



Crack-willow  
(Withy)

# Friends of The Withey Beds

## Autumn 2015

### Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

It was a very busy spring and summer at The Withey Beds this year. Work started with Hazel Godfrey returning to work on the willow hide in April. She introduced two new varieties of willow – Northern Ireland (*Salix viminalis*) and Flanders Red (*Salix alba/fragilis*) which were alternated around the hide. This should encourage growth from lower down the stems which can be woven in at a later date.

We have been working to update the leaflet and interpretation boards. The originals were over ten years old so it really was time for a refresh.

The Countryside Management Service and their willing volunteers have worked very hard for us this year. Not only have they extended the boardwalk so we can reach the willow hide during winter and autumn but they also repaired a kissing gate and removed the old interpretation panels ready for the new ones to be installed.

Other works include digging several small dragonfly ponds around the boardwalk. Dragonflies and damselflies spend the first stage of their lifecycle in water as nymphs which voraciously prey upon aquatic invertebrates. After around five years the nymphs emerge from the ponds as the adults we see flying in spring and summer.

A new fence will be installed in preparation for the inaugural visit of the Dexter cattle at the LNR which should (hopefully) be taking place in spring 2016. This will mean that we won't have to bring in heavy machinery to carry out an annual cut and lift as the cows will do all of the hard work for us – read more about the cattle on the back page of this newsletter.

There was a Wildlife Wander in April around the LNR as well as the annual guided walk as part of Ricky Week in May. Highlights of the walks included spotting a slow worm and newt as well as following the tracks of a number of badgers which had been wandering around the LNR.

The Friends of The Withey Beds also hosted their usual stand at the Rickmansworth Festival which was as popular as ever.

The Friends of The Withey Beds are proud to

announce they now have their very own website. You can read back copies of the newsletter, see a variety of photos or read more about some of the wildlife that can be seen at the LNR. Why not take a look for yourself at:

<http://www.thewitheybeds.org.uk/>

### Nature News by Anna Marett

There have been sightings of slow worms and grass snakes this summer due to reptile refugia being placed at the LNR. A glow worm was discovered glowing by the boardwalk in July. Roe deer and muntjac were spotted on several occasions. Common and soprano pipistrelle and noctule bats were identified in August. A dead pygmy shrew was also identified. Blackcap, chiffchaff, whitethroat and garden warbler were present as was a sedge warbler which was singing for a few days at the far end. The last snipe observed was in April.

Blue tits and great tits nested in at least three nest boxes and bullfinches were observed all summer. Long tailed tits nested in the thick bramble beyond the second bridge. Great spotted and green woodpeckers were regular visitors with the occasional sighting of lesser spotted.

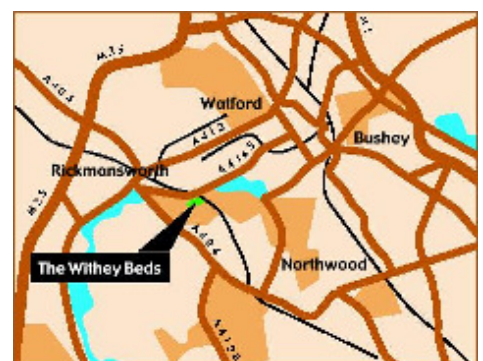
Insects included green leaf dock beetles, snipe flies, red soldier beetles, meadow grasshoppers, Roesel's bush cricket, slender groundhoppers and a longhorn beetle. Butterflies seen were ringlet, gatekeeper, meadow brown, small skipper, comma, peacock, speckled wood and cinnabar moth caterpillars on ragwort. Emperor dragonfly, brown hawk, banded demoiselle and common blue damselfly were recorded.

**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 [friendsofthewitheybeds@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofthewitheybeds@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.



## The Benefits of Conservation Grazing

Conservation grazing is a traditional and well established practice for managing and improving grassland areas for the benefit of wildlife such as wild flowers, insects, small mammals and birds. The main way that grazing animals work to the benefit of wild flowers is through the removal of biomass and nutrients as this helps less competitive species (such as the more delicate wild flowers) to get a foothold whilst the more dominant and vigorous species (such as the hardy grasses) are reduced. Cows will also nibble away at scrubby bushes which helps keep them under control. Wild flowers do well on nutrient poor ground and by having grazing cattle on the site this is effectively reducing the available nutrients.

As cattle roam across sites they create areas of bare ground. This encourages seeds that have laid dormant in the ground, just waiting for the ideal conditions, to spring in to life. Bare ground isn't just good for wild flowers but also animals that like to bask in the sun on warm ground such as insects and reptiles.

Cows will also create vegetation of varying heights. They do this by eating sections of vegetation and when they are at rest – there isn't a great chance that if you are sat on by a cow that you will stand as tall as you did once the cow has moved on! This brings its own benefits by creating structural diversity. It is this structural diversity that ground nesting wading birds, such as the snipe which have occasionally been spotted at The Withey Beds, need in order to fledge their young successfully.

You may be surprised to learn that cow dung is a bonus of having cattle on a site! Dung not only creates pockets of nutrients and pockets of bare ground but also benefits at least 250 insect species which just can't stay away from it! This, in turn, attracts animals such as bats and birds that feast upon the insects.

Cattle are better grazers on sites of conservation value as they are non-selective, unlike sheep which tend to eat the nice flowers and leave all other vegetation. Both sheep and horses also crop vegetation close to the ground resulting in a flat, uniform, sward. Cattle, however, pull up tufts of vegetation which means they are not cropping the vegetation close to the ground which results in a tussocky appearance of grazed areas.



As you can tell, although the annual cut and lift that has been carried out at The Withey Beds has tried to emulate grazing by removing nutrients from the site there are so many more advantages to actually having cows do all of the hard work and this is something that we hope to see in the very near future. A local grazier has some Dexter cattle and he is keen to take them to The Withey Beds. The area where they would graze is the field with the pill box within it. Of course some work needs to take place to the fences before this can happen and the water supply needs to be re-instated. It looks likely that we will receive at least part funding for this from a scheme called Higher Level Stewardship which is administered by Natural England. As long as everything goes to plan cattle may well be at The Withey Beds next year.

There would probably be around six Dexter cows (adults only, no calves) at The Withey Beds. They would probably arrive on site around April and leave around September/October, depending on the weather and the amount of vegetation available for them to munch on. Dexter cattle are ideal for conservation grazing as they are a small breed standing at only 111cm (44") in height, in fact they are the smallest native breed in the British Isles. This means they are light and ground damage is limited. They are a friendly breed that is quite hardy and copes well with extreme weather – something which might come in handy at The Withey Beds!