



# Friends of The Withey Beds

## Spring 2026



### Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

We hope this newsletter finds you well, enjoying the improving weather after a wet winter and looking forward to a summer without hosepipe bans.

Unfortunately, the boardwalk remains closed. There has been progress, with funding now actively discussed and potential sources identified. While we do not yet have a precise figure, a full replacement is expected to exceed £150k, with a partial option estimated at £80k. We thank the councillors who have visited the site and supported funding efforts. Updates will continue to be posted on the website: <http://www.thewitheybeds.org.uk>.

In the meantime, access is via the field. Due to heavy rainfall and surface water, much of The Withey Beds has been inaccessible over winter, making maintenance difficult.

**NOTE:** As we move into spring, the Beds will host nesting birds and, depending on water levels, Dexter cattle and sheep. Please keep dogs on leads.

Reptile mats remain in place, though some need replacing, which we aim to do in spring. Even now, visitors continue to spot grass snakes, mice, and voles/shrews. If lifting a mat, please do so slowly and replace it carefully to avoid disturbing wildlife. Most members now receive the newsletter by email. If you receive a paper copy and can switch to digital, please contact us via email @ [friendsofthewitheybeds@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofthewitheybeds@gmail.com).

**Membership:** If you have not renewed, please contact the Membership Secretary by email or post at 14 Sandy Lodge Road, WD3 1LJ with your £5 subscription or completed Standing Order form (available on the FoWB website).

### Nature Notes – by Anna Marett

There were some days when the field was accessible, but water has increased in front of the gate, and cattle and sheep were taken off the reserve.

Great White Egrets appeared (31 January, and some dates during February) what a wonderful surprise to see these large elegant birds in the Withey Beds. Little Egrets, 3, also noted. Grey Herons were regularly seen.

The water has attracted Mandarin, Gadwall, Teal, Wigeon, Mallard and Canada geese. Egyptian geese, (14 on 1 Feb) were noisy visitors.

Redwing and Fieldfare were present over the winter months. Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers were seen and Treecreeper, Nuthatch, Long tailed Tit were observed.

Water Rail were calling in December and January. Song and Mistle thrush were singing (Feb) as was Cetti's Warbler. Kingfishers were frequently heard from the large pond. A Cormorant perched on the lone tree by the boardwalk for some time. Bank vole, Wood mouse, Fox, Slow worm (Feb) were found.

### 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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### Plant Galls – Nature’s Curious Growths

Have you ever spotted a knobby lump on an oak leaf, a marble-like ball on a twig, or a woody bump on an acorn and wondered what it was? Chances are you’ve found a “plant gall”. There are around 2,000 types of galls in the British Isles. They can appear on trees, wildflowers, grasses, fungi, lichens and even algae. Some resemble tiny apples, spiky sea urchins, smooth marbles or fluffy pom-poms, in greens, reds, yellows and browns – each with its own story.

What exactly is a gall? Simply put, it’s a plant growth triggered by another organism. When an insect, mite, fungus or similar settles on or inside a plant, it releases chemicals or causes irritation that alters growth. The plant’s cells enlarge and multiply, forming a structure that provides food and shelter for the gall-maker. These include bacteria, fungi, mites, tiny worms and – most famously – insects. It’s one of nature’s more remarkable partnerships: the plant builds the home, but the lodger directs the design.

**The Mighty Oak and Its Many Galls** - Staying with the oak, there are over 50 types of gall associated with native Pedunculate and Sessile Oaks, their hybrids, and the non-native Turkey Oak. Most are caused by tiny insects called gall wasps, part of the Hymenoptera group (which also includes bees and ants). Though rarely noticed, their handiwork is easy to spot.

One striking example is the Knopper Gall Wasp (*Andricus quercuscalicis*), which affects acorns of the Pedunculate Oak. Instead of forming smoothly, the acorn becomes a knobby, ridged growth. It starts green, then turns brown and woody, often slightly sticky before falling in late summer. Inside, a larva develops safely within plant tissue.

**A Complicated Life Cycle** - The Knopper Gall Wasp has a complex life cycle. In spring, an all-female generation emerges from fallen galls and reproduces without males (parthenogenesis). These females lay eggs on Turkey Oak catkins, forming small cone-shaped galls that produce both sexes. After mating, females return to Pedunculate Oak acorns, restarting the cycle. This alternating use of two oak species is a remarkable survival strategy.

The Knopper Gall is a relatively recent arrival, first recorded in the UK in the 1960s, and has since spread widely. Although it can affect acorn development, it rarely harms mature trees.



Normal acorn & Knopper Gall  
(J. Archer)



Knopper gall in situ  
(N. Shepherd)



Spangle Gall  
*Neuroterus quercusbaccarum*  
(N. Shepherd)



Artichoke or Hop gall  
*Andricus foecundatrix*  
(N. Shepherd)

**Next Time You’re Out...** When you’re walking through the reserve, take a closer look at oak leaves, twigs and fallen acorns. Those odd little growths aren’t diseases or deformities — they’re tiny living worlds. Plant galls are reminders that even the smallest creatures can reshape the mighty oak — and that nature is full of hidden stories, if we stop to look closely enough.