

Newsletter

March 2024



Goldfinch by Dave Smith

Welcome

1st April marks ten years since the creation of Love Hambrook Marshes Charitable Incorporated Organisation. For those who aren't familiar with the site's story, here is a brief potted history. The area was acquired by Thomas Brett and Sons in 1950, and was quarried for sand and gravel in the 1960s and 1970s, following which the pits were backfilled with chalk rubble from the A2 Canterbury bypass construction. Following a long, quiescent period, the site was bought by Kent Enterprise Trust (KET) in 2004, to be managed as a nature reserve, using unemployed young people who were experiencing difficulty getting back into work. In 2013 KET decided to sell up but, amidst concern that the site might be acquired by interests hostile to the existing arrangements of free access and management for wildlife, an anonymous local donor bought the land in 2014, and passed it on to the Love Hambrook Marshes CIO, a trust formed specifically to manage the site. Ownership papers were handed over on 1st April that year. Since then, the management of the marshes has been overseen by a group of up to seven trustees, who coordinate work needing to be done between themselves, volunteers, Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership and contractors. Ten years on, the site is about to enter a new phase of management, about which we hope to be able to give you full details next month.

A report published by the Rivers Trust at the end of February reveals that, thanks to the discharge of treated and untreated sewage, industrial and agricultural runoff, our rivers are in the worst state than ever. 54% of the rivers tested failed chemical and ecological tests, and 62% of English rivers didn't meet good standards of chemical and biological pollution. Damningly, a mere 15% of rivers were found to be in good biological health. Even more worrying are the so-called 'forever' chemicals that break down at glacial speed in the environment. One of these, perfluorooctanesulfonic acid, (blessedly referred to as PFOS in the literature) is still present at three hundred times the safe level for aquatic life, despite having been banned 15 years ago. Now we hear that Thames Water was pumping raw sewage into the Thames on the day of this year's Oxford and Cambridge boat race, and that high levels of E. coli contamination in the water led to the crews abandoning the age-old custom of tossing their cox into the river at the end of the race.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership volunteers cleared more scrub on the embankment during what was otherwise a quiet month for management.

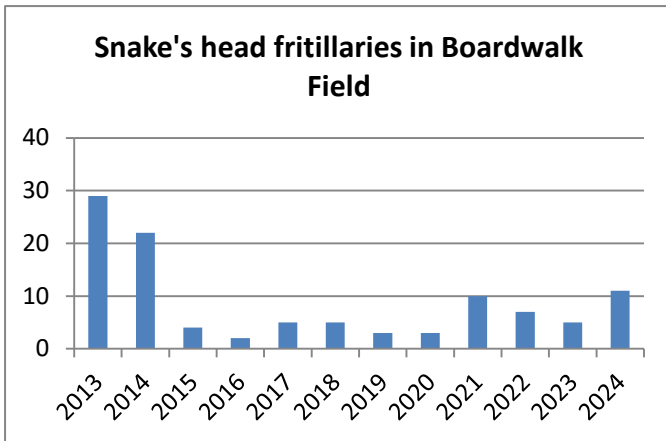
Wildlife Report

Hanging on to the coat tails of winter, 12 tufted duck were still bobbing on Tonford Lake on 28th, and on the same day a single meadow pipit was present, while a week earlier eight redwings had flown out of trees on the embankment, where a group of 14 had been present two weeks before. Single snipe were also still present on 28th but, despite the sight of small numbers of mallard dabbling in some of the fields' flooded shallows at the month's end, the overall sensation was of spring intermittently making itself felt. A blackcap (right), that may have been wintering around the Mediterranean a few weeks earlier, was singing nearby on 13th, and on Hambrook a week later, joining several chiffchaffs, while a starling on the embankment on 7th had me wondering if perhaps it was considering occupying an old woodpecker hole in the poplars, but I haven't encountered it again. Two vocal kingfishers (below)

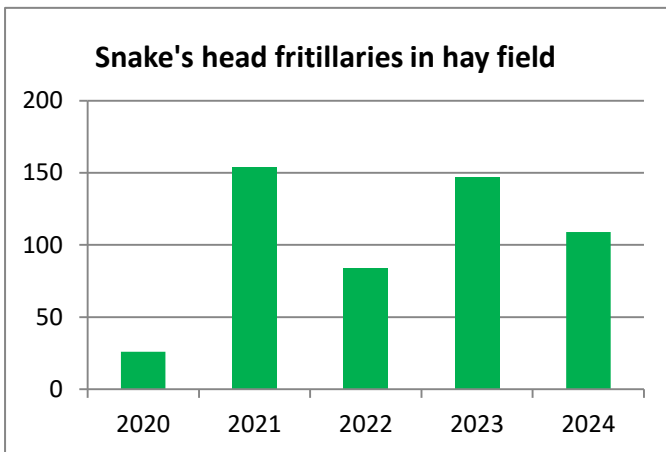


in the air, as these would either have been rival males vying for a stretch of river to call their own, or else a female indulging in hard-to-get behaviour as the frustrated male chased her up and down the watercourse.

With no sightings this month of great crested grebes on Tonford Lake or of stonechats in Tonford Field, it seems reasonable to assume that once again the grebes have abandoned any idea they may have had of nesting there, and that the stonechats have moved away to some scrubby coastal stretch of the county to set up territory.



One of the joys of early spring is the annual count of snake's head fritillaries, although this pleasure has been tempered in recent years by the generally low numbers. The first graph relates to a population that was established by the previous owners around 2010, since when the numbers have plummeted; this month's count of eleven was in fact marginally the highest for ten years, but as thousands of bulbs were planted originally, this still represents an extremely poor showing. Normally dark purple, or occasionally white, one plant in this tiny population was a rather lovely pink and white (below, right).



The second graph refers to a population of 400 bulbs that were planted in autumn 2019, but where, I think it is safe to say, there is no trend, though my suspicion is that we are not going to be charmed by a major expansion of this delightful little flower's toehold on the marshes.

A few cowslip plants may sometimes be chanced upon; these are also thought to have been planted by the previous owner, but they are evidently unhappy in this location, if only because it is too wet, and the single plant I stumbled upon a couple of days ago (below, left) was very stunted, whose flowers, borne on short stalks, weren't being proudly advertised to passing visitors.



Asian hornets are much in the news these days, having first been recorded in England in 2016. There is always a risk that alien species will upset the native ecosystem, but with this voracious insect there is the potential for it to wipe out whole colonies of commercially important honey bees. All the

hornets have to do is position themselves at a hive entrance and pounce on the honey bees as they

approach. Already this year an Asian hornet has been captured at Ash in Kent, and a disproportionate number of the killed adults and destroyed nests have been in the county (in 2023 39 of the 56 records nationally came from Kent) so there is a very real risk of them becoming established in the county. Despite its fearsome reputation, it is actually a little smaller than the European hornet, which has also thrived in Britain in recent years, and from which it can be distinguished by its largely brown abdomen with one broad orange band. Much effort is now being put into tracking down as many as possible of these invaders, and the British Bee Keepers Association recently installed a trap on Hambrook Marshes (above). It contains a pheromone chemical that is attractive to the hornets and draws them into the trap, which needs to be inspected regularly to ensure the insects don't escape.



Goldfinch, blackcap and kingfisher photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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