

Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2012

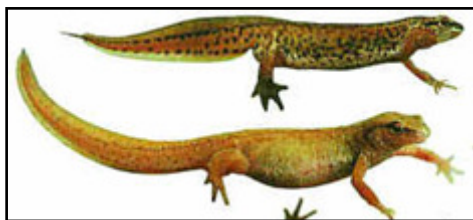
Local Nature Reserve Update

Back in March this year the **main pond**, to the left of the causeway, dried up. This is the first time this has happened since the pond was dug in 2004. The below picture was taken in mid-April and the pond is as equally dry as it was in March.



The Pond in April

Although the drying out of the pond is unfortunate, in terms of its wildlife value, it presented the ideal opportunity to remove some of the encroaching reeds and make the pond a little deeper in the hope that it would stay wetter, for longer, in future years. As such it was on 18 April that the **Countryside Management Service** and their volunteers came along prepared for such work. Unfortunately, their efforts were thwarted as they quickly found a collection of palmate newts under the parched sediment. Palmate newts can live for up to ten years in such ponds and rather than disturb them the decision was made to abandon the task. Read more about our newt species on the back page of the newsletter.



Male (top) and Female (bottom) Palmate Newts

At least two **Barn Owls** have finally been spotted in the Barn Owl box at The Withey Beds. The box was put up in 2005 and has only been used by pigeons up to now so it is great to hear that Barn Owls have finally found the box. Let's hope that they return next year and there is news of the Barn Owls breeding.

Here is a picture taken by one of the Council Tree Surgeons, Richard Lee, who bravely set up his camera after dark to capture this image of a Barn Owl in mid- September. If you look closely you will see that the Barn Owl is actually coming

out from the nesting box at The Withey Beds.



The annual **cut and lift** took place at The Withey Beds in September. This is to mimic the effects of grazing, that is cutting the vegetation and taking it off site. This reduces the fertility of the ground which then encourages more wildflowers to grow.

In September the Council carried out a **reptile survey** at the LNR. This involved placing around 30 black corrugated sheets all over the site and revisiting them several times over the course of the following weeks. This initial survey found female Slow Worms near the pill box. We hope that this survey can be used as base line information and built upon by carrying out additional surveys in the forthcoming years.

The Friends of The Withey Beds were again a key attraction in the Environment Marquee at the **Rickmansworth Festival** in May. As



usual Hazel Godfrey was there demonstrating the craft of willow weaving and there were lots of fascinating insects and creatures to identify.

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@googlemail.com

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.

NEWTS

In the UK there are six native amphibian species, three of these are newts. The other three amphibians are the common frog, the common toad and the natterjack toad.

The native newts are the great crested newt, the common newt (also known as the smooth newt) and the newt recently discovered at The Withey Beds, the palmate newt.

The common newt is relatively abundant across the UK and is also found in Ireland, unlike the palmate and great crested newt. Palmate newts are not rare, especially where common newts are less abundant. However, as you may be aware, great crested newts are rare and localised in their distribution. All species have suffered population declines in recent years, principally due to habitat loss, and are protected by law.

Newts live for around five years and an ideal habitat to spend those years is somewhere with damp areas to hibernate (such as the muddy pond bed at the LNR) and a fish free pond in which to breed between April and June. Eggs are laid individually (rather than en mass as with frogs and toads) on smooth surfaces such as leaves. The reason why it is important that newt ponds are fish free is due to the fact that fish like nothing more than to feast upon newt tadpoles and can decimate a population. Tadpoles, known as efts, begin to emerge in June and will leave the pond from August onwards when they will be on the hunt for a suitable hibernation location to keep them warm until the following February/March. Efts can be distinguished from frog and toad tadpoles by their feathery gills and the fact that newts develop their front legs before their back legs. After two or three years newts are sexually mature and will breed for the first time.

Newts, throughout the majority of the year, are nocturnal and if you wish to see a newt up close take a torch to a pond during the spring and you might just be lucky enough to see their courtship displays. While you are out also keep an eye open for leaves which are folded over – a tell-tale sign that an egg may well be hidden on the inside. By summer you are more likely to see newts wandering on land searching out tasty invertebrates, such as slugs, worms and insects, to snack upon.



Smooth/Common Newt



Palmate Newt



Great Crested Newt

The easiest way to distinguish our three newt species is to look out for a smooth skinned newt with an orange belly with dark spots on the throat (common newt); a yellow belly with no spots (palmate newt) or a large newt with warty skin, sides stippled with tiny white dots, a crest and spotted orange or yellow belly (great crested newt). Newts also vary in size with palmates being the smallest at 7 – 11cm. The common newt is slightly larger and the great crested newt is considerably larger growing up to 17cm in length. Both palmate and great crested newts develop crests, but that of the latter is large and jagged whereas that of the palmate is considerably smaller and is not jagged. The feet of a palmate newt are also said to look like the palm of a hand due to the skin between its toes.

WHERE IS THE WITHEY BEDS LOCAL NATURE RESERVE?

As you travel along Moor Lane, from Rickmansworth, the entrance to The Withey Beds is on your right - about 150m after the entrance to the Moor Park estate (where the security guards sit in the Lodge).

The LNR entrance has a green vehicle barrier and kissing gate. If you go over the River Colne on to Tolpits Lane, then you have gone too far.

