

## Well Creek water margin improvements

A long term project to improve plant diversity and control encroachment by reed sweetgrass, *Glyceria maxima*, along the margins of Well Creek in Upwell and Outwell is already beginning to show signs of success. A programme of regularly cutting back the growth of *Glyceria* at the water margins was started with Middle Level weed boats in April, after checks for breeding birds had been carried out.



A flushing pass with suspended golf balls and bells checks for nesting birds before mowing takes place.

The checks were achieved this year by carrying out a 'flushing pass' before cutting took place. Light weights with bells attached were trailed over the areas to be cut to gently flush out any nesting birds. Those areas were then marked with flags to identify a protective buffer zone to be avoided during the cut that followed.

Several cuts later, the Creek margins are looking better and the floating islands of vegetation that got caught around navigators' propellers are much reduced.

Another element to benefit the Well Creek margins has been the installation of pre-established coir rolls at two locations. These are large 'sausages' made from coconut fibre and pre-planted with various water plants. The most obvious plant in the mix this summer

has been purple loosestrife. Its numerous flowers are very attractive to butterflies and many other insects and provide an attractive summer margin to the Creek. A total of 100 meters of coir were installed at two locations in Upwell, (in front of the cemetery) and Outwell, (at Lowside) in spring 2010. It is hoped that further sections can be added in future if funding is available.



Well Creek, Upwell. The flowers of purple loosestrife proved an attractive feature of the coir roll plant mix for many insects, especially butterflies and hoverflies.

### **Water Voles and Ditching workshop for machine operators**

In June the Bedford Group of IDBs and the Middle Level Commissioners, (MLC), joined forces to provide a training workshop for ditching machine operators and their managers that focussed on ditch maintenance where water voles are present.

Although water vole distribution has suffered very significant declines in other parts of the UK, they are present in a high percentage of ditches in the fens. Surveys in the Middle Level have shown them to occupy between 60% and 90% of ditches managed by drainage boards. As a Biodiversity Action Plan species, the legislation and significant penalties protecting water voles and their habitat means that particular care must be taken when carrying out ditch maintenance where they occur.

Diana Ward, Ecological Consultant to the Bedford Group of IDBs and I co-hosted the workshop at the Middle Level Offices. Indoor presentations were followed by a field trip to view water vole habitat and look for water vole signs at MLC Chairman Duncan Boughton's farm in Ransonmoor DDC.

The indoor element included presentations on the legislation protecting water voles, their biology and field signs, habitats occupied, the ADA/Natural England 'Best Practice' guidance on mitigation procedures and ditch management methods that benefit water voles and improve bank stability.



*Diana Ward addressing the workshop attendees.*

The event was well attended by more than 30 staff from both the Bedford Group of IDBs and machine operators and managers employed by drainage boards and contractors throughout the Middle Level area. The catchment of attendees extended from Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and into Norfolk. The workshop therefore covered a sizeable proportion of IDB activity in southern England. The success of the workshop has stimulated interest in holding further joint training events where the different drainage boards can join forces to address practical management and conservation issues for mutual benefit.

### **Drainage Board Conservation Group expanded**

With the adoption of Biodiversity Action Plans an existing group has been expanded and refocused to support and guide the delivery of plans for the boards in the Middle Level BAP Partnership. A further four IDB representatives have been invited to join the existing two and representatives from MLC Operations and Engineers Department, the Environment Agency, the Biodiversity Partnership and the Wildlife Trust. Originally formed as a steering group for the Drainage Ditch Project Officer post, the expanded group should be well placed to advise and support Boards with carrying out their Biodiversity Action Plans. An annual meeting of District Officers was one of the first plans agreed by the group, see below.

### **District Officers Meeting Planned**

On the morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> of December a meeting of District Officers and Board Chairmen is taking place at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March. Biodiversity Action Plans, (BAPs), have been adopted by all of the 35 Drainage Boards in the Middle Level BAP Partnership and District Officers will be the key people to ensure the plans are incorporated into the work of their Boards. A series of meetings are planned to give support and guidance on the different elements involved. In many cases the Board Chairman also acts as the District Officer so they would be the appropriate person to attend. In other cases it may be appropriate for both the District Officer and the Chairman to attend so that both the practical and the financial sides of board management are represented.

Aspects to be covered in the first meeting include identifying what makes a ditch good for biodiversity, selecting sites for bat boxes, mink control hints and tips, how to tackle the recording and reporting of actions achieved and a

general forum for discussion, questions and queries. Different types of barn owl box and bat boxes will be on show and traps and equipment for mink control will be available for collection.

### Hare haven at Sutton & Mepal IDB.

A hare found a very safe haven for her young at Sutton and Mepal IDB this summer. David Stimson, the Board's District Officer found that a female hare had brought her young into the enclosed garden behind his house beside Mepal Pumping Station. She hid them among the plants of the flower borders where they were well hidden from natural predators. David would see the mother hare slipping into the garden at dusk to suckle her young. When he told me about this activity I thought it was pretty unusual but reading up on hare behaviour, it turns out that 'Despite their inherent wariness, it is not unusual to find that Brown hares give birth to their young in close proximity to humans, even in the flowerbeds or vegetable beds of country cottage gardens', (from 'The Hare' by Jill Mason, Merlin Unwin Books). The hare must have found David's garden to her liking because she returned to it and raised a second litter of young there a few weeks later. It will be interesting to see if this becomes an annual event.



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*Above. A young leveret looks out from its hiding place in a stand of flowers, in David Stimson's garden, right, beside the Pumping Station at Mepal.*

### Sedge plugs planting

Sedge is a very good plant to encourage at the edge of drains for several reasons. It forms a non-invasive natural revetment because its roots stabilize the soil at the bank toe and in winter its bowed leaves can aid protection of the vulnerable wet zone between the high summer water level and the lower winter level. It also provides good cover for water voles and a variety of invertebrates.



As a further development from the coir rolls revetments being trialled at different locations on Middle Level rivers and drains, sedge plugs are being tested as an even cheaper method of establishing a protective band of vegetation at the water margin. Sites on the Forty Foot River and Well Creek have had the sedge plugs planted on small ledges cut just above summer water level. Hundred of Wisbech IDB and March East IDB also are carrying out trials on short sections of ditch to see how the method works on smaller drains.

If the sedge can get well established during the first year it will develop as a stable plant community with roots that help stabilise the ground and prevent bank slips in light soils.

*A wet job on a wet day. Ben Wales at Hundred of Wisbech IDB installs sedge plugs at a new ditch margin ledge to trial the method for the benefit of bank stability and biodiversity.*

## IDB Biodiversity Competition 2010 Awards

The Association of Drainage Authorities in conjunction with Natural England ran a competition this year to encourage new initiatives in IDB Biodiversity Action Plans. This was part of ADA's contribution to 2010 International Year of Biodiversity.



*The biodiversity award winners were announced by Jean Venables, CEO for ADA, right, and presented by Helen Philips, CEO for Natural England, left. They were received by your own grateful Environmental Officer and Duncan Boughton, Chairman of MLC. Photo: Ian Moodie, ADA*

The competition winners were announced at the ADA Flood Risk Management 2010 event at Peterborough in September. It was very pleasing to discover that our entry in the 'Best 'large scale' IDB Biodiversity initiative' category', which was for the installation of otter holts, won first prize. Thanks are due to SITA Trust for their funding support for the Middle Level Otter Recovery Project and to the Cambridgeshire Biodiversity Partnership, and the Environment Agency that also contributed to the project.

Our other entry, for the creation of kingfisher nesting opportunities in sheet pile revetments, was joint runner up in the 'Best 'small scale' IDB Biodiversity initiative' category'.

## New MLC offices and depot

Most readers will be aware that the Middle Level Commissioners 'moved home' during July from their offices in Dartford Road, March, (dating from 1904), to a new site on the outskirts of March beside the Old River Nene where there is room to have the offices and the depot at one location and rather more space for visitors to park.



*The new MLC Offices and depot.*

*All photos: Cliff Carson, except where indicated.*

## Contact

I am always keen to hear of interesting sightings of wildlife or other reports from the Middle Level area. If you have any snippets of information, or items that might be of interest for future newsletters, please contact me. Please note my new email address, office number and postal address below.

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