

Environmental Officer's Report - April 2009 to October 2009

Habitat & Species Management

The ML Water Vole Support Project

The coir rolls that were installed on the Middle Level system as the habitat creation element of this project have thrived at the three trial sites. The selection of marginal water plants and sedges that had been pre-established in the rolls developed quickly and provided an effective and at times colourful natural revetment. The long-term permanence of the protection was indicated by the natural development of further vegetation growth on the river side of the revetment.



Purple Loosestrife together with Yellow Flag, Lesser Pond Sedge, Soft Rush and Reed Canary Grass combine to protect the bank edges and adds an attractive feature to the margins of the Sixteen Foot at Bedlam Bridge. In the background, further new plant growth in front of the stabilizing coir rolls is consolidating the revetment.

Further sites for trial coir roll installation in January will be selected using rolls planted mainly with Greater and Lesser Pond Sedge, species that give good cover for water voles, robust bank protection and are non-invasive into waterways.

Mink control was carried out by the many volunteers who borrowed traps from the Middle Level Scheme but trapping at more sites is desired and more meetings to distribute information, traps and rafts are planned for the coming winter.

A network of over 200 water vole indicator boards were installed and checked on the margins of 120 miles of drains and rivers to monitor vole distribution change.

The ML Otter Recovery Project

Further otter holts were constructed on Middle Level waterways as part of this project bringing the total to 32. An otter was seen on several occasions near Chain Bridge beside the Twenty Foot River during the summer, an indication that they are becoming more visible in the area. The survey of 68 bridges over Middle Level rivers for otter signs continued.

IDB Biodiversity Action Plans

The production of IDB BAPs as required by the IDB Review process is proceeding on schedule for the 1st April 2010 completion date in conjunction with The Wildlife Trust, Cambridgeshire, subject of a separate agenda item.

The final document will follow the template provided by Defra/ADA/EN but will incorporate individual plans for each Board and the MLC waterways that reflect specific features of interest.

Elver Pass Design

Eels are a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species due to very significant declines in their numbers. Access for elvers returning to the Middle Level system past the new St Germans pump is an important feature that will benefit their distribution. An opportunity to improve the elver pass design in line with the latest developments regarding access ramp and substrate was taken in conjunction with the Environment Agency who are in a position to assist with funding of elements of the structure as the lead organisation for the UK Eel BAP.

Badger Management

The badgers excluded under specific licence from holes in the banks of Monks Lode did not return. Cleansing works where badgers had holes on various IDB ditches were proceeded with under the general Middle Level IDBs licence.

Bank Vegetation Maintenance Management

Minor amendments to the Middle Level Operations Manual were made and new digital maps produced for it by Technical Services Dept. Mowing rotation plans for the bank toe marginal vegetation strips that will prevent woody plants becoming established were agreed.

Well Creek Water Margins Project

A proposal to reduce channel encroachment by Reed Sweet-grass, *Glyceria maxima* and floating vegetation hazard it presents to navigation on Well Creek at Upwell and Outwell by early and regular marginal cutting was put to the Well Creek Trust and the Parish Councils. The aim is to encourage a diverse but non-invasive plant community to develop by targeting the Reed Sweet-grass by weed-boat side cutting from late March 2010 onwards. Appropriate nesting bird surveys will be carried out to avoid possible nest damage. It will be an on-going trial project that may require up to three years management to achieve plant community change. The proposal was welcomed by both the Well Creek Trust and the Parish Councils.

Survey & Advisory

Mullicourt Aqueduct was surveyed and an environmental report produced for the proposed refurbishment works. Water voles, kingfishers and tree sparrows were found to be breeding in the vicinity and otters regularly visit the site via Well Creek. Mitigation measures to avoid disturbance were devised.

IDB ditches were surveyed where maintenance works are due to take place. Machine operations were monitored to ensure compliance with environmental legislation and Best

Practise. Advice on a range of wildlife issues and legislation was given to IDB board members when requested.

Publicity, Displays & Presentations

Displays were prepared for and stands manned at the Fenland District Council's Greener Living Fair, the Fenland Country Fair, (mink control scheme), and the Great Fen Heritage Event. There was considerable public interest in the work that MLC is carrying out for wildlife and biodiversity at each of these events.

An article written for the Mammal Society on the MLC's water vole and otter projects was featured in their national newsletter. A photograph of the coir roll project on the Sixteen Foot River was awarded a first prize in the ADA Gazette photographic competition and two other submitted pictures of work on Middle Level waterways were runner ups.

A presentation on ditch water level management was made at a national seminar on Water Level Management Plans Best Practise during September. A talk to March Wildlife Group on the conservation and wildlife interest of the Middle Level waterways was given on 16th October.

Liaison and Communication

A second issue of 'The Natural Level' newsletter was produced and made available on the MLC web site during July. It was also circulated by email to a range of organisations and contacts. Spare copies have proved useful as an introduction to the MLC's conservation work when meeting members of the public at events or in the course of field work.

Contact was maintained and MLC interests represented with a range of organisations 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 Cambridgeshire Mammal Group (otter surveys, etc.) in addition to attendance at ML Users and Conservation Committee meetings.

Training

Work experience training on water vole and otter surveying was given to James Stevens, a second year Biological Sciences student at the University of Birmingham between July and September. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement as he was able to work independently after the initial training period and familiarisation with the Middle Level system. A significant amount of water vole survey work and data inputting was carried out for the ML project as a result.

Cliff Carson
Environmental Officer