



Newsletter

February 2024



Love Hambrook Marshes

Great crested grebes by Dave Smith

Welcome

Two years ago this newsletter highlighted the issue of Fipronil and Imidacloprid, flea treatments for cats and dogs, which were being detected in many rivers, including the Stour. This chemical is a neonicotinoid, which has been banned on farms since 2017 because of its devastating impact on pollinating bees. The belief is that the chemical gets into our rivers indirectly, from waste water when pets are treated at home, or directly, when dogs play in the water following treatment. Not a great deal seems to have happened since 2020, but now scientists are urging a change in approach, arguing that prophylactic treatment i.e. dosing pets “just in case” should be strongly discouraged. Instead, they are recommending that owners wash their pets’ bedding regularly, as that is where the flea larvae live. If environmental harm isn’t sufficient to make pet owners change their habits, perhaps the discovery that these chemicals can remain on their hands for up to 28 days after treatment will at least set them thinking, as the compounds are neurotoxins, which work by targeting the nervous system not just of insects and fish, but also of humans.

What's happening on the Marshes?

You may well have heard by now of the recent pollution incident in the Stour. This originated from the now defunct paper mill beside the river at Chartham. Contractors have started dismantling the site, but apparently early on Friday 16th February thieves broke in to steal copper from two transformers. However, in the process they removed a bung from a tank, allowing oil to leak into the Stour. The Environment Agency entered the mill premises later that day and placed booms across the river to prevent any more oil making its way downstream. No figures appear to have been released concerning the quantity of oil released, and there is little information available about the impact on wildlife, other than 35 reports being received of dead birds and fish in a 24-hour period, but the same corpses may have been reported multiple times. The fact that no photos have been published of major fish mortality suggests that this may not have been a serious incident, but any pollution is unnatural and will have an adverse effect on the river's wildlife.



View down from bridge in Chartham, close to the mill, with an oily veneer to the water, on 17th Feb

A team of Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership volunteers moved all but one of the remaining hay piles off the meadow, where we hope the snake's head fritillaries will be flowering next month. They also pushed numerous willow cuttings into soft ground where we are extending the area of the osier bed.



Two unfortunate events occurred towards the end of the month. Firstly, strong winds brought down a large poplar that was growing right next to the path on the old railway embankment, totally blocking the route with its five-foot diameter trunk (right). In view of the size of the tree and its rather inaccessible location, the most likely outcome is that it will be left in situ, and a new path created to bypass it, but for the moment it is impossible to leave the embankment by the northern exit unless you are prepared to walk down a steep, vestigial path.



The second misfortune is that the mural designed and painted onto the brick abutment by Canterbury College art students last September has been vandalised by someone with a can of silver paint. The mural was protected by being given three coats of anti-graffiti paint, which is supposed to facilitate removal of thoughtless tags, but it is usually still quite difficult or impossible to return paintwork to its original state. We aim to remove as much as we can of these two unsightly tags in the next few days, but may have to touch up with matching paint.

Wildlife Report

After something of a hiatus in bird activity, February saw rather more of interest: partial flooding of the marsh at times through the month led to as many as 41 black-headed gulls, 14 mallard, three herring gulls, a common gull and one heron congregating in the shallows, some just idling away the hours, others looking to take advantage of an easy meal of earthworms that were forced to surface from their flooded burrows.

The scene is still essentially wintry, with very occasional snipe in Tonford Field (no more than three), up to seven meadow pipits and 24 tufted duck on Tonford Lake. I'm pleased to report that the delightful pair of stonechats were still present for at least part of the month, though a fairly careful scan of the large field failed to locate them on 27th, and the two coot that had taken up residence on the river seem to have moved on.

However, the days are lengthening, and the sun, when it is allowed to put in an appearance, is strengthening, leading to more signs of spring, with the pair of great crested grebes still present on Tonford Lake, encouraging hope that they will breed, and single reed buntings (right) returning after their usual winter's absence. The male is rather handsome with his striking black head and bib, white collar and rich chestnut patterning on his back, but, as if exhausted after putting so much effort into his plumage, he has no energy left for a decent song, contenting himself with a rather tuneless three- or four-note lamentation. I sometimes refer to the species as scissor birds, due to their habit of flicking out their tail feathers sideways. Rather brighter, but equally unimaginative, the repeated two-note song of a nearby chiffchaff on 27th lifted my spirits; this may have been an early bird returning from its winter break around the Mediterranean, or one of the increasing number that stick it out here now that the winter weather in southern England is usually so much less severe than formerly. A Cetti's warbler also burst into its rollicking, explosive song after keeping quiet for two months.



A pair of greenfinches and two collared doves were both my first records since September, indicating a possible desire to nest on the Marshes, while four stock doves (left) feeding on the ground with a few of their fatter cousins, the wood pigeons, could also be a sign that a pair will breed in a tree hole on the old embankment.

But I have saved the best sighting to last: on 12th, while standing on the old embankment, I glimpsed a tiny bundle of energy disappearing into

the dense scrub – it could only be the diminutive goldcrest, which I don't see that often at Hambrook, but, when it momentarily emerged from the tangle of branches, its thick white eyebrow

immediately set it apart as the goldcrest's close relative, the firecrest (right). Both species have a stripe of yellow crown bordered by thin black lines, but only the firecrest has the white line below the black, making its head look remarkably stripey. Another marked difference is a bronze patch on the neck (clearly visible in the photo), a feature that is missing on goldcrests. This was the 110th bird species to be recorded on Hambrook Marshes since 2012 and, to cap it all, a second firecrest soon began foraging in close company with the first. This is an interesting species as, despite sharing similar habits to the goldcrest, which occurs throughout the UK, the firecrest was not proved to breed here until 1962, since when its distribution and numbers have increased considerably in southern England, including in Kent, where a few can now be found around Canterbury and in Blean Woods. It seems to be less tolerant of cold winters than the goldcrest, though there is a small influx of birds in the autumn, which then overwinter in areas outside its breeding range.



Great crested grebe, reed bunting, stock dove and firecrest photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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