



Crack-willow
(Withey)

Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2018

Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

The small family of dexter cattle returned to The Withey Beds at the end of April. This was a little earlier than in previous years but ideal in terms of giving the cattle extra time to get on top of all the growing vegetation. The cattle are currently due to stay until the end of September but may well stay a little longer if there is still plenty of grass for them to eat.

Back in May, which seems a long time ago now, the Friends of The Withey Beds led their annual guided walk around the Watford Piscators site and The Withey Beds. We were very lucky with the weather and there was a good turnout. Highlights of the walk included seeing two juvenile grass snakes and two juvenile slow worms basking under the black corrugated mats which the Friends have placed at strategic locations around the Local Nature Reserve.

The week after the guided walk the Friends of The Withey Beds made a welcome return to the Rickmansworth Festival. The weather was even nicer than during the guided walk and, despite a royal wedding and the FA cup final taking place on the same weekend, there were still lots of people at the Aquadrome. Many people visited the Friends of The Withey Beds stall at the festival to find out a little more about The Withey Beds and see Hazel Godfrey, the willow weaver, in action.

The current five year management plan for The Withey Beds Local Nature Reserve is due to come to an end in March 2019. As such Three Rivers District Council is working with the Countryside Management Service to draw up a new five year Greenspace Action Plan (GAP) which will guide the management of the site and include projects such as carrying out any necessary repairs to the pill box to ensure that it is still suitable for bats and maintaining the ponds, scrapes, ditches and willow hide. Keep an eye on the Three Rivers District Council website (www.threerivers.gov.uk) for your chance to have an input in to the management plan during the consultation period.

If you still receive the newsletter in the post we would be grateful if you would consider receiving the newsletter by email instead. Not only would this save the team walking many miles hand delivering the newsletters but it would help reduce the use of paper and its impact on the environment. If you are happy to receive the newsletter by email send your email address to friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com

Nature News by Anna Maret

It has been a mixed summer of overflowing ponds and streams, of dry and bare earth followed by tall vegetation, thistles and grasses. Cattle and sheep remain on the Reserve until winter.

Blue and great tits have bred in several nest boxes and a pair of nuthatches took up residence in one box, lining the entrance with mud until they just squeezed through! Two birds were very vocal (2 September). Whitethroat, blackcap and garden warbler were present over the summer and a lesser whitethroat was singing (23 April) but did not stay.

Unusual visitors were three little egrets, a woodcock (26 March) and several pairs of Egyptian geese. An immature mute swan stayed for several weeks on the stream and field.

The ponds teemed with microscopic aquatic life and a fish was found (5 May) in one small pond. A female mallard appeared with six ducklings.

Dragonflies identified were migrant hawkler (2 September), blue-tailed damselfly, emperor, common darter and banded demoiselle. Butterflies recorded were brimstone, holly blue, speckled wood, meadow brown, peacock, small tortoiseshell and red admiral. A gold spot moth was found by one pond (12 August).

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.



Roe Deer and Muntjac Deer

Some of you may have noticed deer tracks at The Withey Beds. The tracks are much more noticeable in areas of bare ground, such as at the top of the site around the scrapes. There are six species of deer in the UK and only two of these, red deer and roe deer, are truly native. Fallow, sika, Chinese water and muntjac deer have all been introduced over the years. Fallow deer were probably introduced by the Normans and sika, Chinese water and muntjac deer were brought over in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Muntjac deer have been visiting The Withey Beds for many years with roe deer being a relatively recent addition. Muntjac are comparatively small being similar in height to a medium-sized dog. They originally found their way in to the countryside from a captive population in Woburn Park, Bedfordshire, at the start of the 20th century and can now be found across much of the country in a range of habitats from wetlands, such as The Withey Beds, through to woodlands. Muntjac may be the smallest deer in the UK but it is thought that they will soon become the most abundant with the population growing from 2000 in 1963 to more than 40,000 today and this number is increasing by 8.2% every year.

Female muntjac tend to be slightly smaller than the males but both sexes can reach around 52cm in height. Males have short antlers and a pair of long canine teeth. Muntjac favour woodland with a diverse understorey as well as areas of scrub and they can be partial to the odd urban garden as well. Unlike other deer species, they breed all year round. Does can breed from eight months of age – gestation lasts for seven months and usually results in the birth of one young. It then only takes a few days for the does to be ready to mate again. Muntjac are solitary animals so you will normally only see a single muntjac, or maybe a doe with its young or a buck. Buck muntjac form territories (which are marked using facial glands) so it is likely that it is the same male visiting The Withey Beds each time whereas there could be several does as their territories will overlap with others. Muntjac are mainly active at dusk and dawn and are most likely to visit The Withey Beds under the cover of darkness – if you hear a dog like bark then it is probable that a muntjac is hiding somewhere nearby.



Muntjac deer



Left: muntjac track. Right: roe deer track



Roe deer

Roe deer can be found in a wide range of habitats, from grasslands to woodlands and, after being hunted to extinction in England, Wales and southern Scotland in the 18th century they are currently the most numerous deer species in the UK (after several reintroductions by the Victorians). Roe deer can be identified by their pale rump, white chin and large black nose. Antlers will grow up to 30cm and normally have three points (tines). Adults can grow up to 75cm with the males being a little larger than the females. Roe deer prefer woodland but have begun to venture out from this habitat into more open areas as the population expands. Rather than eating anything that they come across they can be fairly selective and will opt for specific plants which can bring them in to conflict with land managers (and gardeners!) due to the economic damage they can cause.

Roe deer, like most deer (but not muntjac) have a breeding season. Roe deer rut between mid-July and mid-August but the embryos do not implant until January so that the two or three young are born in the following May or June. Prior to this time bucks will defend exclusive territories around one or more does which are scent marked using glands on the forehead, legs and between the hooves of the hind legs. Roe deer are solitary most of the year but will form small groups during the winter and tend to be most active at dusk and dawn. The roe deer population, of approximately 500,000, is increasing by 2.3% each year.

Whilst it is tempting to look around at head height and to the sky whilst you are walking around at The Withey Beds it is a good idea to also look at the ground for signs of life as well as taking the time to listen to the various wildlife you can hear but not necessarily see – you never know you might be surprised to see evidence of many unexpected creatures or even hear a mysterious bark like noise in the distance.