

Press Release



MIDDLE LEVEL
COMMISSIONERS

Water voles thriving in Fenland drains

A water vole survey carried out at five-year intervals over the last 10 years in two Drainage Districts in the Middle Level of the Fens has shown that water voles are continuing to thrive and maintain good populations despite national declines.



Photo: Cliff Carson Image 7174

The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire has found water voles in very encouraging numbers in the Middle Level of the Fens. In 2015, Wildlife Trust staff and volunteers repeated a detailed survey of two Drainage Districts (Curf Fen and Ransonmoor) between Chatteris and March in the Middle Level catchment. These districts had first been surveyed by the Trust in 2005 and then by a student from UEA in 2010. The 2015 results found water voles at least as widespread as in previous years, which is very impressive against a background of national decline.

A report has just been published by the Wildlife Trust of the 2015 survey results and draws on information gathered in the 2010 and 2005 surveys. It shows that ditch maintenance by internal drainage boards is critical for water voles as it provides an extensive and stable habitat for them. Several conclusions resulted from the study -

- The surveys of Curf Fen and Ransonmoor suggest that these drainage districts (collectively with many others in the Middle Level, which have similar habitat and maintenance regimes) are important as a regional, and possibly national, stronghold for water vole.
- Water vole populations in these two drainage districts appear to be stable with no noticeable declines over the last 10 years.
- Water voles appear to prefer the Drainage Board maintained ditches, probably because these have more diverse vegetation and deeper water.
- Ditch maintenance does not have a significant effect on water vole populations, and in fact the best ditches were cleansed within the past 4 years.
- Water voles were present in the majority of ditches with suitable habitat.
- Better ditch connectivity in Ransonmoor District makes it better for water voles, and is probably a key reason for the very high and consistent occupancy there.
- Water voles at Curf Fen appear to move around, potentially following optimal habitat. At Ransonmoor there is a core area with consistent occupation, although the “best” water vole ditches change within this.
- Re-profiling ditches (removing soil to reshape a bank that has become too steep) does have a negative effect. However re-profiling one bank only and shorter sections can mitigate this, and in general water voles return after 2 – 5 years.

The results also showed that construction of new wind farms has had no apparent effect on water vole populations.

Wildlife Trust staff and volunteers surveyed 307 ditch sections, covering over 80km of ditch on foot or by boat, in collaboration with Cliff Carson, the Environmental Officer for the Middle Level Commissioners.

Ruth Hawksley of the Wildlife Trust, who led the survey, said “Surveying for water vole signs can be very enjoyable but also very demanding along Fenland drains. Our survey only covered two of the 36 districts in the Middle Level catchment, but it revealed that IDB drains can provide a large connected area of good water vole habitat. Our results support the Wildlife Trust’s belief that the Cambridgeshire fens are a regionally, and possibly nationally, important stronghold for water voles.”

Cliff Carson said ‘It is good to have confirmation that regular maintenance carried out by Drainage Boards in the Middle Level catchment not only does not harm water voles but is actually a positive action. It maintains the water plants, structure and cover at drain margins that water voles need to breed successfully and retain a stronghold in the Fens’.

The full report is available at the Wildlife Trust web site here www.wildlifebcn.org/sites/default/files/report2015_final.pdf and also at the Middle Level Commissioners web site here www.middlelevel.gov.uk



Left, surveying from a canoe is one of the most efficient methods of locating water vole field signs.

Photo: Cliff Carson Image 201



Photo: Cliff Carson Image 131

Above, water vole feeding signs outside a burrow.

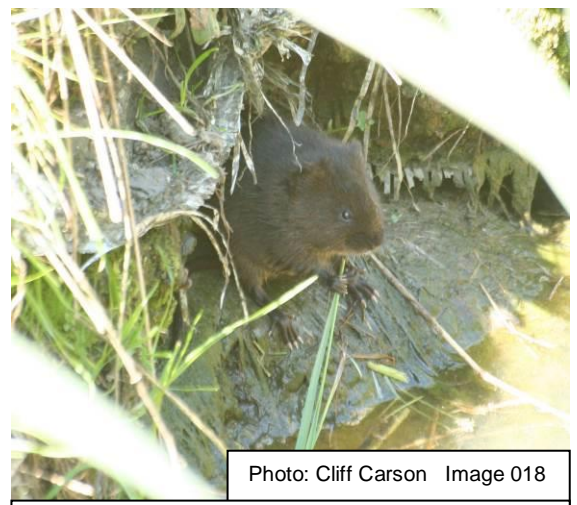


Photo: Cliff Carson Image 018

The distinctive angled cut on the feeding remains are a result of the characteristic way that water voles hold the stems while eating.



Photo: Cliff Carson Image 7186

Above, water voles live in social groups where females hold breeding territories.



Photo: Cliff Carson Image 44-45

Water voles like sitting on floating rafts so mooring a plank at the side of a ditch can reveal their presence when they leave feeding signs or droppings on it.

Cliff Carson, the Environmental Officer for the Middle Level Commissioners offers a free annual two-part training course on the identification of water vole and otter field signs.

The next course dates are the evening of 21st April and the morning of 23rd April 2016. Numbers are limited to 25. Booking is essential. Contact cliff.carson@middlelevel.gov.uk for further details and booking.

Ends.

Notes for Editors

For further information and higher resolution copies of images contact -

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The Middle Level Commissioners

The Middle Level is the central and largest section of the Great Level of the Fens, reclaimed by drainage during the mid-17th Century. Its river system consists of over 120 miles (190 kilometres) of watercourses most of which are also navigations and has a catchment of just over 170,000 acres (70,000 hectares).

The Commissioners, together with local drainage boards, operate a complex flood protection and water level management system to balance the various water uses and requirements and to alleviate the risk of flooding of land and properties.

The efficient operation of the system is vital to the safety and prosperity of over 100,000 people who live and work in the area. But for the operations of the Commissioners and boards, the majority of the fen land would be under water for much of the year, accesses from higher ground would be cut-off and many of the present land uses, which are taken for granted, would be impossible.

For further information about the water vole survey contact –

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Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire

The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire works to make our three counties a place where nature matters, where wildlife can flourish and enrich the lives of the people who live here: with your help we care for local wildlife. Ninety five per cent of the local population live within five miles of one of our 126 reserves and contributions of time or money will directly benefit local wildlife

Web site www.wildlifebcn.org