



Crack-willow
(Withy)

Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2016

Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

This summer saw the inaugural visit of five Dexter cattle to The Withey Beds. Patella, Frieda, Buttercup, Spikey and a calf did an excellent job of munching away at all of the vegetation. The longer we have cattle grazing at the site the more wild flowers that should appear. Wild flowers like nutrient poor soil so the cattle are removing nutrients as they eat the lush vegetation. There are also many other wildlife benefits to cattle grazing. For example not only will the number of insects increase but also animals further up the food chain such as birds that eat the insects and the birds of prey which eat the birds. As well as the abundance of wild flowers increasing at The Withey Beds the variety should also increase. Cattle will not only allow more seeds to germinate but, by poaching the ground, will also create subtle changes in the micro-climate that will allow different species to flourish.

The new interpretation board has now been installed near the notice board at the entrance and gives visitors a nice overview of The Withey Beds. For example the interpretation board says a little about what wildlife can be found and some of the management that is undertaken.

Earlier in the year the annual guided walk, via the Watford Piscators site, to the LNR took place. The weather could have been better but it could also have been a lot worse! Around 15 people joined the Friends and were fortunate to see a variety of colourful butterflies, wild flowers and birds to name just some of the wildlife that was out and about.

The following week the Friends of The Withey Beds were at the Rickmansworth Festival. Again the weather could have been better but there were plenty of people who stopped at the stall to learn a little more about this valuable wetland site.

You may have noticed some changes to the river of late. The Wild Trout Trust, in conjunction with the Environment Agency, ran a 'habitat masterclass' at the end of July. The volunteers who attended worked hard to improve the value of the river to fish and other wildlife by, for example, creating gravelly areas in the river which are ideal for spawning or

forming areas with increased cover in order to help safeguard fish against predators.

Don't forget to have a look at the Friends of The Withey Beds website where you can check out the latest wildlife sightings, sign up to pay your annual subscription by Standing Order (very helpful to the Friends if you do!) or read back copies of the newsletter: <http://www.thewitheybeds.org.uk/>

Nature News by Anna Maret

By the beginning of September all of the newly made ponds were dry apart from one which was covered with pond skaters. Earlier the ponds had attracted a pair of mallard which had five ducklings and a pair of gadwall which frequented the far scrape. This also attracted pied and grey wagtails while the kingfishers remained along the river.

Warblers seen were chiffchaff, willow warbler, blackcap, whitethroat and garden warbler. Kestrel, buzzard and red kite were observed and a young tawny owl heard.

Nineteen ring-necked parakeets noisily visited recently and green and great spotted woodpeckers are constantly seen.

A marsh tit, a new species for the LNR was in a mixed feeding flock recently, will it stay? Another newly reported species, a marbled white butterfly was reported during the summer.

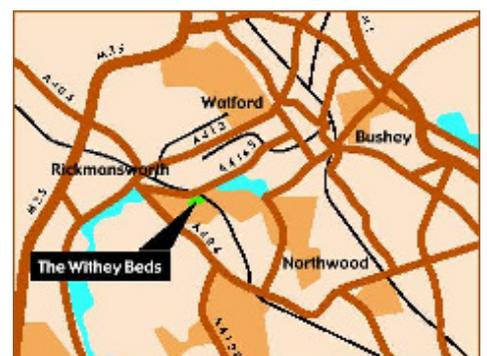
Roesel's bush cricket was found along with a groundhopper and two species of beetle, see the website. Grass snakes and slow worms were found on the LNR. Fox, roe deer and muntjac appeared. Yellow dung flies are accompanying the cattle!

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

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.



Badgers

The eagle-eyed amongst you may have noticed three rather small gates that have been placed in the new fence line around the grazing field at The Withey Beds. The inquisitive amongst you may have wondered what purpose these gates serve. Well, they are to allow the free passage of badgers which, although don't have a sett on The Withey Beds, have been known to roam around the Local Nature Reserve for many years. If you look closely at the blackthorn bush at the top of the main field you should be able to pick out a 'desire line' which runs, more-or-less, from the top kissing gate and then towards and in to the blackthorn bush. This track has been made by badgers. The track then seems to come out the other side and head towards the river which is exactly why we have placed a badger gate in the fence line adjacent to the river – so badgers can get to the river side, as they were obviously doing before the new fence was installed.

Badgers are fascinating creatures that belong to the same family as pine martins, weasels otters and polecats – the *Mustelidae*. The adults weigh around 18kg which makes them one of our biggest land mammals. Their name is said to derive from the French 'bêcheur' which means digger and this really is a very apt name as they use their powerful claws to dig out a complex system of burrows to form a sett. Each sett can have many entrances and can be in use for more than a century as generation after generation utilise the same sett. Each sett will be home to an extended family of up to 14 badgers which is made up of the males (boars), females (sows) and their young (cubs). The sett is carefully divided and managed. For example, there will be separate chambers for sleeping and for the cubs. Badgers are known for being clean animals and one of the signs of an active sett is a pile of old bedding in the vicinity as this is removed on a regular basis in order to prevent fleas and lice. Badgers also make latrines on the edge of their territories and they will not bring food in to their setts.

As you probably know badgers are nocturnal and will hunt out a variety of creepy crawlies as well as feasting on fruits, seeds, berries and anything that they can easily scavenge. In fact a badger can eat several hundred worms in a single evening. You will certainly know if you have a badger feeding in your garden as they can make quite a mess digging around in your lawn for tasty morsels. Despite being nocturnal badgers have poor eyesight so rely on their strong sense of smell and excellent hearing to find food.



A Badger Gate



A Badger, *Meles meles*



A Badger Track to the Blackthorn Bush

Badgers do not actually hibernate during the cold months but they are certainly less active as food is less abundant. However, around December the females do become pregnant having mated at any time after the sow's last cubs were born – they use delayed implantation to ensure that the cubs are born between January and March. After a couple of months underground the cubs are ready to venture in to the outside world and by the time they are three - four months old they are fully weaned and will be hunting for themselves. By the time autumn arrives the cubs are almost fully grown (69-71cm) and are preparing to build up their fat reserves so they can make it through the winter.

Tuberculosis (TB) has long been associated with both badgers and cattle and there has been much debate as to whether badger culling is the way to reduce bovine TB. What is known is that bovine TB costs farmers a considerable amount of money and that culling trials are on-going. Fortunately the farmer who brought the Dexter cattle to The Withey Beds is not unduly concerned about badgers at the LNR so they will be able to co-exist happily.