

## Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 25/04/13

### Environmental Officer's Report –October 2012 to March 2013

#### **IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation**

The focus of activity remained on the installation of bat boxes and barn owl boxes in IDB Districts towards the various Biodiversity Action Plan targets. A further 18 barn owl boxes and 14 bat boxes were put up during the period bringing the current total to 50 barn owl boxes and 46 bat boxes in 34 Districts plus the MLC waterways.



*Above, bat boxes installed at Tebbit's Bridge PS, the Forty Foot near Horseway Locks & the reedbed at St Germans PS.*



*Above, Barn owl boxes installed at the reedbed at St Germans PS, Old Popham's Eau and the Old River Nene at the MLC Offices.*

The box installed on the Old River Nene outside the MLC offices is a multi-compartment design that will offer nesting sites for barn owls, kestrel or stock doves. It is unlikely that they will be occupied simultaneously. There are also spaces left between the cladding panels to offer opportunities for bats to use them as roost sites.

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

Reports and checks for signs during the period indicate that otter distribution continues to be widespread throughout the Middle Level catchment but that overall numbers are probably low.

Four otters were found as road casualties during the period near Warboys, Mepal, Chatteris and Earith with two more found outside the Middle Level at Guyhir and Ely. Hard weather seems to be a related factor that may cause otters to move out of their usual territories and be more vulnerable when cross roads. Five of the six casualties were passed to the Environment Agency to have post mortems carried out by Cardiff University Vet Sciences Department.

Three otter holts were constructed during the period, one in Waldersey IDB District, one on Old Popham's Eau near Nordelph Overspill and one in the County Wildlife Site reedbed at St Germans Pumping Station. The total of holts constructed in the Middle Level is 75 and that element of the project is coming to a close.



*Above left, an above ground otter holt covered with logs and brushings in the County Wildlife Site reedbed near St Germans Pumping Station.  
Above right, an underground holt in the process of construction in the side of Popham's Eau near Nordelph with the assistance of volunteer Stuart Findley.*

#### **Coir roll revetment**

The 768 meters of pre-established coir roll revetment installed in the Middle level system at 18 locations over the last four years, plus 250 meters installed on the upstream sides of St Germans Pumping Station makes a total of 1017 meters installed to date. The Operations Department plan to install a further 250 meters to protect eroded locations on the Forty Foot River during 2013.

#### **The Middle Level Mink Control Scheme**

A two-month trapping campaign on the Middle Level main rivers, funded by the Environment Agency, was carried out in November and December and 13 mink were trapped. Further trapping is planned for April 2013. Other trapping is carried out by IDB members and workers with occasional successes, seven being trapped during the period. The trapping scheme continues to be supported and additional volunteers to carry out mink control within the catchment are sought.

#### **Badger Management**

Four sites on Middle Level waterways had badger holes collapsed under NE licence during the period at St Germans PS, the Black Ham (2) and Monks Lode.

Two badger holes were later located in dense brambles downstream of St Germans Pumping Station. As this is a particularly wide and dense bank at that point they do not present a threat to flood defence but the extensive bramble areas have been removed and the holes will have exclusion doors fitted under Natural England licence when the next period for exclusions start in July 2013.

## **Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership meeting**

The annual IDB BAP meeting was held on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012 at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel and was well attended. The 50 attendees heard presentations on the Water Framework Directive (Michael Nunns, Environment Agency), the more obscure but important flora and fauna recorded in fenland waterways (Louise Bacon, the



*Presentations at the Middle Level IDB BAP Partnership meeting.*

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Environmental Records Centre), Supporting Farmland Birds (Niki Williamson RSPB Fenland Farmland Birds Advisor) and Fenland's first colonists: Bronze Age discoveries at Must Farm (Mark Knight, Cambridge Archaeological Unit).

The next BAP meeting will be held on Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2013 and as before will be open to any members of Boards in the Middle Level IDB BAP Partnership who wish to attend.

## **Training & Volunteers**

For a second year a training course was run on 'Identifying the field signs of water voles and otters' for volunteers on 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> March. An evening presentation of photographs of signs of both species was followed by a morning spent looking at signs on ditches and drains in the locality. 20 people attended the evening presentation, rather fewer on the field day as occasional sleet and snow showers during the morning only slightly restricted numbers but did not dampen enthusiasm.



*Course attendees at the indoor meeting and right, braving a blizzard to view water vole signs on a March & Whittlesey IDB ditch.*

### **Liaison, Consultation & Advise meetings**

The usual 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, the Cambridgeshire Mammals Group, the Biodiversity Specialists Group and the ADA Technical and Environmental Committee.

Environmental advice on Planning Applications was provided on a range of matters including Gaul Road Development water vole mitigation measures, Burnt Fen Wind Farm water vole mitigation, Wind Turbine application considerations – P Sole, ML Watermen’s Club moorings application, culvert installation – Nestle Purina and Sutton & Mepal IDB inlet construction environmental assessment report.

In addition to the usual Middle Level Conservation and Users Committee meetings, the Operations Department hosted a second meeting dealing with illegal fishing issues on 14<sup>th</sup> February and invited Angling Clubs, Environment Agency Fisheries staff and Police Wildlife Officers. A good exchange of information was achieved towards improved communications on the various issues. Two separate meetings were held with Environment Agency staff on the MLC’s responses regarding the Water Framework Directive on river morphology issues and our requirements under the Fish Passage Regulations and the Eel and Elver Passage Management Plans.

Further copies of the Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Manual were printed and distributed.

Meetings were held with Norfolk Wildlife Trust regarding the management of the County



Wildlife Site at St Germans Pumping Station. It was agreed that encroaching willow scrub could be removed and this was carried out in March. To further inhibit the drying out process, the re-creation of channels through the reed bed was agreed for the autumn. A contribution towards costs will be offered by the Trust for this work.

*Left, some of the willow scrub removal carried out at St Germans CWS.*

### **Publicity & Communication**

During November a presentation was given to the Cambridge Natural History Society on the Management of Middle Level Waterways for Biodiversity. The ADA Conference was attended and a prize for winning the ‘Working with Communities’ category of the ADA photographic competition was received.

A sixth edition of ‘The Natural Level’ newsletter was produced and circulated to all Board members and email contacts during December.

Cliff Carson, Environmental Officer 09/04/13