

Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2006

Local Nature Reserve Update

Several exciting events have taken place in recent months at The Withey Beds LNR. Back in July people were treated to a special moth night as part of the national LNR Celebrations. Everyone ventured out in the dark to see what delightful moths had been enticed to the moth trap. As darkness descended we not only saw several bats and hundreds of mosquitoes but a number of pretty moths. Some of the highlights included a ruby tiger moth and a several underwings which, as their name suggests, give a flash of colour from their underwings when they are in flight. In typical fashion, just after everyone left, we heard a thud and found a beautiful Poplar Hawkmoth resting in the trap. This is one of our largest moths which can flash a red patch when it needs to warn off predators.

A very successful guided walk in May saw almost 40 people wandering around The Withey Beds and the fishing lakes of the Watford Piscators. The walk was very interesting and everyone was fortunate enough to see a fisherman's morning catch as well as a wealth of wildlife on both sites.

Over the summer, children of all ages were invited to take part in a range of wildlife themed activities. The most popular day saw countless bird boxes being built for blue tits, sparrows and robins to name a few of the lucky birds to be offered new homes.



The Friends of The Withey Beds had a stand at the Rickmansworth Festival this year. Again the weather was not very good but there was a record attendance on the Saturday and overall the event was a success. Many people showed an interest in the stand and everyone certainly went away having learnt something about The Withey Beds.

As you've been wandering around The Withey Beds you have hopefully noticed the new noticeboards. They show the important and popular wildlife which can be found at the site as well a few interesting facts. A new leaflet has also been produced and can be picked up from the Council Offices.



The new interpretation board.

At the start of September The Withey Beds received its annual cut. The brambles along the causeway were also cut back as well as the viewing point from the benches restored.

The barn owl box has now been in place for almost a year. Unfortunately it has been bad year in Hertfordshire and none of the checked boxes in the county showed signs of being used as nest sites.

Future Events

On **Wednesday 11 October** the Countryside Management Service have arranged for a volunteer day to take place at The Withey Beds. Starting at 10am the aim of the day is to give the LNR an 'Autumn Clean'. Everyone is welcome and there will be plenty of tea and biscuits on offer.

The Friends of The Withey Beds are celebrating their second birthday this year. The **AGM** will be held at the Council Offices on **Monday 6 November at 7:30pm**. Everyone is welcome.

Bird News by Anna Marett

Autumn brings the annual influx of winter migrants including redwings and fieldfares. Parties of tits and goldcrest forage the trees looking for small invertebrates and robins start their winter song.

Look out for the occasional reed bunting and listen for the soft 'hoo' of bullfinch, both species frequenting the lone hawthorn bush in the middle of the reserve.

Dragonflies can sometimes still be flying in October and November so it is worth checking the big pond where Emperors and Common Darters fly during the summer months.

Spider news - Doug Marriott, the county spider recorder, has been monitoring The Withey Beds since the beginning of 2004. Attached is an article that he has written for the newsletter.

Membership

Everyone is welcome to join the Friends of The Withey Beds, whether you want to take part in volunteer days or not. For an application form contact the Treasurer at 4 Sandy Lodge Road, Moor Park, Rickmansworth, WD3 1LJ.

THE SPIDERS OF THE WITHEY BEDS

Doug Marriott, Hertfordshire Spider Recorder.
19, Winton Drive, Croxley Green. WD3 3RF

The invertebrate fauna, and particularly the arachnids, of the Withey Beds have been a subject of interest to me ever since the "Save the Withey Beds" meeting in the adjacent preparatory school in the early 1990's. Apart from the ubiquitous spiders that seem to be common everywhere, damp areas can support species that are unique to this type of habitat. Prior to Three Rivers District Council purchasing the reserve, a survey was carried out to assess its value for invertebrates but no investigation was made of the arachnid population. The purchasing and designation of the Withey Beds as a Local Nature Reserve in 2003 gave me the incentive to commence a survey and work finally got under way in January 2004.

There are four main ways to collect invertebrates. 1. Sweeping the vegetation with a large robust net. 2. Kneeling down and searching the ground layer, known as "grubbing." 3. Sieving leaf litter on to a white sheet. 4. Setting pit-fall traps in the ground. All these methods and others were employed during visits but pit-fall trapping was carried out for the whole of the twelve months of 2004. To explain more fully, pit-fall trapping consists of sinking containers, in this case plastic vending machine cups, into the ground so that the rim is level with the ground surface. A small amount of preserving fluid is poured into each cup and covered leaving just enough room for creepy crawlies to walk underneath and fall into the trap. The plus point of this method is that you have a 24hour 7days a week collecting period. The negative point is that it does not differentiate between common and rare species and your catch is dependant on the number of traps installed. Fourteen cups were used in clusters of 3-4 placed in four locations. One group was placed on the bank of the ditch fairly near to the entrance path, while another was situated near the wartime concrete emplacement. Yet another was placed across the reserve near to the woodland and the last cluster was installed on the other side of the old concrete bridge (now replaced) by the path leading into the woodland area. Ideally more traps were needed but fatigue and shortage of time prevailed. The traps were visited and serviced every 10-14 days and the catch sieved out and taken home to be identified under a microscope.

In spite of these limitations a total of 68 spider and 5 Harvestman species have been identified at the reserve. The most pleasing discovery was of a tiny male spider approx. 2.5mm in length identified as *Baryphyma pratense* (sorry no English name!). This was trapped in the wet habitat by the ditch and is an uncommon spider that lives in wet areas near streams and rivers. This species had not been reported in Hertfordshire since the 1880's when it was found in the Hoddesdon area of East Herts.

What next? There are undoubtedly more species to find, and some sections of the reserve have not yet been examined for arachnids. I anticipate that there should be well over 100 species on this tract of land (there are around 650 species in Great Britain) and work is continuing albeit more slowly with the passing years. Young arachnologists are needed with vigour in their loins but there are none on the horizon in Hertfordshire at present!!

A full list of species identified is available from Kay FitzGerald at Three Rivers D.C. or myself at the above address.