



# Friends of The Withey Beds



## Spring 2021

### Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

I am hoping that this newsletter finds you all well. Have you enjoyed the Withey Beds over the lockdown?

With any luck, there will not be an occurrence this Spring of the vandalism of last year. The reptile mats have been replaced – we now have 6 placed at various places along the track. Those on the pond side attract field mice, water shrews, grass snakes and slow worms, depending on the time of year. I always have great anticipation on what might be hiding there. Please remember to pick up the mats slowly and put them down carefully.

The sheep that were in the field had to be removed in Jan as they were up to their tummies in water. This was caused by sluice gates being opened further up the Colne to prevent flooding. The consequent rush of water also flooded the Aquadrome. I understand cows will be put into the field next.

The brambles have been trimmed back, to allow passage of the livestock trailer. CMS will return to maintain the reserve when the water has receded.

Unfortunately, it has been too wet to put up a replacement kestrel box, which will have to wait until later in the year.

Please let us know of anything which needs doing in the Reserve, or if you have any ideas for the area.

I expect you will have heard that the Ricky Festival has been cancelled again. This means that the May walk via the Watford Piscator's Lakes to the Withey Beds will not now take place.

Most of our members now receive the newsletter by email. If you receive a paper copy but would like to go digital, please inform the membership secretary.

[friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com)

**Membership subscriptions** - If you have not renewed for last year please contact the Membership Secretary at 14 Sandy Lodge Road, Rickmansworth, WD3 1LJ with your £5.00 or the completed SO form.

[friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com)

### Nature News (Anna Marett)

Autumn and winter produced some good sightings, ice, snow and plenty of water! A pair of Egyptian geese, gadwall, teal and mandarin (29, 30 Dec) and up to 40 mallard have been observed.

Red kite, buzzards (3 on 23 Feb) male and female kestrel and 2 sparrowhawks (5 Jan) were noted. Up to 7 Little egrets were regularly recorded feeding in the field and then headed west late afternoon, possibly to roost at Stocker's lake.

Good numbers of winter thrushes, fieldfare and redwing have been heard and seen around the reserve and mistle thrush often heard on the northern edge.

Treecreeper and nuthatch were occasionally heard, a siskin was present (11 Jan) and a chaffinch unusually, seen 9 Dec.

Chiffchaff was singing 23-26 Feb, singles noted in September and January. Cetti's warbler has been heard and seen from 5 December up to late February, will it find a mate and breed?

Common shrew, wood mouse, field vole, fox, muntjac, slow worm (29 December) all recorded.

### WHERE IS THE WITHEY BEDS LNR?

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.





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### Giant Willow Aphids



Figure 1: Close up of a great aphid (Lorn Natural History Group)

There are about 600 species of aphid in the UK and Giant Willow aphids, *Tuberolachnus salignus*, are regarded as being the largest aphid, up to 5.8 mm.

Aphids are small, pear shaped bugs which suck sap. They sometimes can have their wings held roofwise at rest. Winter is usually passed in the egg stage but some species can remain active in mild winters.

Few insects are active in winter but Giant Willow aphids are always active during the winter months. Unusually no male has ever been discovered and little is known of where the females go in summer.

The females produce live young, clones of themselves, several in a day on a willow branch of 1 - 3 cm diameter which is not covered in lichen or moss. Ants 'farm' the aphids, consuming the honeydew which they produce from their rear end. In return for this sweetness the ants run along the branches seeing off any possible predators. Mostly, the aphids will flick the drop of honeydew off with their rear legs unless an ant takes it. The ants stroke the back of the aphids with their antennae.

The aphids are very distinctive looking being larger than other species which can be pink, green, black or brown as they are grey with dark spots. Some adult females grow wings but most do not. This species was first described by Johann Friedrich Gmelin in 1790.

As there are willow species at the Withey Beds it is worth looking closely at the branches! Look for dark patches in the winter.



Figure 2: Onsite in the Withey Beds (A Marett)



Figure 3: Giant is always a relative thing (Wild Life Macro)