Friends of The Withey Beds

Autumn 2026

Local Nature Reserve (LNR) Update

We hope that this newsletter finds you all well.

The boardwalk remains closed and unfortunately currently there is no additional information regarding funding for its repair. During this time the FoWB's (Friends of the Withey Beds) and the local CMS (Countryside Management Service) group have continued to undertake maintenance of the Beds including fence repairs and maintenance.

Updates on progress will be made on the website: http://www.thewitheybeds.org.uk. **In the meantime, access remains via the field. NOTE: as we have the Dexter cattle and sheep grazing in the field, please keep dogs on leads.**

The reptile mats remain in place and visitors continue to find grass snakes, mice and voles/shrews. 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 Please let us know of anything which needs doing in the Reserve, or if you have ideas for the area.

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 Neil Shepherd

A very different year! The prolonged dry spells with patchy rain in between meant that little water was flowing through the reserve at all. The large shallow scrape at the top end of the field dried out completely. The overflow from Merchant Taylor's lakes, coming underneath the railway feeding both the field scrape and the ditch under the bridges, was reduced to a bare trickle. Slowworms hiding under the reptile mats had been seen earlier in the spring, but when the weather warmed up, it was far too hot underneath for anything to survive there. This was the first year I had not seen any grass snakes.

The dragonflies also were far less abundant. Common Blue, Azure and the scarcer Blue-tailed damselflies were seen, but there were only a few sightings each of Hairy Dragonfly, Broad-bodied Chasers and Black-tailed Skimmers. Ruddy Darters, a relative newcomer to the reserve were in abundance and as we go into Autumn, there are still a few Willow Emerald damselflies, Common Darters and Migrant Hawker dragonflies to be seen.

Of note was the observation in July of two male Southern Migrant Hawker dragonflies on two separate occasions. The hot southerly airstreams undoubtedly the reason. They have been seen in Hertfordshire on just a few occasions and rarely in the UK.

This hot weather also led to many Painted Lady butterflies being seen in early summer on the Bramble bushes. A summer visitor, they outnumbered the Red Admirals, Small Copper and Brown Argus butterflies also recorded.

Most probably due to the general lack of insects, bird life seemed very subdued. Water birds, apart from Coot and Moorhen, were not recorded by me. Nuthatches, Goldcrest, and Great Spotted Woodpeckers were seen occasionally. A Treecreeper was observed nest building in a crevice just below one of the kestrel/owl nest boxes. To add to the jeopardy, a Sparrow Hawk was seen over the carr along with the ubiquitous Buzzards and Red Kites.

Foxes, Muntjac and a Roe Deer Buck had been seen as usual, along with a partial male Muntjac skull.



Photos copyright Neil Shepherd taken at The Withey Beds 2026: Sparrowhawk (Accipiter nisus) Southern Migrant Hawker (Aeshna affinis) Eurasian Treecreeper (Certhia familiaris) Painted Lady (Vanessa cardui)

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The Night Shift – by Anna Marett

Six owl species breed in the UK, each with distinctive characteristics. A 6th, the Snowy Owl, has bred here only rarely, with records from the Shetland Isles. From the familiar Tawny Owl to the elusive Long-eared Owl, these birds have inspired folklore and mythology for centuries.

Long-eared Owl – Favours woodland and dense hedgerows, often near water. Well camouflaged in foliage, it may roost in small groups. Its ear tufts are distinctive, while the young have a call resembling a squeaky gate!
Short-eared Owl – Often active by day and at dusk, hunting over open grassland and coastal marshes.
Tawny Owl – Common and much loved, its familiar "twit-twoo" is a duet between male and female: the male's "hoo-hoo" answered by the female's "kewick". Its diet includes small mammals, frogs and birds, occasionally bats. It is on the UK Amber List, partly because the loss of old trees has reduced suitable nesting sites.
Barn Owl – Recognisable by its pale plumage and heart-shaped facial disc, it has an eerie shriek rather than the familiar hooting call. It hunts by day as well as at dawn and dusk and is legally protected in the UK.
Little Owl – At just 23–27 cm tall, this is our smallest owl. Introduced from continental Europe in the 19th century, it favours farmland, orchards and open countryside. Active by day and around dawn and dusk, it perches patiently before pouncing on insects and small mammals. Little Owl has been heard once at the Beds. Apparently, it was a lone female in the owl box at Woodoaks farm, and a male joined her some months ago.

Owls in culture and nature

Owls feature prominently in folklore, mythology, art, literature and film. Wildlife photographer Eric Hosking captured one of the world's best-known bird photographs: a Barn Owl in flight carrying a vole.

Nature writer D Couzens notes that woodland owls often hunt at night by perching, watching and listening for prey, sometimes following regular routes through the trees. Their specialised wing feathers muffle the sound of flight, allowing them to approach prey almost silently. Look out for signs of owls at the Withey Beds: Tawny Owl feathers can be found on the reserve, and a Little Owl was heard calling reminding us that these remarkable birds are part of our local wildlife.



Long-eared Short-eared Tawny Barn Little