

Kingfishers breeding successes continue



Kingfishers had another very successful nesting season in the Middle Level during 2017. While mild winters without prolonged freezing conditions may not be favoured by fen skaters, it certainly has helped the survival of good numbers of kingfishers. Newly adopted holes out of the 93 drilled for them included sites in Woodwalton DDC District, the Hundred Foot Washes, Benwick IDB District and March Riverside.

In some locations steel sheet piles are not available to drill for kingfishers. In 2017, we tried using timber boards to create a vertical face to drill a potential kingfisher nesting hole and tunnel at culvert sites, as a less expensive alternative to steel piles. Time will tell if they attract willing tenants.



Left: volunteer assistant Maureen Barker backfilling silt behind boards to create suitable tunnel conditions for kingfishers at a Manea & Welney DDC site.



Right: a timber culvert headwall drilled at a Hundred Foot Washes site on an IDB drain where kingfishers hunt for small fish.

Volunteering in the Middle Level

Sometimes it is very helpful to have an extra pair of hands when carrying out biodiversity work around the waterways and IDB districts of the Middle Level. It might be holding a ladder when checking barn owl or bat boxes, planting black poplar cuttings, or searching for signs of water voles. If you would be interested in helping out on the occasional day, please get in touch, contact details are at the end. All that is required is an interest in wildlife, a back in good working order and an enthusiastic outlook. With luck, amongst the practical work, there should be a chance of seeing some of the wildlife of the waterways featured in this and previous newsletters. Back issues can be viewed via the Middle Level website, <https://middlelevel.gov.uk/conservation/environmental-newsletters/>

There is another chance to attend a training evening and morning on 'Identifying the field signs of water voles and otters'. Both species are elusive to catch a glimpse of but you can learn to identify the signs that tell where they have been. There is an evening talk showing images of the field signs to look for on Thursday 19th April 2018 from 7pm to 8:45pm. On the following Saturday morning, from 10am to 12:30 on 21st April there is a field trip looking at local drains and waterways for signs of both species in the field. As numbers are limited and there is no charge for this event **booking is essential**. Contact details at the end.

Water voles and coir roll revetments study

In January 2009, the Middle Level Commissioners (MLC) trialled the use of coir rolls that had been pre-established with native marginal plants as an alternative revetment system at three different sites in our catchment. They proved very effective in providing instant protection to eroded bank edges and established a 'beachhead' that naturally regenerated and also offered a more natural habitat than conventional hard revetment materials such as stone, timber or steel. Informal observations suggested that water voles used the areas where the coir rolls had been installed, but no scientific study had been carried out.

In spring 2017, Lucy Stoddart, an MSc student who was studying Conservation Science at Imperial College London carried out a project for her Master's thesis to look at the habitats most favoured by water voles on Middle Level waterways. She installed water vole indicator rafts at 112 sites of five different bank margin types around the MLC system. The research showed that coir rolls were indeed the sites most favoured by water voles. In a newly created section of drain where water voles were not previously present, every one of the indicator rafts revealed droppings on every one of the survey visits. A report of the project can be viewed on the Middle Level web site at <https://middlelevel.gov.uk/conservation/water-voles/>

Lucy has been working on a four-month contract at the MLC as an Assistant Environmental Officer to further her practical experience. She produces a personal blog that features some of the biodiversity work involved. It can be viewed at <https://lucystoddart.blogspot.co.uk>.

IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Meeting 2017

The annual Middle Level IDBs BAP Partnership Meeting on Wednesday 7th December 2017 proved very popular and was the best attended yet. The excellent presentations covered a range of topics given by knowledgeable speakers and held the interest of the 76 participants. Martin Redding made a welcome return and gave an update on further developments relating to the Must Farm Bronze Age site. A stake from a dam at one site that showed the cuts made by beavers teeth was a very interesting find and a physical reminder of the wildlife active in the Fens at the time.



Presenters Martin Redding, Lucy Stoddart and Nicholas Watts await their turn to speak at the IDB BAP Partnership meeting.

Lucy Stoddart gave a presentation on her study of the different types of bank margins used by water voles, especially coir rolls. Nicholas Watts showed how the decline in tree sparrows and other farmland birds can be turned around based on his 50 years+ experience as a farmer and conservationist. Leona Murphy from the Hull International Fisheries Institute (HIFI) gave an update on the research that HIFI are carrying out in fenland waterways. This aims to establish cost effective methods of enabling eels to bypass pumping stations without injury on the return

migration to their Sargasso Sea breeding grounds. Peter Wilkinson then gave his summary of how barn owls fared in the fenland region. His report can be viewed on the Middle Level web site, www.middlelevel.gov.uk. The final presentation was given by Hilary Conlan on human-wildlife conflicts and solutions. She gave examples from her work in Tanzania where bee hives were used to protect village crops from elephant damage and more local studies on the most effective plant species for pollinators on drain-side verges without giving ground to botanical 'thugs' such as thistles, docks and ragwort. **The next IDB BAP Partnership Meeting will be held at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel on the morning of Wednesday 5th December 2018. Booking is required.** Priority is given to members and staff of Internal Drainage Boards in the Middle Level IDB BAP Partnership. Contact Deb Watts at Deb.Watts@middlelevel.gov.uk to book a place.

Little grebes living on the edge

Little grebes are risk-takers when it comes to nesting and raising young. Their nest is often a barely-floating raft of wet vegetation built at the edge, or even in the middle of a drain. A pair that selected a nest site less than 100 m upstream from the Upwell IDB pumping station at Bedlam Bridge were really pushing their luck. Composed chiefly of filamentous algae, it was only a few cm above water but they still managed to raise a clutch of four eggs. By the 9th August, the four youngsters were ready to leave the nest but it was raining heavily. Fortunately, the next day the sun was shining and the pumps had not started running strongly enough to affect the floating nest. The young grebes had abandoned the nest and were being fed selected small fish and invertebrates as their parents took them further away from the pumping station.



In heavy rain the little grebe brood huddle on their barely floating nest.



The next day they leave the nest and follow their parents away from the pumping station.

Elver and eel passage

Elver and eels continued to make their way steadily through the elver pass at the Middle Level pumping station at Wiggshall St Germans during 2017. The total of 50,000 was better than the 28,000 recorded in 2015, but a far cry from the bumper total of 121,000 recorded in 2014.



Sorting elvers and eels into three size categories after they have climbed the eel pass. They are then weighed and counted before being sent on their way to spend eight to 12 years in fresh water, putting on fat and preparing for their return migration to the Sargasso Sea.



Towards the end of the passage season, in October and November, larger and older eels are more common than elvers at the pass. These young eels will have spent one or two years in coastal waters before moving into the Middle Level system.

Floating Pennywort threat

Floating pennywort, *Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*, is a highly invasive non-native aquatic plant that has been spreading throughout the Bedford Ouse, the River Cam and other rivers in the South Level reaching as far as Denver Sluice and the Tidal River Ouse. It forms very dense mats, blocking out light for other species and presenting a hazard for livestock that try to walk across what appears to be a green roadway and then get stuck.

It spreads by forming rafts that break away and float downstream. Any small fragments of the plant will establish and spread. It is important to prevent its spread into the Middle Level waterways if at all possible. Anglers and boat owners are being asked to ensure that no vegetation is carried on equipment, boats or boots from areas outside the Middle Level.

Anyone walking or working near waterways should keep an eye out for first signs of the plant. Further identification information can be found at www.nonnativespecies.org/factsheet/.

Any suspected sightings should be reported at once to the Environment Agency on their hotline number 0800 807060 and, if in the Middle Level, to the Environmental Officer on 07765 597775.



Photo: Environment Agency

Floating pennywort can blanket a waterway completely, blocking out light, creating a hazard to livestock and problems for native wildlife.



Photo: NNSS

Floating pennywort leaves can be floating or emergent and are up to 7 cm across, kidney shaped with crinkled edges.

Otter downs and ups

Otters have suffered a high casualty rate in the west of the Great Ouse catchment during the 2017/18 winter with 10 deaths recorded during January 2018 compared with only one in January 2017.

On the positive side, surveys carried out during winter 2017/18 revealed that otter spraints were present at 43 out of 69 Middle Level Catchment bridge sites (62%).

A family of otters recorded at a site in the west of the catchment was comprised of a female with (unusually) three young. One of the youngsters is disabled, but appears to be managing well despite limited rear limb mobility on land.



Photo: Lucy Stoddart

Contact details

As always, I am keen to hear of any interesting sightings of wildlife or other reports from the Middle Level area. If you have any information that might be of interest for future newsletters, please contact me –

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Photographs - Cliff Carson, except where indicated.