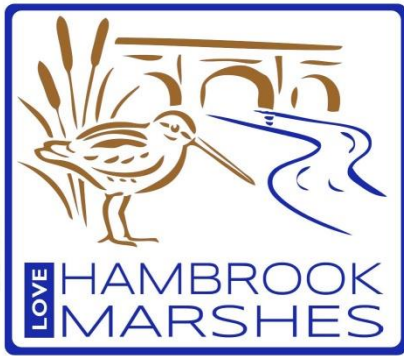




Newsletter

March 2025

Love Hambrook Marshes



Dawn on the river Stour by Simon Pettman

Welcome

It is now well-established that time spent in green surroundings, or even just with a restricted view of trees and other vegetation, is beneficial to our health and well-being. However, it seems that what we know to be good for us, and what we actually do, are not the same. Research commissioned by the National Trust showed that while 94% of those interviewed said that seeing blossom on trees and in hedgerows made them feel happy, and 80% maintained that they felt more positive after taking a break from work to go outside, only 10% of us actually do spend short periods in the open air, away from work. Presumably, the other 90% of workers remain glued to their screens, failing to gain any of the therapeutic benefit that nature can endow us with, and end the day feeling tired and unhappy, or even angry. Fortunately, in Canterbury we have no excuse for not getting out into the fresh air as, although the city itself is not that well-endowed with green space, there is a wealth of rural areas within a mile or two of the cathedral, including Blean Woods, Old Park, and our very own Hambrook Marshes.

What's happening on the Marshes?

There was more action on the Marshes this month, a highlight being the erection of new fencing (right) along the foot of the A2 embankment. Readers may recall that last summer a cow leapt the fence and ended up on the A2, leaving everyone relieved that no accidents were caused. We were also extremely fortunate that the exceptionally dry month meant that a normally very boggy stretch was negotiable, meaning that Plan B, which would have involved completing the wet section of fencing later in the summer, did not have to be brought into play. The above work was carried out by contractors, but Andy and his volunteers strengthened two stretches of dilapidated fencing with new posts. But it's not all new fencing; one obsolete section, originally designed to keep cattle off the northern part of the old railway embankment, was taken down, as we would in fact like the beasts to do a bit of grazing up there; but perhaps more importantly, the cattle will be able to seek out welcome shade on the embankment if we end up experiencing a heatwave.



Hundreds of willow cuttings (left) were pushed into the ground by volunteers, as part of a continuing programme to extend the osier bed, with the emphasis on encouraging wildlife rather than simply providing more material for the willow weavers. Unfortunately, the weather has been against us, with just 5mm of rain in the 45 days since 26th February, when the expected total would be in the region of 64mm. Willow cuttings are literally short pieces of straight stem that are forced as deeply as possible into the ground; there are no roots to keep the sticks alive, so the first thing the sections of stem have to do is generate their own roots. For this to happen, the willows need to be in contact with very damp soil – something that is in increasingly short supply now. I am therefore reluctant to place bets on what percentage of the many cuttings will survive and grow into healthy willow trees.



Next time you're up on the old embankment you may notice some small mounds (left) covered in dead turf (or live grass if we've had some rain by then!); these are what are known as hibernacula, which are places for lizards to overwinter in. Each mound has a short length of pipe incorporated, through which the animals can enter the hibernaculum, where they will find odd scraps of wood loosely covered in soil, leaving plenty of small spaces for them to burrow into, where they will be relatively safe over the winter months.

Insects haven't been left out of management this month either; last year we were approached by some enthusiastic apiarists who were looking for somewhere to site their beehives. Bees are useful beasts to have in the countryside, as they are important pollinators of a wide variety of flowers, so the trustees agreed to a single hive being installed for a one-year trial period (some of Indy and Rob's bees at one of their colourful hives last year, right). To avoid any risk of vandalism, or complaints from visitors about being stung, the hive has been tucked away in a spot where it won't be seen, but you may well notice some of the inhabitants buzzing around clover, meadow cranesbill and other flowers through the summer.



Wildlife Report



The seasonal dial continues to shift, albeit jerkily, from winter into spring, and my snipe count declined from 21 on 10th to none on 31st as birds dispersed to breeding grounds in Britain or returned across the North Sea to Scandinavia and Russia. Similarly, you might expect numbers of tufted ducks on Tonford Lake to tail off during the month, and indeed there were only three present on 31st, but a sneak look into April shows that numbers subsequently built up to 12, the highest total since December. As some birds head out of the county, others are now streaming in from the

south; a chiffchaff was singing its simple song on 10th, while the more tuneful melody of a blackcap (female among blackthorn, above), reminiscent of a robin's song, was first heard on 25th. Less often thought of as a migrant, reed buntings abandon Hambrook Marshes in autumn and winter, with the odd pair or two returning each spring to breed in reed-lined ditches. Then there is the roaming



lesser black-backed gull (left), occasionally seen this March; unlike its more familiar cousin, the herring gull, which is very definitely here all year round, the lesser black-backed is a true migrant, spending its winters off the west coast of Africa, then heading north in spring, when a handful make a cacophonous beeline for the flat roofs of the Wincheap industrial estate.

A pair of stock doves (below) occasionally breed in a tree hole on the old embankment;

smaller and slenderer than a wood pigeon, they are much closer in appearance and behaviour to the despised feral or town pigeon. Unusually, I was able to watch a group of four stock doves in the hay field one morning. Unlike the waddling barrel of a woodpigeon, the stock dove is really quite a sleek, elegant bird, and in place of the wood pigeon's white "badge" on the side of its neck, the stock dove has striking iridescent bars of purple and green.

Two great crested grebes were sailing regally on



Tonford Lake on 25th, but their irregular appearances leave me unconvinced that they are about to nest there. We're used to seeing moorhens on the river, but their larger, more belligerent cousins, the coots (left), usually haunt the nearby lakes, but one was here on 10th, just over a year after a coot popped up along the same stretch of river. Frequent kingfisher activity along the river after several quiet months may indicate that a pair will soon be nesting on the Hambrook stretch of water.

Snake's head fritillaries (right) gradually raised their delicate lantern flowers as the month progressed, and by the end of March 50 had been counted in the hay field, with the promise of more to come.



Thanks to Dave Smith for the blackcap, lesser black-backed gull, stock dove and coot photos, and to Simon Pettman for the banner photo of a mute swan.