

## Environmental Officer's Report - March 2008 to October 2008

### Habitat & Species Management

#### **The ML Otter Recovery Project**

Surveys of otter sprainting signs were carried out at 62 bridges over Middle Level waterways in March and July. In March there were spraints at 19, (plus 2 possible), out of



62 bridges, nearly a third visited by otters. The July survey had lower numbers of bridges with spraints at 15 out of 62 bridges, but several new bridge sites were used.

*A typical otter sprainting site on a stone underneath a bridge over a Middle Level waterway.*

Opportunities to make progress on holt construction was taken during the period when maintenance machines were working in the area of potential sites. A further 8 holts were constructed on the Old River Nene, the Forty Foot and the Middle Level Main Drain making a total of 22 to date. Three of these were to a new design incorporated into the base of an artificial kingfisher nest site, see Kingfisher Site Project item below.

#### **The ML Water Vole Support Project**

A £50,000 bid for funds from Biffaward was, (at last) successful. Final approval to proceed was received in mid May. The three-year project will support and enhance water vole populations within MLC waterways and IDB managed drains in the Middle Level by the creation of a catchment-wide mink control scheme and by the establishment of water-vole friendly marginal habitat, (pre-vegetated coir rolls), in areas of poor vole distribution. The mink control scheme will be inaugurated in Nov/Dec. 250 traps and 90 indicator rafts have been purchased and will be available for loan to IDB members, other landowners, angling clubs, reserve wardens, BASC members and other groups interested in mink control. CC met and gave a tour of ML drains to three staff from Cambridgeshire ACRE, Rural Action East and Biffaward on 20<sup>th</sup> August. They expressed appreciation of the planning that had gone into the project bid and were impressed with its aims.

### **Kingfisher Nest Site Project**

A project to provide potential nest sites for kingfishers on the Middle Level Main Drain was developed and three sites were created between Morton's Bridge and North Hook Bridge. Bushes which had actual and potential kingfisher sites below them had been removed in this area to allow bank reprofiling so the sites were created as mitigation.



The design allowed an otter holt to be built in the bottom half. In the upper half a silt burrowing area was created behind holes in the sheet piles to provide opportunities for kingfishers to create their own nest sites. 26 perching posts for kingfishers were installed at 350 meter spacings between Morton's bridge and North Hook Bridge to replace sites lost in bush removal.

### **Hazel Coppice Project**

All the 720 hazels planted in January are growing well at the Pingle Bridge site. Weed control by herbicide and mowing is being carried out.

### **Willow Revetment Trial, Ransonmoor**

A trial to use living osier willows as a bank revetment and stabilising method suffered a set back during the winter when low water levels exposed their roots but an alternate source of willows has been located and the trial will continue.

### **Badger Management**

Badger holes undermining the east bank of Monks Lode have had non-return doors fitted under licence by CC to allow exclusion of the animals and bank restoration after 21 days of non-use. Woodwalton Fen NN Reserve staff are assisting with the required regular checks.

### **Bank Vegetation Maintenance Management**

The Middle Level Operations procedure of early and regularly mown bank tops and unmown water margins are providing good feeding opportunities for barn owls and excellent nesting habitat for reed warblers and great crested grebes. The retention of an emergent vegetation strip at the water margin is providing good conditions for fish spawning, see Waterway Breeding Survey below.

### Survey & Advisory

The production of the Middle Level IDB Guidance Manual, in preparation by CC, was held back to await the production of two key national guidance publications from ADA, Defra and Natural England – IDB Biodiversity Action Planning, (A guide and template for the production of IDB Biodiversity Action Plans, Web version available at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/enviro/fcd/policy/idbrev/idbbapguidance.pdf> ), and The Drainage Channel Biodiversity Manual, (a comprehensive revision of the ‘best practice’ manual on integrating wildlife and flood risk management, Web version available at <http://naturalengland.communisis.com/NaturalEnglandShop/product.aspx?ProductID=e2dae3b7-f789-40e8-b0f6-8cf8a1637032> ). The ML IDB Guidance Manual draft will be revised to compliment and refer to the guidance in these publications.

A report was completed following surveys that assessed the potential environmental impact of the guillotine door replacement and indicated mitigation measures at Salter’s Lode.

A Waterway Breeding Bird Survey of the Twenty Foot Drain from Beggars Bridge to Holloway Bridge was carried out. The May transect revealed a high density of reed warblers holding territories, due to the good fringe of emergent vegetation left according to Operations Manual guidance. Very extensive fish, (chiefly carp), courtship activity was also taking place among the submergent vegetation at the margins of the Twenty Foot indicating good spawning conditions had been achieved.

14 kilometres of the Sixteen Foot Drain between Horseway and Cotton’s Corner were surveyed (on bicycle), for breeding birds and increased numbers of reed warblers were also recorded there.



*A reed warbler, one of the species that is benefitting from more emergent vegetation being retained at the edges of Middle Level waterways that provides both feeding and nesting habitat.*

Bill Fen Marina planning application site checked and confirmed for water vole occupation, a report was submitted.

A range of other MLC rivers and drains were informally surveyed & photographed. Digger drivers were met and advised on appropriate management for water voles and biodiversity.



### **Liaison and Communication**

In addition to IDB and ML Users and Conservation Committee meetings, a range of external meetings were attended and contacts maintained with organisations and groups including the Fenland Environmental Partnership, (Fenland District Council), Water for Wildlife Group (Wildlife Trusts), Eastern Region Mink Control Group, Ouse Washes Strategy Group, Cambs & P'bro Biodiversity Partnership and also Cambridgeshire Mammal Group (otter surveys, etc.), Kingfisher Bridge Trust liaison meeting, Kings Lynn Angling Association (otter project), Plantlife (BAP plant species surveys).

A return visit was hosted for Chris Manning, Environmental Officer at Lindsey Marsh IDB and two other Lincolnshire IDB Conservation Advisors on 27<sup>th</sup> May and a tour of the district was given, visiting various biodiversity project sites.

### **Publicity & Presentations**

A press release on the Water Vole Project was sent to local and regional media contacts and an article in the ADA Gazette emphasised the MLC's contribution to biodiversity targets and mink control. Cliff Carson (CC) was invited to speak about it on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire on 9<sup>th</sup> September.

A press release on the Pingle Bridge Hazel Coppice Project was circulated to local media contacts and piece on it also appeared in the ADA Gazette.

The Middle Level Commissioners contribution to biodiversity in the management of its waterways was the subject of a presentation made by CC to delegates from organisations throughout the region at a national seminar for Local BAP stakeholders at St Johns College, Cambridge in mid July. The MLC was again selected as an example of a body that is at the forefront of carrying out its biodiversity responsibilities.

A presentation on the practical biodiversity actions being carried out in the Middle Level was made by CC at a Natural England seminar on IDB BAPs for IDB representatives from all parts of the country on 23<sup>rd</sup> July. A similar presentation was made at the ADA Catchment 08 event on September 18<sup>th</sup>.

CC manned an Eastern Region Mink Control Group stand at the Fenland Country Fair, Stow-cum-Quy on 24<sup>th</sup> August to publicise the Middle Level Mink Control Scheme that will be a core part of the ML Water Vole Support Project.

CC was asked to make a video contribution to a Sainsbury Arts Centre project at UEA called 'Mapping Norfolk'. The six minute piece was part of an exhibition at the centre and was posted on the internet. CC talked about how the fens might have looked prior to drainage and the Middle Level Otter Recovery Project. It ran from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 31<sup>st</sup> August.

### **Training**

CC attended a water plant identification session lead by Tim Pankhurst at Woodwalton Fen on 12<sup>th</sup> May and also a Water Vole Management and Mitigation Seminar at the London Wetlands Centre on 4<sup>th</sup> October.

Cliff Carson. Environmental Officer.