

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 28/04/16

Environmental Officer's Report - October 2015 to April 2016

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Support and Implementation

The completion of the five-year Biodiversity Action Plans of the Middle Level BAP Partnership IDBs provided an opportunity to publicise the environmental targets achieved. A press release issued on 1st December 2015 received widespread coverage locally and regionally. The Eastern Daily Press ran two 2-page spreads on successive weekends and the Cambridgeshire Times ran a 3-page spread on a third weekend in December.

Social media is an increasing means of communicating news and the story was featured on several web sites including The Great Fen Project and the Ouse Washes Landscape Project with linking Twitter messages. In January, BBC Radio Cambridgeshire transmitted a live interview from the site of the BAP's first kingfisher hole to be adopted in March Third DDC District. The current BAP targets totals are - barn owl boxes 91, bat boxes and bricks 108, black poplars 150 kingfisher holes drilled 152 at 82 sites. Discussions with other IDB ecologists are taking place as part of an ADA initiative to produce guidance for the creation of a new series of BAP targets.

Bat Boxes

Checks for signs of occupation during the previous summer at some of the installed 108 bat boxes and bricks turned up signs at a further five sites bringing the total used to 11.



Above left, a 'woodcrete' bat box installed near a Board drain at the Hundred Foot Washes IDB was adopted by bats the year after it was sited.



A bottom board from a panel bat box sited on Duncombes Pumping Station beside the Twenty Foot Drain in March & Whittlesey IDB District showed the first signs of occupation, probably by pipistrelles.



A tawny owl in residence at a box at Fairy Holt in Sutton & Mepal IDB.



A pair of barn owls in a box at Aspen Farm, Curf & Wimblington Combined IDB.

Barn Owl Boxes

Winter and early spring checks at some of the 91 barn owl boxes revealed some early nesting stock doves and some boxes where barn owls were already in residence.

Kingfisher Nest Hole Provision

A further 10 kingfisher holes were drilled at 8 sites bringing the total to 152 holes at 82 sites. After season checks at existing holes revealed a further two sites that had been used by kingfishers in 2015 making nine sites known to have been used last year.



A potential kingfisher hole drilled in a hollow drain-side willow in Swavesey IDB



A drilling rig being used to create a hole in piles at Purlis Bridge PS, Manea & Welney DDC.



A winter check at a hole created in a brick headwall in Upwell revealed a mass of tiny fish bones that confirmed it had been used in 2015.

Black Poplar Planting

150 black poplar cuttings have been planted to date at 56 sites. Previous cuttings that had failed to 'take' were replaced. Offers of sites for further cuttings are welcomed.

Water Vole Survey, Mitigation & Conservation

Ruth Hawksley carried out a repeat of water vole surveys that were carried out in 2005 and 2010 in Ransonmoor DDC and Curf Fen District with the assistance of staff and volunteers from The Wildlife Trust and the Cambridgeshire Mammal Group. A survey report is in draft and near completion. Results indicate no observable change in the number of water voles signs over the past 10 years, which is very encouraging against a background of national decline. Results support previous indications that these drainage districts, collectively with many others in the Middle Level, are at least a regionally important stronghold for water vole and probably of national importance. A press release publicising the survey results is being prepared for circulation.

Mink Control Scheme

There has been an increase in mink reports throughout the catchment. Traps have been set but there were several occasions where mink appear to have been 'trap-shy'.

Otters

Otter sightings continue to be reported in the catchment and the distribution of otter spraints indicate they remain widespread. Two otter road casualties were recorded during the period, at Wisbech and near Ramsey St Mary.

The reports of otters found drowned in illegal nets throughout the Middle Level during the previous period decreased but the problem may still be present. Members are requested to be watchful for suspicious activity and report it to the Environmental Officer on 07765 597775 immediately.

Badger Management

Badger exclusions were carried out under licence at five sites in the Middle Level catchment – Monks Lode (2 sites), New Cut, Black Ham, and ML Main Drain (St Germans). The tunnels were collapsed. New excavations have occurred at Monks Lode and Black Ham so licences to exclude will be applied for again.

Eel and elver passage

The elver and eel passage at St Germans Pumping Station pass started late in 2015 with the first elvers seen on 1st May, a month later the first arrivals in 2014. The passage ended in late December. At just under 6,000 the total for 2015 was very different from 2014 when 91,500 were recorded.

The small elvers (less than 80mm long) and medium elvers (81 to 120mm long) weighed 3.3kg and formed a small proportion of the total weight of eels and elvers recorded which was 28kg, (121kg in 2014). Older, larger eels that may have spent one or two years in coastal waters made up the main weight of eels through the pass.

It was therefore good to hear that substantial numbers of elvers (80,752) were recorded further up the River Ouse at the Environment Agency's Brownhill Staunch elver pass. It will be valuable to compare records at these two sites in future years and gain insight in to what influences arrivals at the passes.

Eel passage trials at St Germans Pumping Station by Hull University and the Environment Agency using tagged silver eels established that they passed through the pumps without being harmed.

Further studies of tagged eel movements throughout the Middle Level catchment are ongoing.

Operations Manual Review

No amendments to the Operations Manual were considered necessary in discussion with the Operations Engineer. A summary version of the Operations Manual was completed and added to the MLC web site.

Presentations, Talks, Training and Publicity

In addition to the successful press release on the BAP targets achieved described on page 1, the usual opportunities to communicate the positive work of the IDBs and MLC in conservation and biodiversity were taken during the period. Presentations were given to groups in Benwick, Chatteris, March, Cottenham and Cambridge.

The annual Middle Level IDB BAP Partnership meeting was held on 02/12/15. 44 attendees heard presentations on Whittlesey Mere by Iain Smith, The Great Fen Project by Helen Bailey, the ML IDB BAP Targets by Cliff Carson and Must Farm Archaeological Developments by Martin Redding. The next IDB BAP Partnership meeting will be held on the morning of Wednesday 7th December 2016.



A layer of wire mesh is buried at the location of a collapsed badger tunnel to inhibit further digging at the site in the bank of New Cut near Speed the Plough.



Martin Redding giving his very interesting presentation on the Must Farm Archaeological site near Whittlesey at the annual IDB BAP Partnership meeting on 02/12/15