



Newsletter

April 2023



Newly restored willow maze

Welcome

Back in January we stated that, for a variety of reasons, camping wasn't allowed on Hambrook Marshes. That, however, hasn't prevented a succession of people from setting up their tents, sometimes for extended periods, and not always tucked unobtrusively into a quiet corner. Most recently two campers pitched up for some weeks in the boardwalk field, on their eventual departure leaving behind a gargantuan quantity of material that can't be recycled – tents, sleeping bags, blankets, food and many smaller items, plus the obligatory supermarket trolley. We recently updated our camping policy, creating a Rough Sleeper Action Plan that utilises StreetLink, an organisation operating throughout England and Wales, which coordinates reports of rough sleepers and passes the details on to the relevant council's outreach team. We then have a series of steps to take, liaising with the outreach workers. This culminates either in the sleepers being offered accommodation or simply moving elsewhere, and usually abandoning their tent. Once again, it then falls on trustees to clear up the mess. Anyone can make use of StreetLink and we would encourage you to report rough sleepers on Hambrook and elsewhere via <https://www.streetlink.org.uk> or using the smart phone app 'StreetLink' from Apple iTunes/Google Play store or by phoning 0300 500 0914.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Following the success of last month's collaboration with Canterbury College to totally renew the willow maze, a different group of eight students turned up in April to plant more willow cuttings, as part of our plan to extend the osier bed. The cuttings are basically sticks with buds which burst into leaf in early spring; as soon as this happens, water is lost from the surface of the leaves, and fresh water has to be drawn up from the soil, but at this point the stem has not yet put out a significant root system, so the amount of water that can be extracted is minimal in the early days. Add to the mix the 2022 drought, the like of which had not been seen before, and you have a recipe for failure, so it is no surprise that many of the cuttings planted a year ago have died. We are therefore rather hoping that this summer the conditions are not so severe, enabling the cuttings to establish a decent root system which can then cope with moderate drought stress.

Wildlife Report

The solitary great crested grebe was still present on Tonford Lake at the end of the month, strengthening my hope that its mate was secreted on a nest amongst dense fringing vegetation. Also parading around the lake were ten tufted ducks, which usually depart at the end of March or early April, so perhaps some of these will also stay to nest. Breeding is certainly on the mind of many birds: a goldfinch was building its nest inside a dense bramble thicket beside the Whitehall stream at the end of the month, whitethroats fresh in from Africa are setting up territories, and on 20th I briefly heard a nightingale singing in the abandoned orchard beside the Tonford railway crossing.

Winter has lost its grip, and a snipe flying over on the late date of 27th was likely to be the last I'll see until autumn (like the tufted duck, they usually vanish early in the month). An interesting record was of a compact flock of thirty Mediterranean gulls (right) flying over on 20th. Historically it was a bird of eastern Europe, centring on the Black Sea, but during the 20th century its range expanded westwards, reaching England in the 1960s. When I moved to Kent forty years ago only two pairs were known to breed in the county, but since then it has become firmly established on the North Kent Marshes, where the breeding population has built up to around 500 pairs. Somewhat like a black-headed gull, though with a true black hood rather than a chocolate one, other features make it more closely resemble a herring gull, and its distinctive "mwow" note is certainly more reminiscent of the larger bird than the harsh shrieks of the slightly smaller, more delicate black-headed gull. I hesitate to explain their presence in a flock flying down the valley in April; were they heading to breeding islands on the north Kent coast?



Eleven magpies were feeding in the boardwalk field one morning, and the dreaded parakeet (for whom I have developed quite a soft spot) squawked a reminder of its continuing presence after several quiet weeks.

Last month I mentioned that the snake's head fritillaries planted in 2019 were putting on their early spring show. Thanks to the emergency additional mowing carried out by Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership in January, all four of the original clusters were relocated, and the final tally of fritillary "lanterns" was 147, a 75% increase on last year. However, given that 400 bulbs were planted four years ago, it is still not clear if the population is likely to increase significantly: if it does, we may go ahead with a more extensive bulb-planting scheme.



Several years ago I collected seed from marsh marigolds growing on the riverbank in Westgate Gardens, and cultivated them in my greenhouse. Many of the thirty or so marigolds that I planted out the following spring came to nothing, but some did survive and one particularly magnificent specimen is currently in billowing bloom beside the Whitehall stream just before it enters the Stour. Walking in from Canterbury, go past the brick abutment remains of the old railway bridge, past the iron railings of the first ditch crossing,

and then at the second crossing with iron railings look to your right and you can't miss the exuberant plant.

To find out more about the Marshes, why not visit our [website](#), where there is historical information, a comprehensive photo gallery of nearly all the birds recorded here, together with a selection of the flowers, a library of old newsletters and, of course, an opportunity to volunteer on the Marshes or donate to the cause!

Photo credits: Dave Smith for the Mediterranean gull

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