

## Conservation Officer's Report – April to October 2018

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### Introduction

Cliff Carson retired in Summer 2018 and was succeeded in July by Peter Beckenham who compiled this report. All queries regarding environmental matters discussed here or otherwise are welcomed – please see contact details at the end of 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 at St Germans

Elver and eel passage continued regularly throughout the spring and summer period, with the first check of the season made on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2018. Monitoring and data suggests 2018 is not likely to be a bumper year (as 2014) at St Germans, with eel totals between April – August largely consistent with 2017. Anecdotally by way of context, the EA have reported an exceptional eel passage from their pass at Brownhill Stauch (Bluntisham) this summer.

In August 2018 the main eel pump tripped out 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.

### Kingfishers

There is little occupation data to report for this period so far, however birds have been regularly encountered along many of the water ways in the region. As in previous years sand martins used a number of holes. All sightings of kingfishers and sand martins by waterways users in the Middle Level are gratefully received.

### Water Voles

There were a number of water vole sightings during the period, including remarkable views of several crossing and re-crossing a ditch during the day in Warboys, Somersham & Pidley IDB District. Spot checks across the region continue to turn up water vole presence in many areas.

### **Bats**

Not all boxes have been checked this summer, but at least 15 appear to be occupied to date. Notable results so far include boxes at Ramsey IDB and Needham & Ladus IDB that appear to be in use for the first time. 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**

Volunteer Barn Owl ringers/checkers Charles Gunn, Simon Dudhill and others have been a big help in continuing to monitor a number of barn owl boxes erected as part of the MLC/IDB Biodiversity Action Plans. Charles has provided this update for MLC Districts in summer 2018:



Photo 2: A licenced barn owl specialist checking a Middle Level nest box

“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.

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 in Ramsey, Upwood & Great Raveley IDB in April 2018. The process was filmed by the BBC’s ‘Springwatch’ program. Otter surveys reveal their presence throughout the region.

### **Invasive Non-Native Species/Environmental Issues**

A few reports of American mink spotted (Forty Foot, Kings Dyke, Old Bedford/Counterdrain) but this is again likely to be under reported.

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 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. Waterways users can greatly help combat the spread of invasive plants by taking relevant precautions and reporting any sightings - [www.nonnativespecies.org/](http://www.nonnativespecies.org/) is a great resource to check.

### **Meetings, Training, Talks and Publicity**

The annual Middle Level IDBs BAP Partnership meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> December 2018 at the traditional venue, the Oliver Cromwell Hotel, in March.

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. The Environment Agency is starting work on developing the next set of River Basin Management Plans and a response is being submitted.

Lastly, a group of French ecologists from the Dunkerque region became aware of the work carried out for biodiversity in the Middle Level via the MLC web site and have arranged a number of visits to the area – guided by Cliff Carson. Given the similar challenges facing the two regions they hope to

view some of the projects featured in the Middle Level IDB Biodiversity Manual in order to promote similar practices in France.



Above left: a well-used water vole raft

Above right: Cliff Carson in his natural habitat

Left: a distant Osprey (honest!) which dropped in during monitoring in Holmewood & District IDB in July

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