The Natural Level

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A newsletter for the District Drainage Commissioners and Members of the Internal Drainage Boards of the Middle Level

Introduction

This is the first of what I hope will become a series of newsletters highlighting environmental and wildlife matters in the Middle Level of The Fens. Although I work for the Middle Level Commissioners, (MLC), my post is also funded by and provides environmental advice to 35 IDBs and DDCs in the whole area of the Middle Level, lying between the North Level and the South Level as well as Boards outside that area administered by MLC such as Bluntisham and Swavesey. Where I mention the Middle Level below, it refers to this larger geographical area. Since coming to the post three years ago, I have been regularly struck, (not literally I'm glad to say), by the wealth of wildlife hidden in the ditches and watercourses of my patch.

The other striking factor was how little the general public knew of these hidden gems. Below I refer to the up-coming requirement for Biodiversity Action Plans to be produced for each IDB. While this will be a major task, it is one that will give the opportunity for Boards to show to the world at large the contribution they make not just in keeping everyone's feet dry, but in making a place for wildlife at the same time.

I hope that many members will be encouraged to attend the inaugural meeting of the Mink Control Scheme on 12th January. It is an opportunity to make a significant contribution not only to the restoration of the water vole population, but to improve the fortunes of much of the wildlife that inhabits our waterside habitats.

Cliff Carson, Environmental Officer, Middle Level Commissioners

Mink Control Scheme meeting

One of the key elements of the Middle Level Water Vole Support Project is about to get off the starting blocks. The project, which is funded by a Biffaward Landfill Tax grant with additional support from the Environment Agency, Cambs and Peterborough Biodiversity Partnership and Natural England, is focusing on controlling American mink numbers and creating riverside habitat suitable for water voles where it has been lost.

A meeting of all people with an interest in reducing the numbers of mink throughout the Middle Level is being held on **Monday evening, 12th January 2009 at 7:30pm**. The venue is the **Parkfield Pavilion**, Chapel Lane, Wimblington. PE15 0QX. It will be an opportunity for those with previous experience of mink control to exchange tips and for newcomers to get an insight into effective humane control methods of this problem species.

Live capture traps and rafts will be available for collection on the night by those interested in joining the scheme. Internal Drainage Board officers and members are particularly well placed to operate traps where mink are active as they often frequent pumping stations and bridges. The meeting is open to everyone with an interest in reducing mink numbers as the aim is to set up a coordinated catchment-wide scheme that targets control during the most effective months prior to the breeding season. Ample parking is available at the Parkfield Pavilion.

Water vole predator. An American mink seen on a Ransonmoor DDC drain side.

Otter Project Update

The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project has been in operation for a year during which time 22 otter holts have been constructed on Middle Level watercourses. Of these,16 have been built into the banks and six constructed above ground. In addition, four mini holts were built. These are half size dens that will give temporary cover to an otter moving along the waterways and usually are built where an existing bush gives cover. Surveys of 62 bridges over Middle Level waterways in the spring revealed positive signs of otter, (spraints), at 18 of them. Lower numbers of bridges with spraints later in the year suggested a prospecting population rather than established breeding animals. The project has been supported by SITA Trust, which makes awards through the Landfill Communities Fund

Messages in the mud

The idea that otters are shy creatures of the night that avoid contact with human activity took a bit of a knock one morning in October at Salter's Lode. Middle Level workers Jules Carlile and Morgan Lakey noticed some fresh prints on the mud at 10:30am that had not been there when they started work at 8am, assisting the contractors that were replacing the guillotine door of the locks. On closer inspection, the tracks showed five pads confirming it had been an otter. The surprising fact was that the piling works had been in progress 30 yards away but the otter had felt confident enough to leave a spraint, (a distinctive scent message for other otters), on a mound of silt it had scraped up for the purpose, made a brief tour of the silt bank and carried on its way southwards along the tidal river bank.

Salter's Lode outfall at the Tidal River Ouse. In the foreground, the otter's scraped sprainting mound, otter prints in the background.

BAPs and IDBs

The Implementation Plan of the Defra Internal Drainage Board Review commits IDBs to producing Biodiversity Action Plans, (BAPs), by 1st April 2010. IDBs already do a lot for the environment, largely without getting the credit for it. This is an opportunity for Boards to demonstrate and record the contribution they already make to biodiversity and to create a plan that will identify the priority areas both for flood management and for biodiversity interest. Defra have issued guidance to IDBs to produce their own Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) and a very useful template. Both can be found on the Defra website. Enter the following link in a web browser to find it: IDB Biodiversity Action Plan guidance.

Hidden gems. A little grebe feeds its young on a Wimblington Combined IDB ditch.

My challenge will be, with help from organisations such as The Wildlife Trust, to produce a BAP for each of the 35 IDBs in the Middle Level but within an overall structure that contains details common to all. Each board will be contacted in due course and I look forward to being able to highlight the many hidden gems that exist within Districts and give them the recognition they deserve.

Badgers

Badgers are continuing their expansion from the west of the country and they occasionally find the sides of drains or flood banks easier digging than their traditional woodland sites. This can present problems where their excavations threaten to block drains or undermine banks. They remain a protected species and it is an offence to interfere with a badger sett by damaging or destroying it, to obstruct access to a badger sett or to disturb a badger when it is occupying a sett. Licences are available from Natural England to allow temporary disturbance and I have obtained a licence that covers all the IDBs in the Middle Level. This allows setts to be temporarily blocked with a straw-filled bag when a machine is working past their location. Badgers often choose silt hills for easy digging and manage to perch their excavated soil on the upper half of the ditch side. With the licensed person present, (myself or Jonathan Fenn, Assistant Operations Engineer), the machine restores the drain and bank to its original profile.

The bags blocking the sett holes are removed after the machine has passed. This method works in most cases and it is often the easiest way of living with the problem.

A Benwick IDB ditch with badger setts present, before and after licensed reprofiling.

If the excavated soil constantly ends up in the ditch bottom or a flood bank is undermined, the alternative is to seek a specific licence to move the badgers on by installing non-return gates on the badger holes.
This is not undertaken lightly as it is a time consuming process. The gates must be checked by a licensed person at least every three days. Only after 21 days of inactivity can the sett be collapsed. Licences for the fitting of non-return gates are normally only granted between 1st July and 30th November to avoid the badger breeding season. The penalties for infringement of the Protection of Badgers Act are significant and as there are legal means of managing badger activity there is no excuse for those that might bring our industry into disrepute by taking matters into their own hands.

The Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual
A new manual that gives comprehensive guidance on the management of drainage channels taking account of biodiversity interest, (what we used to simply call 'wildlife'), was launched at the ADA Catchment 2008 event at Peterborough in September. It is a major revision of a previous manual and has been produced specifically for Internal Drainage Board staff and members under the direction of Natural England and the Association of Drainage Authorities. It is a very practical guide and its 190 pages are packed with illustrations and examples of management techniques for large or small drains drawn from actual work carried out on IDB channels. A copy should have been sent to each Board but individual members can order their own copy (free of charge, an excellent bargain!), from the Natural England website. http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/. In the search box at the Publications section, type in the reference NE121. It can also be downloaded to view as a pdf file at this location.

A Middle Level IDB Guide
An in-house guide to managing drains and ditches for biodiversity for the IDBs of the Middle Level is in the process of production. Although it will be less comprehensive than the above manual, it will focus on practical examples that will be specifically appropriate to fenland drains. It is planned to be available for circulation by the coming spring.

Kingfisher Nest Sites
Three potential nesting sites for kingfishers have been built at the side of the Middle Level Main Drain. Kingfishers struggle to find their ideal nesting habitat on Fenland waterways, vertical soil banks with water at the bottom. One of the few places that can occur is underneath riverside hawthorn bushes. When bushes have to be removed to allow the banks to be re-profiled to a shallower angle the sites are lost. To ensure that nesting opportunities remain, artificial nest sites have been built at three locations on the Middle Level Main Drain. Elsewhere kingfishers have used a hole through sheet piles to dig their tunnel to create a very secure nest site. The hope is that they will occupy these sites

so that generations of kingfishers will continue to delight as a brilliant flash of turquoise darting along Fenland rivers for years to come. The design also incorporates an otter holt in the lower half so that habitat for two species that lift our hearts if we catch a glimpse of them is available at the same location.

Illegal nets and crayfish traps

Almost every TV celebrity chef seems to have featured the catching and cooking of introduced American signal crayfish on their show. This bank-burrowing alien carries a disease that kills our native white-clawed crayfish and has caused problems in other parts of the country but fortunately it currently occurs very rarely in the Middle Level system. That has not stopped aspiring crayfish catchers from acquiring nets from internet sites and setting them without licences, with lethal results for otters. At least six otters in this region have drowned in this type of trap that resembles a small eel net. Although the nets are small, the funnel-shaped entrances are larger than the 95mm maximum that excludes otters. The picture opposite shows three otters drowned in a single crayfish net found on a tributary of the Cam, probably a female with two well-grown young.

Traps of this type and illegally set eel nets without otter guards fitted present a very real threat to the chances of otters successfully returning to their former haunts on Fenland waterways. If you suspect illegal traps or nets are being set, please contact either myself, mobile 07765 597775, or the Environment Agency hotline 0800 807060 as soon as possible.

Water Vole Habitat Restoration

As part of the ML Water Vole Support Project, some sections of river margins where there is poor or non-existent vegetation cover will have pre-planted coir rolls installed this winter. Coir is a by-product of coconut production and when it is made into giant three-metre long rolls and planted with sedges and other emergent plants it forms a habitat that not only gives cover for voles but also creates a living revetment that protects the bank toe from further erosion. With steel and stones costs rising, MLC Operations Engineers will be looking at the method as a potential means of preventing bank erosion at an early stage and avoiding the necessity of costly traditional revetment later.

Coir rolls in a nursery being established with sedges and other plants

Otter Glimpse

Michael Dale, District Officer at Ransonmoor DDC, had a lucky glimpse of an otter swimming across the Twenty Foot Drain as he was crossing Angle Corner Bridge at 6:30pm on 1st October. Hopefully sightings like that will become more frequent when otters become regular breeders on Middle Level waterways.

Contact Details

I am always keen to hear of sightings like the one above. If you have any snippets of information, or items that might be of interest in future newsletters please contact me by one of the following methods.

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Email: cliffcarson@fen-ditches.co.uk
Letter: Cliff Carson, Environmental Officer, MLC Office, 6 Deerfield Road, March. PE15 0NF