



Newsletter

March 2026



Blue tit by Dave Smith

Welcome

I've written before about the dangers of flea and tick treatment for pets, and in particular the effect this can have on aquatic life. So it is heartening to report that the government has begun an eight-week consultation on a proposal to limit dispensing of the drug to medical practitioners. At present many cat and dog owners routinely dose their pets as a prophylactic - "just in case" - treatment, but if the proposal becomes law it would no longer be possible to buy these lethal insecticides over the counter. Many pets are regularly treated with permethrin, imidacloprid and fipronil; these then filter into the environment when owners wash their hands and contaminated clothing, or the animals plunge into a river. Recent research has shown that bird fertility is affected when the adults line their nests with contaminated fur, resulting in fewer eggs hatching and a greater preponderance of dead chicks in the nest. A single flea treatment of a large dog contains enough imidacloprid to kill 25 million bees! The scale of the problem is staggering, with Environment Agency tests showing that this one chemical was present in 98% of rivers and lakes sampled, while another study found permethrin in 98% of feathers of common garden birds – blue tit, blackbird, chaffinch, goldfinch and dunnock. These compounds have been banned for agricultural use since 2018, so it is high time that restrictions on their use with pets were enacted. Some unrelated research in Sweden demonstrated that cocaine residues remaining in water after passing through a treatment plant could influence salmon behaviour. These fish were more active compared to fish that were kept in uncontaminated water. While increased activity could conceivably be beneficial, it does at least demonstrate the potential for insidious, undreamed-of side-effects of the chemicals polluting our environment.

What's happening on the Marshes?

Visitors tend to have, at best, a rather hazy idea of what managing a reserve involves, and their image probably doesn't extend much beyond a rosy picture of happy volunteers and staff wandering through flower-strewn meadows, a cloud of butterflies arising at every step. Needless to say, this could hardly be further from the truth as, though anyone associated with Hambrook Marshes will certainly get to enjoy the delights of the place on occasion, more often their time is taken up with practical tasks that involve getting muddy, wet and sweaty. But worse is yet to come, as digging ditches and getting scratched by brambles is the enjoyable bit! In order to keep the show on the road, a great deal of time has to be spent in front of a computer, looking at spreadsheets and knitting brows as bewildering government forms are scrutinised and decoded. Some of this work falls to trustees, and includes budget management that is ably conducted by our treasurer, but actually getting the money in the first place is largely down to Andy, the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership warden, one of whose jobs is to apply for the grants we need to maintain the Marshes in a state that is healthy and safe for visitors and wildlife alike.

Wildlife Report

There was a definite clash of migrant birds, with summer-visiting lesser black-backed gull and chiffchaff in the first half of March, and departing fieldfares on 1st. Six tufted duck were still present on Tonford Lake on 1st, suggesting we had yet to shake off the ties of winter, and it was unclear whether a single great crested grebe on the same water body on 13th was a wintering bird or a prospective breeder; only time will tell.

Twelve song thrushes (right) on 31st was an unusually high count. These were probably continental birds, thinking about returning to Scandinavia, as the song thrush isn't your typical visiting species, being classified as a partial migrant. Swedish birds join redwings and fieldfares in crossing the North Sea to Britain in search of less extreme winter conditions, but some of the birds that bred in the UK will in turn move south west to the Iberian Peninsula, while others will choose to remain here and sit out whatever the British winter has to throw at them.



Two greylag geese (left) cruised overhead on 1st; less frequently seen flying over the marsh than was the case up to five years ago, they can occur in any month, but are more frequently seen in March and April. I have no idea what could have been the cause of this decline.



The snake's head fritillary season is over now, but I'll leave an account of how they fared until the next newsletter. Suffice to say that I failed to find any in the Boardwalk Field, which is the site to which they were originally introduced, about 15 years ago. The flowers on the left were photographed in 2021, when there was still a relict population in the Boardwalk Field.

*Thanks to Dave Smith for permission
to use his photo of a song thrush*

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