



Newsletter

May 2023



Boardwalk Field looking towards the old railway embankment

Welcome

With remarkably chilly north-easterly winds blowing in off the North Sea for much of the month, it hasn't often felt much like spring, let alone summer, but Nature seems to grind on relentlessly, and this month the buttercups, though tossed incessantly by the cruel wind, have appeared on cue, as they do every year. The 1520 meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I of France was held in a field outside Calais that came to be known as the Field of the Cloth of Gold because, in their attempts to outshine each other, the two monarchs had erected sumptuous tents enlivened with a great deal of gold cloth. I would much prefer to imagine the site being so-named because the regal summit had taken place in a meadow awash with early-summer buttercups.

Young people need somewhere away from formal surroundings where they can chill out, so when we discovered a sofa and campfire set up on the old embankment, we decided to take a lenient approach and, rather than ban them from the site, asked them to tidy up their rubbish and at least take the sofa away. Well, they have moved the sofa, but only to another corner of the Marshes, leaving in their wake a large amount of litter, including broken bottles, and a supermarket trolley. It therefore seems as though our good intentions were, in this case, misplaced, and that we do need to have rules about what we consider to be acceptable activity on Hambrook Marshes.

What's happening on the Marshes?

The first of the cattle arrived on 14th, but their stay proved short-lived, as two promptly leapt a fence and headed off towards Chartham. Fortunately, a passerby alerted us and, between them, the grazier, a trustee and a couple of visitors, were able to coax the beasts back into the field. Apparently, the young animals had been living as part of a larger herd, and our grazier's thought was that, when they arrived in a much smaller group, they were spooked by a feeling of insecurity, and just wanted out. Fearing that there might be a repeat escape if left on the Marshes, the grazier decided to take them away for the time being. So, just as last summer, we are once again without the livestock that complete the Sidney Cooper landscape here. We hope to see some more docile animals back on the Marshes before too long.

We were finally able to remove the eyesore of tents, bedding and assorted litter from the edge of the boardwalk field.

Wildlife Report

The question on everyone's lips is "Has it really gone?" They are, of course, referring to the ring-necked parakeet that had made Hambrook Marshes its home since August 2021, but whose raucous screech I haven't heard this month. Initially, the old railway embankment was its headquarters, but more recently it tended to wander further afield, and I would often hear it calling from the Wincheap area. In all that time it seems it failed to attract a mate, and the likelihood is that it has either died or the lonely, frustrated bird has moved on to more congenial pastures. Alien it may be, but I can't help feeling a little sadness at its disappearance.



Despite the chilly weather, spring is definitely progressing; a migrant reed warbler was singing in the osier bed on 24th, along with a garden warbler, leading me to ponder whether they were taking advantage of the narrow strip of willow that has been taken out of the annual cutting rotation, and so is now providing potential habitat for these birds. Reed buntings (left), less commonly seen than a few years ago, have also put in an occasional appearance, but all these species are in the relatively early stages of nesting, whereas starlings raced out of the breeding stocks a while back, and flocks of a couple of dozen adults and fledged young are now to be seen on the wires, along the riverside path, or exploring Tonfield field.

A welcome visitor on 18th was a common sandpiper (right), a migrant wader that doesn't nest in southern England, and would simply have been pausing briefly to feed up before continuing its journey into Wales, to the Peak District, or right on into Scotland. Other less frequent visitors were a pair of linnets, which perched in the old embankment scrub for a few minutes before flying off. Will it be another five years before I see this rather charming, neat little finch again?



But it is the losses that really strike home, and with increasing frequency these days: I have yet to see a swift, house martin or swallow hawking over the Marshes, and the only cuckoo I have heard was too far away to truly delight my soul. All four species are suffering fairly massive declines, and it seems there is little we can do to halt the losses. With the cathedral, a wealth of churches and other old buildings in the town centre, there are plenty of potential nest sites for swifts, but the most I have seen there so far this year is a forlorn group of five: in the early 20th century it probably wouldn't have been unusual to see swarms of fifty or even a hundred swifts screeching around Bell Harry.

Speaking of swarms, an interesting phenomenon witnessed by a local resident on 30th was a swarm of honey bees draping themselves over a fencepost and wire netting beside the river path(right). Swarming is part of their natural behaviour, and is a way for them to colonise new areas, or to move out of an overcrowded hive. A swarm usually consists of a single queen, plus hundreds of female workers and smaller numbers of the larger, male, drones. Usually the swarm will move away after a few hours in its search for a vacant hive or a natural cavity. I don't know how long this particular swarm remained on the post, but imagine it proved a tad intimidating to passers-by, although while closely clustered they take no interest in people, who are therefore perfectly safe.



As mentioned in the Welcome section, the buttercups are now in full flower. We actually have four buttercup species on Hambrook but it is the tall meadow buttercup that provides the May spectacle. Mixed in with it is the much shorter creeping buttercup, the bane of gardeners on damp soil. Then there is the much less obvious celery-leaved buttercup, with small yellow flowers, which likes to grow in shallow water. The fourth buttercup is in fact lesser celandine, with the same, hard yellow flowers, but whose petals are arranged in a star pattern. A fifth species, the bulbous buttercup, occurs a few yards upstream near the riverside path, but I have yet to find it on Hambrook.

*Photo credits: Dave Smith for the reed bunting and common sandpiper
Chris Sparks for the bee swarm*

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