

## Environmental Officer's Report –April 2010 to October 2010

### Habitat & Species Management

#### **Well Creek Water Margins Project**

Regular, early cutting of the water margin of Well Creek at Upwell and Outwell commenced in the spring with the aim of curtailing channel encroachment by reed sweetgrass, *Glyceria maxima* and to eventually effect a change of marginal plant composition to a more diverse community. Before flail mowing took place, a flushing pass was carried out to locate and mark any nest sites. Because few nests were found, both sides of the channel were mown which will allow the project to proceed more quickly than had originally been planned. A series of cuts were carried out and the channel margins were looking in much better condition throughout the summer with the floating rafts of *Glyceria* that had hampered navigation much less prevalent. Signs of water vole activity were seen and stands of sedge started to regenerate where the *Glyceria* had previously dominated. The project will be continued next spring.

In addition, two sites, one adjacent to Upwell Cemetery and the other at Lowside, Outwell, had pre-planted coir rolls installed as a measure to limit *Glyceria* spread at



*Coir rolls established on Well Creek at Upwell Cemetery and (insert), hoverflies pollinating purple loosestrife flowers that are part of the plant mix in the rolls.*

narrow sections of the Creek and to improve the amenity value of the margins. A total of 100 metres was installed and had become established by mid-summer with a variety of insects visiting the purple loosestrife flowers.

### **Sedge Bed Nursery**

A very small sedge bed has been established at a corner of a MLC field at Salter's Lode as a trial nursery area to grow sedge plants for later translocation as natural drain revetment. The sedge turfs became available from a ditch-reprofiling requirement on an IDB ditch.

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

Further along the Well Creek, east of Nordelph, further coir rolls were installed as part of the ML Water Vole Support Project. Additionally, 140 metres of sedge plugs at 5 plugs per metre were planted directly into marginal ledges created to establish a natural revetment of greater and lesser pond sedge. The aim is to trial a lower cost alternative to coir roll revetment that will not only provide good habitat for water voles and other species but also help to stabilise the toe of the bank where light soils are prone to slippage.

Coir rolls were installed at two further sites on Whittlesey Dike at Cock Fen and on Beville's Leam near Ponders Bridge. A total of 150 metres of coir roll was installed at the three sites.

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

Monitoring of otter distribution continued at 68 bridges over Middle Level waterways and the April survey had positive signs of spraints, (territorial marking), at 40 of them, (59%), indicating continued expansive use of the system. The number of mink signs recorded at bridges is going down, probably as a result of the otters increased presence. The three-year Project comes to an end in December and further holts will be installed with the remaining funds.

### **Additional Holts and Kingfisher Sites**

As part of the mitigation actions relating to the refurbishment of Mullicourt Aqueduct and the Ramsey Hollow Pumping Station works, two combined otter holts and kingfisher sites were constructed near each site in June.

Co-operative Farms at Coldham sought advice on otter holt construction and paid for the installation of one on the Old River Nene beside their farm there in July.

### **Elver Passes**

In addition to the elver pass planned for installation at St Germans Pumping Station when contractor's works are completed there, discussions are being held with the Environment Agency regarding the feasibility of installing one at Salter's Lode from the Tidal River Ouse into Well Creek. Lock opening may not occur at times when elvers need to migrate into the system. An elver pass would enable better opportunities for this BAP species to return to the Middle Level rivers and drains. An invitation to view the elver pass and monitoring system recently installed by EA at Denver Sluice was welcome. EA funding support for the Salter's Lode pass would normally be forthcoming but Government cut-backs may have a bearing on this.

### **Mitten Crabs**

The expansion of non-native mitten crabs continues with reports of them active to Pingle Bridge on the ML Main Drain from the seaward end.

### **Publicity, Displays, Presentations**

As in previous years, displays of the Middle Level's conservation work were taken to stands at the Fenland District Council's Green Fair and the Fenland Country Fair in August.

A presentation on 'Ditch Management for bank stability and conservation' was given at a Natural England workshop at George Munn's Farm, Chatteris on 29<sup>th</sup> September.

The Ditching and Water Voles Workshop, (see below), was reported in the Autumn issue of the ADA Gazette.

### **Training**

A workshop for ditching machine operators and their managers was jointly organised with the Bedford Group of IDBs and hosted at the Middle Level Offices and at Ransomoor DDC. Diana Ward, Conservation Advisor to the Bedford Group and I gave presentations on legal and practical aspects of working where water voles are present followed by a field visit to view their signs in typical ditches. About 30 people attended from IDBs and contractors and the general consensus was that it was a useful event. Other opportunities for joint training events are being considered.



*A good turnout for the joint training event for machine operators on ditching where water voles are resident.*

A conference on the Conservation of Rivers was attended at York in September.

### **Survey & Advisory**

#### **The Curf Fen and Ransomoor Water Vole Survey**

The availability of a post graduate student from UEA, Yuping Chen, seeking a water vole survey project for her dissertation presented the opportunity for a re-survey of Curf Fen and Ransomoor District ditches five years after the original survey carried out by the Wildlife Trust. Additional survey volunteers were recruited and funding for their travel costs was sought and generously offered. The survey was carried out in April, May and June to a meticulous standard using canoe and walking survey methods. An initial academic report has been received from Yuping and the indications are that the distribution and numbers of water voles present has increased, particularly where ditch management has been carried out, a finding that supports the view that water voles have a

stronghold in the Middle Level because of regular ditch maintenance, rather than in spite of it. A more readable version of the survey, (with fewer statistics), is in preparation for future circulation.

Advice on a range of wildlife issues and legislation was given to IDB board members as required. Works required by the contractors at a reedbed County Wildlife Site where breeding birds and nesting water voles were present was negotiated with Natural England. Environmental surveys were carried out in relation to various proposed IDB and MLC works and reports prepared.

### **Liaison and Communication**

Meetings were held representing MLC environmental interests with the usual range of organisations.

I was invited to join the ADA Environmental and Technical Committee and have attended two meetings in May and October.

### **The Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Action Plan**

A second abbreviated version of the IDB BAPs launch meeting was held on 22<sup>nd</sup> April for Board Officers that had been unable to attend the original launch date.

Two initiatives from the Plan were entered in the Association of Drainage Authorities and Natural England's IDB BAPs competition. The Middle Level Otter Holt Plan won the Large Scale Initiative and the Middle Level Kingfisher Site Creation Plan was a runner up in the Small Scale Initiative section. Presentations of prizes of £125 of vouchers for Natural History books or equipment and the opportunity of a period of supportive liaison with Natural England were made at the ADA Flood Management 2010 event at Peterborough.

The Fenland Drainage Ditch Project Steering Group has been re-focussed to provide support for the IDB BAP process and a further four IDB members in addition to the three existing representatives have been recruited to it to give a wider geographical spread of involvement. The new name for the meeting will be the Drainage Board Conservation Group. There will be a single annual meeting of the group and then a larger workshop meeting of all District Officers (or Chairmen as appropriate) of all the Boards in the Middle Level BAP Partnership. The first of these meetings is planned for the morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2010 at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March. This will focus on giving advice to District Officers on how to tackle the IDB BAP actions for their boards, the reporting of actions carried out and dealing with questions and queries on this new aspect of work.

Future workshop meetings will be held in spring with the smaller Group meetings held in autumn.

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