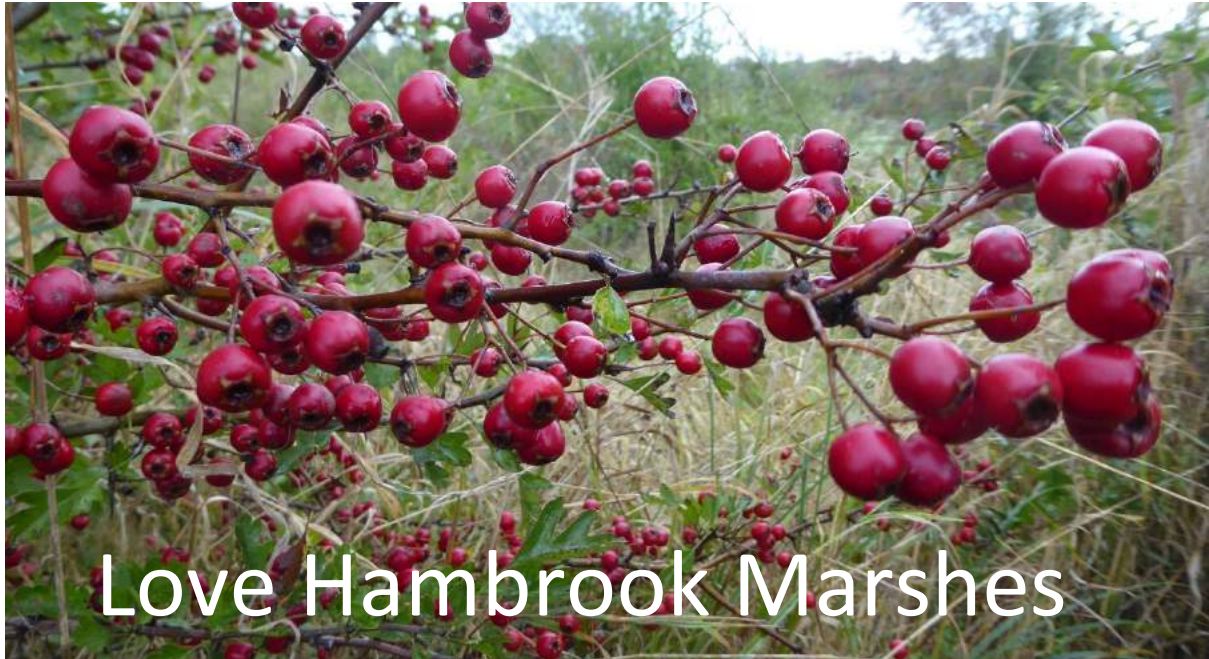




Newsletter

November 2023



Welcome

Jon Shelton, partnership manager for the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership, has pointed out an inaccuracy in last month's comment about the Water Framework Directive, based on an article in The Guardian. While it is true that the Environment Agency is no longer required to monitor rivers annually, a programme has been put in place for monitoring macro-invertebrates every three years and fish every six years. Additionally, the article stated that "under the revised WFD rules, no full survey of rivers is proposed until 2025" when it should have said that monitoring carried out in 2022, 2023 and 2024 won't be reported until 2025.

In mid-November Tony Juniper, chair of Natural England, mused that building on the green belt could be part of the solution to the housing crisis. His argument is that much existing green belt has poor access and low conservation value, so it would make more sense to allow development on that land, while increasing the wildlife interest of other areas, especially those with public access. This may have just been him thinking aloud, and without seeing any case studies it is difficult to judge the merits of the suggestion, but such a proposal does not come without risks. Rough Common, Thanington, Fordwich and Sturry are already little more than suburbs of Canterbury, and proposed or existing developments, such as Saxon Fields, mean that our city is still swallowing up much countryside, albeit on land of low wildlife value. Sites such as Hambrook Marshes and Blean Woods are welcome green lungs which won't be built on, but Old Park's future is less secure, and each new

development creates more residents wanting to enjoy fresh air, but having to travel ever further out of the city to reach countryside of any description. Tony Juniper's argument that a new wood close to a conurbation is more valuable than one in the wilds of Scotland where it will be visited by few people does make some sense, but a wood created on or near green belt land would then be cheek by jowl with the existing high density population, and additionally perhaps subjected to yet more pressure from residents, dogs and cats visiting from new developments on adjoining land that is former green belt. Pristine habitats generally cannot survive undamaged in those circumstances, and the proposal is fraught with risk. We surely need more wildlife-rich habitats in both remote and populated areas.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Last week's Kentish Gazette gave details of the council's latest [outline planning application](#) for an A2 off-slip road at Wincheap. More information is available on the [council's website](#), where there appears to be just one map, which is considerably less helpful than the Gazette one! This application is just for the slip-road, not for an extension to the park and ride parking area. In terms of the alignment of the proposed road, little seems to have changed: it still departs from the A2 immediately after the Stour bridge crossing, and, as before, there appears to be a hairpin bend where it meets Ten Perch Road, giving the impression that traffic will still be directed down to a roundabout by the park and ride entrance, before coming back up again to the traffic lights, where it can then turn left for Canterbury or right for Ashford. If the slip-road doesn't diverge from the A2 until after the river crossing, there might not be any disruption on the Hambrook side of the river during construction, but we still don't know if the scheme will go ahead, so it is too soon to start worrying about potential temporary closure of the riverside path.



Little management took place this month, but Canterbury College planted more willow cuttings in the osier bed extension, until driven back by rain.

Wildlife Report

Highlight of the month was the appearance of a single great white egret on Tonford Lake, adjoining Hambrook. First reported by a riverside resident on 12th, and present at times until at least 16th, this is the 109th species to have been recorded on, over or close to the Marshes since 2012. Until recently the great white egret was a rare vagrant to the UK from southern Europe, but it has been moving steadily northwards for fifty years, its European breeding population increasing from around 150-200 in the 1970s to between 11,000 and 24,000 by 2000. In England the number of birds recorded annually has rocketed but there are still no more than about ten nesting pairs. It therefore remains to be seen if their breeding population takes off in much the same way as the



little egret's did. My record shot of the bird is shown above, so it was more than a little fortunate that I was able to call on the rather superior services of Dave Smith for you to appreciate what a magnificent bird it is (left).

Another unexpected egret story was the appearance of an amazing seven little egrets (below) in one of Hambrook's grazed fields on 6th, when there was shallow flooding. This flock was all

the more remarkable for the fact that I can go months without seeing a single one (my previous sighting was in February). While I once saw eight on the nearby Tonford Lake, this is the first time I've found more than four on Hambrook Marshes.

Less encouraging was the almost total absence of snipe, the first birds usually arriving in September or early October, but this year none probed the mud in Tonford Field until two appeared on 29th November. A quick glance over the fence is enough to explain this anomaly: after a summer with absolutely no grazing, due to fears about the security of the fence along the A2 embankment, there is now an extremely dense thatch of grass instead of the normal fairly short turf. Snipe may have longish legs and beaks, but they are no match for this vegetative barrier, and the birds must have simply moved to somewhere more congenial.



Partial flooding of the fields for several days from 6th brought in 160 black-headed gulls on 6th, plus a single common gull (right) nearby on 14th, and up to 15 mallard for the following fortnight.



Very similar to a herring gull, common gulls are smaller, with a thinner beak, and grey-green, not pink, legs.

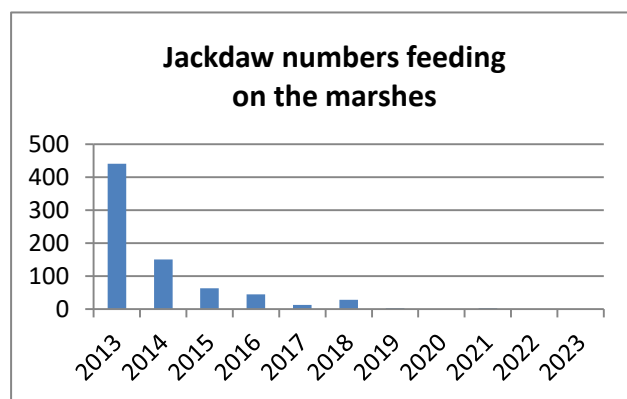
The family of up to nine mute swans has declined to six, but I imagine this simply indicates that some of the young birds have moved off onto another part of the valley, rather than that they have died. Also on the river mid-month was a single coot, a bird more usually seen on Tonford Lake.



A single chiffchaff on 20th was

presumably a hanger-on from summer that may now hope to survive an English winter, but the dial has definitely turned to winter, with 18 redwings feeding on the embankment on 20th, and a siskin present on 6th; primarily a winter visitor to Kent, the siskin is usually a rare visitor to Hambrook, not recorded in every winter, and then usually just flying over. Unusually, I failed to note a single wood pigeon (left) on the ground or perching in trees during October, but the occasional birds have been seen this month. Numbers of this little-loved bird have declined in recent years, which can only be good news to farmers and allotment holders.

A jackdaw flying over was the first one I had seen since last December. The graph shows how this species has declined dramatically since observations began in late 2012. I have previously speculated that this could be due to a change in the husbandry of the cattle, namely that a former grazier may not have routinely dosed the animals with the antibiotic ivermectin which, in addition to promoting growth of livestock, has the effect of killing off invertebrates that feed on their dung. The dung of undosed cattle in the past would therefore have been a richer source of food for crows and jackdaws. I haven't been able to prove the correlation, but the decline depicted in the graph is most striking., and it is now 2½ years since I saw a jackdaw feeding at Hambrook.



The Cetti's warbler that had set up home on the embankment appears to have moved on, and a buzzard flying over was my first record since July.

Great white egret, little egret, common gull and wood pigeon photos courtesy of Dave Smith