

Middle Level Commissioners Meeting 24/04/18

Environmental Officer's Report – October 2017 to April 2018

Elver and eel passage

Elver and eels continued to make their way steadily through the elver pass at the Middle Level pumping station at Wickenhall St Germans during 2017. The total of 9,500 (50kg) was better than the 5,780 (28kg) recorded in 2015, but a far cry from the bumper total of 94,000 (121kg) 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.

Coir Roll Bank Protection / Water Vole Habitat Creation

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 the sites where coir rolls had been



A water vole latrine on an indicator raft.

installed were 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/>

It is hoped that further coir rolls can be installed for the benefit of water voles as part of the MLC BAP on the Forty Foot/Old River Nene corridor with the assistance of funding from an EA source. Other BAP targets are under consideration based on Biodiversity 2020 guidance.

Biodiversity Action Plan Implementation

A few additions were made to the IDB BAP targets but the main activity was checking the existing installations, as below.

Bat Boxes

Of the 84 boxes erected, 25 have been used by bats so far. Bats may be responding to



*The bat box at Adventurers House, Welches Dam had droppings from a larger bat and a dead Nathusius's pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus nathussi*) bat present. The droppings are from a larger bat, perhaps brown long-eared or possibly Leisler's bat. Checks will be carried out in 2018 to establish if any of the different bat species return.*

milder winters. When checking a bat box on 15th February 2018 at Stratford House Farm, Churchfield and Plawfield IDB it was a surprise to find it occupied by a pipistrelle bat outside the usual occupation period of May to October. This was a new box to be taken up by bats.

A check at a Welches Dam box had a rare dead Nathusius's pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus nathussi*) in it in May 2017. Also present were droppings from a different bat, perhaps brown long-eared or possibly Leisler's bat.

It was encouraging to see in the latest UK Biodiversity Indicators Report produced in 2017, the

long-term trend for a composite index of eight bat species, there was an increase of 34% between 1999 and 2016.

Kingfisher nest hole creation

Kingfishers had another very successful nesting season in the Middle Level during 2017. 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. At two locations timber boards were installed to create a vertical face for a potential kingfisher nesting hole and tunnel at culvert sites, as a less expensive alternative to steel piles.



Black Poplar Planting

Management of the 150 black poplar cuttings that have been planted at 55 sites continues. Cuttings that failed to take are being replaced and offers of further sites for black poplar cuttings are welcome.



The black poplars planted beside the Middle Level Main Drain in 2013 are thriving at left, Neeps Bridge and right, the junction with Old Popham's Eau.

Barn owl boxes

Two barn owl boxes were installed during the period and one was replaced bringing the number erected during the BAP programme to 94, plus six erected previously, a total of 100.



Otter Recovery Project

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 44 out of 66 Middle Level Catchment bridge sites (65%).

Photo: Lucy Stoddart



Recently camera traps have revealed two different families of otters, three well-grown young and their mother at either end of the catchment.

An ADA working group involving Natural England, RSPB and IDB ecologists met to progress guidance to assist IDBs updating their Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs). Guidance around the IDB contribution towards Biodiversity 2020 is broadly complete, work on updates to how best to record IDB biodiversity actions nationally in future following the demise of BARS. The aim is to ensure the focus remains on IDBs setting meaningful actions for delivery, and to instill a culture where it is better for IDBs to deliver more than play it safe and set sights too low.

Invasive Non-Native Species

Concern over the presence of the invasive species floating pennywort in the Bedford River Ouse, the Hundred Foot Drain and in the South Level as far as Denver Sluice and the possibility of it invading the Middle Level system remains. Warning leaflets were produced and circulated, see attached copies.

New Zealand pygmy weed, *Crassula helmsii* was found in ditches in Swavesey IDB. It was given two treatments of Roundup but has proved difficult to eradicate at two other sites in the Middle Level so will probably require further treatments in 2018.

Meetings, Training, Talks and Publicity

The annual Middle Level IDBs BAP Partnership Meeting on Wednesday 7th December 2017 proved very popular and with 76 attendees was the best supported yet. Excellent presentations covered a range of topics, see The Natural Level newsletter for a summary. A new edition of The Natural Level newsletter was produced and distributed to about 2,000 contacts in February.

Meetings of 11 different local or regional environmental groups were attended. Presentations on the conservation work of the MLC were given to six groups during the period, - March Wildlife Group, Cambridgeshire Bird Club, Chatteris Library, Swavesey & Over Wildlife Group, Ely Ladies Group and March Library.

A researcher on BBC Springwatch saw the You Tube video clips of otters in holts on the Middle Level web site and they decided to feature the ML Otter Recovery Project in their spring programme. The construction of a holt was filmed with presenter Lucy Cooke on 4th April at the side of the Old River Nene at Ugg Mere Fen Mill. The item will be shown some time in the two weeks after Springwatch commences on 28th May 2018. It should generate significant positive publicity for the biodiversity work that MLC have carried out throughout their waterways.



The Springwatch team spent a full day filming the construction of an otter holt.



This was the 81st otter holt constructed as part of the Middle Level Otter Recovery Project.