

## **Otter and Water Vole Signs training days**

Two training events are planned in 2013 for anyone who would like to learn to recognise the signs to look for when surveying for otters or water voles in Middle Level waterways and ditches. In March 2012 similar sessions were held with considerable success. An indoor evening event will give an opportunity to view images of the field signs both animals leave at water margins and to discuss equipment, methods and safe surveying techniques. This is followed by a half day Saturday session in the field when actual water vole and otter indications can be identified and the shape and even the smell of signs can be recognised with confidence. Recognition of mink scats will also be covered. There will be future opportunities for volunteers to survey ditches and drains in the Middle Level system if they wish to develop their new skills. The indoor evening will be held at the Middle Level offices, 85 Whittlesey Road, March, PE15 0AH on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> March from 7pm to 8:30 pm. This will be followed by the outdoor meeting on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> March, meeting at the Middle Level offices at 10am, returning at 12:30. Anyone interested in attending should book a place with me, (contact details at end). The only requirements are an interest in wildlife, a walking stick and the ability to climb up and down banks. I can still just about manage the latter myself!



*Some of the volunteers on the spring 2012 training course studying an otter spraint underneath a bridge on the Sixteen Foot River near March.*

## **District Officers IDB BAP meeting**

As this newsletter goes to press the annual meeting of the Middle Level IDB BAPs Partnership is being held on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> December in the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March at 9:20 am. It is an annual event open not just to District Officers and Chairmen in the Middle Level IDB BAPs Partnership but to any members of IDB boards with an interest in wildlife. Topics covered by our speakers will include the wealth of insect riches in our drains, help available for farmers in supporting farmland birds, the Water Framework Directive and the remarkable archaeological finds from the Must Farm Bronze Age site near Whittlesey. The date for next year's meeting is Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

**Alien invader overpowered**

The spread of the invasive plant Water Fern, *Azolla filiculoides* during the 2012 summer proved to be as extensive as feared. At its worst it covered sections of the Main Drain, Sixteen Foot and the Forty Foot Rivers completely. Help was at hand however in the form of the natural control weevil *Stenopelmus rufinasus*. Its population appeared to have survived the winter frosts better than expected because its exponential growth and appetite eventually outstripped the growth of the Azolla and removed the blankets covering the waterways. A residue of Azolla fronds may remain to grow next year but it appears the weevils are also able to survive the winter and be on hand to tackle the invaders again.



Above, Azolla covering the Middle Level Main Drain like a carpet as far as the eye can see at the Wiggshall St Germans Pumping Station intake during August 2012.

Below, some of the tiny weevils that eventually ate their way through the Azolla can just be seen as dark dots on the plant.



**Otter families use constructed holts**

The importance of the network of 72 otter holts built in the Middle Level system was highlighted during the period of freezing conditions in February 2012. At least two different female otters with young used the constructed holts as a base during the cold snap.



A female otter relaxes with her family in a holt constructed alongside a fenland drain. Video clips of otters and other wildlife using the network of Middle Level holts can be viewed via a link on the Conservation page of the Middle Level web site [www.middlelevel.gov.uk](http://www.middlelevel.gov.uk)

In the east of the catchment, a female with two well-grown young used a holt for about two weeks while the river was largely frozen. There were many clips of the two young and their mother playing together and interacting in the holt. The recorder also captured the 'conversations' between the animals, intimate sounds not often heard when they are hunting in the open. During that time the female brought in many bundles of vegetation as bedding, an action rarely filmed. She brought in so much material that it eventually blocked the camera view for a spell. When a view returned, the two young otters appeared more nervous and less playful and the mother appeared to have taken her leave of them. They were the same size as their parent, probably a year old, and it may have been that filling the holt with bedding was her final act before leaving them to fend for themselves. The two young otters eventually took their leave of the holt. Perhaps they will find some of the other sites in the system to visit. During the same period in February, another female otter and one equally large young used a different holt in the middle of the catchment for several days while the icy conditions prevailed.

## Elver pass for St Germans Pumping Station

Eels are in serious decline throughout the UK and Europe. The number of juvenile eels returning to our rivers has collapsed to just 1% of historic levels. There are many possible causes which include a parasitic nematode that affects their ability to dive to the great depths that they reach on their way to the Sargasso Sea and changes to the currents of the Gulf Stream that carries the tiny larvae that become elvers back to our shores. Other challenges then face the eels, particularly the barriers such as pumping stations that man has constructed across their route along the rivers, drains and ditches they will inhabit for many years as they build up fat reserves for their eventual return journey.

The Eel Regulations aim to address actions that will benefit eel population recovery and work has been in progress at Wickenhall St Germans Pumping Station to construct an elver pass around the structure. supplied by Aquatic Control Engineering Ltd and with funding support from the Environment Agency. When it is completed, elvers will be attracted to the tidal river end of a bristle-filled trough by a flow of freshwater from the upstream side. Following a trickle of water, they wriggle up through the bristles for 35 meters to the top and have a quicker journey down a wet pipe to the Main Drain from where they can spread into the Middle Level system.



*The elver pass in the process of installation by MLC workers Morgan Lakey and Julian Carlile at St Germans Pumping Station. When completed, infra red video cameras will monitor the movement and numbers of elvers through the pass.*

## Fens for the Future Strategic Plan

In early November 2012 a partnership of conservation organisations, government bodies, local authorities and IDBs working in the Fens launched their strategic plan to identify the top priorities for biodiversity action and assist with subsequent funding bids across the 'Inland Fens'. The Partnership's vision is to see sustainable wetlands restored, re-created and reconnected for the benefit of people, our natural and historic heritage and the rural economy. The plan can be viewed via this web site - <http://www.lincsfenlands.org.uk/index.php?page=BiodiversityFensFuture>

The aspiration of the Partnership is for the Fens to become an area containing multifunctional wetlands that support biodiversity, maintain historic heritage, reduce flood risk and improve water resource availability interconnected by wildlife corridors and surrounded by sympathetic sustainable farming and land use practices. There are mutual gains to be achieved when the creation of new wetland sites also offers opportunities for flood water management.

David Thomas, Middle Level Chief Engineer, gave a presentation on 'Water Management in the Fens, Challenges and Opportunities' at the launch event at Baston near Peterborough on 7th November. The partners recognise that recreation and tourism are already major sectors of the Fenland economy. In 2010 these sectors supported over 18,000 jobs with a value of almost £1.9 billion in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough alone. Thus, it is hoped that through delivery of the ecological network proposed there is huge potential to boost tourism, leisure and an improved quality of life for visitors and local communities.

## The Fens Biodiversity Audit

A major audit of the biodiversity of the Fens National Character Area was carried out by researchers at the University of East Anglia during 2012, looking at over a million records from the fenlands of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Suffolk. Their analysis showed that the Fens region is very important for biodiversity with 13,474 species recorded of which 1,932 are priority species comprising 27% of the UK BAP species. Sixteen Global Red Data species have been recorded in the Fens including black-tailed godwit, otter, European eel and compressed river mussel. The majority of priority species records came from protected relic fen sites especially Woodwalton Fen, Wicken Fen and Chippenham Fen however the biodiversity status of the wider landscape was unclear since these areas are rather poorly recorded.

Under the ditch management section in the report a recommendation is 'IDBs should ensure that a variety of ditch rotations from short to medium to long continue to be implemented, even though the majority of ditches will continue to be managed on short rotations' That is a fair statement of what actually happens throughout the districts of the Middle Level Biodiversity Partnership and our boards can be proud of the fact that they have been maintaining biodiversity through rotational drain management, especially the 'little and often' method.



*A European eel, now a less common species in fenland drains, is a Global Red Data Species.*

The audit also states that 'IDBs need to know where the most valuable ditches and ditch systems are so that they can base their ditch management decisions on up-to-date and accurate biodiversity information'. This will help to promote the commissioning and funding of specialist surveys of fenland waterways and further recognise their value for wildlife diversity in addition to their primary function of flood defence. The report can be viewed and downloaded at <http://www.cperc.org.uk/about-us/news.php>

## Mammal records request

The Cambridgeshire Mammal Group, (CMG) are in the process of updating an atlas of the distribution of mammals in Cambridgeshire and are seeking records of sightings, especially in the north of the county.



*A harvest mouse nest found after the breeding season attached to reed stems at the side of an IDB drain.*

Perhaps you have come across a harvest mouse nest (a ball of fine grasses strung between stalks of tall vegetation) or the cat has brought in a water shrew, (tiny, black back, long nose) or a wood mouse has appeared in the garden shed (big eyes and ears, long tail). The Group can check owl pellets for small mammal remains so pellets from barn owl roosts are welcomed. These records will help to give an updated picture of the distribution of mammals in the county and can indicate if species are expanding or contracting.

Either send your records to me or alternatively send them directly to the group via their web site, <http://www.cambsmammalgroup.co.uk/>

## Contact details

As always, I am keen to hear of any interesting sightings of wildlife or other reports from the Middle Level area. If you have any information that might be of interest for future newsletters, please contact me –

Cliff Carson, Environmental Officer, MLC Offices, 85 Whittlesey Road, March. PE15 0AH  
Direct line 01354 602965 Mobile 07765 597775 Email: [cliff.carson@middlelevel.gov.uk](mailto:cliff.carson@middlelevel.gov.uk)  
Web site: [www.middlelevel.gov.uk](http://www.middlelevel.gov.uk)

*Photographs – Cliff Carson*