

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 05/11/15

Environmental Officer's Report - October 2014 to April 2015

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation

Progress with the BAP targets continues. Current numbers are - barn owl boxes 91(target 90), bat boxes 98 (target 80), black poplars 140 (target 83), kingfisher holes drilled 137 holes at 71 sites (target 70 sites).

Bat Boxes

The total of 98 bat boxes installed includes 16 bat bricks installed in tunnels and culverts. Checks have revealed that the bat boxes are starting to be occupied by bats. Signs of use have been recorded at several sites including Bedlam Bridge Pumping Station, Cock Fen PS, Conington Mill PS, Horseway Locks tree site, the Control Sluice and Welches Dam.



Above left, wrens droppings as well as bat droppings in a box on the Control Sluice on the Great Raveley Drain. Above right, bat droppings and earwig cases in a box beside the Forty Foot Drain near Horseway Locks.

Barn Owl Box Installation

One further barn owl box was installed, bringing the total to 91. The 2015 season started out very differently from 2014 with a late start to egg laying for barn owls. Unusually two boxes have been used by tawny owls which usually prefer woodland nest sites.



Above left, two adult barn owls with no eggs laid by 14/05/15 at Burgess Farm, Manea & Welney DDC. Above right, a tawny owl chick at a March Sixth DDC box.

Kingfisher Nest Hole Provision

Progress has been made with kingfisher nesting hole creation. 141 holes have been drilled to date at 72 sites. It was a good year for nesting kingfishers and very pleasing to find kingfishers starting to occupy some of the holes provided. A hole in a reinforced concrete culvert headwall at Burrowmoor Fen, March Third DDC had taken some time to drill in 2013 so it was very rewarding to find it occupied in 2015. Judging from droppings present early in the season, it was first used in 2014.



Above, top left, a kingfisher leaving a hole drilled through a concrete headwall at Burrowmoor Fen. Top right, a bird returning to a hole created near Horseway Locks. Bottom left, a kingfisher bringing a fish to its brood in piles beside the Catchwater Drain at Manor Farm. Bottom right, a male at Ladus Fen outfall culvert site watching for small fish from a perch near the nest hole, drilled through brickwork.

Black Poplar Planting

The target of 50 trees was passed and 140 black poplar cuttings have been planted to date at 52 sites. Several previous cuttings that had failed to 'take' were replaced. Offers of sites for further plantings are welcomed.



Above left, an established black poplar on the Black Ham at Frogshall Bridge. Centre, new cuttings at New Popham's Eau. Right, 25 cuttings were planted along the route of a pipeline through Greysmoor Pits, Waldersey IDB.

Pond Creation

Sutton and Mepal added three ponds to the District at drain junctions courtesy of Chairman Mathew Lata and constructed by District Officer David Stimson. They all included islands with water vole friendly features and provided sites for planting black poplars.



Water Vole Survey, Mitigation & Conservation

Milder than average weather encouraged water voles to become active earlier than usual this season. The Wildlife Trust is repeating a survey of water voles that was carried out in 2005 and 2010 in Ransonmoor DDC and the Curf Fen area of Wimblington Combined IDB. Low water levels in the spring in the Curf Fen area meant the surveys there had to be postponed until later in the season.

The creation of new water vole habitat in ditches created to mitigate the loss of habitat due to ditch infilling has made good progress at Colne Fen Farm. Vegetation placed on marginal shelves has grown well, see right.

Natural England is interested in the project as it has the potential to demonstrate the effectiveness of water removal as a displacement method to move water voles to new habitat over the significantly more costly and potentially stressful 'capture and release' method.



Mink Control Scheme

Small numbers of mink continue to be caught at sites throughout the catchment. Although reported sightings are down, scats and other signs indicate they are still thinly but widely present in the area.

Otters

The 2014 increase in otters drowned in illegal eel nests does not appear to have continued into 2015 but an otter drowned in an eel net was reported at New Popham's Eau in May. Illegally set nets were also reported in the Needham & Ladus District in August. On both occasions the nets had been removed before they were located by the Environmental Officer. In conjunction with the Environment Agency Enforcement Officers, measures are being taken to increase monitor activity in the catchment. Members are requested to be watchful for suspicious activity and report it to the Environmental Officer on 07765 597775 immediately.

Badger Management

Badger activity in banks that requires their displacement by non-return gates has been recorded at two existing sites - Monks Lode (7 holes) and the tidal section of the ML Main Drain (1 hole) and two new sites - the Black Ham (7 holes) and New Dyke (10 holes). The relevant Natural England licences have been applied for to permit the exclusion of badgers and the collapse of the burrows.

Eel and elver passage

The 2015 elver passage season started in early May, a month later than in 2014 and with reduced numbers of small elvers being recorded compared to the previous year. Recently numbers of older, larger eels have increased but numbers are still lower than in 2014. The Environment Agency (EA) however report good numbers throughout the season passing through their Brownhill Staunch elver pass so overall numbers may be good.

MLC are working with EA to establish that the St Germans PS pumps are 'fish friendly', especially for eels returning to the sea for their migration to their breeding grounds. Trials with a large net at the outfall to one of the pumps were carried out to test the catching method in the spring. As a test, various objects (vegetables) were passed through the pump and found to be unmarked. Trials using live tagged silver eels will be carried out during October. Hull International Fisheries Institute are assisting EA and studies of tagged eels movements around the Middle Level waterways will form part of a two-year study to better understand eels migratory movements around and out of a below-sea level catchment.

Operations Manual Review

The summary version of the Operations Manual for publishing on the MLC web site has been completed and will be added to the site shortly.

Presentations, Talks, Training and Publicity

A one-day training workshop on Fenland Aquatic Plants was held on Tuesday 29th September. Like the Non-native invasive water plants course held last September it was funded by the Ouse Washes Landscape Partnership scheme, supported by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund.



Jonathan Graham demonstrating some of the finer points of water plant identification.

It was hosted by the RSPB at Welches Dam, Manea and expert botanist Jonathan Graham once again gave attendees the benefit of his experience surveying many local and distant Fenland drains. This time the focus was on native plants, including species that are scarce nationally but have a stronghold in the Fens. Staff and officers from Manea & Welney DDC, Upwell IDB, Sutton & Mepal IDB, Hundred Foot Washes IDB and Haddenham IDB were among the 25 that enjoyed the day. Further courses will be

organised in 2016.

In July a presentation on the environmental work of the MLC was given to a national group of NFU Environmental Officers, followed by a visit to St Germans Pumping Station and elver pass.

Two weeks Work Experience was given to Zoe Nosworthy in August, a local Neal Wade student interested in geography and environmental studies.

In September I concluded a five-year term serving on the ADA Technical and Environmental Committee.

The annual Middle Level IDB BAP Partnership will be held on the morning of Wednesday 2nd December 2015 when a selection of presentations will be given on subjects of interest to IDBs. It is open to any members, staff or ratepayers of IDB boards with interests in wildlife, the history of the Fens or water management topics.

Cliff Carson Environmental Officer 06/10/15