



Newsletter

January 2024



Love Hambrook Marshes

Kestrel by Dave Smith

Welcome

Landscape that we haven't grown up with can often seem immutable, but change in the countryside is occurring at an accelerating pace, and even at Hambrook a scene from 1957 can seem barely recognisable today. A friend recently sent me a photo that he can date to that year, taken from the old Tonford bridge, and the two views, separated by 67 years, are shown on page 2. The present bridge is considerably higher than the old one, so the perspective is not quite the same, but the viewpoint for the modern photo is essentially unchanged, yet it is immediately clear that the scene has altered over the years. Below I have listed the features of 1957 that differ from what you can see today, some quite minor, others very significant.

- River less straight, with a marked bay on the right-hand side
- The right-hand side looks much wilder as there were no gardens, so probably none of the bungalows had been built, though there were evidently some buildings, and the presence of washing on a line suggests there may have been a house nearby.
- No riverside path, and the fence was much closer to the river bank.
- Scattered line of hawthorn trees running across Tonford field
- No electricity cables on the left-hand side of the river



- The landscape looks altogether more open, with no trees near the bridge on the river bank on the right-hand side, or further away from the bridge on the left-hand side. Rising ground on the far left horizon is more or less free of trees, whereas in the recent photo a thick band of scrub and trees growing on the A2 and Elham Valley embankments completely blocks out any more distant view.
- The London Road estate evidently hadn't been completed, as I would have expected to be able to see signs of it at the top of that elevated land.
- More or less the whole of the cathedral is visible as the A2 embankment across the marsh has yet to be built (cathedral now entirely hidden by a single large willow).

- Despite the presence of a fence, it is evident that grazing had occurred right up to the left-hand edge of the river, as the vegetation had been closely cropped right up to the bank lip.
- The grass in the field looks closely cropped, so management would have been far more intensive than now, and it looks as though there wasn't any coarse vegetation, such as rushes.
- Smoke from the former gas works near the castle is just about visible, between the cathedral and the big block of trees on the right

What's happening on the Marshes?

It's been another quiet month, but the willow weavers have, as usual, made a start on cutting down the 2023 regrowth in the osier bed to use in their basket-weaving. This work will be completed in February.

Wildlife Report

The good news is that a pair of stonechats have returned to the Marshes and are now present in Tonford Field. My thanks to Stephen Brooks for alerting me to their presence. Stonechats tend to bond quite strongly and, having spotted one bird, it is usual to find its mate nearby. As I've written before, they have an unvarying hunting technique of perching on a tall plant, such as a dock stem, and keenly surveying the ground below for any sign of insect movement, then dropping down when they spot something. So, given that Tonford Field is quite large, the trick is to scan through it, looking for an apparent bulge on top of the stem, which may turn out to be a stonechat. If you are in luck, it is then worth scanning all the stems in the immediate vicinity for its mate.

The photo on the right is of a male coming into breeding plumage, so the orange of the breast and black head are not quite as vivid as they soon will be, and the reason for this is all to do with feather abrasion. All birds moult their feathers once or twice a year, and the moult may be responsible for a marked change in appearance of the bird: drake mallard, for instance, lose all their colourful feathers in mid-summer, going into a mottled brown plumage that closely resembles the female's appearance, but the feathers can regrow at the remarkable rate of 4.5mm per day (just as well that our fingernails aren't quite so speedy!), and within weeks they are in their full finery once more. For stonechats, the process is a bit different: there is a full body and wing moult in autumn, after which the male's plumage looks much more subdued. This is due to the new feathers having pale tips, which give the plumage a slightly wan appearance. But, and this is the cunning bit, although the keratin of which the feathers are composed, is very tough, it does slowly wear away, particularly at the tips, so the paler bits gradually rub off to reveal the birds in all their glory without a single feather having to be shed.





A second piece of good news was seeing 12 meadow pipits (left) strung out along the electricity cables that cross the marsh. This rather undistinguished little winter visitor to Hambrook has declined in recent years, and this is the largest flock I've seen since 2020.

And finally, to complete a triple bill of happy events, a pair of great crested grebes (below) were on Tonford Lake on 30th, the first I've seen this winter. It is far too premature to say that they are likely to stay and breed, but we live in hope. There has been at least one breeding attempt in recent years, but I have never seen any stripy-pyjamaed chicks on the lake.



The snipe situation remains fairly dire, with none present on 7th, three on 14th, and five on 30th. It is just possible that this represents a tiny, but genuine, increase because, as winter has progressed, the thick mat of old grass that prevented the birds from poking deep into the soil has gradually been flattened by rain and decomposition. The main area used by snipe in previous winters does definitely look more suitable for the birds, so perhaps a few will remain there for the rest of the winter.

On a rather sadder note, I recently found the freshly-dead corpse of a sparrowhawk on the old railway embankment. This was all the more poignant for the fact that it was two years since I'd seen one on the Marshes. It lay on the ground, leaving me to wonder if it had hit a trunk while unwisely pursuing a small bird into the dense scrub. The female sparrowhawk is markedly larger than the male, and lacks the male's chestnutty breast. In the photo you can just about make out one of the hunter's adaptations to chasing birds, namely its long legs – giving it that little bit of greater reach to grasp its prey.



The coot that has been enjoying life on one short stretch of the river has now been joined by a second bird, and as coots are one of the most bellicose of species, it seems likely that these peaceable birds are a pair. I expect they'll disappear soon, but it makes a bit of a change from the usual fare of mallard and moorhen, and just to add a more exotic touch, a little egret was hunting along the river's edge one morning. So long as people walked straight past, it wasn't too bothered, just freezing momentarily while it sized up the situation, but if you stopped to admire it, well, that was crossing the red line, and off it went with ponderous flaps of virgin-white wings.

Two buzzards sailed overhead on 11th, and ten days later a single buzzard (right) was being mercilessly harried by a kestrel. Buzzards are over four times the weight of the fairly diminutive falcon, but that doesn't stop them being fair game. Far less manoeuvrable, there was little the bumbling buzzard could do apart from occasionally flick its wings, as if swatting off an annoying insect, and keep flying until it was far enough away from the kestrel's home patch for the pursuit to be called off.



I had just a single sighting of a little grebe on the river this month, and a visitor who stopped to chat, evidently knowledgeable about birds, also commented on their scarcity in recent years. Like me, he could remember when several were regularly to be seen diving for food in the vicinity of the railway bridge by Canterbury East station.

My peak tufted duck count was 14 on Tonford Lake, and even when it was nearly completely frozen over, ten birds still managed to huddle in one small ice-free patch.

But, despite talk of ice and low temperatures, signs of spring are definitely in the air, with several species of birds already in full song, most vocal being the great tit, with its "squeaky bicycle pump" notes. A stock dove, last recorded in September, was back mid-month, perhaps with a view to nesting in a hole in one of the poplars on the old railway embankment. Finally, on 30th a noisy group of three great spotted woodpeckers flew into the embankment trees. Thoughts that this must be an early territorial dispute were borne out a few minutes later when the unmistakable, hollow sound of drumming broke out. February and March can still bring some nasty weather shocks (indeed I don't really feel safe until May is out of the way) but you can't halt the progress of the rising sun.

Kestrel, stonechat, meadow pipit, great crested grebe and buzzard photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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