



Crack-willow  
(Withy)

# Friends of The Withey Beds

## Spring 2019

### Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

The dexter cattle left The Withey Beds at the end of the last season after they had caused a bit of chaos on Tolpits Lane. It seems that one Thursday afternoon someone had decided to undertake a spot of illegal fishing on the adjoining river and they thought it would be a good idea to cut the boundary fence in order to do this. However, when the cows decided to follow they obviously thought better of it, abandoned their expensive fishing rod and left the cattle to go on their own adventure! The cows made it on to Tolpitts Lane where they stopped the traffic for a quite a while before the grazier was called to herd the cattle safely back to The Withey Beds.

If you would like to meet the Friends of The Withey Beds committee then why not come along to the AGM which will be held at 7:30pm on 15 April, at the Council offices in Rickmansworth. Everyone is welcome and it would lovely to see some new faces.

The annual guided walk will take place at 2pm on 12 May. Starting at the Batchworth Lock Centre the walk will follow the Ebury Way until we get to the Watford Piscators for a tour of the site and then move on to The Withey Beds to learn more about how the LNR is managed and why it is so special.

The Rickmansworth Festival, on 18 and 19 May, will see the Friends of The Withey Beds and Hazel Godfrey return to promote the site. The Friends will be exhibiting a range of specimens that can be found at the site and elsewhere and Hazel will be demonstrating the art of willow weaving. Do come along to find out a little more and enjoy the many activities on offer.

Swifts join us for just three months a year each to nest on our buildings. However, many modern or renovated buildings exclude swifts. A local group is concerned about the need for additional swift nesting sites in the Three Rivers area as numbers have declined nationally by 50% in the past 20 years. If you spot any groups of screaming swifts or any nests please send an email, with the location details, to [3riversswifts@gmail.com](mailto:3riversswifts@gmail.com)

If you still receive the newsletter in the post we would be really 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 please send your email address to [friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com)

### Nature News by Anna Maret

The winter months had highs and lows regarding the water levels in the streams and ponds. This attracted teal and mallard in January and again in March. The willow hide was pruned when it was dry enough to reach! Redwings and fieldfares visited in numbers and were still present on 1 March - over 30 fieldfares being seen on one occasion.

Stock doves were displaying in late January. Carrion crows were mobbing two buzzards, one a very pale buzzard. Red kite frequently fly over the LNR. One little egret was feeding on the scrape.

Nuthatches started calling in late December and are commonly heard each month. Song thrushes were singing in November. Bullfinches occasionally are seen and heard, especially near the flowering blackthorn near the boardwalk.

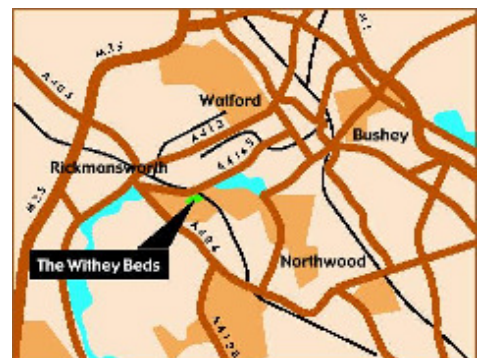
A pair of long tailed tits with nesting material were flying in and out of the bramble on 1 March; was this happening earlier because of the exceptionally hot February? Fox and muntjac were seen; one fox was fast asleep at the far end behind the fence. One male pheasant was seen with three females in the field.

**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](mailto: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.

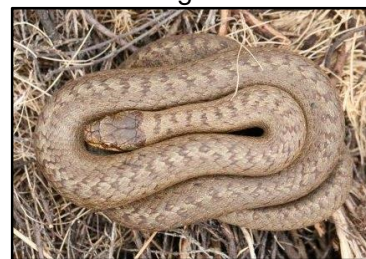
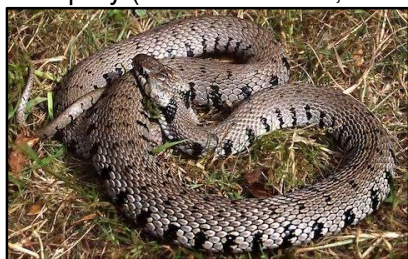


## Snakes and Slow Worms

There are four native snake species in the UK. These are adders, grass snakes, smooth snakes and barred grass snakes. Slow worms are often mistakenly thought of as snakes but they are actually legless lizards. The barred grass snake is a relatively recent edition to the species list having only been formally recognised as a species in its own right, rather than as a sub-species of the grass snake, in 2017. It is greyer and lacks the yellow collar of grass snakes and, as the name suggests, the dark bands of barred grass snakes are more pronounced than in grass snakes. Barred grass snakes can reach 1m in length and they like to eat amphibians such as frogs, toads and newts.

Grass snakes can live up to 25 years and grow up to 150cm, which makes them our largest snake. They are good swimmers and are often found near or in water where they hunt amphibians and fish. Grass snakes are olive green and have a distinctive yellow neck collar and black bars on their sides. Grass snakes, our only egg-laying snake, find piles of rotting vegetation in June or July to lay their eggs which hatch in summer. They have many predators, such as herons and badgers, but flip over, stick their tongues out and play dead when under threat.

Smooth snakes, which live up to 20 years, are not only relatively rare but also quite shy so your chances of seeing one aren't high. They are confined to sandy heaths in Dorset, Hampshire and Surrey with reintroduced populations in West Sussex and Devon. They grow up to 75cm and are superficially similar to adders but can be distinguished by their round pupils, more slender bodies, less well-formed body pattern, polished scales, a heart-shaped crown and a dark eye-stripe. Although not true constrictors they subdue their prey (small mammals, lizards and smaller snakes) through constriction before swallowing them whole.



Top Row, L-R: Barred  
Grass Snake, Grass  
Snake, Smooth Snake



Bottom Row, L-R:  
Adder, Slow Worm

Adders, the most northerly member of the viper family, are the only venomous snake species in the UK. However, there have only been 10 recorded fatalities in the last century. Adders are commonly observed in woodlands, heathlands and moorlands where they hunt small mammals and ground nesting birds. In addition to their distinctive zig-zag markings adders have red eyes with vertical pupils. Adders do not feed until they have mated so will live off fat reserves they built up before going into hibernation. Once males have performed a 'dance' to deter competitors they will mate, with any young being born in late summer. Assuming the young can fend off their main bird predators they will live for 5-15 years and grow to 80cm.

Slow worms are lizards as, unlike snakes, they can shed their tails (which wriggle to distract predators), they have a flat forked tongue and they can blink. They are commonly found on heathlands, tussocky grasslands and woodland edges where they hunt invertebrates. Slow worms are brown, with the males being paler than the females – the males can have blue spots and the females will have a dark stripe along their backs. During courtship males bite the female's head or neck as they intertwine for up to 10 hours. Eggs are incubated internally with around eight young being born in the summer. At around 50cm they are smaller than the UK snake species which may be why they are often found hiding under stones and wood.

One feature that snakes and slow worms have in common is that they are all cold-blooded so need to bask in the sun to warm up. This is exactly why the Friends of The Withey Beds have placed several black corrugated sheets around the LNR. These sheets warm up faster than the surroundings so are ideal places for snakes and slow worms to warm up in relative safety before they are ready for the day. Next time you are at the LNR, between April and September when the snakes and slow worms aren't hibernating, lift up one of the sheets and you might be lucky enough to see a slow worm and grass snake making the most of a localised hot spot. However, remember not to lift the sheets too often as we don't want to disturb the animals too much.