

Middle Level Commissioners Board Meeting 1/11/18

Conservation Officer's Report – April to October 2018

Introduction

Cliff Carson retired in Summer 2018 and was succeeded in July by Peter Beckenham who compiled this report.

Weather-wise the period covered was a notable one. Late-March to mid-April was generally cool and wet with periods of northerly winds and extensive flooding on the major fenland washlands. Temperatures then fluctuated until early May with much of the period from that point on being universally hot and dry. Rainfall was minimal. May was reportedly the warmest since records began more than 100 years ago. Less than two-thirds of the average amount of rain for the month fell, but on average, rainfall for the UK for spring (March to May) as a whole has been near average (BBC).



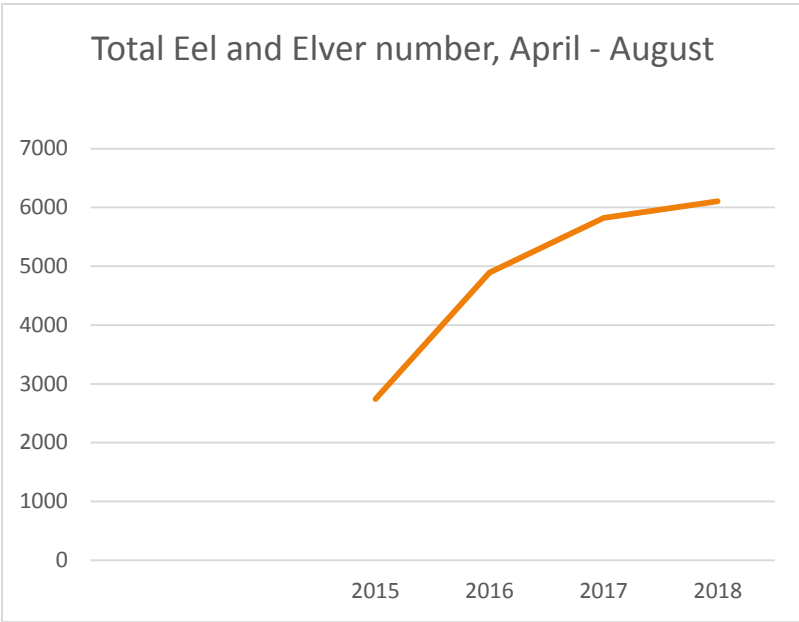
Photo 1

Conservation Officer Peter Beckenham inspecting eels at St Germans Pumping Station

Elver and eel passage

Elver and eel passage continued regularly throughout the spring and summer period, with the first check of the season made on 15th April 2018. Monitoring and data suggests 2018 is not likely to be a bumper year (as 2014), with eel totals between April – August largely consistent with 2017. A look at eel numbers for the April – August period between 2015 – 2018 suggests though that there has been a small recovery since 2015 with this period recording 2743 elvers and eels compared to 6105 in the same period for 2018. Anecdotally by way of context, the EA have reported an exceptional eel passage from their pass at Brownhill Staunch (Bluntisham) this summer.

In early August 2018 the main eel pump tripped out after a brief 'flash' storm which resulted in a period of no freshwater flow going down the elver pass trough to the tidal river. This was restored and discussions are ongoing about solutions to this persistent issue, caused by invasive non-native freshwater mussels clogging up an internal pipe.



Graph showing eel numbers at St Germans Pumping Station between April and August 2015-2018. *An average was used for 2016 as no data is available. Graph not for release.

Badger Management

Site visits in September 2018 confirmed continued badger activity at 4 sites within the Middle Level area, 3 of which involve Middle Level drains (St Germans and Conington Mill – Monks Lode, a further site between Speed the Plough and Speechleys PS will be monitored). 2017 badger returns have now been sent back to Natural England and 2018 licence applications are being applied for. Due to time constraints it is hoped Peter can work under Cliff’s licence this year and review the process in 2019.

Water Voles

Spot checks across the region continue to turn up water vole presence in many areas. Nationally water voles remain a major conservation concern and high-profile re-introductions have been reported in the media from Kielder Forest, Northumberland and Exmoor, Somerset. The Fens however remain a natural stronghold for the species with self-sustaining populations.

Kingfishers

There is little occupation data to report for this period so far, however birds have been regularly encountered along many of the Middle Level water courses, particularly 16ft and the main drain.

Bats

Bat box checks are ongoing but across the region at least 15 appear to be occupied to date. Whilst checking Dissolved Oxygen levels along the Forty Foot in July a bat roost was found at a previously unknown location. At the time of writing this will be revisited shortly for further study. The Middle Level Commissioners have kindly purchased an Echo Meter Touch 2 device that can be plugged into a mobile phone in order to detect and identify bats.

Barn Owls

At the time of writing there are no confirmed broods from boxes on Middle Level Commissioners drains however several have been used by Stock Dove, an amber listed bird of conservation concern in the UK (RSPB), and Jackdaw. Maintenance and further study will take place through winter.

Across the wider region, barn owls, after a slow start due to early spring conditions, probably fared quite well in 2018 with the warm conditions helping boost productivity for late broods. Volunteer Barn Owl ringers/checkers Charles Gunn and Simon Dudhill have prepared this update for Summer 2018:

“Based on reports from the team who monitor MLC sites, barn owl occupation of nest sites in the Middle Level Commission districts seems to be holding up in 2018. Whilst ringers in some parts of the country (for example parts of East Anglia and Somerset/Bristol) are reporting reasonable seasons, other parts of the country (such as East Lincolnshire, Northumberland and North Yorkshire) are reporting very poor numbers of established barn owl sites being occupied – perhaps those areas being more severely hit

by long periods of lying snow around the period of the “Beast from the East”, when hunting would have been extremely difficult for barn owls and adult barn owl fatality may have been high.



Charles Gunn checking an occupied barn owl box at Drysides Pumping Station, August 2018

Generally, eggs have been laid relatively late compared to other years in MLC boxes, again perhaps as a result of the cold March weather and wet Spring, which may have affected vole populations. Also surviving barn owl chick numbers have been relatively low, averaging typically around 2.5 per brood up to mid-August again probably a reflection of prey availability. However, this number has been picking up to around 4 per brood for those ringed recently, the calm dry weather providing excellent conditions for hunting and the early harvest has perhaps exposed more mice and voles to predators. Unfortunately (and perhaps due to the wet spring) a number of failed first barn owl broods have been reported where eggs have been abandoned or not hatched – in many cases though a later second attempt has been successful. In “good barn owl years” some pairs can produce a second brood later in the year although in the small number of boxes checked for a second time this year there has been no evidence of second broods in MLC boxes to date.

As well as the main target species of barn owls there has been the usual small number of breeding successes from kestrels reported in MLC boxes this year. There is also a continuing healthy population of breeding stock doves in the MLC boxes not occupied by birds of prey. The stock dove is on the “amber list” of Birds of Conservation Concern and so it is good to note that MLC boxes are assisting in the conservation of this species.

Finally, and very pleasingly two new barn owl boxes erected by Cliff Carson in Whittlesey District in November 2017 have already been successful in 2018, with a total of five barn owl chicks being ringed by the team, demonstrating that continuing the investment in and expansion of barn owl box coverage across the MLC districts will continue to help with barn owl conservation efforts in the Cambridgeshire Fens.”

Otters

Cliff Carson installed a new otter holt (no.81) at Ugg Mill, Ramsey, Upwood & Great Raveley IDB in April 2018. The process was filmed by the BBC’s ‘Springwatch’ program. Otter checks reveal their presence on numerous Middle Level drains with 1 fatality, on the A141 in Warboys, Somersham and Pidley IDB in April. Fatalities likely to be under reported.

Biodiversity Action Plan Implementation

The working group that met in 2017 to review and assist in the updating IDB BAPs has submitted its recommendations to ADA. A national guidance document from ADA is awaited.

Invasive Non-Native Species/Environmental Issues

Just a few reports of American mink spotted (Forty Foot, Kings Dyke, Old Bedford/Counterdrain) but this is likely due to under reporting.

The hot, dry, challenging weather over the summer period provided perfect conditions for algal growth in the water ways. A substantial fish kill was widely reported from the Nene at March town bridge and passed to the EA. *Azolla filiculoides* continued to be present in Swavesey IDB and a ditch in March Fifth DDC. Parrot’s Feather *Myriophyllum aquaticum* also continued its presence in the latter ditch.

Meetings, Training, Talks and Publicity

The annual Middle Level IDBs BAP Partnership meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 5th December 2018 at the traditional venue, the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, in March. Further details to follow.

Meetings were attended with several local conservation projects – ‘Fens for the Future’ and ‘New Life on the Old West’ run by Cambridgeshire ACRE, which seeks to better connect local people with their green spaces and heritage. A comment was given for a water vole article to be released by ADA. A preliminary ecological report was made for the Stow Fen Pumping Station project and comments were made on ecological issues at three other sites (Block Fen, Ramsey St Mary, South Brink).

A group of three French ecologists that became aware of the work carried out for biodiversity in the Middle Level via the MLC website visited in mid-September to view some of the projects featured in the Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Manual. This was a preliminary visit to make plans for a larger group visit of about 30 during October. Cliff is assisting with showing the visitors what has been achieved.



Above left: A well-used water vole raft; Above right: Cliff Carson in his natural habitat, July 2018