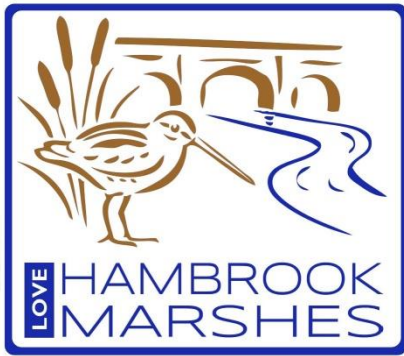




Newsletter

July 2024



Misty July dawn at Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

The above photo was taken four days ago (29th July), and goes to show that, like it or not, the seasons march on, and we are rapidly approaching the period of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Already the marshes are festooned with thousands of spiders' webs, the bramble bushes are groaning under the weight of their fruit, thanks to the generally wet start to summer, while in Canterbury the few swifts that still return here to breed are once more heading back to Africa. For me it is a poignant realisation that birds have, for the most part, completed their gruelling breeding responsibilities, so song is largely in abeyance; the welcome splashes of colour provided by flowers are diminishing day by day, and the poor showing by butterflies (the worst season in my 43 years of monitoring at Blean Woods) has only served to lower the mood. The next six weeks may have some scorching heatwaves in store for us and, while these would dispel thoughts of damp and musty autumn, they would also serve to shrivel up the remaining flowers. Oh my goodness: it's high time this misery man got out into the sunshine to be delighted by the dancing swarms of insects over the twinkling surface of the Stour.

What's happening on the Marshes?

A variety of tasks were carried out over the past month, and we were pleased to see that KCC had finally mown the riverside path verges, as required by the contract they have with us, and Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) trimmed back the vegetation alongside the narrow path on top of the old railway embankment. Normally, at this time of year the grass isn't so rank, but the often cool, wet weather has encouraged rampant growth, and now everything is tending to flop across the paths. This was the second wettest July in the past 43 years (the wettest occurring way back in 1987); in fact, it was even wet enough mid-month for there to be a little minor flooding of one section of the riverside path. But, surprisingly, in view of what seemed ideal growing conditions for the willow maze, it has been rather easier to keep under control this year and, nearly a month after its second trim of the season, it isn't yet in need of a third. KSCP staff and volunteers also repaired a section of fence, and removed Himalayan balsam, the invasive, but attractive alien that can dominate riverside vegetation. Something that will need attention early in August is the rebuilding of a stile on the old embankment that was totally demolished by someone for reasons unknown (right). The immediate problem is that some of the cattle are soon to be moved to the more eastern fields, from which they can gain access to the embankment. With the loss of the stile, they could now wander onto the viewpoint and then, if able to negotiate the steep flight of steps, could make their way down onto the riverside path and out to Toddler's Cove and beyond. A sad and totally unexpected event was the drowning of one of the cattle in a ditch, which hasn't been a problem before, but the circumstances are unknown. There are still 26 cattle on site.



A dumped trolley was duly wheeled back to Morrisons.

Hambrook Marshes was one of just nine community projects in the south east to receive a Green Flag Award from the Keep Britain Tidy group.

Wildlife Report

It has been a relatively uneventful month, devoid of any great excitement. One of the more surprising records was of a lesser black-backed gull on the river one morning, as this was the first one I'd seen since June last year. Two tufted duck were present on Tonford Lake on 1st, but have not been seen subsequently, so there is no suggestion that they may have nested there, although there is a breeding population of around 500 pairs in Kent. Another surprise was seeing a heron fly over

on 29th, as this was actually my first record for the Marshes since April. Given the presence of the river and a number of streams and ditches, it does seem odd that they don't spend more time at Hambrook, although the sheer numbers of visitors and dogs are presumably a limiting factor.

The last of the summer gatherings of starling families (at least 48 birds) was in Tonford Field on 1st. A pair of green woodpeckers have reared two young in the Whitehall Meadow/Bingley Island area, and it may be those birds that are now venturing onto Hambrook. The photo on the right is of an adult bird, but juveniles are rather duller, with a heavily spotted breast and throat.

While moving dumped hay to reinstate a fenceline that had collapsed, Andy Craswell, the KSCP warden, disturbed three slow worms (below) that would have been enjoying the warmth of the rotting vegetation. Like the common lizard, which occurs on the old embankment, slow worms give birth to live young, albeit covered in a very thin eggshell from which the juveniles immediately emerge, so the adults aren't seeking the warmth for incubation but, as so-called cold-blooded reptiles, they must appreciate the luxury of a higher ambient temperature inside what is effectively a gigantic compost heap.



*Thanks to Dave Smith for green
woodpecker photo and to Glynn Crocker
for the slow worms*

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