

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 01/11/12

Environmental Officer's Report –April 2012 to October 2012

The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project

With the focus of activity during the period on bat and barn owl box installation, monitoring the otter holt network took a lower priority but indications of use continued to be seen. As the previous year, activity at the holts appears more frequent during the harder winter months when their provision is more valuable to the otters in the catchment.



An otter was reported as a road casualty by a member of the work force beside the Sixteen Foot River near Bedlam Bridge on 18th April and the animal was subsequently passed to the Environment Agency for post mortem. Road casualties remain the most frequently recorded deaths of otters in the UK.

A second otter holt was constructed for the Co-operative Farms at Coldham during August as a contract funded by their Habitat Heroes project. The total of otter holts constructed in the Middle Level catchment is 72.

The Middle Level Water Vole Support Project

The 768 meters of pre-established coir roll revetment installed in the Middle level system at 18 locations over the last four years continues to thrive, including 270 meters installed during April this year. Its ability to establish an instant barrier to further erosion and to allow consolidation at its base to produce a regenerating margin at vulnerable sections of bank has been found to be a continuous process.



Above, new coir rolls installed on the Great Raveley Drain. Right, established rolls on the Forty Foot River near Puddock Bridge.

Informal surveys indicate that water voles continue to maintain a widespread distribution throughout the Middle Level catchment, especially in IDB drains and ditches.

The ML Mink Control Scheme

The Middle Level Mink Control Scheme was promoted, as in previous years, at the Fenland Country Fair in August. A two-month trapping campaign on the ML main rivers, funded by the Environment Agency, is being carried out in October, November and December. While reports of mink appear down, scat signs at bridges suggest they remain widespread, perhaps becoming less obvious in their behaviour.

The Well Creek Water Margins Project

This project, designed to change the dominant vegetation on the margins of Well Creek in Upwell and Outwell from the troublesome sweet reedgrass, *Glyceria maxima*, to a more diverse and wildlife beneficial plant community continued with early season riparian checks and cuts. Work on the project has been carried out since 2008 and the benefits of early spring cutting of the *Glyceria* are observable by the significant reduction in the floating rafts of the plant that formerly caused problems for navigators through the villages.



Above left, the expanding margins and floating rafts of Glyceria prior to early cutting management and, above right, the much improved channel margins in 2012.

The management method was extended to Mullicourt Aqueduct, where access allowed, in 2012 and will be continued in future.

Badger Management

Badger exclusion licences were applied for and granted by Natural England for four sites in the Middle Level system at St Germans, Black Ham and Monks Lode. All holes showed little or no signs of current occupation when the exclusion gates were fitted and have passed the 21 day no-activity period without use. They are currently in the process of having their tunnels collapsed as cropping and machine availability allows.

Invasive Water Fern *Azolla filiculoides*

The non-native water fern *Azolla* grew extensively throughout the waterways of the Middle Level catchment during the summer with particularly strong growths covering the Sixteen Foot and Forty Foot Rivers. Checks showed that the host-specific weevils were also present and they eventually overtook the growth of the floating weed and consumed it, opening up the surface of the waterways again. It appears this natural control agent is effective even after a cold winter period, as experienced in early 2012.

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation

Installation of bat boxes and barn owl boxes at IDB pumping stations continued on schedule in fulfilment of the various Biodiversity Action Plan targets. 18 barn owl boxes and 22 bat boxes were put up during the period bringing the current total erected to of 32 of each type.

Right, a barn owl box re-installed beside the Middle Level Main Drain near Morton's Bridge.



An elver pass trough with bristle boards has been installed on the tidal side of the new St Germans pumping station. When the plumbing and passage monitoring elements are completed it will enable elvers returning from the breeding grounds in the Sargasso Sea to gain access to the Middle Level system, in compliance with the Water Framework Directive (WFD), the Eels Regulations and fulfilling the MLCs BAP target.



Above, Morgan Lakey and Julian Carlile in the process of constructing the 35 meter elver pass on the tidal side of St Germans Pumping Station.

The Drainage Board Conservation Group met in June. Further copies of the Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Manual were produced and distributed. An article on it was produced for the autumn 2012 ADA Gazette.

The annual IDB BAP meeting will be held on Wednesday 5th December 2012 at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel and will be open to any members of Boards in the Middle Level IDB BAP Partnership who wish to attend.

Training & Volunteers

In addition to the two training courses run for survey volunteers in March 2012, a Toolbox Talk on Invasive Plants and other species was given to the workforce in July.

Occasional voluntary assistance was received during the period from several individuals including two temporarily unemployed environmental consultants, a Polish zoology graduate working in the area and a semi- retired GP. Most of these contacts came as a result of presentations on my work or displays and attendance at events.

In September I attended a two-day national workshop on Diffuse Agricultural Pollution Mitigation Methods in September at Rothamstead Research Station in Devon.

Liaison, Consultation & Advise

Representation of MLC environmental interests was maintained via liaison with a variety of groups including the Fens for the Future partnership, the Ouse Washes Strategy Group, the Middle Level Catchment Watercare Partnership and the ADA Technical and Environmental Committee

Publicity & Communication

A farm Open Day at the Co-operative Farms, Coldham Estate was attended with a display and presentation on the MLCs Otter Project work in June.



A Middle Level conservation display at the Fenland Country Fair.

The Fenland Country Fair was attended over the August Bank holiday with an expanded display in the Conservation Marquee covering the MLCs biodiversity work as well as promoting mink control.

Presentations were given to the Friends of Ely Museum and at the Great Fen BioBlitz Day on

Management for Biodiversity in the Middle Level. A picture taken on the water vole and otter training field day won the Working with Communities category of the ADA photographic competition.

Cliff Carson
Environmental Officer 15/04/12