



# Newsletter

December 2024

## Love Hambrook Marshes



*Two juvenile cormorants resting beside the river*

### Welcome

At this time of year, when the loudly proclaimed lengthening days seem as shrivelled as they have ever been, and I feel short-changed by endless, sunless weather, it gives me great glee to spot signs of an approaching spring, despite the fact that the treacherous months of January and February have yet to be negotiated. Song thrushes are now frequently to be heard singing lustily, and I have even picked out the quieter song of the blackbird, not normally heard until around mid-February. It can be depressing to see all the drake mallard going into their drab eclipse plumage in mid-summer (a sad reminder that "summer's lease hath all too short a date"), but they have been resplendent in their new breeding finery for many weeks now. Other species are slower to shed their non-breeding plumage, so black-headed gulls, which lost their chocolate hoods in late summer, are still obdurately white-headed, with just smudges of grey behind and above the eye to remind us of their former finery, so I was delighted on 15<sup>th</sup> December to see one bird that was bucking the trend by moulting prematurely into its spring garb. Good on yer!

## What's happening on the Marshes?

It has been a quiet month for management, with no major work undertaken. However, something is stirring just across the river, as city council officers have recommended that the £8.8 million Wincheap slip-road project should go ahead after the original approval lapsed in 2021, and councillors will vote on the proposal on 7<sup>th</sup> January. You may recall that the original proposal, which would have involved the loss of parking spaces at the park and ride site, planned to extend parking onto adjoining allotments and onto the meadow adjoining the river opposite Hambrook Marshes. Thanks to vigorous objections from the Save Wincheap Water Meadows campaign, which was supported by Love Hambrook Marshes, the council eventually dropped the plan. Under the new plan the riverside meadow wouldn't be tarmacked over, but money from the Saxon Fields developers would be used to seek out a new site for part of the park and ride. Full details can be viewed on the council's website, application reference no. CA 23/02167.

## Wildlife Report

Bird numbers have been generally uninspiring, with only a handful of tufted duck (right) on Tonford Lake for much of the month, though mercifully increasing to 14 on 27<sup>th</sup>. Double figures used to be the norm at this time of year, and my highest ever count was 48 one December, but milder winters on the continent are discouraging many species from making such lengthy migrations now: why expend so much energy and exposing yourself to all manner of risks by flying south west for thousands of miles, when you can find sufficiently mild conditions so much closer to home? Snipe are another case in point, with numbers only just inching their way into double figures for most of the month, and the highest count so far being just 15. A final example is the meadow pipit, now often seen in ones and twos, if at all, during winter visits, whereas double figures were not unusual a decade ago.



Better news is that a pair of great crested grebes are still present on Tonford Lake, while its diminutive cousin, the little grebe, increased to four on 27<sup>th</sup>, the most I have seen for four years, though prior to then five to seven were occasional.

A secretive water rail (left) was heard squealing beside Tonford Lake one morning, and two little egrets were present there on three occasions. The only other waterbirds of note were six mute swans on the river on 27<sup>th</sup>, patiently waiting for their

morning feed from a Tonford Lane resident whose garden backs onto the river.



Otherwise, it was very much a month of odds and ends, with an overwintering chiffchaff calling on 3<sup>rd</sup>, a flock of 20 redwings and three greenfinches present on 15<sup>th</sup>, and a house sparrow on 3<sup>rd</sup> – a bird not normally present on the marshes outside the May-July period when they are busy feeding their young. A pair of stock doves made a welcome return after an absence of two months, and a mistle thrush (left) was singing powerfully on 15<sup>th</sup>. Always one of the first birds to resume song after the summer hiatus, their country name of storm

cock is a nod to their propensity for singing from the very top of a tree during a stormy spell, when all other birds are skulking in the undergrowth.

*Thanks to Dave Smith for the tufted duck, water rail and mistle thrush photos*

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