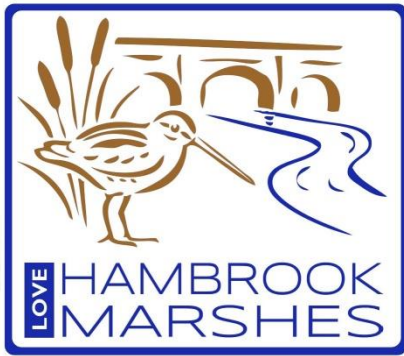




Newsletter

January 2025



Burdock burs in hard frost on 12th January

Welcome

Hambrook Marshes isn't quite the pristine environment that we would like to imagine, as the following tale reminds us. Walking along the riverside path from Canterbury and Toddler's Cove, you pass beneath the arch of the railway bridge leading into Canterbury East station, and then skirt Boardwalk Field on your right. Further on you come to the still-splendid picnic table, then go by the brick abutment, which is all that remains of the bridge that formerly took the Elham Valley Railway over the Stour. Almost immediately you cross a ditch on a bridge and a little further on you cross another small footbridge. This second bridge spans the Whitehall Stream, which rises from springs in Upper Harbledown, meanders down through orchards, skirts Harbledown, and eventually crosses Hambrook Marshes to enter the Stour. You might imagine that this innocuous-looking minor tributary was a channel of uncontaminated, sparkling water, but I'm afraid you'd be wrong. In 2023 Southern Water recorded 21 incidents when sewage from Upper Harbledown was allowed to flow into this little stream for a total of 96 hours. The authority aims to reduce these pollution incidents to fewer than ten a year by June 2027 (a remarkably precise date!). Also, by this same deadline, Southern Water hopes to alleviate the problem by slowing down the flow of water by, for example, diverting runoff from impermeable surfaces such as car parks and other hard standings.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Bramble that had encroached several yards into the Boardwalk Field was cut back to the fenceline in places, revealing that a hawthorn tree had in fact been blown onto the fence, pulling over several fenceposts in the process.

With the help of volunteers from Canterbury College, Andy cut more scrub on the old railway embankment.

Wildlife Report

January temperatures were a little below the long-term average, with air frosts on 11 nights and ground frosts on at least a further 12 evenings, when a star-spangled sky allowed what little warmth the soil had acquired during the day to be dissipated into space. Consequently, Tonford Lake was completely frozen over on 12th, the only birds present being three common gulls and six black-headed gulls standing rather disconsolately on the ice. The great crested grebes vanished, and just a solitary bird had returned by 26th, so hopes for a breeding attempt this spring have probably been laid to rest. A secretive water rail (above) was again heard squealing from dense vegetation around the lake, and up to ten tufted duck sailed up and down like miniature tugboats. Last winter was a good one for these smart little ducks, but numbers have been low so far this season.



Snipe numbers in Tonford Field remain disappointing, with a highest count of 13 in January, but that is an improvement on the same month last year, when the peak count was just five, thanks to the lack of grazing leaving the ground covered in a thick mat of vegetation. It has also been a lean period for wintering thrushes, and a single fieldfare (left) on 7th was the first one of the winter. The only other wintering bird of note was a single little grebe on the river on 22nd. Their favoured haunt remains a short stretch of river immediately downstream of the railway bridge leading to Canterbury East station.

An overwintering chiffchaff was heard twice, and on 26th I actually glimpsed a Cetti's warbler, one of the most skulking of birds that is incredibly reluctant to reveal itself to public gaze.

Eight greylag geese (right) flew over one morning. Along with Canada geese, these birds occasionally fly along the valley in small flocks, but their behaviour seems to have changed over the years, and I now see less of them than in the past.

Still in the “overflying” category, a visitor reported two red kites on 8th, and I saw up to six rooks (below) on three dates. As reported previously, rooks occasionally fed on Hambrook Marshes between 2012 and 2015, but since then they appear to have abandoned the area completely, and are not usually even seen flying over, despite there being a rookery at Thanington Without.



*Thanks to Dave Smith for the
water rail, fieldfare, greylag goose
and rook photos*

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