



Newsletter

July 2023



Magpie courtesy of Dave Smith

Welcome

As alluded to previously, 2023 is the year in which the trustees review the five-year management plan, with the opportunity to change the direction of management in light of our experience since 2018, coupled with financial implications (our government grants have been in steady decline since Brexit, and it is unclear whether we will eventually be able to claim something approaching our pre-Brexit income), and the increasing prevalence of droughts. To help us come to sensible decisions, we are enlisting the help of three specialists: a botanist, an entomologist and an ornithologist. The botanist, Alex Lockton, gave us a fascinating running commentary as he walked round the site with four trustees last week, leaving us with much to ponder on. Inevitably the other two specialists, who will be visiting later in August, will not agree with Alex on all points – management that is beneficial to one suite of plants may not suit key bird species or invertebrates – but then nobody said this was going to be an easy task!

The weather didn't make for a relaxing July, and we seem to be getting more of the same in early August. However, while not beach weather, it wasn't actually record-breakingly wet as, in the 41 years I've been measuring rainfall locally, seven July totals have been greater than this year's. Just be grateful that this isn't 1816, the so-called "year without a summer", when thousands starved or died of epidemics. This disaster is attributed to the eruption of Tambora in Indonesia the previous year, rather than to climate change.

Biodiversity Emergency Declaration

Biodiversity – the interconnected variety of plant and animal species – is in deep trouble. As habitats disappear because of ever-increasing development, or deteriorate because of damaging agricultural practices, as temperatures rise and as food chains and ecosystems are disrupted, more and more species are endangered or in decline. It’s something we know from direct experience, on Hambrook Marshes and in east Kent – fewer cuckoos, fewer skylarks, fewer swallows and swifts. Iconic species like these are just the most obvious examples. It is rightly described as a biodiversity crisis, and it is both a global crisis and a local crisis.

That is why Canterbury City Council has been asked to follow the example of some other local authorities and adopt a Declaration of Biological Emergency. LHM trustee Sian Pettman started an e-petition on the Council’s website calling for this, and thanks to her incredible hard work it gathered over a thousand signatures in less than a month. Sian presented the petition to the Council meeting on 20th July, and councillors themselves proposed a motion recognising the need for a Biodiversity Emergency Declaration and asking for the detailed work to be done on what it should say. The motion had strong support from all the political parties and was approved unanimously. It was a good debate, with a lot of suggestions for positive action including cooperation between the Council and partners such as community groups, schools, farmers and landowners.



Cross-party agreement: Sian Pettman (LHM trustee), Rachel Carnac (Con), Pat Edwards (Lab), James Flanagan (Lib Dem), Rick Norman (LHM trustee) and Clare Turnbull (Green)

We look forward to the formulation of a full Declaration. We hope that it will come to the next Council meeting, on 19th October, and that it will provide a comprehensive framework for action to restore nature, in which Love Hambrook Marshes can play its part.



An unusual sight on the guildhall screen showing votes cast: all 36 councillors voted in favour of the motion, which must be some sort of record! So the council has taken the first, easy step, and it now remains to be seen how much, practically, our councillors are able to enact that will make a small difference to our already hugely depleted wildlife.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Once again Hambrook Marshes has gained a Green Flag award, the international quality mark for parks and green spaces. The scheme, which is managed by environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy under licence from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, recognises and rewards well-managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of green spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.

Tall vegetation was cleared from in front of some of the riverside benches so that visitors can once more enjoy views of our lovely river. Brambles, and pretty much all the other plants on Hambrook, have revelled in the weather (early spring warmth to kick-start the regrowth, followed by ample rain to enable pioneering shoots to extend triffid-like, and unabated into virgin territory), so some time was spent cutting back stems as thick as a thumb. This was all totally unprecedented.

After the May debacle that led to the cattle being removed from the marshes after some of the beasts leapt over a fence and made a bid for freedom, we finally have ten cows back in the Boardwalk Field. We hope more will follow shortly to help make inroads into the vigorous regrowth that has taken place this spring.

A new stretch of fencing has been installed (right), which will serve two functions. In the first instance, it replaces a very dilapidated fence which was not adequate for keeping the cattle safely on site. But it will also enable us to control cattle access to the osier bed: you will notice that the new fence is set about 20 yards further out from the old one. This gap is being populated with willow cuttings that will eventually form a small osier bed that can be managed by coppicing every few years, while enabling the willow weavers to continue harvesting what they need from the block further back. At the south west end the fence has to cross the modest width of the Whitehall stream. To ensure that this weak point is also cattle-proof, the contractor installed a short stretch of wooden fencing (right), which should do the trick. In winter spate the stream is liable to sweep along twigs and branches, all of which could get caught up in the lattice, with leaves and other smaller debris then piling in behind, so it may be necessary to periodically clear away any blockages.



The willow maze received its third cut of the year, and it is now possible to maintain a more even height, so the end result is a little more professional. I have yet to find the skeleton of a small child who was unable to find his way out!

In a bid to raise the profile of the river Stour, one of a very small number of chalk streams globally, the city council is launching the Great Stour River Fest, with a range of river-related activities taking place in the week leading up to 24th September. Details are still being worked out, but there will be an evening bat walk in the Westgate Parks and a riverside walk on Hambrook Marshes. More information will be made available in the coming weeks.

Wildlife Report

Poppies are classic weeds of bare, disturbed ground, hence their proliferation on the cratered killing fields of the First World War, so it is a little surprising to see the odd ones cropping up here and there on the Marshes, but Kent Enterprise Trust, the previous landowners, did scatter seeds of arable weeds in the hay field about 12 years ago, and the present handful of poppies are probably the legacy of that task. Close inspection of the brown seedheads reveals a marvel of blind engineering. The seeds mature inside a roughly spherical capsule, which turns from green to grey-brown as it ripens, and is surmounted by a neat little conical hat that does a vital job of retaining the unripe seeds in the capsule, but when the seeds are ripe, the hat is inverted, just like an umbrella in a gale, to reveal a ring of holes, through which the tiny seeds can now escape every time the plant is shaken by the wind or knocked by passing animals – nature’s pepper pot!



Tragically, I haven’t seen a single swift over Hambrook this summer, and they are already heading back to Africa, so it looks as if this is going to be the first blank year for a truly iconic species. Loss of nest sites in old buildings may be part of the problem, and the erection of nestboxes has often brought small colonies back to areas that they had deserted, but the massive decline in insects is surely largely to blame, both here and in their winter quarters.

Swallows and house martins, while not related to the swift, do occupy fairly similar niches, with all three catching their food on the wing and nesting almost exclusively on man-made structures. So it is perhaps not altogether surprising that these two species are also in steep decline, and neither has yet been seen by me on the Marshes. Their southward migration takes place a couple of months later than the swifts’, so I suppose there is still time to see a few. Mind you, any birds that pass through this autumn will mostly have bred further north in England or Scotland, where they are enjoying more breeding success than down here, so September and October counts don’t give a true indication of how well they are faring in Kent.

Photo credits: Dave Smith for the swift

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