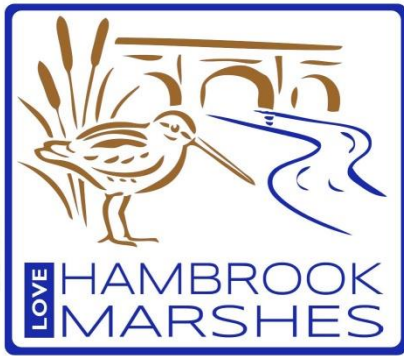




Newsletter

February 2025



Long-tailed tit courtesy of Dave Smith

Welcome

Back in 2014 it was the generosity of a local benefactor in buying the land that saved Hambrook Marshes for the people of Canterbury in perpetuity. Now, another wildlife gem on the outskirts of the city is at risk. You may have read about the threat to Old Park and Chequers Wood, which lies behind the former council offices, magistrates court, and the old army barracks, and extends out to Fordwich. Once used as an army training ground, while also being grazed by a farming tenant, this area of acid grassland, scrub and woodland, is a wonderful wilderness of semi-natural habitats that supports one of the best breeding populations of nightingales in the country, and also boasts several pairs of turtle doves, a highly threatened species on the verge of extinction in Britain. Now, however, the Ministry of Defence has put the land up for sale, using the system of sealed bids, which is a bit like a blind auction, as nobody knows how much they will have to pay in order to secure it, and the land will simply go to the highest bidder. The Friends of Old Park and Chequers Wood are putting in a bid for the land to be registered as an Asset of Community Value. This doesn't provide any long-term protection for the site, but does give interested parties a six-month breathing space in which to raise funds for the purchase. Canterbury City Council is interested, but cash-strapped, but it may be possible to involve one of the major conservation organisations. One way in which you can help right now is to send a brief paragraph to oldpark@gn.apc.org, describing the pleasure you may have derived from visiting the area in recent years; unfortunately, your responses must be received by Monday 8th March.

What's happening on the Marshes?

The main activity this month took place on the old railway embankment, where Andy cut out and burnt more scrub, with the help of volunteers.

Wildlife Report



According to the Met Office, winter begins on 1st December and ends on 28th February so, by that definition, we are now (1st March) frolicking into Spring. The more cautious, traditional cut-off date for the cruellest of seasons is 20th March – still rather early by my own cold-averse standards. However, there is the faint suspicion of change afoot on the Marshes now, as evidenced by the unmistakable sound of a

great spotted woodpecker regularly proclaiming his territory by drumming on resonant dead wood throughout the month, while more conventional birdsong is becoming increasingly obvious. Another sign of the turning seasons is that of a tiny blackthorn bush (above) beside the river walk bursting into a froth of white flowers, warming the chilled soul when a biting wind tears through the supposedly protective layers of your clothing.

Despite these tentative signs of spring, it was still largely wintry business as usual, with up to 12 snipe on Tonford Field, a little grebe (right) on the river on 11th, and up to nine tufted duck on Tonford Lake. There was even some mild flooding of the fields, which led to stretches of the riverside walk being briefly under an inch or so of water, but this didn't lead to any major congregations of birds in the fields – just 13 mallard, four moorhens, 13 black-headed gulls and three herring gulls on 11th.





Following last month's report of a pair of red kites (left) overflying the Marshes, I saw two languidly circling and drifting slowly down towards Canterbury on 18th. The status of this charismatic species has changed so remarkably in recent years that it is no longer possible to guess at their provenance: there is usually an influx of continental birds in spring, but several pairs are now nesting in Kent, so were these local birds touring the area, or birds from one of the more congested breeding areas in southern England that were checking out suitable habitat for more lebensraum?

But easily the most interesting record came from a local resident who has recently been seeing a barn owl (below) quartering the fields at dawn. I regret to say that, despite my weekly early morning visits to Hambrook, I have yet to see the bird, often likened to a ghostly apparition, so white and silent in flight.



*Thanks to Dave Smith for the long-tailed tit,
little grebe, red kite and barn owl photos*

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