

# Friends of The Withey Beds

## Autumn 2011

### Local Nature Reserve Update

Back in March The Friends of The Withey Beds bought two **bird boxes**, just in time for the bird-nesting season. A kestrel box was put up at the far end of the boardwalk and a box for lesser-spotted woodpeckers at the end of the boardwalk near the first bridge – both in oak trees. A lesser-spotted woodpecker was seen at the site last year a

caused quite a bit of interest – even the BBC phoned to look in to the possibility of filming at the LNR. Lesser-spotted woodpeckers are the rarest and



The Kestrel Box

smallest of our woodpeckers. They feed and nest high up in trees, which is why the nest box has been placed very high up! Look to the treetops, and listen out for it's drumming, next spring for chance to see this elusive bird. Kestrels like to hunt for prey such as small mammals, birds, worms and beetles over grassland so The Withey Beds should provide a suitable habitat.

Back in April volunteers from the Countryside Management Service built a **dipping platform** at The Withey Beds. This is a small wooden platform from which you can dip a net in to the ditch below and scoop out a variety of invertebrates that live in the water at the Local Nature Reserve. The dipping platform is located just down the slight bank after the first green bridge across the ditch.



The **Rickmansworth Festival**, which celebrates our canals and environment, took place on 21 and 22 May. The Friends of The Withey Beds stall proved to be highly interesting to everyone who visited the Environment



Marquee thanks to a small tank of invertebrates, which had been collected using the new dipping

platform. Creepy crawlies which could be spotted included a dragonfly larva (a sign that the water at The Withey Beds is clean) and freshwater shrimps. Hazel Godfrey also made a welcome return to demonstrate the practice of willow weaving and attracted much interest in her own right.

**Membership subscriptions** are now over-due. If you have not renewed yet then please contact the Treasurer at 16 Sandy Lodge Road, Moor Park, Rickmansworth, WD3 1LJ with your £5.00 or completed Standing Order to continue your valuable, and much appreciated, support. You can also contact the Treasurer at [peterrobin2007@gmail.com](mailto:peterrobin2007@gmail.com)

**Photo Competition.** Thank you to those Members who submitted images for the recent photo competition. Images were selected based on relevance to The Withey Beds, composition and technical quality.

The winner is Charles Jervis (11) who produced the beautiful picture of Teasel shown below. This species is readily identifiable as part of the Withey Beds ecosystem.



Hugo Parry, Luke Parry, Jillian Christensen and Matthew Jervis also submitted excellent pictures. Selected images will be printed and displayed at the 2012 Rickmansworth Canal Festival.

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](mailto:kay.fitzgerald@threerivers.gov.uk) or on 01923 776611.

## LADYBIRDS

You may be surprised to learn that we have 46 species of ladybird living in the UK. Not all are red and not all have spots. The ladybird which you will probably see most often is the seven-spot ladybird; its name is thought to be related to the Virgin Mary who is often depicted wearing a red cloak with seven spots representing the seven joys and sorrows of Mary.

Many of you will have fond memories of collecting ladybirds as a child. You may also have not so fond memories of the yellow smelly “reflex blood” that some of them may have left on your hand. This is a sign that ladybirds should not be eaten! It contains toxins which, in addition to their bright red warning colours, are a deterrent to many potential predators such as birds.

The majority of ladybirds live for just one year, and no they don't get more spots as they get older. During their life they are truly a gardeners' friend as they love nothing more than to feast on aphids or scale insects. In fact a seven-spot ladybird can eat 5000 aphids in its lifetime.

After spending the winter in a dormant state ladybirds increase their activity as the weather warms around March. After mating in the spring clusters of yellow eggs are laid during late spring and early summer on leaves. It is at this point that the ladybirds which over-wintered start to die. The ladybird larvae which hatch are quite different in appearance to the adults. The larvae still have six legs but are rather more grub like: they are spiky, segmented and black. The primary role of the larvae is to eat as much as they can to enable growth as once they have pupated into adults they no longer change size. The larvae have three growth stages and can only increase in size by shedding their skins and forming new, larger, skins. After the third growth stage the larvae attach themselves to leaves and pupate in to adults after one to two weeks. The new adult ladybirds must then devour as many aphids as they can to ensure they have sufficient reserves to see them through the winter – and so the cycle begins again.



Seven-Spot Ladybird



Ladybird Larva

Most ladybirds are carnivorous and, as already mentioned, have a fondness for aphids. However, ladybirds aren't afraid to tackle some of the larger garden 'pests' such as small caterpillars as well as mealybugs, whitefly and mites. As ladybirds go about their work of eating garden pests they have the added bonus of pollinating flowers. However, not all insects are defenceless when it comes to a ladybird attack. Recent research has shown that cabbage aphids will sacrifice themselves in order to save the colony. When being assaulted one aphid will release mustard oil which not only kills the aphid but also kills, injures or repels the attacking ladybird.

You can attract ladybirds to your garden by providing suitable places for them to hibernate such as trees where they find cracks in the trunk or amongst ivy which provides warm nooks for the ladybirds to sleep through the winter. Ladybirds can be found in their thousands (to keep each other warm) hibernating at the base of large grasses such as pampas so check any clump forming grasses before cutting them down. Another good idea is not to use pesticides so there is food source – a well fed ladybird can lay 2,000 eggs in one year. Nettles are an ideal plant for ladybirds to lay eggs upon so if you can bear to have a nettle patch ladybirds, amongst other insects, will be grateful. You could consider placing a ladybird house in a sheltered, warm, spot in your garden borders which will not only benefit ladybirds but other insects such as solitary bees and lacewings. A ladybird house is basically a block of wood with holes drilled in an upward angle so you can try you hand at a spot of DIY or buy a fancy one.