

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 06/11/14

Environmental Officer's Report – April to October 2014

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation

Progress with the five-year Biodiversity Action Plan targets to be achieved by 31/03/15 continued. Current situation is - Barn owl boxes installed 90 (target 90), bat boxes erected 80 (target 80), black poplars planted 57 (target 84), kingfisher holes drilled 87 at 47 sites (target 91 sites).



Trials installing bat brick as roosting sites in culverts are proceeding. It was a good breeding year for barn owls and kestrels (brood in barn owl box above) with several barn owls having second broods. The creation of nesting-hole opportunities for kingfishers continued with brick culvert sites being successfully drilled as well as steel piles at pumping stations.

Water Vole Survey & Conservation

From general observations water voles appear to have had a good year and remain widespread throughout the Middle Level system. There are continuing indications that water voles are adapting their ecology to cope with the presence of mink as an aquatic predator.

Discussions with other IDB Environmental Officers were held on a Natural England draft Class Licence for IDBs managing water voles. A final draft based on our amendments is awaited.

Advice on water vole mitigation measures was given to board members for situations where displacement to accommodate ditch modifications were being considered.

Mink Control Scheme

Although reports of mink sightings are down on previous years, small numbers continue to be caught at sites throughout the catchment.

Otter Project

Sightings of otter continue to be regularly reported and signs of use are frequently recorded at constructed holts and bridge sites.

An otter was found drowned in an illegal eel net (no otter guard, no licence tag) on the Old River Nene near Wells Bridge on 11th of August. The Environment Agency Fisheries Enforcement Officer assisted in collecting the fyke net and passing the corpse on for post mortem. Increased eel numbers appear to have resulted in more trapping activity, both legal and illegal. In conjunction with the EA Fisheries Officers efforts will be made to monitor and apprehend illegal eel trappers setting unlicensed and unguarded nets.



A large male road casualty otter reported on 08/10/14 near Goosetree on the A605 was collected and passed to the EA for post mortem.

Badger management

A training session for Middle Level workers and contractors on the requirements of the new 'Class Licence' that Natural England has produced as an option for IDB staff carrying out operations that might disturb or damage badger setts was given to the labour force on 25th April.

Wildlife licence applications, including those for badger exclusion gates, have been changed from manual to online via the Government Gateway. There was a delay in receiving licences for three sites where further action is required but they should still be completed by 30th November.

Bank Protection Trials/ Water Vole Habitat Creation

The existing 1266 meters of coir rolls planted at 20 sites since 2009 are thriving and have developed natural protective revetments with the bonus of good habitats for a range of species from butterflies and other pollinators to water voles and otters.



Coir rolls that were installed on the Sixteen Foot Drain at Bedlam Bridge in January 2005 continue to thrive and to provide good bank protection opposite the outfall from Bedlam Bridge Pumping Station.

Eel and elver passage

At the beginning of April the first elvers of the year were seen climbing the St Germans pumping station elver pass. 10,000 glass eels were recorded in the first three days of April and over 50,000 that first month.

The good news story of elver numbers returning in quantities not seen for many years was publicised



via a press release during July and resulted in articles in the Eastern Daily Press, several local newspapers, an interview on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire and a good piece on BBC Look East broadcast on 17th July. Larger eels are now using the pass and 84,000 elvers and eels have been counted through it to date.

As part of the requirements of the Eels Regulations 2009, St Germans and Bevilles Leam Pumping station were identified by the Environment Agency as High Priority sites to ensure passability. We are joining with other IDBs to have EA preferred consultants carry out reviews and recommend actions.

This will be funded by EA monies. Details of the pumping station and related catchment have been supplied by MLC engineers and myself.

We have recently been advised of several further additional priority sites at Boards in the Middle Level area that EA overlooked originally that will require further details for their consultants. They are Mepal PS (Sutton & Mepal IDB), Glenhouse PS (Manea & Welney DDC), Cock Fen PS (Upwell IDB) and South Brink PS (Waldersey IDB).

Non-native Invasive Species

A further site was discovered where three non-native invasive plant species, New Zealand Pgymyweed *Crassula helmsii*, Parrots Feather *Myriophyllum aquaticum* and Water Fern *Azolla filiculoides* were present in a pond in Hundred of Wisbech IDB at Elm. The land owners were advised and control measures are being instigated by them.

In view of increased concerns regarding these and other potential invaders, MLC organised and ran a half-day course on identifying and controlling non-native invasive water plants on Friday 26th September 2014. It was funded with help from the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership scheme, supported by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The training was given by Jonathan Graham, an experienced botanist who has carried out vegetation surveys throughout the Fens over many years. It was a half-day course and was based at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March. There was very positive feedback from the 59 attendees. Further training courses in conjunction with the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership are being considered for 2015.



Operations Manual Review

The creation of a summary version of the current Operations Manual for publishing on the MLC web site is in progress and should be completed soon.

Presentations, Talks and Publicity

The usual opportunities to communicate the positive work of the IDBs and MLC in conservation and biodiversity were taken during the period.

The three-day Fenland Country Fair was attended during the August Bank Holiday weekend with displays on the conservation and biodiversity projects that are carried out in the Middle Level IDBs. The mink control scheme was also promoted to the attendees who are largely country sports enthusiasts.

A presentation on otters in the Middle Level was given to Otter Class at Streham Community School on 5th September. A group from Doncaster East IDB Environmental Committee visited on 30/09/14 to study some of the biodiversity measures MLC has put in place. A talk on the conservation work of the MLC for an over 50s group will be given at March Library on 27/10/14 at 2pm.

Cliff Carson
Environmental Officer
17/10/14