 9pm a couple of their staff came out to see what could be done. Their solution was to cut through the fence, after which it was a relatively easy matter to grab the bird and release it. The bird's saviour was dressed in his Network Rail-issue orange hi-vis clothing, which, combined with his pretty impressive white beard, made it look as though the swan had been rescued by a certain S Claus who had been delivering presents when he saw the bird's plight and landed his sleigh on the riverside path! As you can see from the photo, the bird was immature, with dirty grey-beige plumage and slate-grey bill. Many thanks to Network Rail staff for coming out at that time of night.



Two collared doves returned to the embankment after a two-month absence, and I was delighted to watch a pair of stonechats at close quarters on 27<sup>th</sup> after a one-month break, but convincing me that they have been present somewhere on the marshes all winter.

On milder days I have heard snatches of song from blue and great tit, song and mistle thrush, robin and even blackbird. A chiffchaff called on 21<sup>st</sup>, so evidently managed to struggle through the freezing spell – being small and insectivorous puts you at a distinct disadvantage when confronted with cold weather.

*Photo credits: Dave Smith for fieldfare*

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