



IN THE THICK OF IT: "Snake hunter" Christian Whiting looks for signs of movement in the

grass fringe and reedbed at the floodbank at Fritton, near Yarmouth; above, a female adder

BROADLAND

Tracking down

“
This site near Fritton Woods is one of regional importance for adders, and other protected species we have come across are common lizards, grass snakes and slow worms. One section of the bank is home to a very rare mollusc.”

Helen Markwell

A £120m flood alleviation project being carried out across Broadland conjures up images of heavy machinery and major earthworks.

But long before the invasion of the diggers come Helen Markwell and her team of fellow environmental scientists – equipped with nothing more sophisticated than strong boots and gloves and a primitive-looking snake-catching stick (AKA the handle of a B&Q paint roller).

The only concession to the scientific age in their painstaking survey work is the GPS system that enables them to accurately pinpoint the location of any wildlife discoveries.

In bright spring sunshine yesterday morning, the team were walking the floodbank dividing the River

By **STEPHEN PULLINGER**

Waveney from Fritton Woods, near Yarmouth, heads characteristically bowed looking for signs of movement in the grass fringe and reedbed.

Broadland Environmental Services – the consortium responsible for the 20-year programme – will not begin flood defence work on this stretch for about three years, but Ms Markwell explained that ahead of a planning application to be submitted later in the year a comprehensive wildlife survey had to be carried out.

They were now into their fourth week of surveying 15-20km of floodbanks in an exercise costing about £30,000.

She said: “This site near Fritton Woods is one of regional importance



ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENTISTS: Christian Whiting hunting for snakes at Fritton with Adele Dodgson, left, and Jane Harris.

elusive adders

Picture: ANDY DARNE

for adders, and other protected species we have come across are common lizards, grass snakes and slow worms. One section of the bank is home to a very rare mollusc.”

She said adders hibernated in cracks on the banks, a dry, frost-free environment, but this was the time of the year they began to move off, breed and forage for food.

Adders could live for more than 30 years, but they tended to return to the same place each winter to hibernate.

Ms Markwell said their survey data was used in designing the bank-strengthening work. An extreme example of this was that at one previous location it had been decided to leave the bank untouched because of the importance of the wildlife habitat coupled with the low risk of over-topping.

“If adapting the design to mitigate the impact is not possible, we have to physically catch the animals on the bank and put them somewhere else,” she said.

She said at the start of their survey it had been much easier to find snakes, but as the weather had warmed up they had become faster-moving and far harder to spot, let alone catch.

Nevertheless, in the space of a 15-minute walk, the scientists had fleeting glimpses of two grass snakes and a number of common lizards.

Then finally, success – team member Christian Whiting emerged from the edge of the reed bed clutching an angry-looking female adder. “They are harder to find than the males and tend to be more aggressive,” he said.

The snake was weighed, indicating it to be a mature adult,



WILDLIFE SURVEY: Christian Whiting searches carefully for an elusive adder.

before it was freed. Ms Markwell said because of the retiring nature, they multiplied by the number of adders they found during a day to estimate the total resident in the area.