

Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2009

Local Nature Reserve Update

The 2009 guided walk around The Withey Beds and the lakes of the Watford Piscators proved to a great success. More than 30 people turned out and were rewarded with sightings of many colourful insects and pretty flowers as well a hot and sunny day. The group was lucky enough to spot a large red damselfly, which is one of the earliest damselflies to appear, laying eggs in the water adjacent to the boardwalk at the eastern end of the Local Nature Reserve.



The following week the Friends of The Withey Beds hosted a stand at the **Rickmansworth Festival**. As usual Hazel Godfrey, the artist who created the willow hide at The Withey Beds, came along to show the skilful practice of willow weaving. The Festival had a different layout this year but still proved to be as popular as ever. The weather was a little uncertain, with a few showers here and there, but the Friends of The Withey Beds stall attracted a large number of visitors.



As many of you will be aware **Hampton Hall Meadows** – the area of meadow land on the opposite side of Moor Lane to The Withey Beds was recently put up for auction by Tarmac. It is understood that the area of agricultural land eventually sold for £130,000, which did not include mineral rights. Much of the site has been designated as a County Wildlife Site due to the importance of the grasslands which can be found here. Wildlife Sites are discrete areas of land which are considered to be of significance for their wildlife features in at least a District context and are offered a degree of protection.

Membership subscriptions are now due. If you have not renewed yet then please contact the Treasurer at 16 Sandy Lodge Road, Moor Park, Rickmansworth, WD3 1LJ (peterrobin2007@googlemail.com) with your £5.00 or Standing Order request to continue your valuable, and much appreciated, support.

Future Events

The Friends of The Withey Beds will be holding their **AGM** at the Council Offices on 19 April 2010. The meeting will start at 7:30pm. If you fancy joining the committee then why not come along to see how things work and to meet the rest of the team.

Nature Notes

by Anna Maret

Throughout one hour in May 40 Painted Lady butterflies were seen migrating across the Reserve - the country saw a huge influx of these beautiful butterflies at this time. A female pheasant with three young were present in the field and young of chiffchaff, whitethroat, wren, great tit and blue tit were all present in June including a young cuckoo.

Easy to find were Common blue damselflies by the river and walking along the far end of the field proved excellent for Banded demoiselles - views of up to a dozen males opening and shutting their wings to impress any females. Glow worms were once again found in July.

Autumn will bring in flocks of small birds - look out for tits, goldcrests and wrens quietly moving through the bushes hunting for insects though contact calls can be heard. The bill of the great tit slightly changes shape as the birds change from insect eating in the summer to seed-eating in the winter.

Look for herons and cormorants standing on the tall bare trees around the Reserve - one tree has fallen which will provide an ideal breeding place for beetles and other invertebrates.

If you would like further information on The Withey Beds, or any of the Council owned Local Nature Reserves, contact Kay Fitzgerald at kay.fitzgerald@threerivers.gov.uk or on 01923 776611.

Barn Owls

With their heart shaped faces, buff back and wings and pure white underparts barn owls are distinctive birds of our countryside.



Throughout the year barn owls live alone or in pairs. Barn owls normally mate for life with the female laying between four and seven eggs from April to May. The laying of the eggs is staggered so that the youngsters' ages vary within the brood. Barn owls are known to, occasionally, breed twice in one year. After 33 days the eggs hatch and the young can fly after nine – 12 weeks. At just 10 weeks old barn owls are fully grown and are about 34cm in length with a wing span of around 85cm. Male barn owls are hard to distinguish from the females but at 300g they are around 60g lighter than the females. Barn owls are normally nocturnal but may be seen out hunting during the day, especially if they have young to feed.

Barn owls favour open country, field edges, river banks and roadside verges as these are the most productive areas for hunting their favourite prey of mice, voles and shrews. Although barn owls have excellent eyesight they hunt mainly by sound. Its ears are situated under the feathering of the inside edge of the facial disc and are asymmetrical so that one is higher than the other and, therefore, sound coming from directly below will be detected by the right ear before the left so that the vertical difference will be accentuated. The shape of a barn owl's face funnels, collects, filters and directs all sound which permits them to detect the slightest movement of its prey with the greatest of accuracy – a barn owl is so adept at distinguishing between frequencies that it is thought it can tell whether a rustle or squeak is being made by a wood mouse or a bank vole.

One adaptation of the barn owl which makes it such a good hunter is that the wing feathers have a soft, downy surface, which eliminates the noise of them rubbing together. Furthermore, the feathers at the tip of the wings are fringed to help air flow smoothly over them. Finally, the trailing edges of the wing feathers have soft, hair-like fringes, which damp down turbulence created by the air streams that meet behind the wing.

A common mis-conception is that barn owls 'twit-twoo' or 'hoot'. However, it is tawny owls which make these calls with barn owls 'screeching' and 'hissing'.

The estimated UK population of barn owls is between four and five thousand pairs. However, barn owls have declined recently, for the same reason that many species have also seen a reduction in their numbers – habitat loss due to changing farming practices, loss of suitable nest sites due to changing building practices and the general increase in the human population and the associated increase of road networks.

The ideal time to spot a barn owl is during fine weather about half an hour before sunset in and around rough fields and field margins so, one day, we might be fortunate enough to see a barn owl or two using the nest box that has been placed at The Withey Beds.

