

Introduction

It was very pleasing to receive favourable comments about the first issue of The Natural Level, enough to encourage the production of further issues. A note that this issue can be viewed on the Middle Level web site at www.middlelevel.gov.uk is being included with ratepayers' letters. If you have not seen Issue No. 1, it can also be viewed on the website. Go to 'About Us', then 'Conservation'. It is possible that some future issues may be distributed solely by email. All Board members are encouraged to supply an email address, if you have one, to the Middle Level office as it is a very cost-effective means of communication. I recently spoke over the internet to a 91 year-old relative in Australia who has become a keen silver-surfer of the web, so age clearly need not be a barrier to those with an inquiring mind.

Cliff Carson, Environmental Officer, Middle Level Commissioners

Floating Grebe Nests

Great crested grebes are one of the birds that have benefitted from the Middle Level policy of leaving a margin of uncut vegetation at the edge of the large drains and rivers. As early nesters, they usually build their nest among the reeds close to the bank.

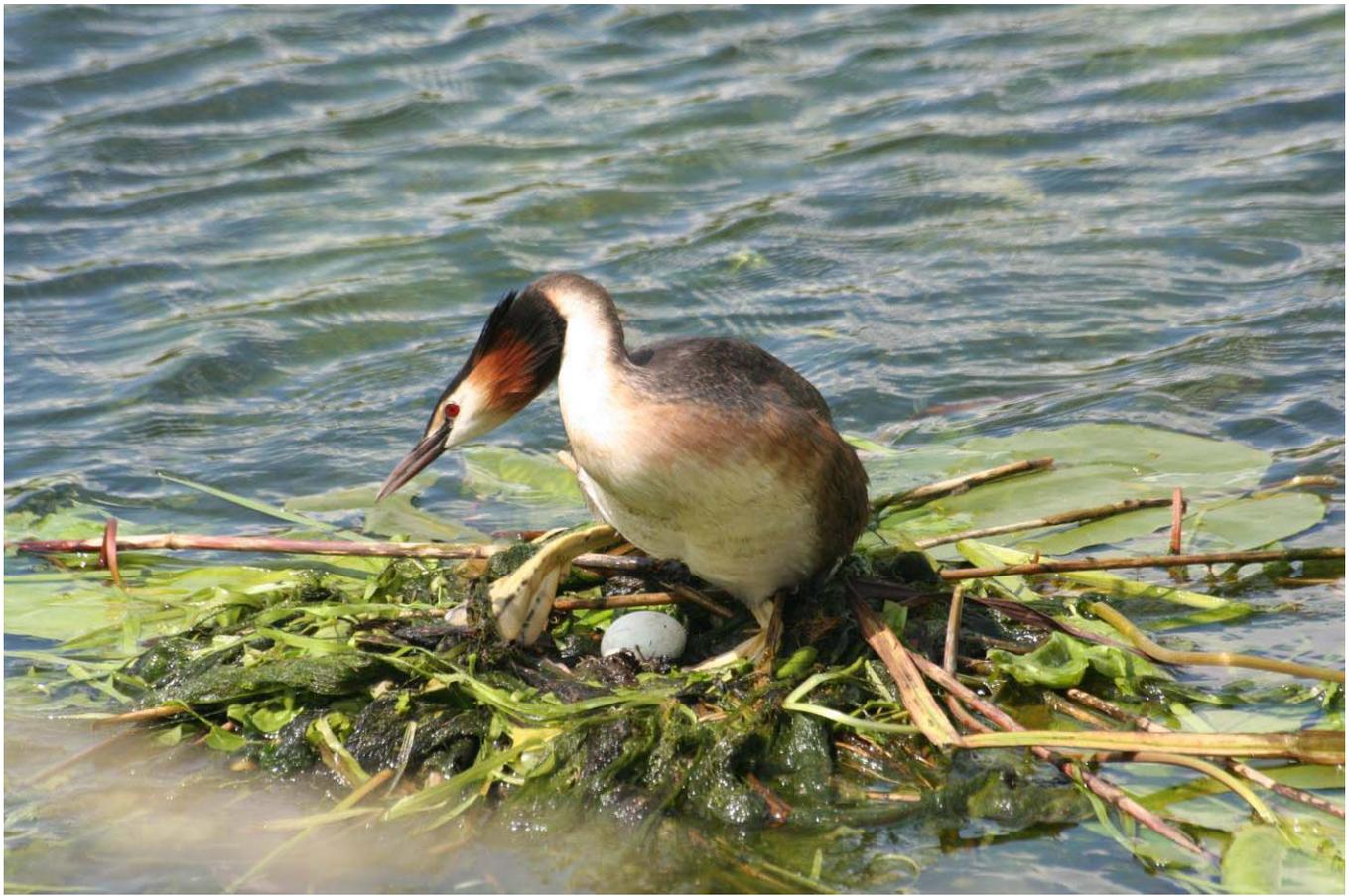


Photo: Cliff Carson

This particular bird must have lost an earlier nest on the Twenty Foot River as it was re-laying in a new nest at a very precarious location supported only by yellow water-lily leaves two metres out from the bank near Holloway's Bridge in early June. Usually grebes have hatched their young by that time but will sometimes re-lay if they lose their eggs. Another pair built a late nest in a similar location on the Forty Foot River at the same time. We put up signs asking navigators to go very slowly when passing the nest but success is always a gamble when your eggs are this close to the water.

Events

Two events worthy of a visit are coming up. Fenland Greener Living Fair is being held in West End Park, March on Saturday 15th August from 2pm to 5pm. Organised by Fenland District Council, the theme is 'Water'. There will be plenty of free activities, including pond dipping. I will be there with a stand, spreading the word about the good work that Drainage Boards do for wildlife and biodiversity throughout the Middle Level. Drop by for a chat if you can.

I will also be waving the flag at the Fenland Country Fair at Stow-cum Quy which is held on Sunday 30th August and Bank Holiday Monday 31st August. I will be there on the Sunday at a stand near the BASC tent promoting the Middle Level Mink Control Scheme. This will be the third year I have attended in support of mink control to benefit water voles. It is a very good day out with a lot of events going on that draws crowds from the whole region.

Reed Die-back

This spring there has been a very noticeable effect among the stands of reed along many of the Middle Level channels. Where the previous year's reed stems remained uncut, the new reed growth has suffered die-back on quite a large but discontinuous scale. It looks as if the reed had been sprayed by Glyphosate, but that is not the case. It has been particularly marked on the Sixteen Foot River and the Forty Foot River.



Left, unmanaged reed margin affected by die-back compared with, right, strong growth where reed was cut during the previous winter. Both examples on the Sixteen Foot River close to Stonea Railway Bridge.

Photo: Cliff Carson

Closer examination suggests the likely cause to be a stem-boring moth, probably a member of the Wainscot family, with the Twin-Spotted Wainscot *Archanara geminipuncta* as the most likely suspect. The larvae of this moth hatch between mid-April and mid-May from eggs laid on reed leaves the previous year. After hatching they move to a reed shoot where they make an entrance hole into the reed stem. They develop in the tube between the reed stem joints, (the internode), moulting five times and moving between up to four shoots before pupating in June or July. In each shoot their mining activity kills the reed stem above their cavity. The adult moths emerge between mid July and mid August and live for one to two weeks. During that time, females lay up to 240 eggs each in neat rows under the leaf sheaths of the reed stems where they spend the winter. This cycle of events for this and many other reed-dependant insects is why two-year-old reed is much more valuable to insectivorous species like reed warblers. The milder winters we are experiencing may well be aiding the success of this moth.



An adult Twin-spot Wainscot moth.
Photo: Patrick Häfliger



The pupa case left behind when a moth left the reed stem by the exit hole at the left. The Twin-spot Wainscot moth only breeds on Common Reed.
Photo: Cliff Carson

It remains to be seen if this is a continuing trend or just a freak year but one could see how it might have future relevance as to how Drainage Boards manage their reed-fringed drains. The invasive nature of Common Reed means Boards usually battle to keep it from blocking drains by cutting or spraying. It may be that the benefits of this natural process that suppresses reed growth will make it more economic to leave reed uncut on certain wider drains to allow the moth eggs to over-winter successfully and enable the larvae to carry out its control during the following spring. We will be following the progress of this potential biological helper to reed control with interest.

Water Vole Support Project Progress

A Middle Level Project supported by Biffaward with additional support from the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Biodiversity Partnership.

During January, 150 metres of pre-planted coir roll revetment was installed at three trial sites on the Sixteen Foot and Forty Foot Rivers and Whittlesey Dike as part of the Middle Level Water Vole Recovery Project. The aim is to create a protective, self-sustaining revetment that will also benefit water vole re-establishment.

The mix of plants established in these standard coir rolls features Lesser Pond Sedge, Yellow Flag, Reed Canary Grass, Soft Rush and Purple-loosestrife. Next winter further coir roll revetments will be installed at other sites. This time they will come planted with our own bespoke mix, chiefly of sedges. Experience has shown that sedges are well favoured as cover by water voles and they also provide excellent protection to banks from erosion.



Sedges and other water plants growing in coir roll revetment on the Sixteen Foot Drain near Bedlam.
Photo: Cliff Carson

The inaugural Mink Control Scheme meeting was well attended in Wimblington in January and mink traps and equipment were distributed. This has produced some good results but trapping needs to be further extended.



Similar meetings will be arranged in other parts of the catchment during the winter to support and encourage the control of this predator of water voles that has a non-native species advantage. Our native water voles have not been able to evolve defences against its aquatic hunting skills. We need to buy them the necessary time to adapt by reducing mink numbers to levels that allow water voles to continue to thrive in Fenland drains.

The winter months are often the most productive time for mink control. I have some mink lure from the USA that seems to be effective in attracting them to traps, especially when it is put in a hole drilled in a golf ball. If anyone wants the loan of cage traps, mink rafts or some smelly golf balls, I'm the man to contact!

IDB BAPs

Work is proceeding on the production of Biodiversity Action Plans for the IDBs and Drainage Commissioners of the Middle Level. Ruth Hawksley at The Wildlife Trust, Cambridgeshire, is carrying out the majority of the collation of existing information that is available on county and national files. If I have not already done so, I will be making contact with Boards to confirm details of drain and bank management rotations, timings and methods employed and other information that may be useful in highlighting the existing and potential biodiversity within each district.

Otter Recovery Project Update

A Middle Level Project supported by SITA Trust through the Landfill Communities Fund with additional support from the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Cambs and Peterborough Biodiversity Partnership.

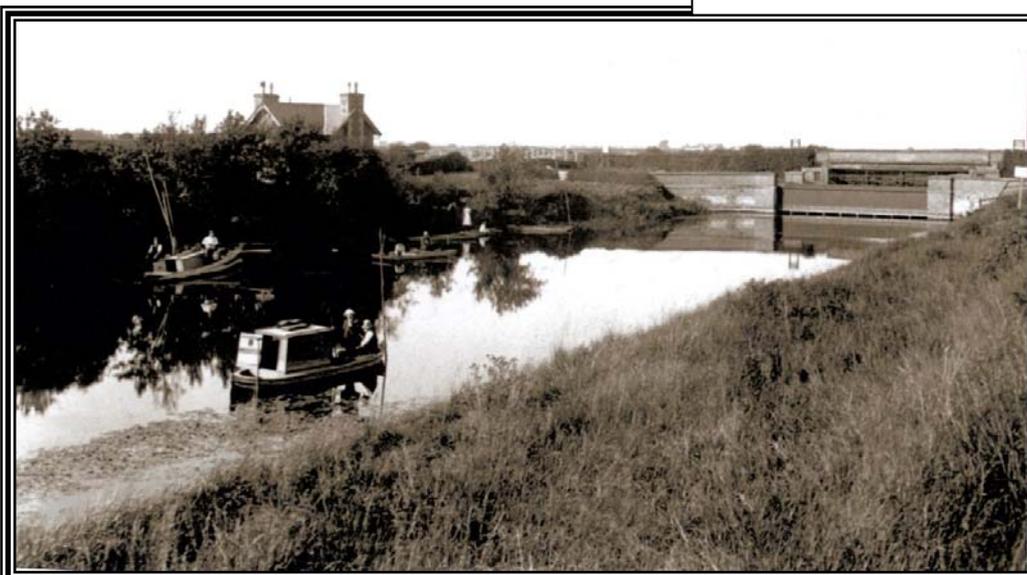
The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project is going well with over 30 holts, (otter dens), constructed to date on drains and rivers throughout the system. Indications that otters are increasing in their use of our waterways came when the same 62 bridges over Middle Level rivers and drains that were surveyed in March 2008 were checked again this Easter with help from members of the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group. In 2008 there were spraints at 18 bridges, (29%). This year there were spraints at 31 bridges, a very impressive 50% of sites.

One of the most regular sites for otter signs are bridges over the Twenty Foot River near March. It was pleasing therefore to see a video clip taken of an otter swimming near there during the day. The observer watched it swimming and diving for half an hour and then remembered the video facility on his mobile phone and captured a short but clear image of a very relaxed otter.

An otter visited and left spraints at one of the project holts near Woodwalton Fen NNR and elsewhere brief visitors to other built holts have included fox and mink.



An otter spraint on top of a holt pipe and a watery track leading to the entrance through the vegetation.
Photo: Cliff Carson



Even water voles and badgers have left their calling cards at the holt entrances but the first video images of an otter seen by one of the internal infra red cameras are still eagerly awaited.

Images of Times Past

Old photographs offer a window into the past and are particularly interesting

when we are familiar with the location. I was especially pleased therefore to have a chance to view this picture of Mullicourt Aqueduct and Aqueduct Cottage that Andy Stephens, the present owner of the cottage, showed me. Taken in 1912, the original was produced as a postcard and shows the location was a favoured spot to moor one's boat just beyond the lily fringe and enjoy a spot of fishing. There are bushes and trees on the opposite bank that are no longer there and a lady and a child are viewing the scene from a landing stage that is long gone. I imagine there are other old pictures of Middle Level waterways, pumps and maintenance work tucked away in drawers that are worthy of a closer look. With the 150th anniversary of the formation of the Middle Level Commissioners only three years away, it would be interesting to dig out pictures that record some of the history of the catchment. We would be glad to hear from anyone who has pictures that we could take copies of for showing to a wider audience.

Contact Details

As always, I am keen to hear of interesting sightings or records of wildlife in the Middle Level. If you have any snippets of information, or items that might be of interest in future newsletters please contact me, details below.

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