



Crack-willow
(Withy)

Friends of The Withey Beds Spring 2010

Local Nature Reserve Update

The Friends of The Withey Beds have been **planting willow cuttings** at the Local Nature Reserve (LNR). Two areas have been planted up; one with Whissender (*Salix purpurea*) and the other with Lancashire Dicks (*Salix triandrs*). Both Whissender (the plot closest to the noticeboard) and Lancashire Dicks are very popular basket willows.

The aim of the trial is to try and establish traditional willow species on the LNR that can be cropped as withies – the historical use of the site. Hazel Godfrey, who built the willow hide at the LNR, not only provided the cuttings but will also be coppicing the willow to use in her craft.

The plots are just on the right of the entrance to The Withey Beds.

A **new bench** has been installed at The Withey Beds. The bench was purchased using funds kindly donated by Moor Park (1958) Ltd and is made from recycled plastic. The bench is towards the middle of the Local Nature Reserve, at the end of the causeway, and overlooks the main field and pill box.



Future Events

On **Monday 19 April** the Friends of The Withey Beds will be holding their **AGM** at the Council Offices. 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.

At 2pm on **Sunday 9 May** the Friends of The Withey Beds will be leading a **guided walk** to the LNR. The walk will start with a short talk about the canal at Batchworth Lock Centre followed by a stroll along the Ebury Way to the lakes of the Watford Piscators where a member of the fishing club will lead a tour before crossing over Moor Lane to The Withey Beds to learn more about this special wetland site.

The following week, on **15 and 16 May**, the Friends of The Withey Beds will be hosting a stand at the **Rickmansworth Festival**. As usual Hazel Godfrey will be displaying woven willow items as well as the art of willow weaving itself. 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 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 support. The Friends would be grateful if you could pay by Standing Order as it makes group administration easier. You can contact the Treasurer at peterrobin2007@googlemail.com

Nature News by Anna Marett

Recent sightings include a Buzzard flying over, and a Woodcock which flew up from the wood by the boardwalk. Water rails have been observed fairly easily and their strange squealing calls heard. Stock doves may have taken over the owl box for breeding - displays of fanned tails and much coo-ing took place around the box. Two Kingfishers were seen flying over the LNR calling in courtship display.

Treecreepers and Nuthatches have been vocal, as have Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers. The much less common Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is sometimes seen and heard drumming. Lesser Redpolls and Bullfinches were spotted near the living hide and a female Kestrel caught a vole and proceeded to devour it in ten minutes!

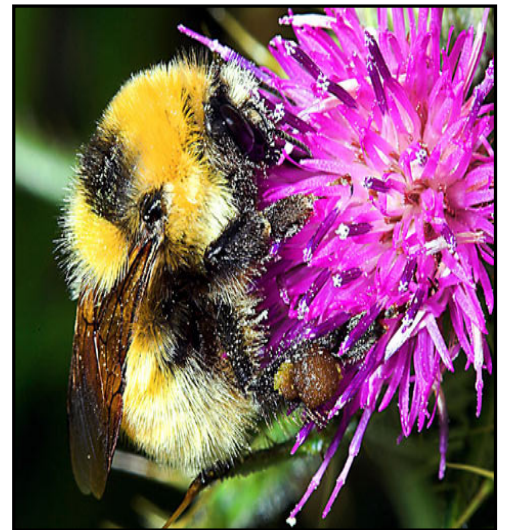
Butterflies out in April are Small Tortoiseshell and Peacocks which have been hibernating. St. Mark's Day, 25th April coincides with the emergence of the black and hairy St. Mark's fly which flies slowly with dangling legs. The three nestboxes hopefully will be occupied by Blue or Great tits which feed their young about 700 times a day with caterpillars. Whitethroats and Blackcaps will be starting to breed in April around the Reserve.

The Plight of the Bumblebee



Shrill Carder Bee

Twenty-seven native species of bumblebee used to be found in the UK. Each species varies according to size, colour, shape and tongue length in order to suit a range of flowers. However, as many of you will be aware, bumblebee numbers are in decline and of the remaining 24 species only around six (buff-tailed, white-tailed, early, common carder, red-tailed and garden) can now easily be spotted in most areas of the United Kingdom. The two species of bumblebee of greatest concern, due to their small and fragmented populations, are the Shril Carder bumblebee and the Great Yellow bumblebee.



Great Yellow Bumblebee

The decline may have started after the second world war when subsidies encouraged farmers to remove hedgerows, fell woodlands and plough up wildflower meadows in order to increase productivity. As you can imagine cereal crops are not as rich in nectar as a field of wildflowers, nor do they offer as many nesting opportunities to bumblebees which like to create colonies in hedgerows, woodlands, old meadows, banks, tussocky grass and often in tunnels made by other animals such as wood mice.

It is the arrival of spring that awakens the queen bumblebees from their winter hibernation. Their first job is to find a new nest site so a new colony can be established. The queen will build wax pots and cells in to which she will store food and lay the first batch of 16 eggs. The queen keeps the eggs warm by constantly shivering so that they are able to develop in to larvae which are fed on carbohydrates (nectar) and protein (pollen). The larvae eventually become pupae which, in turn, develop in to female adults who chew their way out of the nest. The whole process, from egg to adult, can take up to five weeks. The workers (all female) now forage for food so the queen can lay more eggs in order to increase the size of the colony. Eventually males and new queens are produced. The only job of the males is to fertilise the queens, which will leave the colony at the end of the season to hibernate and ultimately establish new groups the following spring.

Unfortunately not all bumblebee colonies survive the year which is becoming an increasing cause of concern in the countryside. Without bumblebees the wildflowers they pollinate could disappear. Without bumblebees numerous insects, mammals and birds that feed on these plants would struggle to survive. Without bumblebees crops such as raspberries, currants, beans and peas would be less productive.

Part, but by no means all of the problem, is down to small population size which means one bad season can wipeout an entire colony. Furthermore, isolated groups can become inbred.

However, it is not all bad news. We can help by providing bumblebees with a mosaic of habitats and what better mosaic than wildlife friendly gardens and nature reserves such as The Withey Beds? Even roadside verges and golf courses can play their part. Bees are also adapting to help themselves. Bees have, for example, learnt that aphids secrete honeydew which they like to drink – just like nectar. The feet of bees also leave a cheesy smear on each flower they visit so that subsequent bees flying in the area know not to waste their time visiting a flower which has already been depleted of pollen. 'Sonication' is another technique that bees use. They use a high pitched buzz to release pollen from certain flowers which the bees then use their feet to comb from their bodies and into the leg 'baskets'.

Bees are also known to cheat! If you take a look at the comfrey growing at The Withey Beds you might be fortunate enough to spot the tell-tale signs of this devious behaviour. Look out for nibbled holes near the tops of the flowers made by short-tongued bees that can not reach the nectar in the usual way. So, the next time you take a wander around The Withey Beds, keep your eye out for any gnawed holes in the leaves around the Local Nature Reserve and see if you can find the hole maker nearby.