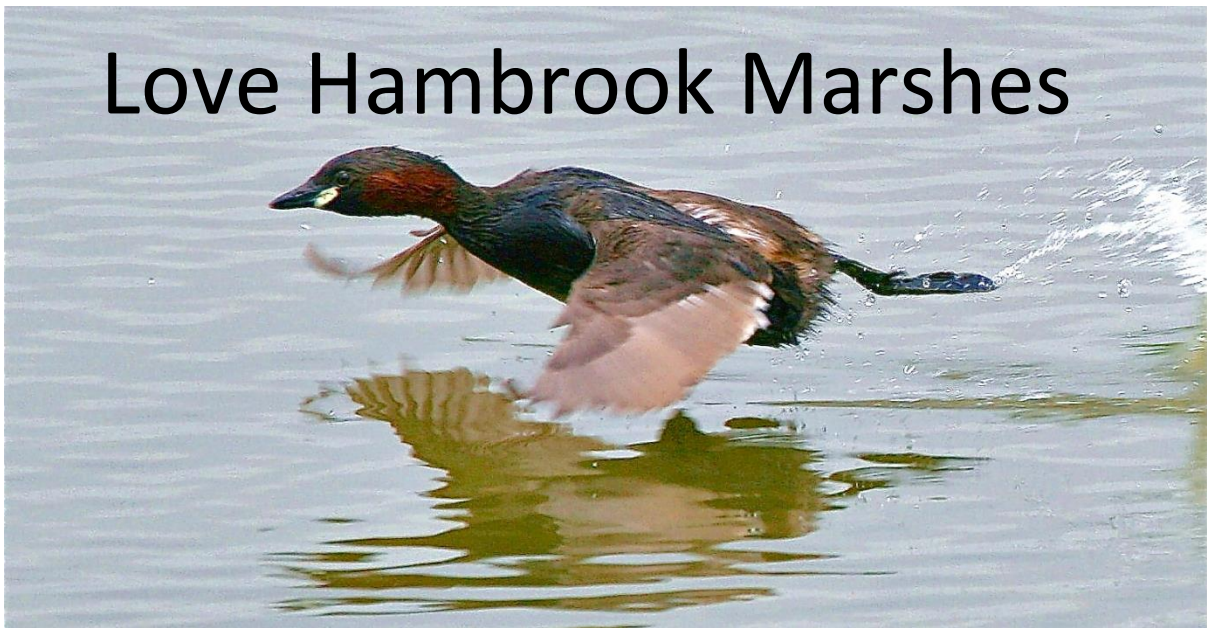


# Newsletter

December 2023

## Love Hambrook Marshes



*Little grebe by Dave Smith*

### Welcome

It's not quite official yet, as at the time of writing (New Year's Eve) we haven't quite left behind the calamities and lunacies that comprised 2023, but there is general consensus amongst meteorologists and climatologists that, globally, 2023 was the hottest year on record. Adequate records extend back to around 1880, so we can say that 2023 was hotter than any other of the past 140 years, but the situation is actually rather more stark than that, with the suggestion that we've just lived through the hottest July globally for 120,000 years. Given that the best formulation of words that COP28 could come up with was a commitment to "transition away from fossil fuels", you may well wonder what hope there is for us.

It has certainly been a mild winter so far, leading me to think I ought to start recording first dates for wildlife milestones, the study known as phenology. To set the ball rolling, I saw my first hazel bush covered in powdery catkins on 28<sup>th</sup> December, and a bumble bee in my garden the following day. Flowering wild carrot and dandelion are just two of the plants I've seen that are taking advantage of the largely frost-free nights and mild days.

## What's happening on the Marshes?

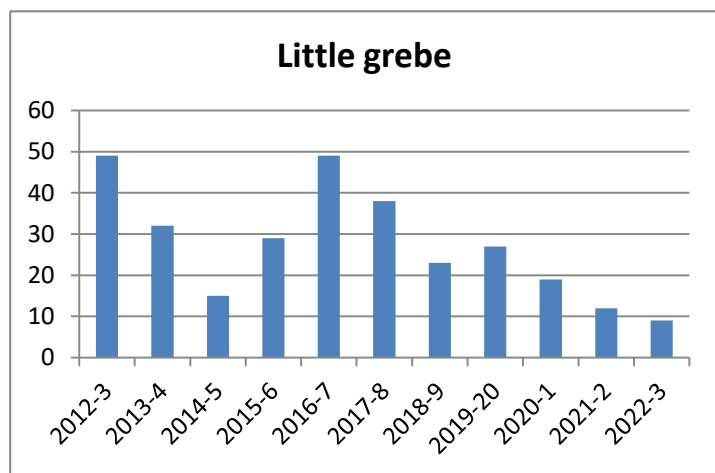
No authorised management took place this month, but the Environment Agency returned to finish the job they began in November of removing a willow that had crashed into the river. Using a tractor to haul the large trunk out of the water, they made quite a mess of the river bank, and all the wood was dumped unceremoniously on the Marshes (see photos below), despite the tree having come from the other side of the river, which is nothing to do with Hambrook.



## Wildlife Report

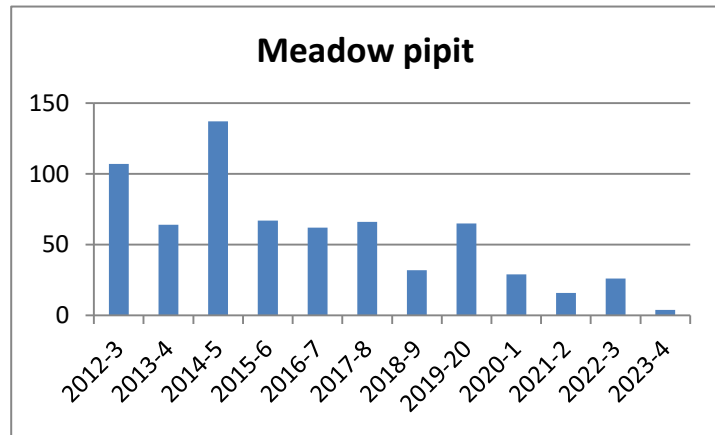
With much of the floodwater having drained away, far less use was made of the Marshes by birds, with just four black-headed gulls and 15 mallard on 5<sup>th</sup>. A dead swan, still in its beige juvenile plumage, was found on 8<sup>th</sup>, having evidently collided with the low tension electricity cables that cross Tonford Field. Small metal balls are slung beneath the cables where they cross the marsh, but this is evidently inadequate, as this is the third time that a swan has crashed into the lines and died. Previous communication with UK Power Networks failed to elicit any action.

The pattering of little feet –no, not grandchildren – alerted me to the presence of my first little grebe for over seven weeks. The header photo on page one nicely illustrates the way these birds run across the water, making a characteristic splattering sound as they go. Sadly, this is only my second record this winter of our smallest grebe, yet until six years ago I regularly saw three or four, occasionally as many as seven, on the river, usually in the vicinity of the Canterbury East



railway bridge. The graph on the right shows how their fortunes have varied over the past eleven years, but we are now in the sixth year of a fairly consistent downward trend. This is a cause for deep regret, as so many other species are also seen less frequently and in lower numbers than just a few years ago, a random selection of other examples being stonechat, moorhen, swift, swallow, house martin, snipe and meadow pipit, the last two being featured in the next paragraph.

Thanks to the thick thatch of grass in the ungrazed Tonford Field, the poor snipe winter continued, with no more than three seen on any of my visits this month. The first four meadow pipits (below) of the winter were seen on 20<sup>th</sup>. This is yet another species that is in decline, as shown clearly on the graph opposite. Until recently flocks of up to 18 were fairly regular from September through to March.



A water rail (right) was squealing beside Tonford lake on 5<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>.



Up to ten blackbirds were present on the embankment, and a jay (below) was seen there twice, while a hunched little egret perched high up in one of the embankment trees resembled an oversized snowball.



In the previous two winters a kestrel was regularly hunting over the Marshes, but the habit seems to have been lost this year, so it was good to see one this month, the first since August.

Perhaps most remarkable of all my sightings this month was of a group of four squirrels clambering around in a small hawthorn bush on the embankment to eat the berries. It was highly unusual for two reasons: previously I had only occasionally seen a single squirrel on the embankment, so four was totally unprecedented, and it was decidedly odd to see four of these normally belligerent animals feeding peacefully so close to each other; and secondly, I had never before seen squirrels eating fleshy fruit, their usual diet being dry seeds of conifers, acorns, hazelnuts and hornbeam seeds. The berries were dealt with very deftly, too quickly for me to make out exactly what was happening, but it appeared that individual fruits were held between the two front paws so that most of the flesh could be stripped off, as it was the small woody seed that was of interest.

*Little grebe, water rail, meadow pipit and jay photos courtesy of Dave Smith*