

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 24/04/14

Environmental Officer's Report – November 2013 to April 2014

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation

Progress towards the BAP targets for their completion date of April 2015 continued during the period with 34 black poplars planted and 28 kingfisher holes drilled at 12 sites. The barn owl box total is currently 73 (15 still to install) and the bat box total is 72 (7 still to install).



Above, left to right, black poplars planted at Herbert's Bridge on the Black Ham, at Hundred Farm, Sutton & Mepal IDB and at Corney's Farm near New Dyke .



Above, left to right, potential kingfisher nesting holes drilled in piles at the former pumping station site at St Germans, at Manor Farm Bridge on the Catchwater Drain and in a culvert headwall near Pingle Bridge on the ML Main Drain.

The Middle Level Mink Control Scheme

Reports of mink sightings or activity appear down but it may be because mink are becoming more secretive as control measures reduce the bold and inquisitive individuals. Their control via live trapping continues to be promoted.

The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project

Otter sightings continue to be recorded at various locations around the Middle Level. An otter was reported crossing the road beside the Twenty Foot Drain towards Gray's Moor Pits on 5th February 2014 but sadly one was found dead there as a road casualty 10 days later. It is the same spot that an otter had been killed almost exactly seven years previously. Signs at bridges indicate that small but widespread numbers of otters are active throughout the Middle Level system.



Left, a previously constructed holt at White Fen on Whittlesey Dike was refurbished and expanded using wood from pollarding the adjacent ash tree. Visitors to the original holt recorded in a single night on a trail camera included weasel, mink, rabbit, rat and bank vole. Right, otter spraints and prints were present at many of the Hundred Foot Washes IDB inlets in April.

Badger Management

Discussions have taken place with Natural England regarding the introduction of a new Class Licence for drainage maintenance operators that may be working at badger setts. Recent clarification indicates that unless setts are actually being physically interfered with it will not be necessary to have all persons who are employees or contractors of the IDBs to register to use the licence. Guidance will be provided to Board members, staff and contractors when written confirmation is received.

A Bluntisham IDB drain with 35 badger holes alongside it recently required dredging and after discussions with the local Natural England Licencing Officer it was cleansed under direct supervision to ensure compliance with legislation while ensuring channel restrictions were removed (see below).



The extensive presence of badgers at a site like this does not prevent channel maintenance when urgently required, even during their breeding period, if the method is discussed and agreed with NE.

Coir roll revetment

No coir rolls were installed by MLC during the period but 210 meters of coir rolls were installed on Fillenhams Drain under the Environmental Officers direction by the developer's contractors as part of the channel re-alignment mitigation measures.

Elver and eel management

The elver passage started early at the St Germans Pumping Station elver pass with the first glass eels seen on 31st March. Over the next three days 10,000 elvers were recorded passing through, an exceptional number so early in the season. Similar good numbers of



early arrivals have been recorded in other parts of the country so it is promising to be another good year following the good one in 2013. Physically weighing the elvers and calculating the numbers based on a count of a few hundred individuals every two or three days is currently the only practical way of quantifying them. Motion detection and counting individuals among the quantities of glass eels arriving is currently not possible.

Left, some of the 15,000 glass eels that arrived in early April at St Germans PS.

Measures to allow the safe passage of elvers and eels past Tebbitt's Bridge Pumping Station are being investigated and procedures for the operation of Salters Lode Locks to allow the passage of elvers and silver eels through the structure are being initiated.

Non-native Invasive Species

Two non-native invasive plant species, New Zealand Pgymyweed *Crassula helmsii* and Parrots Feather *Myriophyllum aquaticum* were discovered in March Fifth DDC drains near Creek Road, March. Control action was initiated to eradicate both plants and prevent their further spread into the main drains of the Middle Level system.



*Left, New Zealand Pgymyweed *Crassula helmsii* and right, Parrots Feather *Myriophyllum aquaticum**

Information & Training Events

The annual Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership Meeting was organised and held on Wednesday 4th December 2013 at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March. It was well supported with 50 attendees. This year's talks included presentations by Michael Sly on Thorney Farmland Bird Friendly Zone, Ken Rolfe on the Geology of the Fens and Jonathan Graham on the results of a water plants and beetle survey in drains at six local IDBs.

The date for next year's meeting is the morning of Wednesday 3rd December 2014. It is open to any members or staff of IDB boards with interests in wildlife, the history of the Fens or practical water management issues.

The now annual training course on the identification of field signs of water voles and otters was organised during March as an evening presentation of photographs of signs followed by a morning spend looking for signs in the locality. It was very well attended with over 20 people on both dates coming from a range of organisations including ADAS, the National Trust, Natural England, the Wildlife Trust, North Level IDB, Witham Third IDB, Anglia Ruskin University, All Saints Inter-Church Academy, Community Greenspaces and Ely Wildspace.



Some of the enthusiastic attendees looking for water voles signs in a Needham & Ladus IDB drain.

People

John Drew, a student on a Wildlife Management Course at Easton College is being given work experience on one day per week for two years.

Hilary Conlan, who is undertaking a three-year PhD project on 'Assessing insect pollinator assemblages in relation to their use of fenland ditches and the Ouse Washes' is being given support and advice on drainage board sites near the Ouse Washes.

I attended a Confined Spaces Course during the period that will prove helpful when looking at potential bat roost sites.

Liaison, Consultation, Publicity & Communication

The usual promotion of MLC environmental interests was maintained via attending a range of groups and organisations including the Eastern Mink Control Group, ADA Technical & Environmental Committee and the Ouse Washes Strategy Group.

A talk on the management of the Middle Level waterways for biodiversity was given to March Rotary Club in February.

Cliff Carson

Environmental Officer 10/04/14