



Crack-willow
(Withy)

Friends of The Withey Beds

Spring 2015

Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

The Withey Beds is wet again! This isn't really a great surprise as it is a wetland in a floodplain but it can make maintenance a little tricky. We are currently waiting for the ground to dry out so we can put up two starling nest boxes that the Friends of The Withey Beds have purchased and so that the willow hide can be worked upon and brought back in to a decent shape ready for the year ahead.

Once the weather improves there is also a lot of project work planned. We will be installing new fencing so grazing can take place as well as creating a number of small ponds and scrapes (shallow ponds) which will help attract wildlife. Some of the ditches will have a proportion of the overhanging vegetation removed so more light can reach down and we are also hoping to replace the interpretation boards which are now rather old and tired so it is going to be a very busy year indeed.

Future Events

The Friends of The Withey Beds **AGM** will take place at the Council offices on at 7:30pm on **Monday 13 April**. The meeting will see the election of the committee and discuss general matters relating to the site. Everyone is welcome.

On **Sunday 10 May** the Friends of The Withey Beds will be leading their annual **guided walk** as part of an array of activities that take place during Ricky Week. We will be gathering at the Batchworth Lock Centre at 2pm where the walk will commence with a brief talk on the history of the canal and how it helped form Rickmansworth before walking approximately 1.5 miles along the Ebury Way where we will be met by the Watford Piscators. Following a tour of the picturesque fishing lakes, which are not normally open to the public, we will cross over Moor Lane for the final part of the guided walk around The Withey Beds where you can hear more about the LNR and the projects that are planned for this special site. The walk will take place whatever the weather so do please join us if you can.

The **Rickmansworth Festival** takes place the following weekend; on **16 and 17 May**. The Friends will be joined by Hazel Godfrey, who built the willow

hide at The Withey Beds. Hazel will be performing willow weaving demonstrations throughout the weekend and you will also have the opportunity to meet most of the committee who will be taking it in turns to man the stand. Of course there will also be the usual stalls and activities at the Festival – everything from live music from local bands and the fun fair to the boat tug of war on the canal and a host of stands selling everything from cheese and bread to clothes and jewellery.

Spring Wildlife Walk, Saturday 25 April, 10am. Come and meet the Council's Park Ranger for a tour of the LNR looking at the great variety of wildlife that is coming to life. There will be some reptile refugia set out so we might even be fortunate and see a slow worm or two. Parking will be available at the Watford Piscators on the corner of Moor Lane, just before it becomes Tolpits Lane.

Nature News by Anna Marett

The LNR has been very waterlogged but the usual birds have been seen such as great, blue and long tailed tits. Badger latrines were very visible in the middle of the field but the flooding has destroyed all signs now. A more unusual visitor, a grey wagtail, and siskins appeared. Several wrens have taken advantage of the wooden slats under the boardwalk, dunnocks also in the bushes at the edges. Kingfishers, herons and great spotted woodpeckers are daily visitors with the occasional water rail and buzzard.

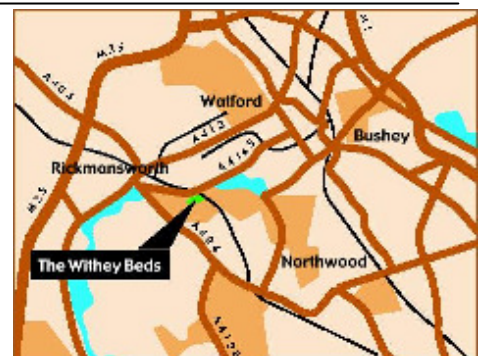
Wonderful tracks of birds and fox appeared in the snow on the boardwalk. A large flock of redwing flew over the LNR and a chiffchaff was observed in the vegetation in early February.

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.



TO STING OR NOT TO STING

As you wander around The Withey Beds Local Nature Reserve you may well be taking care to avoid the odd nettle here and there for fear of getting stung. However, you may not need to be so cautious as many of the nettles at The Withey Beds are stingless. The so-called stingless nettle, which is also known as the Fen Nettle, prefers wetland areas such as The Withey Beds and is relatively rare in the UK. It can be found in damp areas and river banks and is particularly frequent around Wicken in Cambridgeshire. There is some debate as to whether the stingless nettle (*Urtica galeopsifolia*) is a sub-species of the stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) or a species in its own right. For those of you interested in genetics the stinging nettle is tetraploid and the stingless nettle is diploid. This means that the stinging nettle had four sets of chromosomes per cell whilst the stingless nettle has two. Most plants and animals are diploid (having inherited one set of chromosomes from each parent) but tetraploids are quite common in nature, especially within plants. In general, tetraploids tend to be more vigorous than diploids.

If you want to know the main differences and similarities between the stinging and stingless nettle and how you can be sure you aren't going to get stung have a read through the table below.

STINGLESS NETTLE	COMMON STINGING NETTLE
No/very few stinging hairs on the stems and leaves	Numerous stinging hairs on the stems and leaves
Long and narrow leaves	Spear shaped leaves which are wider and shorter than those of the stingless nettle
Grows in damp, neutral soils	Grows on most moist or damp, weakly acidic or weakly basic, richly fertile soils
Is not associated with disturbed ground	Is associated with disturbed ground
Starts flowering mid-July	Starts flowering in June
Lowest flowers are on the 13 th to 22 nd node from the base of the plant. (A node is the area of a plant's stem from which the leaves grow)	Lowest flowers are on the 7 th to 14 th node from the base of the plant
Leaf surface has very few hairs	Leaf surface has many conspicuous hairs
More delicate looking	More robust looking

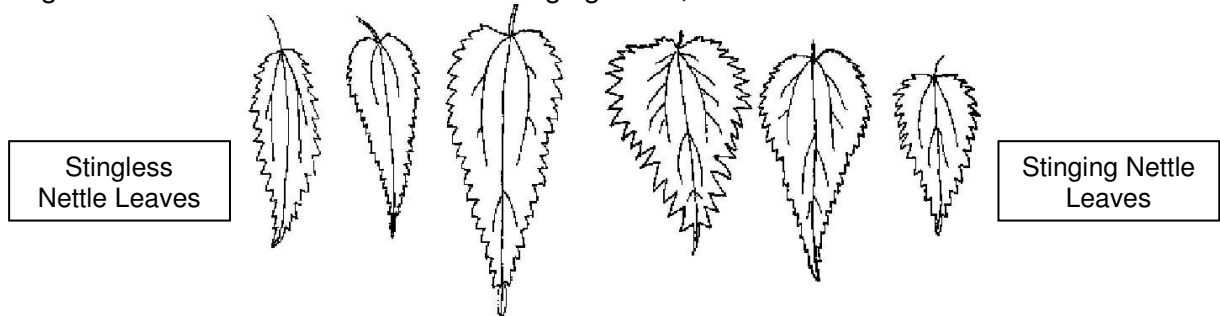


Stingless
Nettle



Stinging
Nettle

Unfortunately, for identification purposes, the stingless and stinging nettle are similar in a number of ways. For example, they both have a tendency to form dense stands and grow to around two metres in height. The flowers and catkins look similar and the leaves are serrated in both the stingless and stinging nettle. However, the most notable difference is in the leaves with those of the stingless nettle being longer and narrower than those of the stinging nettle, as shown below.



One small note of caution is that the stingless nettle can breed with the stinging nettle which results in a hybrid with both stinging and non-stinging hairs – you have been warned!