

## Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership nears five year targets

Progress with key elements of the five-year Biodiversity Action Plan targets to be achieved by the end of March 2015 continued. The current situation is -

90 Barn owl boxes installed (target 90)



80 Bat boxes erected (target 80)



87 Kingfisher potential nesting holes drilled at 47 sites (target 91 sites).



57 Black poplars planted (target 84)



Add to that the 78 otter holts constructed beside our rivers and drains and the 1266 metres of pre-planted coir roll revetment installed at 20 locations and it amounts to a significant gain for wildlife and biodiversity.

If any members would like to offer a site to plant an historic black poplar, please contact me, details on the last page.

### A bumper breeding year

2014 has been a very good year for breeding barn owls, not just in the Middle Level area but apparently country wide. This has been due to it being 'a vole year', a bumper year for the small mammals that the owls prey on. Broods of up to seven barn owls have been recorded and the number of second broods was significantly up. Kestrels too benefitted from the abundance of prey and they took advantage of the extra nest boxes available.



*Above, a brood of kestrel chicks in a barn owl nest box. Right, a kestrel chick is weighed and ringed under licence by Peter Wilkinson in March Sixth IDB District.*



### Eel and elver passage

At the beginning of April the first elvers of the year were seen climbing the St Germans pumping station elver pass. 14,000 glass eels were recorded in the first week of April and over 50,000 that first month.

The good news story of elver numbers returning in quantities not seen for many years was publicised via a press release during July and resulted in articles in the Eastern Daily Press, several local newspapers, an interview on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire and a TV interview on BBC Look East broadcast on 17th July.



Photo: Chris Bell



Larger eels are now also using the pass and 91,000 elvers and eels have been recorded passing through it to date.

### Otter drowning concerns

As well as the good numbers of elvers returning to Middle Level waters, an increase in the numbers of adult eels in the system was recorded in 2014 as well. The level of licenced eel trapping consequently increased, as did illegal trapping. Illegal eel trappers do not have the required licence tags on their nets or fit the legally required otter guards. A drowned otter was found in a fyke net near Wells Bridge on the Old River Nene during August 2014. The Environment Agency subsequently recorded three other drowned otters in nets in the area during September.

This heartless and avoidable destruction of one of our most valued animals is something we need to prevent. If anyone sees suspicious activity relating to net setting contact the Fisheries Enforcement Officers via the Environment Agency hotline which is 0800 807060. If it is in the Middle Level area, also contact me on 07765 597775.



Above, a fyke net that drowned an otter on the Old River Nene near Wells Bridge.

Otter casualties on the regions roads remain a sad but regular event. Post mortems can provide valuable information about how the animal lived, its age, breeding status and much more detail about the otter population's health. If you see an otter casualty let me know as soon as possible and I will aim to pass it to the Environment Agency at Brampton who in turn pass it to Cardiff University who carry out the post mortem.

### Non-native Invasive Species

A second site was discovered where three non-native invasive plant species, New Zealand Pigmyweed *Crassula helmsii*, Parrots Feather *Myriophyllum aquaticum* and Water Fern *Azolla filiculoides* were present in a pond in Hundred of Wisbech IDB District at Elm. The land owners were advised and control measures are being instigated by them.

In view of increased concerns regarding these and other potential invaders, MLC organised and ran a half-day course on identifying and controlling non-native invasive water plants on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2014. It was funded with help from the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership scheme, supported by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The training was given by Jonathan Graham, an experienced botanist who has carried out vegetation surveys throughout the Fens over many years. It was a half-day course and was based at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March. There was very positive feed-back from the 59 attendees. Further training courses in conjunction with the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership are being planned for 2015.



### The 2014 IDB BAP Partnership meeting

The attendees at the annual Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership meeting at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel on 3<sup>rd</sup> December enjoyed presentations on a range of subjects.

Steve Parnwell, Principal Ecologist at Greenwillows Associates, talked on 'Reptiles in the Fens'. During a survey of the Fenton Lode at Chatteris prior to the diversion of the drain he used felt survey mats and found 71 common lizards and 12 grass snakes in an 800 metre length. Clearly they are more common than we realise and it is surveys like this that help us understand the value of our drain margins.



Left, a reptile survey mat in use. Lizards and snakes are attracted to the warmth that develops underneath which allows their cold-blooded systems to warm up more quickly. Below, a common lizard. Image: John Baker



Nick Gibbons's topic was 'Creating winter roost sites for bats'. One of his special areas of knowledge is in the design and creation of hibernaculum for bats. He described the construction of a major roost site for the Forestry Commission in the Brecks and also gave valuable pointers on the adaptation of existing structures for their use.

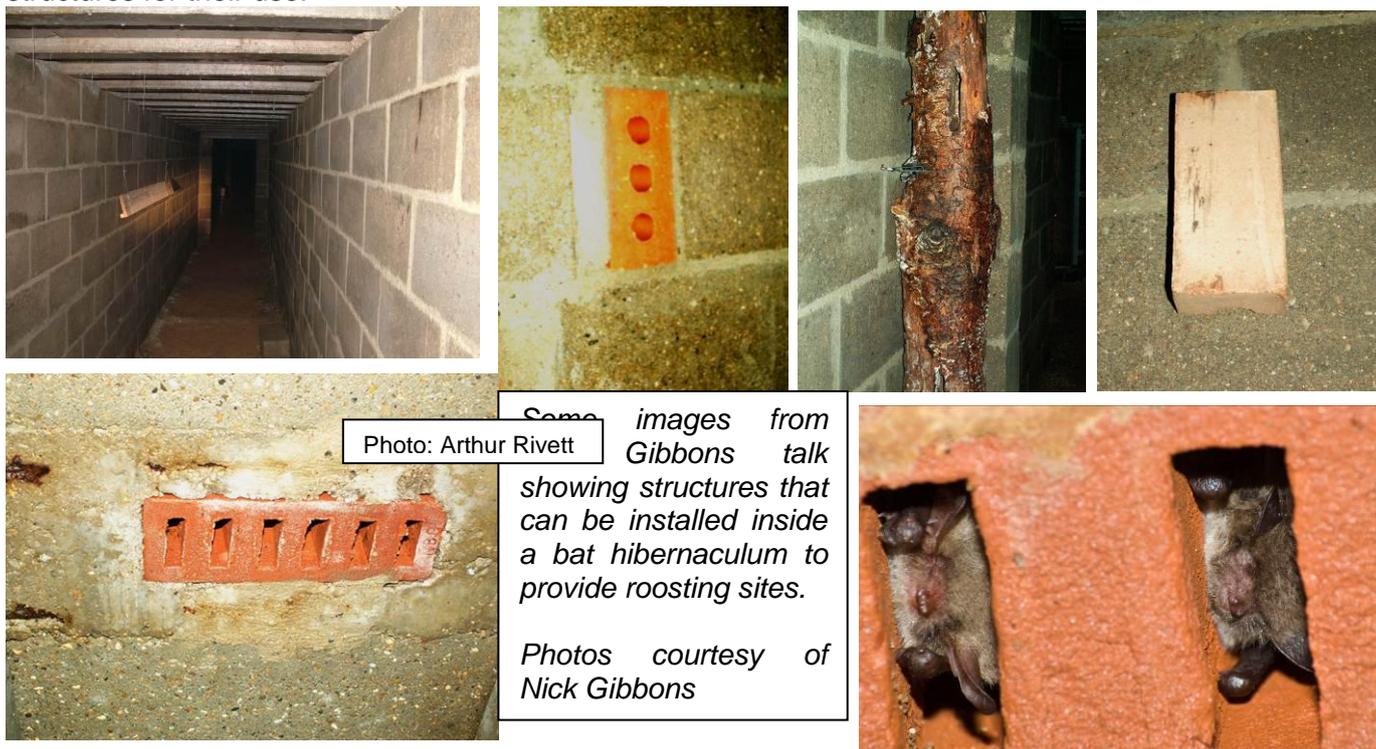


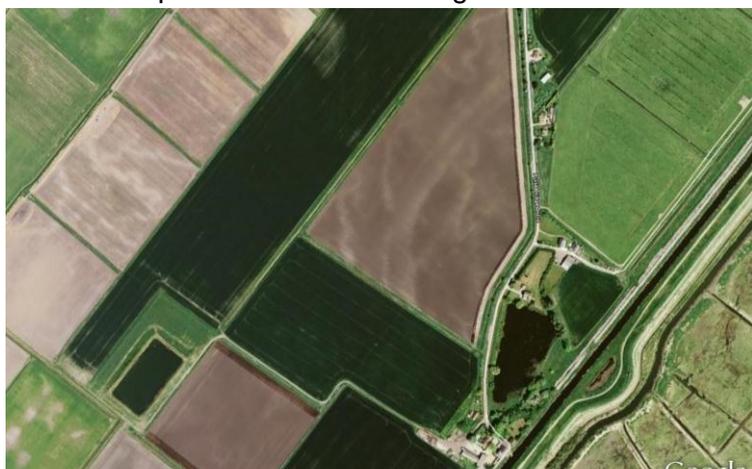
Photo: Arthur Rivett

Some images from Gibbons talk showing structures that can be installed inside a bat hibernaculum to provide roosting sites.

Photos courtesy of Nick Gibbons

The final speaker of the morning was Dinah Smith with a presentation on Fenland roddons titled

'Research that just keeps going down the Drain' describing her work with the East Anglian Fenland roddons. Her studies with the Geology Department of University of Leicester for six years focussed on the sediments of the fenland roddons, throwing light on their creation and history. She gave a fascinating description of how roddons developed from ancient creeks and became the winding ridges and crests through arable fields when they were drained.



Above, aerial pictures such as the satellite images available via Google Earth give excellent views of the roddons showing the network of former creeks that filled the un-drained fens.  
Image: Google Earth.

John Heading very ably chaired the meeting and thanked the speakers for the very interesting morning they had given the attendees. Next year's meeting will be held on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2015 when another selection of topics will be presented. Put it in your diary now to ensure you do not miss it.

**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 –

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Photographs by Cliff Carson, except where indicated.