

Environmental Officer's Report - November 2008 to April 2009

Habitat & Species Management

The ML Water Vole Support Project

The two main parts of this Biffaward funded project got underway. The control of water



voles' chief predator was addressed with the inauguration of the Middle Level Mink Control Scheme. A meeting of about 40 landowners, managers and interested individuals prepared to undertake mink control on a voluntary basis was held at Parkfield Pavilion, Wimblington in January when traps and rafts were distributed.

As a trial, golf balls treated with mink lure are being hung in the cage traps. The method is proving initially effective in attracting mink to the traps.

The habitat creation element of the project was also started in January with the installation of 90 metres of coir rolls, pre-planted with sedges and a variety of marginal water plants. Contributions to the project from the Environment Agency and Cambs & P'bro Biodiversity Partnership funded a further 30 metres each, making a total of 150 metres installed. Three sites were selected on the Sixteen Foot Drain, the Forty Foot Drain and on Whittlesey Dike. Two underlying support methods were trialled, willow faggots and soil membrane. Because of the short lengths installed at each site and the learning process of a new method, costs worked out at circa £40 per metre but longer installation lengths and the experience gained will bring economy of scale and costs for longer lengths are likely to be similar to or lower than conventional hard revetment



Pre-planted coir roll revetment being installed near Bedlam Bridge.

installation. A further 150 metres of coir rolls planted with a bespoke mix of sedges and grasses is planned for installation at other sites in winter 2009/10.

The ML Otter Recovery Project

A fourth survey of otter sprainting signs was carried out at 68 bridges over Middle Level waterways during April 2009 which showed a significant increase in sites with signs of otter presence. Spraints were recorded at 36 bridges, (53%). The previous count carried out in November 2008 recorded 19 positive sites out of 64 sites checked, (30%). Mink scats were also recorded at nine bridge sites in November 2008 and 13 sites in April 2009.

Further good progress was made on the construction of otter holts in the Middle Level system when machines were working in the area of potential sites. A further seven holts were constructed on Monks Lode, the Sixteen Foot Drain (2), the Forty Foot Drain, Whittlesey Dike, Old River Nene and the Black Ham, making a total of 29 holts built to date.



An otter's spraint on a holt entrance pipe and tracks going into it confirmed the first signs of use for the MLC project.

The first indication of use of a constructed holt by otters was confirmed in February and March with spraints and tracks going into one built on the Great Raveley Drain near Woodwalton Fen NNR.

Kingfisher Nest Site Project

The project to provide potential nest sites for kingfishers combined with otter holts on the Middle Level Main Drain between Morton's Bridge and North Hook Bridge was monitored. The 26 perching posts installed on that section for kingfishers are being used regularly. At present there are no signs of occupation by either species, but kingfishers have returned to a traditional site at Rungay's Bridge.

Hazel Coppice Project

The hazels planted in January 2008 are growing well at the Pingle Bridge site near Upwell on the Middle Level Main Drain. Weed control by mowing is being carried out. Despite several clean-ups, fly tipping at the entrance to the site remains an unsightly problem.

Willow Revetment Trial, Ransonmoor

This project was set up with the aim of trialling willows as a natural revetment method to protect IDB drain margins where a high summer and winter water level differential prevails. A source of willows for osier sets and willow faggots was located at Waterbeach via Peter Carter. The willow faggots were installed horizontally behind new osier sets. Some sedge clumps were harvested from existing beds and placed behind the faggots to encourage natural vegetation protection. The trial continues.

Badger Management

Badgers burrowing in the east bank of Monks Lode were eventually successfully encouraged to return to their main sett by the use of non-return doors fitted under licence from Natural England. An extension to 15th December was required due to a badger burrowing back into the most extensive site but after 21 days of non-use the tunnels were collapsed and the banks restored. Chain-link fencing was installed just below soil surface to prevent re-occupation while new grass was established. Woodwalton Fen NN Reserve staff assisted with the required door checks every three days. No signs of attempted re-occupation at the repaired sites have been recorded.

Bank Vegetation Maintenance Management

The Middle Level Operations procedure of early and regularly mown bank tops and unmown water margins continues to provide good protective swards on the tops and sides that also benefit voles and shrews and the barn owls that prey on them. Great crested grebes and other riparian species continue to benefit from the nesting opportunities provided by the unmown water margins.

Survey & Advisory

IDB Guidance Manual is in the process of revision and will be circulated in due course. The Middle Level Operations Manual was reviewed with the Operations Engineer and his Assistant. Agreed amendments will be included in a revised version with improved maps. Selected MLC rivers and drains were monitored & photographed. Digger drivers were met and advised on appropriate management for water voles and biodiversity.

Agreement was reached with The Wildlife Trust, Cambridgeshire, for them to carry out the collation of information and desk-top work for the forth-coming production of IDB Biodiversity Action Plans by April 2010, required under the IDB Review Implementation Plan.

Publicity & Presentations

An article and pictures submitted to the ADA Gazette featured the coir roll trial revetment installations on Middle Level drains in the Spring 2009 edition. A press release on the Mink Control Scheme element of the Water Vole Project was sent to local and regional media contacts. Biffaward featured the Middle Level Water Vole Support Project in their national newsletter.

Liaison and Communication

A newsletter, 'The Natural Level', was produced featuring information about wildlife and conservation matters in the Middle Level area. It was circulated to all IDB Board Members and other interested parties in December. Further issues will be produced when sufficient material of interest is available.

Visitors to view and be briefed on MLC Projects included The Cam Conservancy, (coir rolls & otter holts), British Waterways, (Kingfisher nest sites) and College of West Anglia, (potential mink control training).

Colin Sparkes (River Foreman), Dr Philippa Noon, (River Manager), Ralph Honey, (Deputy River Foreman) from the Conservators of the River Cam and Peter Duthie (Cambridgeshire County Council, Countryside Access Team) enjoyed a windy visit to view the MLC coir roll revetment work on the Forty Foot Drain at Puddock Bridge.



Two UEA post graduate students have been assisting CC with ML otter and water vole surveys and gaining experience in field work and identifying mammal signs.

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), Wetland Vision Group, (Natural England), 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.)

Training

CC attended a 'Wildlife and the Law' course during March.

Cliff Carson
Environmental Officer