

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 07/11/13

Environmental Officer's Report – April 2013 to October 2013

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation

The installation of bat boxes and barn owl boxes in IDB Districts for Biodiversity Action Plan targets continued with a further 20 barn owl boxes and 22 bat boxes installed during the period bringing the current total to 70 barn owl boxes and 68 bat boxes in 34 IDB Districts and the MLC waterways.



Above, bat boxes installed beside the ML Main Drain at Pingle Bridge, beside the Sixteen Foot River at Cotton's Corner and near a Manea & Welney DDC drain at Manea Fifties.



Above, Barn owl boxes installed beside New Popham's Eau at Black Sluice Bridge, beside the Old River Nene near Bill Fen and beside a Waldersey IDB drain near Waldersey Sidings.

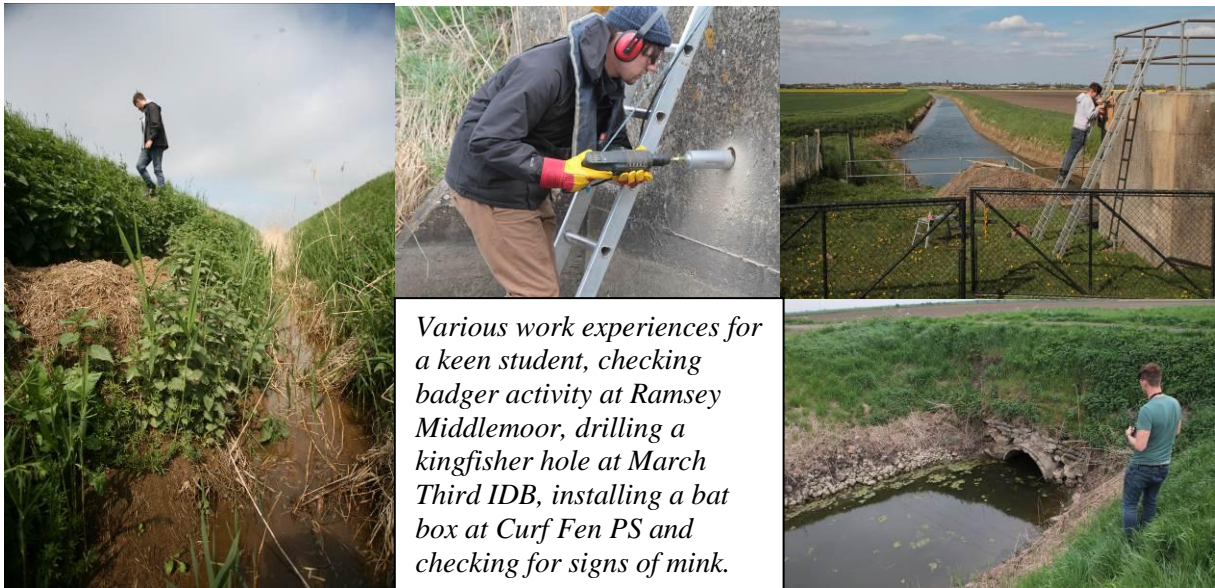
It was a poor year for barn owl breeding as the wet spring appeared to set back many pairs initially but late broods were recorded at several sites.

Samples from local black poplar trees were sent for DNA fingerprinting to check their clone type and ensure cuttings for propagation were taken from pure (non-hybrid) stock. All were found to be pure stock and three of the sample came from trees of a rare clone that had only been recorded at one location previously. This will enable cuttings to be taken and sited at various suitable locations as per the IDB BAP targets.



Above, Black Poplar cuttings planted near St Germans Pumping Station in the old bypass channel, in the former Old Croft River channel beside the ML Main Drain near Three Holes and beside a Manea & Welney DDC drain near Welches Dam.

The above projects and many other elements of the post were well progressed due to the assistance of a natural sciences gap-year student, Carlton Brady who worked with me for four months from mid-April to mid-August. A combination of paid work (three days per week) and voluntary work (two days per week) proved mutually beneficial period as he gained practical experience on a wide range of conservation activities and many more tasks than usual were completed efficiently and safely for MLC.



The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project

The period was a fairly quiet spell for otter sightings. Two dead otters were recorded during the period, one on the Old River Nene near Gaul Farm, one beside the Forty Foot near Puddock Bridge.

An otter holt was constructed under contract on Fillenhams Drain at Fenland Way, Chatteris as part of the developer's mitigation measures for the diversion of Warboys, Pidley & Somersham IDBs drain.

The Middle Level Mink Control Scheme

Reports and sightings of mink appear to have reduced although the District Officers at Ramsey IDB and Hundred of Wisbech IDB continue to catch mink fairly regularly. There are signs that water voles are evolving strategies to cope with mink as predators. The Middle Level water vole populations remain strong and appear to be increasing.

Badger Management

Three sites in the Middle Level had badger holes collapsed under Natural England licence during the period, downstream of St Germans Pumping Station, at Monks Lode and at Ramsey Middlemoor IDB. Exclusion doors were fitted and the holes collapsed after 21 days of inactivity.

Kingfisher Nest Holes Project

Potential nesting holes were drilled for kingfishers at four sites during the period, Curf Fen Pumping Station, a headwall in March Third IDB District, Nightlayers Pumping Station and at a bridge over the Fenton Lode in Warboys, Pidley & Somersham IDB.

Coir roll revetment

The Operations Engineers installed a further 250 meters of coir rolls to protect locations on the south bank of the Forty Foot River near Ramsey Forty Foot during the spring. A total of 1267 meters of coir rolls have been installed on Middle Level waterways since 2009.

Right, by August the pre-planted coir rolls (with purple loosestrife showing well) that were installed in April have created a protected margin that is enabling further emergent plants to become established in front of the revetment.



Elver and eel management

The 2013 summer proved to be a good year for elver passage throughout the UK after decades of exceptionally poor arrivals. The new elver pass at Wiggshall St Germans pumping Station had good numbers of elvers passing through it. Initially the elvers were ‘glass eels’ and the fact that they were translucent made it difficult for a monitoring video camera to pick them up on motion detection. A solution for that is being worked on but the arrival of elvers in quantity is good news. Whether it is sustained in future years or is a flash in the pan remains to be seen.



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Left, a knot of glass eels reaches the top of the elver pass at St Germans Pumping Station, the last leg of their journey from the Sargasso Sea before entering the Middle Level system.

Water Quality and Oxygenation Monitoring

Concerns over potential de-oxygenation situations during the summer on certain vulnerable Middle Level channels were addressed with the purchase of a second oxygen meter so that the two weed boat teams could each be in a position to monitor levels prior to commencing work in reaches known to be prone to poor oxygen levels. The weed boat teams were trained in the use of the meters in a series of three ‘Toolbox Talks’ and a picture of levels is being built up by regular readings taken by the work force members.

Invasive Non-native Crabs and Crayfish

Recent evidence has appeared of the spread of both signal Crayfish and mitten crabs in the Middle Level system. Previously it was believed that signal crayfish were confined to small numbers in the Whittlesey area but recent catches from a local eel catcher have revealed substantial numbers of mature specimens of both them and mitten crabs in the Old River Nene from Whittlesey Dike to the Twenty Foot junction. Both species present problems for native species and mitten crabs damage both the ecology of the waterways by eating everything they come across, especially damaging to fish stocks and by burrowing into banks and under-mining them. Discussions are underway with ML Angling tenants towards some level of control by trapping.



*Left, part of the haul of mitten crabs caught in the Old River Nene east of March.
Right, a large signal crayfish ready to do battle. It will be important to ensure any traps used to control them are fitted with otter guards and bio-security measures are in place to contain crayfish plague that signal crayfish carry and are lethal to our native white-clawed crayfish.*

Survey of Aquatic Vegetation and Water Beetles

At short notice funding became available for survey work around the Ouse Washes as part of the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership and I was able to direct it towards surveys that included four Middle Level Boards as well as two to the south and east of the Ouse Washes. An excellent survey and report was completed by Jonathan Graham (vegetation) and Martin Hammond (aquatic Coleoptera). Among their findings were that the majority of the high conservation value drains are IDB controlled and their intensive management involving regular weed clearance is responsible for their species richness. The report will be available on the MLC web site in due course and Jonathan Graham has agreed to speak at the annual Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership Meeting which will be held on Wednesday 4th December 2013. As before the venue is the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March and the meeting is open to any members of the 34 Boards in the Middle Level IDB BAP Partnership who wish to attend.

Liaison, Consultation, Publicity & Communication

The usual representation of MLC environmental interests was maintained via liaison with a variety groups and organisations. A stand at the Fenland Country Fair was manned to promote mink control and publicise the conservation work of the MLC generally.

Cliff Carson

Environmental Officer 17/10/13