



Annual Report

2022-3



Cormorant by Dave Smith

Introduction

Hambrook Marshes is 50 acres of marshland and meadow beside the river Stour, immediately upstream from Canterbury. It was acquired by the Love Hambrook Marshes Charitable Incorporated Organisation in 2014 and is managed for wildlife, with free access on foot across most of the site. During covid lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 the Marshes were extremely heavily used by local residents, but the number of visitors is thought to have now eased off to roughly pre-pandemic levels.

Weather

2022 experienced the warmest ever summer, peaking at 40.2°C on 19th July. There was very little rain in early autumn, and in October the Marshes were still completely dry, but then we suffered the wettest November in 41 year of recording, enabling the Marshes to at last have some standing water. December turned unseasonably cold, with air frosts on 12 consecutive nights. We then had the driest February in 41 years of recording, immediately followed by the wettest March in the same period. All in all, the weather of the past twelve months has not conformed to the usual pattern.

Habitat management

- As usual, our local willow weavers came over in January to cut down the one-year-old growth in the osier bed, removing all the wands for their basketry work in the following weeks.

- The cattle finally came onto the marshes in June, having been kept back by our grazier so that they could be tested for TB.
- The willow cuttings established as an extension to the osier bed have not thrived; a high percentage have died and the survivors have put on less vigorous growth than expected. This is thought to be due to the exceptionally dry and hot 2022 summer. We intend continuing the experiment in 2023 in the hope that a less extreme summer will enable much healthier growth this year.
- Part of the hay field was cut by our grazing tenant in September. Most of the arisings were picked up by tractor and dumped to rot down in the adjoining Scrub Field, but some had to be raked up by hand. The initial mowing once again failed to cut most of the area where snake's head fritillaries were planted in 2019, so in January Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) cleared some of the rank vegetation with a brushcutter (right) and reciprocating mower. KSCP volunteers also raked up and stacked the cuttings in the Scrub Field.
- In October KSCP volunteers pulled reedmace from a pool in the Boardwalk Field to create areas of open standing water.



Estate management

- Routine repairs were carried out to stiles, fences and gates.
- KCC contractors installed new wooden safety fencing at the approaches to two small bridges on the riverside walk (right) and also at the Wincheap bridge over the river Stour.
- Only limited mowing of path verges was needed, owing to vegetation growth being inhibited by the hot, dry weather.
- Six sections of riverbank vegetation (largely nettle and goosegrass) were again cut by hand to give visitors better views of the river during the summer months.
- In February the willow maze was completely rebuilt with the help of students from Canterbury College (right). One-year-old regrowth from last winter's cut stumps was woven around hundreds of stakes, and tied down with hessian string to hold it all firmly in place.
- November storms caused more damage to a large coppiced willow in a corner of the Whitehall Field, and in February volunteers carried out tree surgery to four main limbs that had almost broken off, leaving their tips resting on the ground in an unstable state.
- In November a large quantity of camping equipment was removed from the North Embankment.



Visitors and promotion

- Public willow-weaving classes were held on the Marshes in August and September (right), ably tutored by Nicola Jane Claxton. On the second session students were joined by Mike Sole, Lib Dem councillor for Canterbury South, who funded the installation of five benches last year.
- In September two members of staff from Canterbury's Rock Paper Scissors shop gave a class in monoprinting, a simple but very effective way of converting natural vegetation into inked images on paper.
- In September 20 members of CANDIFA (Canterbury & District Inter-Faith Action) joined a trustee for a walk through Hambrook.
- Five members of KLAW (see under Administration below) were shown round the Marshes by trustees in January.
- In February a group of 12 local RSPB members were given a guided tour of the Marshes.



Undesirable activity

- A handrail beside the steps leading up to the embankment viewpoint was cut through.
- In May a line of upturned supermarket trolleys was laid across the river beneath the A2 bridge (right).
- There was relatively little graffiti damage this year.
- The litter bin beside the Wincheap footbridge is being emptied more regularly by Canenco now, with the result that there were few problems with overflowing rubbish being blown around the area.



Planning threats

- In April we reported a possible proposal by the city council to relocate the Wincheap and Old Dover Road Park and Ride car parks. No more has been heard of this idea, but if it were to come about, that would finally remove the risk of the Wincheap water meadow being converted into a park and ride extension.
- We have not been made aware of any development of the British Horse Society proposal to create a byway over the level crossing, down the edge of Hambrook Marshes and across the river Stour.
- In December readers were encouraged to comment on the council's Local Plan 2045, particularly with reference to the park and ride and various inaccuracies contained in the report.

Administration

- During the year Love Hambrook Marshes CIO joined KLAW (Kent Landholders Assisting Wildlife), a new organisation bringing together private owners of fairly small areas of land being managed for wildlife. The primary aim is to disseminate information about conservation management, grants and public events.
- In January the city council erected Public Space Protection Order signs at points along the riverside path (right). These illustrate a whole raft of activities that are not permitted, along with a poor-quality map that doesn't actually show Hambrook Marshes, despite it being included in the scheme.
- We were again given a Green Flag Award, the international quality mark for parks and open spaces.



Wildlife

- After seeing an encouraging 154 snake's head fritillaries in the 2019 planted area last year, numbers were down to just 78 in spring 2022 (right), perhaps partly due to parts of the meadow not being cut for hay last autumn. Early signs are that there may be a slight increase in 2023.
- The southern marsh orchid population increased from five to six flower spikes.
- Bird breeding records included:
 - Possibly three pairs of Cetti's warbler at the edge of the marshes
 - Possibly two pairs of reed buntings
 - A pair of collared doves for the first time, with up to four adults on the south embankment close to the river on occasion
 - In August the pair of great crested grebes on Tonford Lake finally appeared with two chicks
 - Also in August, a female tufted duck was seen on the river with four well-grown ducklings (right). This species is almost exclusively a winter visitor to the valley, but ducklings have been seen in two previous years.
- Surprisingly, a fox seen in July was the first recorded on the site.
- A red-eyed damselfly in July was a new species for the Marshes, and is the 14th species of dragonfly to be identified here.
- Sightings of kingfisher increased in August, the same month that a hobby dashed across the fields. There was also plenty of warbler activity in the embankment scrub at times.



- The stonechat situation over the winter months was confused: initially there appeared to be two males and one female, but later in the winter only a solitary female was encountered.
- A single jack snipe was seen briefly in December.
- A female goosander appeared on the river occasionally from December through to March.
- In December a juvenile mute swan got caught behind high fencing at the edge of the railway embankment by the Canterbury East bridge. Trustees were unable to reach the bird, so Network Rail were called in. Staff cut through the fence and safely released the bird (right).
- Little grebe and meadow pipit are two declining wintering species at Hambrook; peak count was once again of just three grebes on the river; the peak count for meadow pipits was higher, at eight, but sightings were few and far between, with just four seen in the January-March period. Until a few years ago, 15-25 meadow pipits were occasionally present.
- For the first time, no cuckoos were recorded.



Thank you

Our thanks go to the various contractors, local volunteers and KSCP, without whom most of this work could not have been achieved.

Photo credits: Dave Smith for the cormorant and tufted duck

The Trustees
Love Hambrook Marshes CIO

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Registered charity no. 1156473