



Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2021



Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

I am hoping that this newsletter finds you all well. We hope you have enjoyed the Withey Beds over the lockdown and will continue to do so as things improve.

We have fortunately not encountered a repeat of the vandalism of last year. The reptile mats are back and still in place. 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.

Water levels remained high throughout the summer but by mid Aug the sheep were back. The weather and challenges of lockdown has meant that nature has taken over with the area needing a bit of attention.

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

Membership subscriptions - If you have not renewed for last year please contact the Membership Secretary by [email](#) or by post at 14 Sandy Lodge Road, Rickmansworth, WD3 1LJ with your £5.00 subscription or the completed SO (Standing Order) form. SO and membership applications forms are available via the [FoWB webiste](#).

Nature News (Anna Marett)

Three chiffchaff were present by mid-April. In April a singing willow warbler was recorded from the far end but not heard from again. Blackcaps sang throughout the spring and summer. Two reed warblers indicated the possibility of breeding, with alarm calls heard in July. A Cetti's warbler was seen and heard in April and August. And we are asking ourselves if they bred?

A pair of mute swans nested on the big pond with the cob (male) seen several times along the river clambering over fallen branches while the pen (female) was incubating. Three young coot and three young moorhen were recorded. Two male kestrel, red kite, sparrowhawk were all noted.

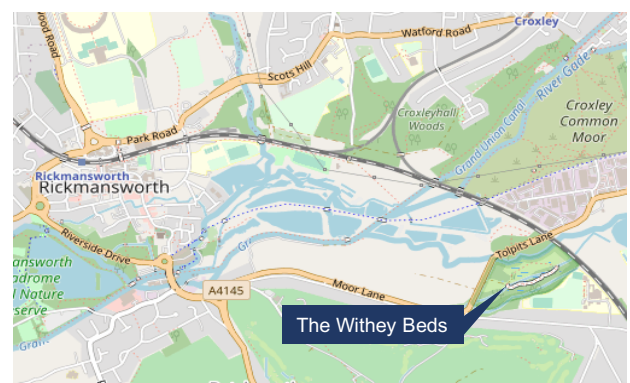
To add to this we were graced by the presence of a mistle thrush, little egret, pheasant, greenfinch, singing garden warbler, three singing whitethroat, kingfisher, a great spotted woodpecker, and a green woodpecker and a stock dove. Other species also present included - red admiral, comma butterfly, gatekeeper, grass snake, slow worm, muntjac, grey squirrel, pygmy shrew.

One gypsy moth caterpillar (*Lymantria dispar*) was found on the first bridge in July. This European moth is expanding its range and can be a serious pest of trees and shrubs. The hairs of the caterpillars are an irritant on human skin. The record was sent to the Hertfordshire moth 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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Swifts



Swifts are fascinating birds. They are aeronautical experts and fly for great lengths of time over very long distances during their lifetime. Recent studies have recorded flight speeds of 69.3mph! There are many species of swift worldwide but we are most likely to see the common swift *Apus apus*. They usually arrive in the UK in early May having flown from as far away as South Africa, travelling 500 miles a day. They remain here until August and then make their epic journey back to Africa. En route they do not land at all and sleep, feed and mate on the wing.

In the UK they return to known nesting sites. Their nests are made of saliva and insect remains or other material that is found floating in the air. 2-3 eggs are laid, each weighing 3.5grams, and these are incubated for 19-25 days. Once hatched, if the weather turns cold and prevents feeding the

chicks can go into torpor until better weather returns. Fledging depends on supply of food. Adult swifts feed on thousands of airborne insects a day. Chicks are fed on a regurgitated bolus of food. Each bolus weighs around 1 gram and contains about 1000 insects. Chicks strengthen their wings by performing press ups and once they leave the nest they do not return.

Swifts have evolved over many millions of years but like many animals (and on this point they are often compared to bats) they face challenges which mean numbers are in decline. The obvious factors is destruction of roosting potential and challenges finding food. We need to ensure that our countryside is protected including our waterways which harbour aquatic insect larvae of flying insects. There have been several issues regarding our local rivers and pollution.

Swifts are nest-faithful using areas under roof tiles, gables and eaves in house and other buildings. Roof repairs and replacement can destroy these sites. New builds may be energy efficient but at a cost to roost potential. There is room to mitigate in any new build by installing swift nest boxes either externally or internally into cavity walls. Don't stop at swift boxes – sparrow and bat boxes are available too.

Some councils are embracing these issues. Cambridge County Council installed a swift tower in a local nature reserve. There is capacity for 100 pairs of swifts to take up residence and swifts started to nest there after 3 years.

I have witnessed at close hand a swift entering its nesting site under a barge board of an office in Rickmansworth. Interestingly there was also a bat roost 2 feet further along. It was a very special moment. Swifts can be observed screaming in groups and last year (2020) I observed 24 swifts flying over Croxley Green although it took a few attempts to obtain an accurate count. This year (2021) I only saw 6. Swifts have also been recorded at the Withey Beds witnessed by local experts Anna Maret and Paul Lewis.

Seen a swift? Local records can be sent to 3riversswifts@gmail.com. And for further information on swifts and links to the Swift Mapper please see [RSPB Swifts](https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-animals/swifts/) and www.swift-conservation.org.