

## **Environmental Officer's Report – November 2010 to March 2011**

### **The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project**

This three-year project is reaching completion with an increase in holt building activity to maximise the remaining resources. The original project target was to build 33 holts. Due to improved efficiencies the total constructed to date is 67, 28 of them in the last five months. A further three holts are planned to be constructed, bringing the final total to 70. This is the largest otter holt building project in the UK undertaken by anybody, conservation or otherwise. It has provided a network of secure sites located throughout the Middle Level system. In a catchment that had limited natural sites, otters can now move about the waterways and find a lying-up site in every river or channel. The survey for otter spraints at 68 bridges over ML waterways in November 2010 recorded positive signs at 53% of bridges, compared with 29% three years ago.



*An otter holt in the process of construction alongside a Curf & Wimblington Combined IDB drain.*

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The internal infra red holt cameras are yielding records of visits. The first viewing of an otter visiting a constructed holt occurred when the SITA Project officer was present to assess the success of the project they had funded. Full marks for us and the otters! Video clips from inside the holts can be viewed via a link at the Middle Level web site, [www.middlelevel.gov.uk](http://www.middlelevel.gov.uk) As well as otters, other animals visiting the holts have included wood mice, mink and fox.

### **The Middle Level Water Vole Support Project**

The mink control element of this project continued with over 170 traps on loan at 40 locations. At some sites where mink are known to be present they have proved difficult to trap this spring but elsewhere there have been successes. Peter Carter trapped 18 mink on one section of the Well Creek between The Aqueduct and Nordelph in 2010. An increase in water voles and riverside birds has been observed there.

The Environment Agency made a further £2,000 contribution to the project for water vole habitat creation and pre-planted coir rolls will be installed on the Forty Foot River and the Old River Nene this spring.

## **IDB BAPs**

The main focus of work for the IDB Biodiversity Action Plans during the period was the construction of otter holts so that they could be funded by the Otter Project. The target for IDBs was 11 holts but in the end 27 holts were built within or adjacent to 16 IDB Districts. A press release on the Otter Project and the contribution that Middle Level IDBs have made to it is planned for the near future.

Barn owl and bat box installation will feature in the next focus of effort for IDB BAPs.



*Warboys, Pidley & Somersham IDB were one of the first boards to have a bat box erected. This box has been specially designed to offer opportunities for several different bat species to roost. It also incorporates a slate to act as a heat sink. It was sited on the south-facing side of a new building at Kelvin German's Rookery Farm.*

An IDB BAPs meeting for District Officers, Chairmen and those directly involved with the management of board drains was held at Oliver Cromwell Hotel on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December. It was well attended and presentations on several different topics were made including the reasons for creating biodiversity, opportunities for improving drains for wildlife, the siting of bat boxes and barn owl boxes, mink control and recording and reporting work. This was followed by an open forum where questions, concerns and suggestions were discussed.

The general consensus was that it was a useful event and it is planned to repeat it on an annual basis to provide support for and communication among the IDB BAP Partnership.

The Drainage Board Conservation Group, expanded to 13 members to provide more support and representation for IDBs and their BAP responsibilities, met on 8<sup>th</sup> December and agreed revised terms of reference, among other actions. The next meeting is on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2011.

## **Well Creek Water Margins Project**

The regular, early cutting of the water margin of Well Creek at Upwell and Outwell is already showing signs of changing the dominant reed sweetgrass, *Glyceria maxima* to a more diverse and less invasive plant community. More signs of water vole activity have been observed and this spring the method is being extended further through Outwell village to the Aqueduct.

## Bank Protection with Sedge Plugs and Coir Rolls

The trial of planting sedge plugs to help create a stabilising natural revetment at the



*One year on after planting as plugs, great and lesser pond sedge plants show good signs of growth at the margin of the Forty Foot River near Child's Bridge, Chatteris.*

waters edge that is also good for wildlife continues to show promise. Sites that were planted in spring 2010 show good establishment of sedge. While the sections trialled lack the instant bank protection from erosion that coir rolls provide, the method is significantly cheaper and quicker to carry out.

Where coir rolls have been installed on the Sixteen Foot River, the Forty Foot, Whittlesey Dike, Well Creek and Beville's Leam they have thrived and formed a consolidated protective margin that continues to provide bank protection and an attractive display of colour during the summer.

## Badger Management

During February we became aware that a badger hole had appeared a low level half a meter above water level on the drain side of the Black Ham near Bradford's Bridge. Further investigation confirmed that it went all the way through the bank and connected



*The badger tunnel being filled with clay on the side of the Black Ham.*

to badger holes on the landward side. These holes were due to be collapsed under licence from Natural England in July, when the licensing period commences but the hole through the bank presented a threat to flood defence. An emergency licence to take immediate action with a proposed method that protected potential litters of very young badgers was applied for to Natural England. With the co-operation of their local

officer, a licence was granted within two working days and work was able to proceed expeditiously.

Using an infra red video camera to pre-check the section to be dug, the hole was gradually opened up from the river side to enable the burrow to be plugged with clay. It transpired that the bank did not have a clay core which elsewhere has prevented badgers from digging through banks. Because mid February is the main period for badgers to give birth, it was not appropriate to carry out further tunnel destruction but a stock pile of clay was brought to the site to facilitate a quick response if a further burrow through the bank appears.

The granting of a licence to take action during the badger breeding period is a rare occurrence but Natural England are to be commended for their speedy response to our request in this instance. A licence to exclude the badgers from the site and collapse the tunnels on the landward side will be applied for in July.

### **Presentations, Talks and Publicity**

Opportunities to communicate the positive work of the MLC in conservation and biodiversity were taken at a range of talks given to various bodies in the area. Presentations were given to Cambridge Wildlife Trust Group, Brampton Wildlife Trust Group, (a record attendance at this very active group), the Peterborough Branch of the Institute of Civil Engineers and the Ely History Group. A valuable opportunity to speak to conservationists and managers was taken in a presentation to the Fens Integrated Biodiversity Delivery Area, (IBDA) meeting at Hinchbrook Park on 6<sup>th</sup> December when representatives from throughout the region were present.

A fourth edition of 'The Natural Level', the newsletter on wildlife and conservation work in the Middle Level for Board Members and the wider community was produced and circulated by email during November 2010. This and previous issues are also accessible on the MLC web site, an increasingly valuable and cost effective means of reaching a wider public.

### **Training, Meetings and Workshops**

A two-day meeting on the Water Framework Directive implications for eel and fish pass requirements was attended in November, as was the Robson Meeting in February. Other general training included 'Working with Electricity'.

The usual contacts with a range of organisations were maintained and support given to various Boards with a variety of environmental queries.

Cliff Carson  
Environmental Officer