



Newsletter

June 2023



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

Most of the year we take it for granted: water flows copiously out of our taps, drops annoyingly out of the sky and courses through Canterbury as the river Stour, only to lose itself in the vastness of the oceans. So the worrying need for the recent introduction of a hosepipe ban is, perhaps, only just beginning to percolate through our minds. Do we have enough water? As with everything else on this planet, water is a finite resource, which we are using carelessly in prodigal quantities. Unlike any hotter countries with a greater awareness of the value of water, England is not liberally dotted with reservoirs: we assume that supplies will be replenished through rainfall, and London's hand to mouth approach has led to it only having ninety days' storage capacity – three months without rain and the capital would be in dire straits.

But what about Hambrook Marshes? We are watching it dry out day by day. To survive as a wetland it needs to receive more water: regardless of how much inundation occurs in winter, it will still dry out in hot summers that are becoming the norm. One possible solution might be to engineer a large reservoir that would fill during winter and could then be used to moisten the marshes in summer – an expensive and intrusive operation. The only alternative, apart from managing it as dry grassland or abandoning the site to scrub and woodland, would be to seek a licence to abstract from the river, a request likely to be refused, given the more pressing demands of agriculture and domestic use. The trustees are currently seeking the best solution.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Having finally bludgeoned the willow maze into some sense of order back in the winter, we couldn't sit back on our laurels: willow has a well-deserved reputation for exuberance, and the wet start to the spring certainly encouraged rampant growth. By early June willow shoots had completely blocked the alleys, and it was a relatively major task to trim the hedges so that the maze was usable once more; but within four weeks it was getting out of hand again, so a further round of trimming was needed. It looks as though a monthly cut is going to be required right through summer each year.



Wildlife Report



Six southern marsh orchids were present in the usual spot, three more have just been found nearby, and a further two were stumbled upon in Tonford Field. The number of known pyramidal orchids (left) in Whitehall Field has also increased from one to four!

Normally, cattle would be grazing the Boardwalk Field from April onwards, but thanks to the problems encountered immediately after arrival (see May newsletter), the beasts were promptly removed, and have yet to return. As a

result, the vegetation in that field is far more luxuriant than usual, and one unexpected side-effect has been the prolific flowering of pale flax in one corner of the field. This is a very delicate plant, with thin, wiry stems and very narrow leaves. There are only a few pale blue flowers per plant, but each one is beautifully veined in darker blue. Scarce in Kent apart from in the Dover-Deal area, it is even rarer inland, so there are three possible explanations for its occurrence at Hambrook: it is indigenous to the site, which seems unlikely, as it is a plant of dry places; it was brought in with spoil used to backfill the quarries after all the gravel had been extracted; or it was sown by the previous owners. We may never know which supposition is correct.



Two great crested grebes were still present on Tonford Lake on 1st, but with no sign of any chicks, and the adults seem to have abandoned the lake now. This is a relatively long-lived species (the record is nearly twelve years), so the population can be maintained without every pair successfully rearing young each year.

Reed warbler and garden warbler have both been singing from the narrow strip of osiers that is not being cut by the willow weavers, and which therefore can be allowed to grow on for several years, providing habitat for these birds.

A pair of linnets (right) appear to have taken up residence on the marshes.



Photo credits: Dave Smith for the linnnet and kingfisher

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