

Press Release



MIDDLE LEVEL
COMMISSIONERS

For transmission on or after 1st December 2015

Biodiversity boom on Fenland waterways

Five years of working towards biodiversity targets have produced real gains for wildlife in the districts of 36 Drainage Boards in the Middle Level Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership. The Partnership's annual meeting on 2nd December 2015 will include a review of targets achieved.

One much-loved species that has benefitted from Drainage Board Biodiversity Actions is the kingfisher. To provide nest sites for these jewels of our waterways **150 holes** have been drilled during the last five years through steel, brick and concrete structures at **80 Internal Drainage Board (IDB) sites**. When a 50 to 70mm diameter hole is drilled through steel piles or concrete headwalls that have soil behind them an opportunity is created for kingfishers to establish very safe nesting tunnels and chambers. Natural nest sites in riverside soil cliffs are often quickly eroded and only last a few years but sites like these behind steel piles will remain available for more than 20 years. 2015 has been a boom season for kingfishers in the Middle Level with many more sightings than usual reported from drains and rivers throughout the area.



Image 6095



Image 7067



Image 6602



Image 9296

Kingfishers nesting at drainage board sites drilled in concrete at March Third IDB (top left), in steel piles at Sawtry IDB (top right) and in brick at Needham & Ladus IDB (bottom right). Bottom left, a kingfisher with a fish at a Whittlesey IDB site. Photo credits: Cliff Carson

Other species that have benefitted in the five year biodiversity plans of the **36 IDBs** have been **bats, barn owls, water voles, otters and black poplars**.

82 large panel bat boxes have been attached to pumping stations and **26 bat bricks** have been installed in culvert tunnels.



A bat box installed on a Sawtry IDB pumping station, (image 7925).



Bat bricks fitted in a Churchfield & Plawfield IDB culvert, (image WP_20150217_002).

During the first five-year IDB Biodiversity Action Plan period **91 barn owl boxes** have been erected in the 36 Drainage Board Districts, consolidating the Middle Level of the Fens as a stronghold for the species.



Above left, a barn owl leaving a nest box in Upwell IDB district, (image P1000915). Above right, a barn owl chick from a nest box in Waldersey IDB district, (image 4748). Photo credits: Cliff Carson

The 70,000 hectare Middle Level catchment is also a national stronghold for water voles. **1,770 meters of coir rolls** pre-planted with native marginal water plants have been installed at **23 sites** to create 'instant habitat' for water voles, provide pollen for insects and to stabilise bank margins.



Above, coir rolls being installed on the Old River Nene near Ramsey IDB, (image MG_6211).



Above, established coir rolls on the Sixteen Foot Drain near Bedlam Bridge, March East IDB (image 019).



Water voles on local drains. Above left Hundred of Wisbech Internal Drainage Board, (image 7172). Above right Ransomoor District Drainage Commissioners, (image 021).

Otters have benefitted from the construction of **79 otter holts** (dens) in the banks of Middle Level waterways and spraints (signs of their presence) have been recorded at over 60 bridges throughout the 120 miles of drains and rivers in the catchment.



Otters have been returning to Fenland waterways in recent years although sightings in daylight remain rare, (image 0130).



A fresh otter spraint at a Manea & Welney District Drainage Commissioners pumping station, (image P1010021).

The black poplar is the UK's rarest timber tree and traditionally grows in damp locations beside water. **140 black poplars** have been planted from cuttings taken from local trees and have been established at new sites throughout the Middle Level.



A black poplar cutting thriving beside the Black Ham in Holmewood IDB district, (image 0779).



Black poplar cuttings planted beside New Popham's Eau in Euximoor IDB district. (image 6963).

All photo credits: Cliff Carson

Notes for Editors

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The Middle Level Commissioners

The Middle Level is the central and largest section of the Great Level of the Fens, reclaimed by drainage during the mid-17th Century. Its river system consists of over 120 miles (190 kilometres) of watercourses most of which are also navigations and has a catchment of just over 170,000 acres (70,000 hectares).

The Commissioners, together with local drainage boards, operate a complex flood protection and water level management system to balance the various water uses and requirements and to alleviate the risk of flooding of land and properties.

The efficient operation of the system is vital to the safety and prosperity of over 100,000 people who live and work in the area. But for the operations of the Commissioners and boards, the majority of the fen land would be under water for much of the year, accesses from higher ground would be cut-off and many of the present land uses, which are taken for granted, would be impossible.

The Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Action Plan Partnership is a grouping of 35 Internal Drainage Boards, District Drainage Commissioners and the Middle Level Commissioners. They are - Benwick IDB, Bluntisham IDB, Churchfield & Plawfield IDB, Conington & Holme IDB, Curf & Wimblington Combined IDB, Euximoor IDB, Feldale IDB, Holmewood & District IDB, Hundred Foot Washes IDB, Hundred of Wisbech IDB, Manea & Welney DDC, March & Whittlesey IDB, March East IDB, March Fifth DDC, March Sixth DDC, March Third DDC, Needham & Ladus IDB,

Nightlayers IDB, Nordelph IDB, Ramsey (2nd & 5th) IDB, Ramsey First (Hollow) IDB, Ramsey Fourth (Middlemoor) IDB, Ramsey Upwood & Great Raveley IDB, Ransonmoor DDC, Sawtry IDB, Sutton & Mepal IDB, Swavesey IDB, Upwell IDB, Waldersey IDB, Warboys, Somersham & Pidley IDB, White Fen DDC, Whittlesey IDB, Woodwalton DDC. Recently Haddenham Level Drainage Commissioners and Over & Willingham IDB joined the Partnership.

The ML IDB BAP Partnership has an **annual meeting** on the first Wednesday of December. Speakers give presentations on a range of natural history and historical topics. This year's meeting is being held on the morning of **Wednesday 2nd December 2015** at the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, March. Presentations will be given on the History of Whittlesey Mere, the Great Fen Project, the ML BAP Partnership Targets Achieved and the Must Farm Bronze Age Archaeological Discoveries. A full attendance of sixty delegates is booked. The meeting agenda is attached below.