



Crack-willow
(Withy)

Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2014

Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

After an exceptionally wet start to 2014 the water levels at The Withey Beds seem to (finally) be back to normal.

The Willow hide had its usual trim and tidy up back in early August and the annual cut and lift was carried out at the end of the summer. This should be the last time we need to bring machines on to the site to do this as next year we should, hopefully, have some Dexter cows do the hard work for us. Of course the fence needs to be fixed first and we also need to get the water supply back in working order.

May saw the annual Rickmansworth Festival take place at the Aquadrome. The Friends of The Withey Beds manned their ever popular stand which this year hosted an array of living and dead specimens that can be found at The Withey Beds; everything from the shed skin of a snake to live and kicking newts. The week before the Festival the sun shone as the Friends of Withey Beds led a guided walk. Around a dozen or so people came along and were lucky to have a brief introduction to the history of the canal, a stroll along the Ebury Way followed by a tour of the picturesque lakes of the Watford Piscators before being guided around The Withey Beds and learning about its history, how it is currently managed and plans for the future.

Although June seems a long time ago now it was only then that we were fortunate enough to have a guided walk around The Withey Beds led by Steve Cohen. Steve Cohen seemed to have an endless knowledge of birds and we were fortunate to see a lesser black backed gull attack a heron; something which he has never seen before.

Bird Watch

Anna Marett continues to visit The Withey Beds on a regular basis. At the end of August Anna and our Secretary, Jillian Christensen, were lucky enough to observe a kestrel, buzzard and a hobby at the LNR all in one day.

Anna has also frequently seen kingfishers at The

Withey Beds as well as great spotted woodpeckers. Mistle thrushes, which are often heard singing their fluty songs from the tops of trees, have been observed as has the occasional sparrowhawk as it dashes on through the site.

A number of birds, which Anna believes have probably bred somewhere at The Withey Beds have been noted. These include chiffchaff, whitethroat, garden warbler and blackcaps.

For the very first time Anna has seen coal tits at The Withey Beds. They were observed in the trees by Moor Lane. They actually have a fondness for conifer trees but they will adapt to open spaces as well as gardens. They may well have been hunting out insects and spiders, which were hiding amongst the trees branches, as they have to spend a high proportion of the time feeding.

Some of the more vocal birds which have been heard at the LNR include reed bunting, treecreeper and bullfinch.

As well as many birds Anna has also seen or heard a variety of other insects at The Withey Beds. For example numerous Roesel's bush crickets were heard in July. A host of butterflies were seen fluttering in the LNR over the summer; these included ringlet, meadow brown, small tortoiseshell, small skipper, gatekeeper, small copper, green veined white, peacock and large skipper.

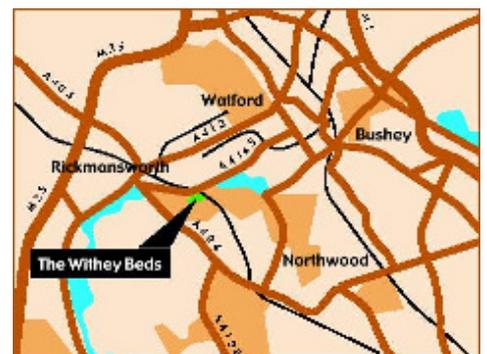
Emperor dragonflies and Brown hawkers were also observed in July.

Membership subscriptions are overdue. If you have not yet renewed for last year please contact the Membership Secretary at 14 Sandy Lodge Road, Rickmansworth, WD3 1LJ with your £5.00 or the completed Standing Order form. The Friends would be grateful if you could pay by Standing Order as it makes administration easier. You can contact the Membership Secretary at friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com

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 a small building).

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.



RED KITES, BUZZARDS AND KESTRELS

As you may be aware red kites were once driven to extinction in all areas of the England and Scotland and only held on in central Wales. The main factor in their decline was persecution as they were considered vermin. It is thought that the last red kite bred in England and Scotland in the late 19th century. Due to a hugely successful reintroduction programme the red kite is now a relatively common sight for us and has been spotted soaring over The Withey Beds on more than one occasion. Red kites are relatively easy to identify due to their distinctive forked tails and wonderful red and white colouration. They also have quite a large wingspan at almost two metres so they are rather impressive birds. Red kites are primarily scavengers so will eat dead animals such as deer but will also take small live prey ranging from items such as worms and frogs to small mammals and birds. Red kites normally pair for life and breed for the first time at around three years of age. They are also fairly loyal to a particular territory and will lay up to four, but typically two, eggs in a nest made high up in a tree. The females take on the majority of the incubation whilst the males hunt and feed the females during this time. After about eight weeks the young are ready to fledge but the parents will still care and feed them for a further two – three weeks at which point the young may fly many miles before returning to the home range as adults to breed for the first time themselves.

Buzzards belong to the same family as red kites. Buzzards are actually the most common bird of prey in the UK with more than 44,000 breeding pairs. It can be confused with a red kite but if you look a little closer you will see that buzzards are mostly brown and have a distinctive shape when in the air with broad wings held in a 'V' shape and a fanned tail. Buzzards are smaller than red kites with a wing span of around 120cm. Just like red kites buzzards eat small mammals, reptiles, birds, invertebrates and carrion. Their main food item is rabbits so in years when myxomatosis is prevalent the population can suffer. Unlike red kites, however, buzzards have strong feet which means they catch more live prey and are less reliant upon carrion. Breeding is very similar to that of red kites.

Our final bird of prey for this newsletter is the kestrel, which many of us will have seen hovering alongside us as we are stuck in traffic on the motorway. Kestrels can often be seen here as they like to hunt on field edges – something which has declined in the wider landscape. A fascinating fact about the way kestrels hunt is that they can detect ultra violet light which means they can hunt by following the urine trails of their prey. With a wingspan of around 75cm they are a similar size to sparrowhawks but have distinctive pointed wing tips. The kestrel is also the only bird of prey to hover. The diet of a kestrel mainly consists of small mammals such as mice, voles and shrews. Kestrels do not build nests but make use of abandoned nests or utilise ledges and tree holes. They lay between three and six eggs which the female incubates while the males hunt, as with red kites and buzzards. The young will fledge after around five weeks and once they disperse from their breeding area completely they may go on a journey of 150 km.



Buzzard



Kestrel



Red Kite

All of these birds of prey have been spotted at The Withey Beds over the years so next time you fancy a wander around the LNR don't forget to take your binoculars and look up to the sky every once in a while.