

The Natural Level

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

Issue 12: December 2019

'Don't let native wildlife sink - ship a Mink'

Sightings, reports and camera traps show that, although some control is ongoing, American Mink are still well-established in the Middle Level in 2019.

The American Mink is an invasive non-native species (INNS) widely regarded as having contributed significantly to the decline of Water Voles across the country. This predation is acknowledged in the 2019 State of Nature report "INNS may outcompete or predate native species, as has happened with American Mink and Water Vole" (Hayhow, et al. 'The State of Nature 2019'. P35). The species is a formidable predator also targeting water birds such as Moorhen as well game birds, fish and other small mammals.

There is now growing acknowledgement of the scale and persistence of the mink problem and a need for a strategic, national approach to control alongside existing commitments made in Biodiversity Action Plans.

A trial of the new 'Remoti' device in the Middle Level has been successful and it is hoped that IDBs will be able to support this project and expand Mink control from spring 2020. The Remoti clips to the back of a cage and is capable of remotely monitoring a mink trap and notifying a volunteer/coordinator via text message or email if the trap is triggered. Once set up this ends the need to check traps daily, reducing the onus on a trap checker and thus greatly increasing the area that can be covered.

Such a scheme in the Middle Level will benefit our native Water Voles through the removal of invasive non-native American Mink and continue to demonstrate our interest in and commitment to Biodiversity Action Plan objectives.

Barn Owls

On the whole, Barn Owls endured a mixed year in the Middle Level; a very good number of young owls were monitored by our licensed volunteers but two periods of particularly challenging



Figure 1 & 2: Mink trapped using 'Remoti' and Mink caught on a trail camera near March



weather, in June and October, saw a significant number perish. Conditions in summer were very promising and many owls laid second broods. On one survey a box in Sutton & Mepal IDB was found to contain a remarkable 8 eggs and 2 young already hatched! However, the box was in a precarious position and had to be fixed carefully on the spot. Sadly, by October only 3 young from the brood had survived showing how tough conditions can be.

We have opportunities to put up more boxes across the Middle Level at a cost of £50 per box. If you are interested please use the contact information at the end of the newsletter.

Figure 3 Barn Owl being ringed in 2019

'Egrets? I've seen a few...

Good news stories in Conservation are often overlooked but there can be no doubt that the arrival of a suite of birds to the drains, fields and wetlands of the Middle Level constitutes just that. Prior to the 1990s the sight of any member of the Egret family in Britain would've been a notable event. Little Egrets were the first to arrive in number as they expanded their range from continental Europe. They first bred in Dorset in 1996 and a decade later were found throughout England. Since then however they have been joined by close relatives the Great Egret and Cattle Egret – with both species now turning up in suitable habitats in the fens. In early 2019 a trio of Cattle Egrets spent a substantial period of the winter feeding in paddocks adjacent the Old River Nene near Ramsey Forty Foot. Elsewhere, Great Egrets were seen too and not just confined to the major wetland sites in the county, they have been seen feeding along both the Forty Foot and Sixteen Foot rivers. Their arrival signifies their ability to colonise new areas as climatic conditions change. It also demonstrates the continued value of a well-managed drainage network that creates niches for a range of species to thrive. Egrets have a diverse diet including small fish, crustaceans and amphibians; for Cattle Egrets, invertebrates, particularly those turned up by hooves of grazing livestock, are key. So, look out for these elegant, all-white wading birds – an exciting addition to our fenland fauna.



Figure 2 Great Egret and Little Egret for comparison. Pic by Jeff Hazell.

<https://britishbirds.co.uk/article/the-changing-status-of-the-great-white-egret-in-britain/>

Around the fens

Free trees

The Environment Agency are open to suggestions from landowners, including those of IDBs, for areas of land which are available for tree planting. The scheme stems from a desire to create compensatory habitat to replace trees removed during flood defence works. This also extends to compensatory hedgerow planting. The trees and hedgerow whips will be fully funded by the EA and allocated on a case of first come first served each year.

If you are interested in tree planting on your land please contact the Conservation Officer for more information.

Water Works for the Great Fen

From April 2019 - April 2021, the Wildlife Trust BCN will create field scale trials of wet farming to test innovative new crops for food, healthcare and industry, and to lock in carbon. A large part of the project will be working with local farmers, food producers and landowners to create and test this new way of farming and to share lessons learned along the way.

Water Works is a two-year project aiming to look at ways to develop a more sustainable future for fenland resources – its soil, water and people. Through the project we are trialing new farming methods designed to protect our precious peat soils and water resources, by using new science and technology to develop and monitor these techniques and by applying for UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status to support and unite people to create a thriving fenland economy and countryside.

The project is managed by a partnership between the Wildlife Trust Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire; Cambridgeshire ACRE, The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and the University of East London and is funded by a grant awarded in 2019 by the People's Postcode Lottery Dream Fund: a grant-giving charity funded entirely by players of People's Postcode Lottery.

IDB BAP Partnership meeting

On December 4th, 56 people attended the annual IDB biodiversity partnership meeting held at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel in March. We heard about a range of fascinating topics including the practical elements and benefits to conservation of sustainable, multi-cropping initiatives like Agroforestry. There was an update on the East Anglian Fens Lowland Peat Pilot work headed by Natural England, seeking to better understand the extent and condition of peat reserves across the region whilst proposing options for carbon-friendly future use. Linked to this was an in-depth look at how the iconic Black-tailed Godwit is faring as a breeding bird. This species depends on a range of management practices with water levels in particular a key challenge for their ongoing success. Finally, there was an illuminating and energetic talk on the vast world of insects that can be found throughout the Middle Level. In his talk, Peter Kirby touched on some drain management practices already in place and highlighted some insect-friendly niches easily overlooked. One thing was certain – insects aren't dull! Thanks to our speakers and all who attended.



Dates for your diaries

The following events are currently planned for 2020 – all are free to board members, families and friends but numbers are limited so booking is essential.

Date	Event	Venue/Time	Details
Friday 20 th March 2020	Introduction to Mink: ecology and control	Head Office, March (followed by field trip to local drain)	10am – 12.30pm. A presentation on mink followed by a visit to see control measures in place and look for field signs
Friday 24 th April 2020	Riparian Mammals: ecology and surveying	Head Office, March (followed by field trip to local drain)	10am – 1pm A talk on Otters, Water Voles and more. A visit after to look for field signs in local drains.
Saturday 12 th September 2020	'Moth morning'	Head Office, March	9.30am – 11am Learn about the colourful world of moths using a moth trap and field guide. Breakfast provided.

Wildlife Monitoring Volunteers

As ever, with such a large area to cover, volunteers are gratefully sought to assist with wildlife monitoring in the Middle Level.

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 and invasive ditch plants. With luck, there will be opportunities to see some amazing wildlife at close quarters such as eels, barn owls, bats and more. 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. If you are interested in volunteering please get in touch using the details below.

Thank you.

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