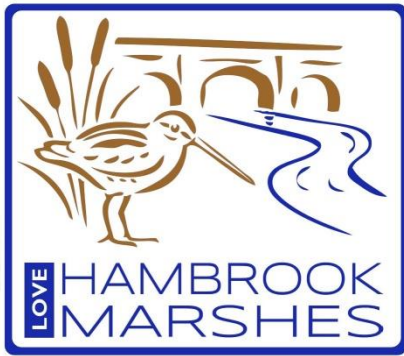




Newsletter

June 2024



Wren by Dave Smith

Welcome

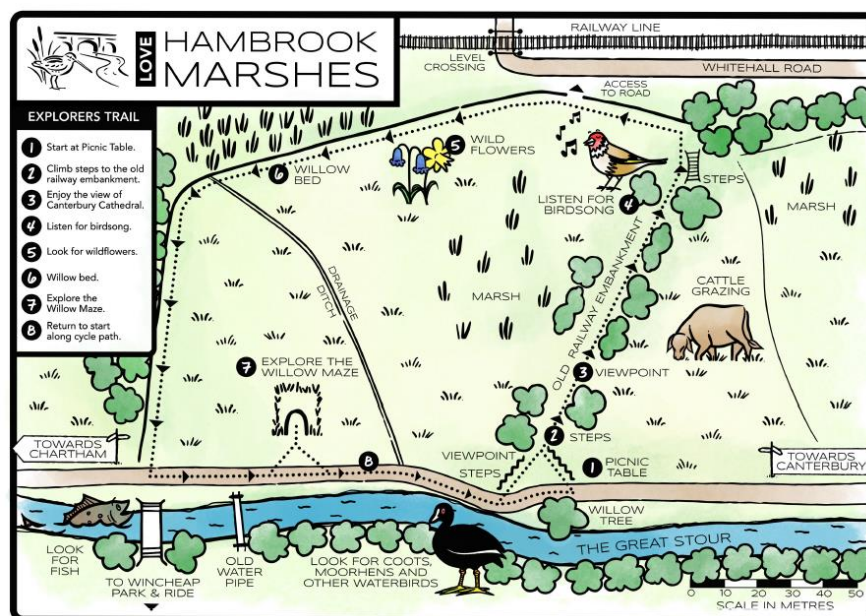
Alongside a demand for new right to roam legislation in England and Wales, the Right to Roam campaign is seeking tighter controls for dogs, in order to protect livestock and wildlife from Britain's growing dog population. A failure to maintain statistics means the government doesn't even know how many dogs there are in the UK, though it is thought that it may now exceed twelve million. Numbers have certainly risen markedly since the pandemic, with a concomitant rise in reports of a surge in the number of sheep killed by dogs since the arrival of lockdown. Reintroducing the dog licence would at least give the authorities an opportunity to tell potential dog owners about the need for training, appropriate breeds and so on. Interestingly, the Right to Roam campaign is proposing that, while greater areas of the countryside should be open to all, including dog walkers, at the same time areas with particularly sensitive wildlife, such as breeding waders, could in future be closed to all dog-walkers. It would be interesting to see if part of this philosophy is applicable to Hambrook Marshes.

What's happening on the Marshes?

We've mentioned the new Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership land manager in the previous two newsletters. Andy Craswell is the young man who has assumed responsibility for all the day-to-day work needing to be done on the Marshes, so we're introducing him to you properly now with a photo of him standing beside one of his first tasks – repairs to one of the stiles. Since then, in addition to sorting out the grazing, he, along with a band of volunteers, has done a variety of other jobs, including cutting riverside vegetation in front of seats so that visitors can once more appreciate the beauty of the slow-flowing river.



Tesco's have awarded us £1000 towards our schools project, which is just getting off the ground. As it took two years to reach us, we have already spent our money on the project, so it is fortunate that Tesco's have agreed that it can be used to pay for site maintenance instead. We also received funding from Waitrose, Co-op and Kent Community Foundation. The first school on the scheme



was St Peter's, back in May. The map here shows the sort of attractive material that has been produced for the educational pack, and which is designed to appeal to primary-aged schoolchildren.

Amy Fitzmaurice, the Human-Wildlife Co-existence Officer for Kent Wildlife Trust, visited the Marshes at the end of the month to advise us on what we can do to make the site better able to cope with the arrival of beavers. As it is a question of when this will happen, rather than if, this was a timely, sobering appraisal of the area's vulnerabilities, and it was suggested that we should be considering installing fences around each important tree along the river bank, in a bid to avoid its destruction, along with the risk of it blocking the river or damaging neighbouring gardens if the beavers were to fell it.

We were preparing to deal with countless thousands of dumped polystyrene takeaway boxes (right), but fortunately Canenco stepped in at the last moment and completed the task for us, which was a great relief. That still left us with a trailer-load of assorted rubbish, mostly campers' detritus, to deal with, but a band of volunteers soon had it all bagged up and taken to the tip.

We are now up to full complement with 27 cattle on the Marshes for the



rest of the summer. At the very end of the month we received a report from a visitor about a cow apparently eating an entire plastic bottle. This just goes to show that litter isn't simply an eyesore, but a very real hazard to livestock and wildlife. We're never going to solve the problem, but trustees and volunteers carry out litter-picks at Hambrook every week, so there is never a build-up of more than a few days' worth of discarded food and drink wrappings.



Last autumn students from Canterbury College painted a colourful mural on the brickwork of the old railway bridge abutment beside the river. Although unsullied through the winter, it inevitably attracted the spray-paint brigade eventually, but some of the same students have now returned to rectify the damage. The photo on the left illustrates three problem areas: in the top right-hand corner is an ugly tag; another tag that obscured the sitting cow has been scrubbed off, but this has smeared the silver paint all over the poor beast; and lurking in the vegetation at the foot of the mural is a rather odd, brown duck. The first photo on the next page shows the students hard at work, while in the final photo you can see that the tag has disappeared, the cow is once more brown, and the strange duck at the bottom of the picture has metamorphosed into a recognisable drake mallard! We are most grateful to the lecturers and students for taking the time to return to Hambrook to carry out these repairs.



Wildlife Report

I couldn't improve on last month's tally of ten southern marsh orchids in the Whitehall Field, but while scouring the area in the vain hope of finding any new ones, I came across a single common spotted orchid (right), a new species for Hambrook. As its name implies, it is indeed a common species in Kent, and there is a patch of this elegant, pale pinkish orchid on the other side of the river; had the park and ride extension plan gone ahead, those orchids would have been smothered under several inches of tarmac, but they have at least been reprieved.

The traditional late spring flocks of starlings and house sparrows have been rather sparse this year; about this time they always descend on Tonford Field to gather invertebrates with which to silence their broods or attempt to satisfy the insatiable, hungry squawks of juveniles following them around the field. Is it just that there are fewer birds breeding locally this year, or is there less invertebrate life than usual in the field?



A cuckoo was heard nearby on 7th, but this is the fifth successive year that I have had no records for Hambrook itself. So far this year I have again drawn a blank for swallow and house martin, the only crumb of comfort being that I saw four swifts hunting over the marsh on 24th.

Other odds and ends: a reed warbler in the osier bed on 7th has not been recorded subsequently, and a collared dove on the old railway embankment on 19th hasn't returned. A great crested grebe turned up on Tonford lake one morning, but didn't stay, and a firecrest was briefly heard on 24th.

It is proving a particularly good year for the fairly flamboyant meadow cranesbill (right). This is an attractive addition to Hambrook, as it is not native to Kent, and is believed to have been established here by the previous owners, Kent Enterprise Trust.

Wren photo courtesy of Dave Smith

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