

Friends of The Withey Beds

Spring 2009

Local Nature Reserve Update

Hazel Godfrey who created the willow hide at The Withey Beds has been waiting, since November last year, to return to the Local Nature Reserve to undertake some work to the hide. The hide is currently underwater which makes any work impossible.

Hazel will re-work and tidy up the hide as soon as (if!) the ground dries out sufficiently.



November also saw the Friends of The Withey Beds AGM.

In February, as part of the Council's fifth Nature Week, a variety of bird boxes were built by children from the area. Over 30 boxes were made and will, hopefully, already be providing valuable homes for nesting robins, sparrows and blue tits.

Future Events

Sunday 10 May sees the return of the annual **guided walk** to The Withey Beds. Starting from the Batchworth Lock Centre at 2pm we will head along the Ebury Way to the scenic lakes of the Watford Piscators. The guided walk will cross over to the Local Nature Reserve after a stroll around the fishing lakes. Whilst at the Local Nature Reserve there will be plenty of opportunities to learn more about this special site and hopefully see some of the wildlife that the Local Nature Reserve is home to.

This year the **Rickmansworth Festival** is to be held at the Aquadrome on 16 and 17 May. Hazel Godfrey will be at the Friends of The Withey Beds stand where you will be able to see her demonstrating traditional willow weaving techniques. There will also be a variety of environmental and wildlife groups in the Environmental Marquee so why not come along over the weekend?



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 with your £5.00 or the completed Standing Order from to continue your valuable, and much appreciated, support. The Friends would be very grateful if you could pay by Standing Order as it makes the administration of the group easier.

Do you have an **email address**? If you do then the Friends are trying to set up a database of addresses for correspondence. You would only be contacted in relation to your subscription but it would make running of the group more efficient. Please send an email, with your email address, to peterrobin2007@googlemail.com if you are willing to be contacted by email.

For more information on any of these activities contact Kay FitzGerald on 01923 727105 or at kay.fitzgerald@threerivers.gov.uk

Nature News

by Anna Maret

Six snipe flew up from the field at the end of March, an excellent record. Most of the summer visitors have arrived by the end of May and birds are breeding all round the Local Nature Reserve. Stock doves are observed on the owl box and could well be nesting in the box itself. Whitethroats return from Africa, also reed warbler, willow warbler and chiffchaff. Ring necked parakeets could find a tree hole for nesting in - this species is gradually spreading north through the area. Sedge warblers were observed last summer displaying and singing their aerial song. Muntjac deer cast their antlers in May and June.

The reward for visiting in early May at 4am is a beautiful Dawn Chorus! The birds choose this time of day as insect prey is not yet active, and sound travels furthest in the early morning.

Carp were seen from the first bridge last summer, and dragonflies and damselflies fly around the river and hawk over the field.

Listen out for the kingfisher - it is generally regarded to sound like a train guard's whistle.

Moths at The Withey Beds Local Nature Reserve

There are around 2500 moth species in Britain, of which several hundred can be seen in our gardens and Local Nature Reserves such as the The Withey Beds. Compare this to the 60 or so species of butterflies that can be found in Britain and you can see that moths out-number butterflies quite considerably. However, as I am sure you have noticed, the butterflies that you see are pretty and colourful and fly around during the day to collect nectar. Moths, with a few exceptions, are the night time equivalent of butterflies. As butterflies are resting moths are waking to take advantage of the scented flowers, such as honeysuckle, evening primrose and jasmine, that open in to the evening. Many people assume moths to be dull and drab. This is far from the truth. Many moths are as colourful as butterflies and they are attractive in their own right – take, for example, the Privet Hawk moth which has been identified at The Withey Beds. The Privet Hawkmoth is Britain's largest resident moth and is shown in the photograph.



Moths aren't too fussy and will lay their eggs on a variety of plants at The Withey Beds such as nettles, docks, grasses, blackthorn, hawthorn and spindle. Moths lay hundreds of eggs at a time. You only have to look at the number of moth predators, parasites and diseases to realise why. Predators of moths and their caterpillars are numerous and include birds, bats, foxes (which eat a surprising number), mice, dragonflies, wasps, beetles, spiders, mites and fungi. As you would expect moths, and their caterpillars, employ a number of defence systems to fight off these enemies and diseases. For example, they may have poisonous hairs, taste horrible, mimic toxic species or use eye spots. Eye spots scare or confuse birds or divert attacks away from vulnerable areas to parts which are less likely to result in death.

It's not just the moths themselves that you should keep an eye out for when you are at The Withey Beds. Their caterpillars are obviously very important too – you can't have one without the other! Caterpillars have rapid growth rates and can increase in weight by 10,000 times in less than a month before pupating. They also provide a good food source for the numerous birds and mammals in and around The Withey Beds.

Moths exploit a wide range of food sources. Moths feed like butterflies, with a tube-like tongue, known as the proboscis. Tree sap, aphid honeydew and nectar are a few of the obvious food sources. The first meal of any caterpillar is usually its empty egg shell, promptly followed by one of its kin if there is insufficient foodplant available. Willow, of which there is plenty at The Withey Beds Local Nature Reserve, provides food for caterpillars of 90 species of moth. Birch and poplar are also good for moths and provide food for 75 moth species and 32 moth species, respectively.



Tussock Moth
Caterpillar

For many moths, the adult stage is the main time of dispersal for colonisation of new areas. Some species may travel great distance while others travel less than a few hundred metres during their entire lives. For a few species, the larva is the most mobile stage and if you walk around The Withey Beds you may come across tiny caterpillars of tussock moths and loopers drifting in the air.



Looper Moth Caterpillar

Once a caterpillar has become a moth its main job is to mate. The males find suitable females by following scent trails. Some males even wait by a cocoon and mate as soon as the female emerges and before the female has even had time to dry her wings.

Typically, the adult lifespan of a moth varies from a few days to two or three weeks, unless overwintering as an adult. Hibernation may occur at any stage of the life cycle and differs from species to species. Many moth species, for example, overwinter in the ground as pupae or eggs that are timed to hatch as buds begin to burst open and thus ensure an immediate food supply.

So, the next time you take a wander around The Withey Beds, keep your eye out for any nibbled holes in the leaves around the Local Nature Reserve and see if you can find the hole maker nearby!