



Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2024



Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

We hope that this newsletter finds you all well.

AGM change of date: Apologies for late notice but our AGM will now be held on Tues, 19 Nov at 7pm, Rickmansworth Public Golf course clubhouse, Moor Lane.

As communicated in our spring newsletter the boardwalk is closed. TRDC have assessed the damage and repair works have started. Unfortunately, during the initial work further repairs were noted. As we head into the autumn/winter, undertaking these will become difficult because of rising water levels. It is therefore likely that the boardwalk will remain closed until spring. Updates will be made on the website: <http://www.thewitheybeds.org.uk>. In the meantime, access is via the field.

As many of you will be aware this year's Rickmansworth Canal Festival was cancelled due to a risk of buried [asbestos](#) on the festival site being disturbed by the construction of marquees and stages. The festival is a key public touch point for the FoWB's and its cancellation impacts our ability to generate interest and new members. As we do not anticipate the asbestos issue being resolved quickly the committee is looking for other opportunities to engage with the public. In the absence of the festival the committee is also reviewing options to support our annual Withey Beds nature walk.

The reptile mats remain in place, and there have been reports of both grass snakes and mice, or possibly shrews, being seen. Visitors lifting them always have great anticipation on what might be hiding beneath. Please remember, if you are going to move them, to pick them up slowly and put them down carefully so as not to surprise any wildlife or yourself! Please let us know of anything which needs doing in the Reserve, or if you have ideas for the area.

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.

Most members now receive the newsletter by email. If you receive a paper copy and can go digital, please email friendsofwitheybeds@gmail.com.

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

Nature Notes – by Anna Maret

Water levels fluctuated but remained mostly high. This attracted wildfowl and waders. A Green Sandpiper (15 Apr) was observed from the field gate and Lapwing (8 Apr) some display behaviour and 3 Snipe (20 Sep). Little Egret and Water Rail were also seen. Kingfishers were very vocal in early May. Wildfowl: Gadwall, Teal, Mallard with 6 young (5 May), Mandarin (8 Apr), Mute Swan, Egyptian geese with 4 young (4 Apr), Greylag geese, Canada geese and pheasant with 2 young (26 May).

A pair of Coot bred near the first bridge and could be seen fetching vegetation and taking it back to the nest. Warblers seen: Garden (6 Jun), Sedge warbler (31 Mar), Reed, Blackcap with young (14 Jul), Willow (7, 20 Apr), Chiffchaff, Cetti's and Whitethroat (26 May). Meadow pipits were seen flying over (29 Sep), and a Grey wagtail (20 Sep). Three Swallows were also reported flying over the reserve (29 Sep).

Other wildlife reported: Blue tailed Damselfly, Banded Demoiselle, immature male Migrant Hawker (9 Aug), Willow Emerald, Emperor, Common Darter and Brown Hawker. Butterflies: Green veined White, Meadow Brown, Orange Tip, Pale Tussock moth caterpillar. Granulated Ground beetle, Whirligig beetles, Two-spot Ladybird, Fox, Bank vole, Common shrew, Water shrew (24 Mar), Grass snake, Slow worm were all observed.





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The Manor of the Mor and Evolution of the Withey Beds (WB): A Journey Through History and Nature

The Manor of the Mor, adjacent to where the WB's are today is steeped in history, dating back to the Anglo-Saxon era. "Mor" or "More," means flat, marshy land, and this fertile ground made it an attractive settlement near the River Colne. In the late 8th century, King Offa of Mercia granted the land to the Abbey of St. Albans and over the centuries became a significant estate, passing through the hands of Cardinal Wolsey and Henry VIII.

At its height in the early 1500s, the manor boasted moats, towers, and a grand gatehouse. In 1525, a treaty between Henry VIII and France was signed

here, and Catherine of Aragon resided in the manor during Henry's attempts to annul their marriage. Sadly, the manor fell into disrepair by the late 1500s and was demolished by 1598. Today, only traces of its moat remain, but the history lingers in the landscape, now occupied by Merchant Taylors' Prep School. In 1919 "a useful osier bed" came up for sale. It was described as a small pasture enclosure and 2 coppices next to Tolpits Lane and lying between it and the river. It does mention the Parish of Watford, presumably further upstream, and suggest that more than one area was historically used for growing withies along the River Colne.

This area is now known as the WB's, a haven for wildlife. The Withey Beds cover 7.6-hectares and offer a fascinating glimpse into traditional land use and modern conservation. Historically, this wetland was used to cultivate "withies," or willow trees, whose long, flexible rods were essential for basket-making, thatching, and even watercress transport via the nearby Grand Union Canal.

Purchased by TRDC in 2001, the WB's is now a protected, thriving habitat for wildlife. This wetland environment features wet grasslands, ponds, and willow plantations, which are home to a diverse range of species. Conservation efforts, including the creation of new ponds, backwater channels, and grazing by cattle and sheep, have helped maintain the natural balance of the area.

For nature lovers, the WB's is a treasure trove of biodiversity. The reserve supports a rich variety of flora and fauna, from ancient crack willows and flowering plants to the bat colonies that roost in the area's WWII pillbox. Bat enthusiasts will be pleased to know that common and soprano pipistrelles, as well as serotine and Daubenton's bats, have been detected here, and ongoing efforts are being made to further enhance their habitats.

Pond surveys have uncovered an abundance of water creatures, including Gammarus shrimp, caddisfly larvae, and demoiselle nymphs. Birdlife is also well-represented, with nesting boxes installed for various species, and occasional sightings of water voles, though their population fluctuates with the water levels in the reserve.

A Link to the Past: Willow cultivation and conservation in the Withey Beds connects the reserve to its historical roots. Today, varieties such as Lancashire dicks and Flanders Red are grown, with local experts ensuring traditional cultivation methods are preserved. These willows provide habitat for pollinators like bees and insects, and even rare species such as the Giant Willow Aphid have been spotted. Early flowering willows are vital for supporting early emerging insects, providing an essential service to the ecosystem.

With plans for future riverfly monitoring and other wildlife surveys, the WB's continues to evolve as a hub for local wildlife and a cherished spot for nature enthusiasts.

Summarised from a Withey Beds talk delivered by J Archer - [link to the full talk](#)

