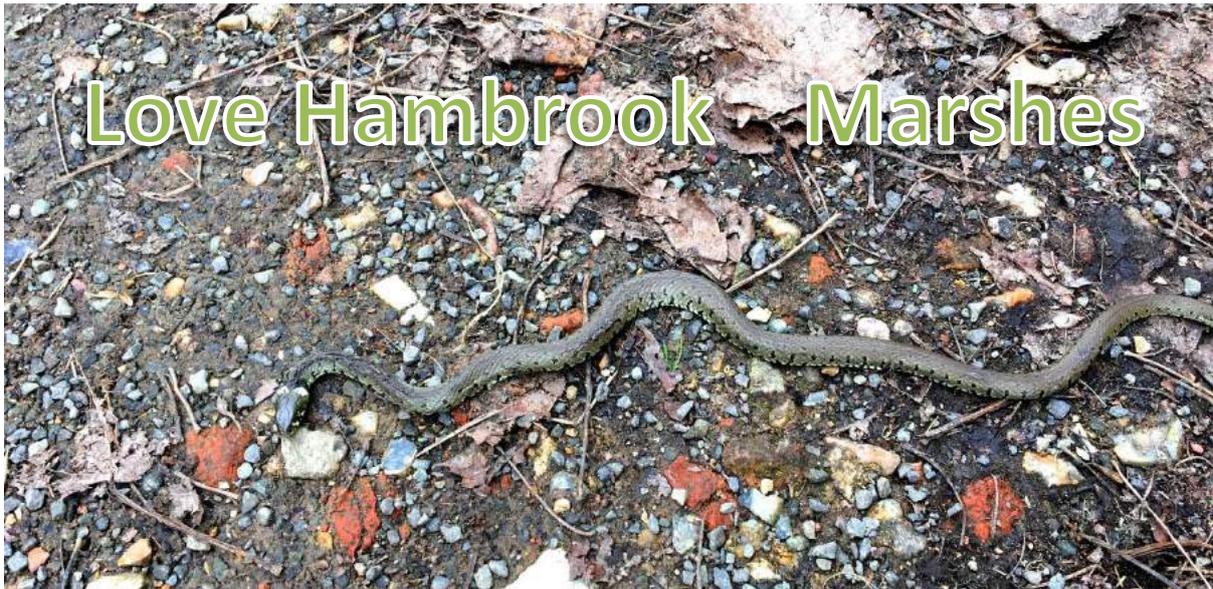




# Newsletter

February 2023



*Early grass snake on the Marshes. Photo courtesy of Catherine Lorenzen*

## Welcome

We were pleased to have students from Canterbury College helping us revitalise the willow maze (see pages 2-3); one of them was actually overheard saying how much he was enjoying the task, so it is gratifying to know that some young people can find working in the countryside rewarding. After the success of the willow weaving and monoprinting workshops last year, the trustees are hoping to increase our involvement with the local community. In particular, we are hoping to get funding to produce educational packs for schools to use on Hambrook Marshes. We want people, young and old, to be able to experience the joys of being involved with wildlife in a variety of ways. More than ever we need future generations of planners and politicians to have a greater passion for the countryside and awareness of the huge pressures that are squeezing our fascinating wildlife into ever smaller areas.

This was the driest February I have recorded in my 41 years at Rough Common, while last year we endured the wettest November in the same period, and we all know that the 2022 summer was the longest and hottest in living memory. If these "irregularities" are going to prove to be the new norm, the character and wildlife of Hambrook Marshes are bound to change. With that in mind we will shortly be reviewing the five-year management plan for the area. Change now seems all but inevitable, so we should be prepared to adapt, and accept that the look and feel of the reserve may alter over the coming decades.

## What's happening on the Marshes?



Winter storms had severely damaged one of our mature willows, leaving four large limbs hanging on by not much more than their bark. Two trustees and another volunteer were able to safely remove all the damaged boughs (left), stacking the wood as habitat nearby. The end result (right) is a tree that is only slightly lop-sided, and after a couple of



years' regrowth the surgery will be unnoticeable. A small number of willow cuttings were hammered into the ground nearby to help make up for all the cuttings that succumbed to last year's drought.

Highlight of the month was a complete restoration of the willow maze over two days, with the help of students from the Foundation Learning department of Canterbury College, who were using the task as a social action project to develop work skills and experience.



The photo on the next page shows the work completed, all bar a few "wands" on the left-hand edge of the picture. Several hundred willow stakes, a by-product of last winter's coppicing task, were



hammered in every two feet or so, then the one-year willow growth was woven around them and held down with hemp string. Previously the willow “walls” were about five feet high, which made trimming them twice each summer quite difficult. As the maze is designed for young children, we decided to reduce the height of the walls to about three feet, which will make future management far easier. We are therefore hoping that it will now be possible to keep the maze going for years.

## Wildlife Report

Spring is definitely in the air, as demonstrated by tufts of snowdrops on the river bank, occasional flowering lesser celandine, and a great spotted woodpecker drumming on 6<sup>th</sup>. But considerably more remarkable than all of these was Catherine Lorenzen’s record (and photo, used as the header for this newsletter) of a grass snake (right) on the surprisingly early date of 19<sup>th</sup>.



Not normally seen until late March or April, this individual emerged from hibernation after two days when the temperature crept up to an unseasonably high 15°C.



There were also signs that this is the transitional period between winter and spring; redwing are getting restless, and 11 were present on 23<sup>rd</sup>; teal (left) are quite a rare visitor to Hambrook, so the presence of three on 26<sup>th</sup> was another indication that these small duck were thinking about moving on to breeding sites. A handful nest in Kent, and about 4000 pairs breed in the UK, but the overwhelming majority of the half a million that overwinter here will return to northern Europe to nest. But the most exciting discovery was of a pair of shoveler (left) on a flooded portion of the boardwalk field on 23<sup>rd</sup>; a new species for the Marshes, they are the 108<sup>th</sup> on my list. Aptly named, the birds have an enormous, flattened bill which they use to scoop up invertebrates from the water surface. Like the teal, it is a fairly uncommon breeder in Kent, and most of the birds seen in the UK in winter will disappear to breed in northern Europe and western Russia.

A third visitor reported the presence of a goosander, which has been on the river periodically since at least late December. I still haven't seen it on the Hambrook stretch, but finally caught up with the bird at Chartham on 21<sup>st</sup>, so it evidently does move around quite a bit.

Other notable bird records were 55 black-headed gulls on Tonford lake, my first buzzard for four months, and a water rail (right) in the flooded area of the Boardwalk field. The water rail's shape is remarkably like a diminutive moorhen, to which it is related, but it is far shyer, and can be almost impossible to find if it doesn't emit its characteristic pig squeal. This one was out in the open, but I didn't spot it until it flew off low, trailing its legs in weak flight, just like a moorhen. Because of its secretive behaviour, it is hard to assess its status on Hambrook; so far as I know, it has never bred here, but one or more individuals are probably present most winters.



A cat's skull turned up in the boardwalk field. Given the absence of a body, it seems likely that the head was brought onto the marshes by a crow or fox.

A single small yew at the edge of Tonford Field was probably planted as screening when the A2 embankment was built, but this month I discovered a yew seedling quite close to steps up to the viewpoint, and this second record is far more likely to represent a genuine Hambrook species.

*Photo credits: Dave Smith for the close-up of grass snake, plus shoveler, teal and water rail*

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