



Newsletter

October 2018



Love Hambrook Marshes

Welcome

If, for whatever reason, you've been doing a rain dance, it seems that your prayers have been answered in abundance: the last six days of October saw over 47mm of rain fall on this dry corner of England, with a further 14mm on 1st November. That's about three weeks' rain in seven days, so the water table is rising steadily on the Marshes, pools and ditches are filling up nicely, and the site generally is getting into a suitably plashy condition to attract in some ducks, moorhens, gulls and waders.

What's happening on the marshes?

The cattle were moved on 14th October for the final time this season, and will stay at the Canterbury end of the Marshes until taken away in the near future.

One of the ironies of life on a marshland site is that land managers spend half their time striving to create the wet conditions essential to the wildlife they wish to conserve, and the other half struggling to get rid of surplus water. For some time we have been pondering what to do about the ever-present wet ground leading up to the south-west end of the boardwalk. The problem appeared to be water spilling out of the ditch behind the boardwalk and seeping across the field before settling on the slightly lower ground around the pathway. Two weeks ago volunteers from the

Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP) cleared out a culvert, which was causing water in that ditch to back up, and it seems that this work has done something to alleviate the situation on the path, which is now just a bit muddy rather than under several inches of water after all the recent rain, although this measure is unlikely to be sufficient to hold the water at bay through the winter.



Another task carried out by KSCP was to give the willow maze a fairly hefty haircut (right). Regular management is essential if the “walls” of the maze are to remain dense and impenetrable.

KSCP carry out tasks for the Hambrook trustees occasionally through the winter, and new volunteers to assist with the work are always being sought. If you would like to help with the management of the Marshes, with a chance to enjoy fresh air, physical exercise and good company, why not come along to one of the tasks this month? They will be held on Thursday 22nd and 29th November, meeting at 10am at the entrance off Whitehall Road, close to the level crossing. Just bring old clothes, sturdy footwear, lunch and a flask. All will be most welcome.

Wildlife Report

Some of the last signs of summer were a common darter dragonfly on 11th October and five swallows on 2nd; remarkably, these were the first swallows I had seen at Hambrook this year, which is an indication of just how seriously the population of these delightful birds has been depleted. A lingering blackcap on 7th was skulking in the dense embankment scrub; a less ambitious migrant than swallows and many other species, the blackcap overwinters in countries around the Mediterranean, so perhaps doesn't feel the same urgency about departing in good time. Interestingly, some blackcaps do now overwinter in England, but ringing recoveries show that these are birds from eastern Germany, rather than ones that have bred here. The birds that have switched to wintering in southern England don't have to migrate so far, and scientists have demonstrated that their wings are slightly shorter than those of their cousins wintering as far south as northern Africa. Longer wings are beneficial to birds needing to fly thousands of miles, but extra energy is consumed in growing them, so if a species abandons long-haul flights it can save resources by developing slightly shorter wings. This looks to be a fascinating example of evolution in action which, if continued, could lead to a separate sub-species of blackcap splitting off from the main population.

From now on the seasonal indicators are going to be wintry ones with snipe numbers building up very slowly to seven, while winter visitors passing through included siskin, redpoll, skylark and redwing. Sixteen fieldfares (right)





descending onto the old railway embankment scrub on 28th to gorge on hawthorn berries were a lovely sight. These winter visitors from Scandinavia rove around the countryside, often in large flocks, stripping hedgerow berries, pillaging orchard windfalls, depleting farmland of its earthworms, and generally behaving much like locust swarms. Blackbird numbers at Hambrook have also increased as some of these familiar thrushes crossed the North Sea ahead of harsher weather. There even appears

to have been a small influx of jays (above), which will have come across the Channel or North Sea. One other winter visitor was a brambling, (right), notable for being the 99th species seen on or from the Marshes. A close relative of the chaffinch, it breeds in northern Europe, and migrates to milder latitudes in winter, though in ever-decreasing numbers to Britain.



Up to three little grebes are now present on the river, usually just off Hambrook, on the short stretch of water from the railway bridge towards Toddlers' Cove. Flocks of up to 90 starlings have been feeding on Tonford Field throughout the month. Finally, winter has brought three tufted duck to the lake just upstream from Hambrook, with numbers expected to increase in November.



Another sign of a vanished summer is the appearance of mixed flocks of small birds: on 2nd I was entranced by an active group of more than twenty blue, great and long-tailed tits, with a few chiffchaffs thrown in for good measure, busily feeding in the dense embankment scrub, flitting restlessly in all directions and making accurate counting out of the question.

Other news: a kingfisher is still putting in a reasonably regular appearance; two mute swans have frequently been on the river; a Cetti's warbler was proclaiming his presence from the railway ditch on a number of days with his characteristic, explosive song; and it was a relief to see a little egret (left) on 24th, my first record since April, the summer months invariably being a lean period for this most elegant of birds.

All bird photos courtesy of Dave Smith

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