

MMLC

The Natural Level

A newsletter for Middle Level IDB members, staff and others interested in fenland wildlife

IDB BAP Partnership meeting

The annual IDB biodiversity partnership meeting held at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel in March on the 5th December was a very enjoyable occasion with 50 attendees. The talks comprised a thematic look at conservation issues in the Middle Level, from the plants growing in our drains, to birds which are dependent on the food these features help support. Dick Newell from Action for Swifts gave an illuminating talk on the life of swifts, a journey that takes them from the skies of southern Africa to our rooftops in May, and made a passionate call for more nest boxes to be installed to help prevent their already steep decline. **It would be great to hear from any IDB members who are interested in installing a swift box – a range of designs means these can be accommodated on most structures.**

There was an interesting look at the developing, international 'Paludiculture' (wetland farming) movement, the opportunities it offers for peatland conservation and the economic hurdles to overcome. The final talk took us as far back as fenland in the 7th century as our speaker, Susan Oosthuizen from Cambridge University, provided a vivid and educational wade through the grazing landscape that characterised much of the (surprisingly well-populated) region in the early Anglo-Saxon period. It was amazing to hear that many of the concepts behind modern drainage had their roots in these ancient waters. Her book, 'Anglo Saxon Fenland', is highly recommended.

Thanks to Jonathan Graham (Fenland Flora), Andrea Kelly (Norfolk Broads Authority), Dick Newell (Action for Swifts), Charles Gunn (Barn Owl volunteer) and Susan Oosthuizen (University of Cambridge) for giving up their time to talk to us.

The next IDB BAP Partnership Meeting will be held at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel on the morning of **Wednesday 4th December 2019**. 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.

Bats in the fens



Figure 1 Pipistrelle bat roost in a MLC box, Oct 2018

With the help of two licensed volunteers, bat box checks in October revealed a roost of pipistrelle bats huddled together in a Middle Level bat box on the Hundred Foot Washes. These bats would have been using the box as a safe refuge in the day, before emerging at dusk to make the most of what flying insects remained, before beginning a period of hibernation. Amazingly, pipistrelles only weigh as much as a 20p piece but can eat 3000 small flying insects in one night. This box was located on a hawthorn tree at the edge of a copse with limited flight lines – not the most obvious of locations but it obviously offered something important.

At least 15-20 boxes within the Middle Level showed signs of occupation in 2018 including several new sites. Not all boxes were in rural locations, for the first-time droppings were collected from one on the edge of Chatteris in very close proximity to industrial units.

Eels

Eel monitoring at the Middle Level's St Germans Pumping Station took place between April and December and revealed 2018 to be a less than bumper year. Spring passage of elvers saw higher numbers than 2017 but trailed off during the summer and autumn with few larger 'yellow' eels noted too. There were however anecdotal reports of a good year elsewhere in the fens.

Barn Owls

Volunteer Barn Owl ringers/surveyors Charles Gunn, Simon Dudhill and David Garner have been a huge help in continuing to monitor barn owl boxes in 2018, erected as part of the IDB Biodiversity Action Plans. Charles describes 2018 as a rather mixed year with a trend pointing to low brood sizes and late egg-laying. It is likely that the poor weather in March and April hampered hunting and availability of their mammal prey. Despite this the team managed to ring 56 young barn owls and reported several new boxes to be in use – highlighting the ongoing importance of nest box provisioning for the conservation of these birds across the Middle Level.

As well as barn owls there were a small number of breeding successes from kestrels reported in MLC boxes this year. There is also a healthy population of breeding stock doves in the boxes not occupied by birds of prey. At one site we were surprised to find both Barn Owl and Stock Dove in a box at the same time! One or two boxes also supported Tawny Owls – the subject of a nationwide survey this winter by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).



Figure 2 Stunning image of a Barn Owl and Kestrel by Charles Gunn

Around the fens

Could the Middle Level become home to the threatened Swallowtail butterfly?

Britain's largest butterfly whose range is restricted to the Norfolk Broads is threatened by sea-level rise. The Broads are predicted to be inundated by salt water this century therefore new inland habitat needs to be found for the species, the Great Fen has been suggested as a possible location. The species is dependent on the availability of its food plant, Milk Parsley. More information available here: <https://www.sbbt.org.uk/>

A good year for Cranes

2018 was a successful year for cranes in the fens with the Nene Washes cementing its reputation as one of the best places in the country to see them. The reserve supported a record 4 pairs with 4 young cranes fledging to boost this iconic species' foothold in the fens. It was a successful season too at Lakenheath Fen and a pair was even spotted within the Great Fen area.

Two Turtle Doves?



Figure 3 Turtle Dove (image via Operation Turtle Dove)

A South Cambs Turtle Dove group has been set up by concerned farmers, landowners and conservation organisations to help stop the precipitous decline of the species across the region. The Turtle Dove is our fastest declining migrant bird, with a 91% population decline since 1995 and, with the population reported to be *halving* every six years, extinction is a very real possibility. East Anglia and Kent are now the stronghold for this farmland species in the UK. Studies show that the main reason for this decline is a lack of food on

their breeding grounds. The lack of food means birds spend more time and energy achieving optimum condition for breeding/feeding young, as a result the season is shortened. The group aims to help turtle doves through supplementary feeding between late-April and June, habitat management and by sharing knowledge/equipment through a forum of occasional site visits and discussions. In 2019 the Middle Level Commissioners will be looking at applying Turtle Dove friendly measures to banks in hand near St Germans. It has since been suggested that a similar Middle Level Turtle Dove forum might be worthwhile – for example by making savings through bulk order of supplementary seed. Feeding stations do not need to take up field space, tracks, yards and verges are options. **If you are interested in this please drop me a line for more information.**

Wildlife Monitoring and Events

With such a large area to cover and with so much wildlife to see a few extra pairs of eyes and ears would be a great help from time to time. If you are interested in becoming a wildlife monitoring volunteer with the Middle Level Commissioners, or know anyone who might be, please get in touch – contact details are at the end.



Figure 4 Do you know your mink scat from otter spraint?

Volunteering is a great way of enjoying the outdoors and volunteers will be trained in aspects of wildlife ID such as spotting signs of water voles and otters, farmland birds and invasive ditch plants. There will be a chance to learn about the work of the Middle Level Commissioners and, with luck, there will be opportunities to see some amazing fenland wildlife at close quarters such as eels, barn owls, bats and more.

Monitoring sessions are an important way of supporting our conservation work and will run throughout the year, there is no minimum commitment and all surveying/safety equipment will be provided. All that is required is an

interest in wildlife and an enthusiastic outlook.

Dates for your diaries

Several events are planned in 2019 – all free to board members, families and friends but numbers are limited so booking is essential.

Date	Event	Venue/Time	Details
Saturday 2 nd February 2019	Bird watching in the Great Fen	Great Fen area, 1.30pm – 4.00pm	To celebrate World Wetlands Day 2019, an afternoon bird walk exploring the Great Fen
Saturday 27 th April 2019	Water Vole ID and field trip	TBC	Classroom presentation followed by field visit to look for signs of this special fenland resident
Evening of Thurs 26 th Sept / morning of Friday 27 th	National Moth Night 2019	TBC	Help set up a light trap to record these colourful and diverse insects

For further information on anything in this newsletter, or to pass on sightings/photographs (all gratefully received) please contact **Peter Beckenham, Conservation Officer:**

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Thank you