

Rare water plant found on the Twenty Foot River

A routine survey of vegetation on the Twenty Foot River at March Sewage Treatment Works during 2009 by Environment Agency staff turned up a submerged water plant that is a national rarity. Grass-wrack pondweed, *Potamogeton compressus*, may look unassuming but is sufficiently rare to have its own Biodiversity Action Plan.



Photo: Andrew N Gagg

Grass-wrack pondweed, *Potamogeton compressus*, (inset) and the Twenty Foot River where it was discovered.

It is a difficult plant to survey as it resembles two other pondweeds and it also has a habit of popping up at one site for a few years then disappearing. The nearest site to where it has been recorded is on the River Nene at Peterborough, upstream of Stanground Locks. As that is where water flows into the Middle Level system from the Nene, that seems the likely source. Like some other submerged water plants it has a clever means of spreading via turions, specialised overwintering buds that sink during winter then rise again to be carried to new sites when the temperature rises. It could be that MLC river maintenance operations assist in its spread.

The fact that it is growing at the outfall of March Sewage Treatment works is a good sign as it favours clear water. Nathan Hall, Monitoring Officer for the Environment Agency, said: "This is quite a find. Grass-wrack pondweed is an indicator of a healthy water environment. Its presence on the Twenty Foot River suggests that work done by ourselves at the Environment Agency, the Middle Level Commissioners and Anglian Water is resulting in cleaner, healthier water."

MLC will aim to maintain it at this site and encourage it to extend its range. As it has found this site to its liking, it may already be present at other sites in the system where river conditions and management are favourable.

IDB BAPs

1st April 2010 is the deadline for all IDBs to have a Biodiversity Action Plan, (BAP), in place. Drafts for each board will shortly be going out to the respective Chairmen and Vice Chairmen for review and comment. The draft BAPs have been prepared in conjunction with The Cambridgeshire Wildlife Trust, and propose a range of measures that will enhance biodiversity aspects of the Districts without affecting the usual management activities. The adoption of the BAP is the start of a process spread over the next five years whereby Boards will develop a management plan in conjunction with the Environmental Officer that looks at the specific features of the district, records the positive

actions already taking place and agrees enhancement measures that are appropriate to the system and its management. There will be targets proposed such as providing barn owl boxes, bat boxes and potential nesting holes for kingfishers. These measures are relatively easy gains to achieve and provide visual evidence of IDBs' contribution to conservation.

It is an interesting period for combining gains for wildlife with waterway management. Small but significant practises set out in the MLC Operations Manual that have already been established on main channels, such as a varied bank cutting regime and leaving a fringe of emergent vegetation at the water margins, have put the MLC in the forefront of combining habitat enhancement with bank and river management. Different but equally valuable actions as part of the IDB BAPs promise to do the same for the Internal Drainage Boards of the Middle Level. Ensuring that the biodiversity benefits compliment rather than conflict with essential water management is the goal to be aimed for over the next five years.

The Middle Level Water Vole Support Project

The coir roll revetment continued to provide an attractive display throughout the summer at the three trial sites with purple loosestrife providing feeding for butterflies. It was good to see that in several places vegetation had started to establish naturally in front of the coir roll revetment, consolidating the protection offered to both water voles and the bank margins. A further three sites will have pre-planted coir roll revetment installed in January and February.



Over 200 water vole monitoring boards were placed at half-mile intervals along most of the 120 miles of Middle Level waterways during the summer as an aid to surveying their distribution throughout the system.

The best period to control mink so that their numbers are reduced when water voles

emerge from their burrows in the spring is January to April so there are two more Mink Control Scheme meetings planned for January in the Ramsey and Upwell areas. At these there will be opportunities for those with an interest in limiting the damage caused by mink to borrow traps or rafts and pick up hints and tips on humane but effective control methods. Dates will be circulated to IDBs when they are finalised, or further information can be obtained by getting in touch with me, see the last page for contact details.

The Middle Level Otter Recovery Project

Indications that otters are returning to the waterways of the Middle Level continue to come in. Two of the holts constructed on the Forty Foot River are being used by otters. One of them is a mini-holt, designed for otters to use as a temporary lying-up site and the other is a full size one, big enough to accommodate a female with young. The survey of 68 Middle Level bridges during November 2009 revealed spraints at 39 of them, our highest results so far and a big increase on the 19 positive sites recorded at 64 bridges at the same time a last year.



An otter has left its spraints, calling cards with a distinct but not unpleasant smell, on the old outfall wall of Ramsey Hollow Pumping Station on the side of the Forty Foot River.

Stag at Bay

During each winter one of the regular jobs for MLC workers Morgan Lakey and Julian Carlile is pollarding and coppicing bankside willows that need to be trimmed to prevent them becoming top-heavy or encroaching too far into navigable channels. Coppicing ensures willows have a longer life than they would if left as a standard tree. They often come across trees that have tunnels bored through their heartwood and occasionally find the larvae responsible. The holes are usually due to the activity of the larvae of the lesser stag beetle which can spend up to three years chewing its way through the middle of a willow.



A willow stump at the side of the Well Creek near Nordelph with the typical signs of a wood boring insect and (inset) a lesser stag beetle larvae.

Because it eats the heartwood and not the bark the tree continues to thrive, (see the willow sprouts in the picture above). Coppicing ensures the tree remains as a safe structure. Logs that may have beetle larvae in them are usually left nearby to allow the insects to complete their life cycle. The only problem is ensuring members of the public leave them too and do not take them to keep the home fires burning!

Badger disturbance clarification from Natural England

In June 2009 Natural England issued helpful guidance on the interpretation of 'Disturbance' in relation to badgers occupying a sett. The note states that they believe badgers are relatively tolerant of moderate levels of activity around their setts and that low or moderate levels of disturbance at or near badger setts do not necessarily disturb badgers occupying those setts. Examples of activities at or near setts that would not normally require a licence now includes 'Clearing out of ditches/watercourses using machinery and/or hand tools where badger setts are present'. A licence will still be required where the activity at the sett involves obstructing access to a sett entrance, so where banks need to be re-profiled where badgers have a sett in the side of a drain, Jonathan Fenn or myself will still be required to come out and temporarily block the holes with straw filled bags and remove them after the work has been completed. This is covered by the blanket licence we hold for all the Boards in the Middle Level area. The full Natural England guide can be viewed on the internet at www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/regulation/wildlife

Chinese Mitten Crabs Advance

Graham Nunn, District Officer for Upwell Internal Drainage Board sent me this picture of a mitten crab that his son Carl fished out from the weedscreen at Nordelph Pumping Station alongside the Old Bedford River south of Salters



Photo: Carl Nunn

Lode. They have also seen them at Nordelph Pumping Station on Old Popham's Eau. Chinese mitten crabs, (the name comes from the furry appearance of their claws), are an alien species thought to have been introduced to the UK via the ballast water of ships. They are well established in the Old Bedford River, the Tidal River Ouse and have also been seen at Marmont Priory Locks. Elsewhere their burrowing activity has caused damage to banks but attempts to control their numbers have proved ineffective. Although the crabs spend most of their life in freshwater they return to the sea to breed. Anglers are usually the first to be aware of their presence when their baits are chewed off. Any reports from new locations in the Middle Level system will be of interest.

Wet Grassland Pilot Project Success

In 2001 a new wet grassland site was created by the RSPB at Purls Bridge alongside Manea and Welney District Drainage Commissioners drains. In fact the drain to their Purls Bridge Pumping Station ran through the middle of the project area so the high water table required within the site was isolated from DDC drains by a vertical

waterproof membrane two meter deep. The site, known as 'The Pilot Project', was designed to trial the creation of damp grassland for breeding waders on former arable land and has been particularly successful in providing vital nesting sites for birds washed out by untimely spring flooding on the Hundred Foot, (Ouse) Washes.

Even in years when the adjacent washes do not flood, such as 2009, the site has attracted significant numbers of breeding birds. This year there were 32 pairs of lapwing, 26 snipe territories and 19 pairs of breeding redshanks, giving an average of one pair of waders per hectare on the 76 hectare site, a benchmark that indicates high quality habitat. Getting snipe in particular to breed on a new site is a rare event as they are very loyal to their traditional nesting areas, even when the original habitat is under flood water, but the creation of the damp grassland close to their favoured sites on the washes has been a key factor in this case.

A Higher Level Stewardship, (HLS), agreement was an important element in enabling the creation of the habitat. The establishment of similar areas close to the Hundred Foot Washes will be vital for breeding birds affected by flooding in future years.

The MLC is supportive of measures that will mitigate the effects of untimely floods on the Hundred Foot Washes and the creation of appropriate alternative habitat on adjacent land within neighbouring drainage districts.

If any landowners close to the washes in Upwell IDB, Manea and Welney DDC or Sutton and Mepal IDB are interested in looking at the Pilot Project or discussing the benefits of HLS agreements, contact Jon Reeves or Niki Williams at RSPB Ouse Washes, telephone 01354 680212, or give me a call on 01354 602902.



Photo: Mike Page



Above
The Pilot Project at Purls Bridge, Manea.

Left
Snipe, now breeding in good numbers at the new damp grassland site.

Photos: Cliff Carson, except where indicated

Contact

I am always keen to hear of interesting sightings or reports of wildlife in the Middle Level. If you have any snippets of information, or items that might be of interest for future newsletters please contact me.

Telephone: Landline 01354 602902 Mobile 07765 597775
 Email: cliffcarson@fen-ditches.co.uk
 Letter: Cliff Carson, Environmental Officer, MLC Office, 6 Deerfield Road, March. PE15 9AH