



# Newsletter

January 2023



*Wintry sunrise over Thanington Farm*

## Welcome

If you've been following the case of wild camping on Dartmoor, you'll know that Alexander Darwall, who owns 3,450 acres of this wild and inhospitable landscape, went to court, where his claim that there was no legal basis for the claimed right to camp on his land was upheld because the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 states that the public has a right of access "for the purpose of open-air recreation", without mentioning a specific right to camp. However, nor is it listed under the prohibited activities. Since "recreation" isn't defined, it might be possible for a future landowner to claim that birdwatching and many other inoffensive activities are also not permitted. Locals could object to their MP, Anthony Mangnall but, guess what, he received a £5000 donation from Mr Darwall, the landowner! The latest news is that the Dartmoor National Parks Authority is to appeal, so the story doesn't end here.

Meanwhile, at Hambrook Marshes, the situation is rather different. In such a heavily used area that is just 0.02% the size of the Dartmoor National Park, the trustees cannot permit camping, and we do take steps to remove unofficial campers. Birdwatching very definitely is allowed, indeed encouraged, along with walking, cycling, picnicking, and many other activities normally associated with healthy outdoor recreation.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

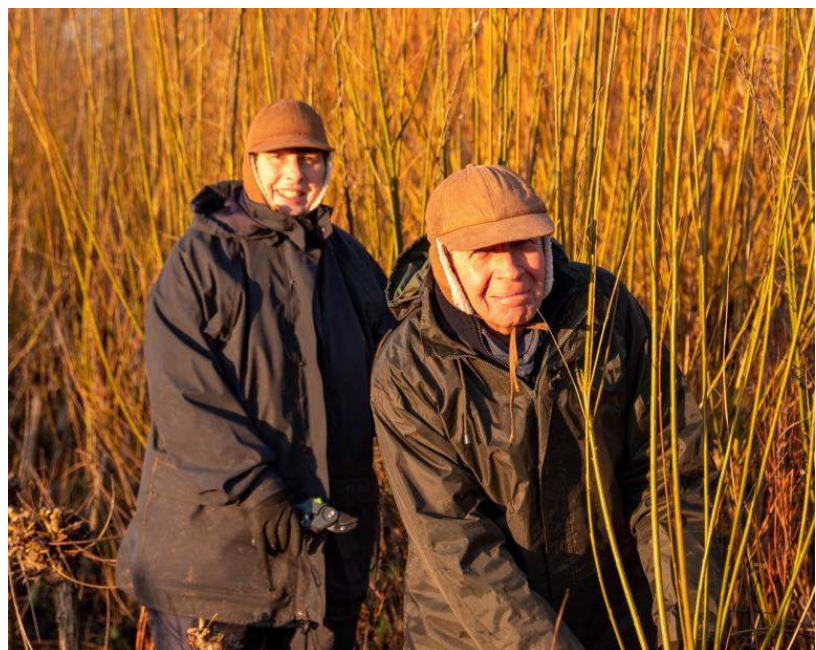


Four Love Hambrook Marshes trustees acted as hosts to a meeting of a fairly new organisation, Kent Landholders Assisting Wildlife (KLA) several of whose members were shown round the Marshes on 21<sup>st</sup>. On a gloriously sunny morning we paused for a group photo (left) before embarking on a slow walk round, stopping frequently to discuss points about grants, visitor issues, habitat management and the like. As our guests were all

managing land for conservation, they were most interested to hear of our success, as well as the inevitable problems.

Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership volunteers spent a day in the hay meadow mowing some of the areas that couldn't be reached by tractor in the autumn, and raking up all the cuttings. The hope is that this will encourage flowering of the snake's head fritillaries that were planted there three years ago. A wide range of seeds was then scattered on the fairly bare ground; this included trefoils, clovers, yellow rattle, wild carrot, fleabane, field scabious and even some common spotted orchid "dust". We would like to see the meadow becoming more diverse and colourful in the coming years, so further sowing will be carried out in future.

Our regular willow weavers spent several days in the second half of the month giving the osier bed its annual trim, in the process generating numerous bundles to take home for future use. Last year's drought led to less vigorous growth of the wands, but this pleased the weavers, as it meant that the stems were thinner and easier to work with. Suitable willow is everywhere in short supply, and some of the weavers are drawn from a fair distance. On the right are a couple who came from Broadstairs, proudly wearing traditional willow cutters' hats!





You may have noticed a number of these signs sprouting on Hambrook Marshes and Westgate Parks recently. These have been produced by the city council to publicise the Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO), which enhances the protection afforded to parks and other open spaces in the Canterbury district. A comprehensive series of symbols covers everything from urination to swearing and consumption of alcohol – all activities that can detract markedly from the enjoyment of a walk in the open air. Beneath is a totally unfathomable

map, truncated so as not to include Hambrook Marshes. The name Stour Parks and Gorrell Valley appears to be a catch-all title dreamt up by the council, and is a little confusing, as it gives visitors the impression that Hambrook Marshes is owned and managed by the council when, as our readers will know, the land belongs to Love Hambrook Marshes CIO. The aim of the PSPO is certainly laudable but, without regular police patrols to enforce the regulations, it is little more than an empty gesture.

## Wildlife Report

One little excitement this month and the tail-end of December was the presence of a goosander on the river. I am grateful to the two friends who independently reported it to me; I'm delighted with their good fortune and not in the least upset for failing to see it myself! Goosanders are sawbills, and close examination of the photo opposite will reveal the serrations on the beak which enable the birds to grasp fish more firmly. They are fairly recent colonists in the UK, having first bred in Scotland in 1871. Since then they have spread throughout the north, Wales and the West Country. Our birds are relatively sedentary, but come winter there is an influx from colder areas of northern Europe, which is when small numbers turn up in Kent, both along the coast and inland. I have one record of my own of a bird on the Stour just upstream from Hambrook, but that was way back in 2012.



A coot was on the riverbank on 17<sup>th</sup>, which is most unusual, but up to four were present on the nearby Tonford Lake, which is their more normal habitat. I was also delighted to see a pair of great crested grebes on that lake, where they nested unsuccessfully the other year. If they remain there as the days lengthen and the weather turns milder, it will be worth taking a look if you are up that end of the Marshes, as you may be lucky enough to see their display, in which the birds face each other, breast to breast, and rear up out of the water with stretched necks, often holding some waterweed in their beaks. One bird shakes its head, and the other bird repeats the action, like in a

child's copycat game. A few days ago I watched one bird stretch out on the water, its head and bill just touching the surface. This can be an invitation to mate, but the second bird seemed perplexed by this behaviour and didn't know how to react, so the first bird eventually gave up and swam away.

It has been a poor winter for the great crested grebe's small cousin, the little grebe, and this month I only saw single birds on two occasions. There seems to have been a fairly steady decline in the number of little grebes wintering on the river since I began recording here in 2012.

Occasional redwings (right) have been sheltering in the embankment scrub, and on 22<sup>nd</sup> I heard them giving a performance of their pre-departure sub-song. In a couple of months the birds will be returning to Scandinavia to nest, but before leaving will sometimes gather in choirs that may number in their hundreds, all chattering away simultaneously in a rather starling-like fashion. This is not the true song, which we don't normally hear in this country, but which contains elements of mistle thrush and a high-pitched blackbird on speed. Why the chorus? Gregarious in winter and on migration, these gatherings may serve to strengthen communal bonds and help them to decide when to make the return flight to their breeding grounds.



I still haven't quite worked out what is going on with our stonechats this year. First there were three, then there was a solitary male, and then on 30<sup>th</sup> I saw a female on her own. Given that the species is normally seen in pairs all year round, this seemed distinctly odd. The female (right) is considerably duller than the male, which in any case is not in his finery during the winter months. But an interesting transformation takes place as spring approaches: the dull tips to all the feathers gradually get abraded due to the stresses of flight and brushing through vegetation, and as the tips rub off they reveal a much brighter part of the feather immediately below. So, without having to undergo the stress of replacing feathers in a moult, it can spruce itself up in time to attract a mate come spring.



I usually only see one kestrel hunting over the Marshes, so it was encouraging to note a pair on 22<sup>nd</sup>, especially as we are planning to erect a kestrel nestbox this year. The normally rowdy Cetti's warbler has been keeping an extremely low profile in recent weeks, so it was cheering to hear one belting out its ebullient, if not particularly tuneful, song at the end of the month.

When a trustee bent down to pick up some litter from a puddle, she was quite shocked to see it writhe: she had stumbled upon an adult eel, a fish that is perfectly happy to travel overland. Eels occur in the Stour but the species has suffered a catastrophic national decline, and it is estimated that numbers have slumped by around 95% since the 1970s.

*Photo credits: Dave Smith for redwing, goosander and stonechat*

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