

Newsletter for the Friends of Towerhouse Wood and of Moored Spout

September 2013

Have you seen Himalayan Balsam?

This alien plant, which has been relentlessly advancing across the UK, is now spreading across North Somerset. In many parts of our country, large areas of riverbanks are covered in its deceptively pretty pink flowers. This plant causes erosion of riverbanks since it suppresses other plants and dies back in the winter, leaving the river banks exposed to erosion. No insect will eat it – and there is no satisfactory control other than by hand pulling, which can be time consuming and expensive. Seed is flung up to 7 metres from the plant by a highly efficient mechanism for dispersal, and each plant produces up to 50 seeds. It is essential that the plant is removed before the seed is set. When it has set seed, it is too late! It spreads quickly, especially beside streams where the seeds can be transported by the flowing water. Himalayan Balsam is an annual, and it should be possible to control the spread by preventing seed production



Himalayan Balsam flowers

and then to continue any treatment for

at least two years or until no more seed germinates. On rivers it colonizes the banks very easily, and the whole catchment would need to be treated for there to be any hope of success. The weed can be removed manually by pulling, when the roots are removed.

On the River Frome near Bath it would now be extremely expensive to eliminate. In Devon, where there are extensive stands, the Marines have been conscripted to remove it. Recently in Somerset nearly two tons were removed commercially from one site. It is particularly prevalent around Tickenham, but it is

also reported from Long Ashton, close to Ashton Court, and we have recently found this plant growing in the banks of the Land Yeo near to the nature reserve at Moored Spout.

Since April 2010 Himalayan Balsam has been subject to legislation in the UK and it is a criminal offence to encourage or cause the growth of this plant - this can include moving soils that contain the seeds of this plant. Soils containing Himalayan Balsam seeds are classified as controlled waste by Part II of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA 1990) and must be managed in compliance with the Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994 or an offence will be committed. This places it in the same category as Japanese Knotweed.

Himalayan Balsam grows well in damp woodland, and several groups of volunteers have been pulling this plant from the vicinity of Towerhouse Wood (NGR: ST 47062 71946) for over six years. If it becomes established in that Wood, it will threaten our native Bluebells. It will probably take several more years to remove it entirely from this area, but it will need



Michael and Avril Marks and Judith Tranter with some of the Himalayan Balsam they removed recently from Stonehenge Lane near Towerhouse Wood

constant vigilance to achieve this. It is clearly possible to eliminate it by perseverance, since the area where we first found it in massive amounts now contains only two or three plants. However even one plant can multiply to over a thousand plants in 2-3 years.



Stand of Himalayan Balsam
Photograph by courtesy of Judith Tranter

This plant has some endearing properties: it looks nice when in flower (which is why it was imported into this country many decades ago), and the flowers attract many bees, which in recent years have seen a drastic and worrying decline. In removing this plant we knew that we were depriving the bees of a good source of nectar, yet those bees should have been pollinating our native plants, so Himalayan Balsam is a distraction for them.

We urge all those who use the countryside to uproot it when seen, leaving it on the ground to rot. Although it is an annual, growing up to 3 metres high in one season, the seed will last over 2 years in the soil. Please tell people that it should not be grown in gardens, however attractive it might seem. A small effort now will prevent an insuperable invasion within a few years. We must try to keep it out of North Somerset

www.ceh.ac.uk/sci_programmes/documents/HimalayanBalsam.pdf or www.nonnativespecies.org

If you would like to help next season please contact Terry Smith so that we can organise groups to begin pulling in June 2014. This year (2013) we could not start pulling until 16th July by which time the seed was being dispersed.

Control

At present the best method to control Himalayan Balsam is by hand pulling, but herbicides have been used over large areas. Scientists at CABI (Centre for Agricultural Bioscience International) have been working since 2006 to identify a potential biological control agent for Himalayan Balsam. This has involved studying pathogens which are effective in the



Bee in a Himalayan Balsam flower.
Photograph by courtesy of Judith Tranter



David Clay with the new interpretation board at the main entrance to Towerhouse Wood.

plant's native range and then testing to establish that there is no impact on native plants and wildlife, including economically important crops. They are working on a fungus (a rust) which causes considerable damage to Himalayan Balsam in India and appears to be specific to that species. Testing will probably take several years and, if successful, an application for the release of the rust into the environment will be made. The rust will probably not eradicate Himalayan Balsam, so we will probably need to continue pulling this plant well into the future.

Moorend Spout

Working parties continue to meet at 10 am on Pound Lane on the first Saturday of each month.

At our recent BioBlitz we tried to identify all of the organisms that we found, with the help of plant experts Lindsay Moore and Pam Millman, and Tony Smith (invertebrates). In earlier surveys we had previously found the rare grass *Catabrosa aquatica* (Water Whorl Grass), but this now appears to be extinct on our field. However Lindsay found *Eleocharis uniglumis* (Slender Spike Rush) although she says that this record needs validation. We have now identified over 130 species of higher plants on our site, but we are still looking for the orchids which grew there about ten years ago.



Trustees and volunteers 9th July with new pond in the background



Pond dug 26th June. The base of the pond is very dark due to the peat.

Pond liner

Paths

Non-slip

As before, please tell me if you no longer wish to receive the Newsletter.

Any offer to compile the Newsletter in the future would also be gratefully received.

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www.newt.btck.co.uk

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/thingstodo/activities?find-type=location&search-for=Nailsea>

www.nailseanature.org.uk

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_Reserves_in_Nailsea