

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 26/04/12

Environmental Officer's Report –October 2011 to April 2012

The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project

The holts constructed by MLC for otters in the Middle Level catchment continue to be used by them in different parts of the system. A holt in the east of the catchment constructed 11 months previously was occupied by a female and two well-grown young during February 2012 for nearly two weeks. Some interesting clips of otter behaviour were recorded and can be seen via a link on the MLC web site. They include views of the family playing together, relaxing and bringing in bedding to the holt, something rarely recorded. Two young otters were recorded playing together at the Hundred Foot (Ouse) Washes in November during the day and a clip of that is also included in the You Tube link.



Four holts were installed at gaps in the catchment network during the period. Surveys of signs at Middle Level bridges continue to indicate otters are widely but thinly distributed throughout the ML waterways.

The Middle Level Water Vole Support Project

The 500 meters of pre-planted coir rolls continue to provide good water vole habitat and self-renewing bank protection at the 12 sites it has been installed since 2009. The sedge plug planted locations are also developing to provide protective sedge banks but the establishment period has been much longer than the coir roll method. Coir rolls are therefore the favoured method of providing naturally renewing revetment in future.



Coir rolls being prepared for installation on the margin of the Old River Nene near Lodes End Locks.

A further 270 meters of coir rolls have been installed during April at six sites, funded by a further grant from the Anglian Water for Wildlife Project and the remaining balance of Biffaward Water Vole Project funding.

The Well Creek Water Margins

Project continues to improve the waterside habitat for water voles and other species by the early and regular cutting of the reed sweet-grass, *Glyceria maxima*. The problem of rafts of free-floating *Glyceria* binding around boat owners propellers navigating this narrow section of Well Creek has been greatly reduced and water voles have re-occupied sites in Outwell and Upwell. It is planned to continue the method in 2012.

Informal surveys indicate water voles appear to be continuing their increase in many sites within the Middle Level IDBs and on the main ML waterways. Activity has been observed particularly early in some locations. There was still ice on the drains where signs of activity were present in early March. Most of the IDBs checked this year show signs of one or more 'hot spots' for water voles within their district.

Mink Control Scheme

Funding has been obtained via the Environment Agency from the Anglian Water for Wildlife budget, a Water Framework Directive source, to employ Peter Carter on mink control during March and April for the benefit of water vole expansion. As last year the focus will be on drains that are efficiently accessed by road such as the Forty Foot, the Twenty Foot and the Sixteen Foot.

Badger Management

A single badger hole appeared in the drain side of Monk's Lode between Conington Fen Bridge and Pole's Bridge during January. As the bank has a clay core and the hole is well above normal water levels it was not considered necessary to carry out an emergency live dig during the badger breeding season. The location is being monitored and an excluding licence will be applied for during July.

A small badger hole appeared in a ditch at the base of the Middle Level Main Drain to the east of St Germans Pumping Station. As this is the thickest part of a clay-cored bank it presents no threat to flood defence but it will be removed and in-filled after harvest 2012 when an exclusion licence has been applied for and carried out.

Badger activity has re-occurred during March 2012 at the Black Ham site where exclusions and repairs were carried out in 2011. Four holes have been dug on the farmland side but only one has excavated much in the way of soil. As the bank had a clay core installed at this point and a risk to flood defence is unlikely. The site is monitored regularly and an exclusion licence will be applied for to be carried out in July.

Evidence of badgers using banks and field margins as feeding areas are present in virtually all drainage board districts and on MLC banks throughout the catchment so these three current incursions into flood banks are relatively minor in relation to the extensive badger population present.

Invasive Water Fern *Azolla filiculoides*

Some patches of this invasive floating plant were seen to persist in several locations throughout the Middle Level system during the winter. Severe cold periods, particularly during late winter, can control the plant but some survive. The weevil that is now

established as a host-specific control agent in the UK is also affected by cold winters. It remains to be seen if additional inoculations of weevils will be required to provide early control of *Azolla* spread.

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation

The Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Manual was completed and launched at the IDB District Officers' meeting in December 2011. It is designed to be both a guide to carrying out the actions in the IDB BAPs and a source of information and ideas for adding wildlife interest to district drains without inhibiting the primary requirement to manage drainage water movement. It is illustrated with photographs of local examples of work that benefits biodiversity and includes appendices with details of how actions can be carried out and where further information can be found.

Hard copies are being distributed to each IDB Chairman, Vice Chairman and District Officer. A PDF copy is available for download from the MLC web site at the Conservation page.



Martin Redding giving a presentation on recent remarkable archeological finds in the Middle Level area to the annual meeting of IDB Officers in December 2011.

The IDB District Officers meeting on 7th December 2011 was a successful event with about 50 attendees. Presentations included De-oxygenation and other threats to fish in IDB Drains and Recent Archaeological Developments in the Middle Level.

The focus of work towards IDB BAP targets during the period has been on putting up bat and barn owl boxes. 12 bat boxes and 16 barn owl boxes have been installed in 12 districts to date.

Elver Passes

The installation of the elver pass at St Germans Pumping Station is in progress. Discussions with the Environment Agency with regard to installing an elver pass at Salter's Lode locks as part of the requirements of the Eels Regulations and the Water Framework Directive continue.

Training & Publicity

Two training courses were given for volunteers interested in surveying water voles and otters in the Middle Level area, one in conjunction with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Environmental Records Centre and one in conjunction with The Great Fen Project.



Volunteers identifying water vole signs in a March East IDB ditch at Binnimoor Fen. The course comprised an evening presentation and a field day shortly afterwards.

Talks on the conservation work of the MLC were given to Little Downham Society and Peterborough Museum Society during the winter.

Cliff Carson
Environmental Officer
12/04/12