



FACT SHEET – Crayfish



Lurking below the surface of the River Great Ouse as it runs through the Park is a deadly enemy, the American crayfish. Not even the most ardent conservationists is prepared to speak out on behalf of this small crustacean that is related to the lobster.

It first appeared in UK waters in the 1970's, having escaped from crayfish farms established to supply the catering industry. Since then it has infested freshwater lakes and rivers the length and breadth of the UK. In forty years or so, it has killed off 75% of our native crayfish and currently threatens them with extinction.

The American Signal Crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus*, to give it its correct name) is about 25 cms long with its claws extended. The undersides of the claws are bright red, making it easy to distinguish from the native species. It also accounts for the inclusion of 'signal' in its name! It lives on the beds of lakes and rivers and is present the section of the River Great Ouse within the Park.

As a scavenger it clears up detritus and the remains of dead creatures. If it stopped there it might not be such an enemy to the environment. Unfortunately, it carries a deadly fungal disease that attacks our native crayfish and for which there is no cure as yet. It also accelerates the erosion of lake and river banks by constructing burrows that can be up to a meter long.

It can live up to 12 years and the females lay up to 275 eggs each year. As a result, ecologists now say that it has reached plague proportions. Research is in hand to find methods of controlling this pest. Until they come up with something more effective, the only practical solution is to trap them and even that has only limited success.

Here in the Park we are fortunate that this pest has not found its way into our lakes. However it is found along the river where fishermen are instructed to destroy them as is the Water Bailiff who is licensed to trap them on a regular basis.