Further News

of the Upper Thames Protection Society

October 2018

Oak & Furrows Wildlife Rescue Centre

The Oak and Furrows Wildlife Rescue Centre based at Blakehill Nature Reserve Leigh, near Cricklade is a registered charity that operates a 24-hour rescue service, 7 days a week, 365 days of the year. The centre relies on donations to survive and does not receive any government funding.

Annually the centre takes in over 3,000 wildlife casualties and receives between 6,000 to 7,000 telephone calls for help and advice. All this is achieved by a dedicated team of people comprising staff, volunteers, friends and supporters, without whom it would not be possible.

Our aim is to provide care for wild animals in need so that they can be returned to their natural habitat fit and healthy for a second chance. Among current patients are moorhens, ducklings, a swan, numerous garden birds, a beautiful tawny owl, a red kite, a baby squirrel and of course the adorable hedgehogs. The most unusual arrival just recently was a lizard, found in a bunch of bananas. (He has now been found a home with some other lizards as he couldn't be returned to his natural habitat!)

Due to the nature of our work and the sensitivity and welfare of the patients in our care, we are not open to the public (other than to deliver wildlife casualties or donations to support our work); visitors are only admitted by prior appointment.

More information on the centre and how you can get involved or donate as well as advice in dealing with animals you may find that look like they need help is available on our web site. www.oandf.co.uk

Carol Rouse, UTPS Committee Member
and O&F Volunteer

Himalayan Balsam – An Invasive Species

What is it and where has it come from?

Himalayan Balsam *Impatiens glandulifera*, is a tall annual herb, reaching approximately 2m in height, with succulent hollow stems, deep purplish-pink - occasionally white -flowers and finely serrated leaves.

Established across most lowland areas of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, it typically inhabits wet moist areas, such as river banks, but can also be found in wasteland and gardens. It is classified as a non-native invasive species and is one of the plants listed under Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for England and Wales. This makes it an offence to knowingly plant or otherwise cause Himalayan Balsam to grow in the wild.

It is native to West and Central Himalayas and was introduced into this country in 1839 by Dr Royle who sent seeds to Kew Gardens from Kashmir. Within 9 years, it is recorded as having escaped from garden settings and by 1855 there is the first record of it having established itself in the wild. This exponential growth and spread is typical for most non-native invasive species and is why early intervention is critical.

On average, within this country, we can expect there to be a density pattern of about 20 mature plants per square meter. Each plant can produce between 700 – 800 seeds giving a potential seed bank of about 15,000 seeds per square meter. Combined with a renowned 'explosive' seed delivery, giving it the alternative name of 'touch me not', which can propel seeds as far as 7m and having small enough seed to be distributed by both wind and water, it is easy to begin to understand the speed in which Himalayan Balsam can out-compete other natural vegetation and produce a monotypic environment. This exponential spread is matched by the exponential growth in costs of control, which is why early intervention is not only critical in delivering successful control, but also preventing unnecessary spiraling costs.

What effect does it have on the environment and why should it be of concern?

Himalayan Balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* tolerates low levels of light, which along with its habit of rapidly establishing tall dense stands, that dramatically reduces the amount of light available to other vegetation in the area, helps to begin to explain its ability to outcompete indigenous vegetation.

This results in significant areas where there is nothing other than Himalayan Balsam growing, or monotypic environments. This not only has a huge negative impact on the natural bio-diversity of the immediate area concerned, but there is also some thought that due to Himalayan Balsam being such an attractive nectar source for bees and other pollinating insects, it can have a further negative impact on the wider local vegetation by being a preferable source of nectar and so reducing the pollination of the natural vegetation by the bees.

Large dense stands of Himalayan Balsam soon become established along river banks, which during periods of high rainfall can impede the flow of water and significantly increase the risk of flooding. Furthermore, being an annual, the plant naturally dies back during the winter and where it has established large stands along river banks, this leaves large stretches of the river bank unprotected during the winter, due to the natural vegetation having been lost. This increases the likelihood of bank erosion and, where Himalayan Balsam has been allowed to establish (which also happens to combine with the presence Signal Crayfish *Pacifastacus leniusculus*) such as some stretches of the River Coln, then there is a very high risk of bank erosion. This is due to the tunnelling habit of the Crayfish, which provided there is an abundant natural vegetation during the winter does not, on its own, necessarily present too high a risk. However, combined with the river banks being denuded of winter vegetation and due to the presence of Himalayan Balsam, then there is the potential for a 'perfect storm' and very significant bank erosion.

Control options

The key to controlling Himalayan Balsam *Impatiens glandulifera*, like most control options with any seed producing plants, is to break the life cycle and reduce the seed bank. This is achieved by intervening before the plants flower and set seed. So any control option should be undertaken before July, when the main flowering season usually begins. The seed is thought to be viable for up to two years and so a two to three year programme should be planned for and ideally co-ordination with other landowners further upstream to break the pathway of infection.

The various options include hand pulling, which due to the shallow nature of the roots is an easy task and, where large numbers of volunteers are available, this has proven to be very successful. Should this not prove to be realistic, then mechanical destruction of the vegetation using flails or strimmers can be carried out. However, this will require more than one visit each season, as it is often noted that there can be quite significant reappearance of the Himalayan Balsam from regeneration of the cut stems and germination from the previous seasons' seed bank.

Chemical control options are available. However, this would require the advice of appropriately qualified professionals and appropriate approvals from the Environment Agency.

Finally, it is known for sheep to graze on Himalayan Balsam *Impatiens glandulifera*, but this tends to lead to a sporadic grazing pattern. However, it could be considered as an option to be used in combination with hand pulling or mechanical destruction of the vegetation.

Robert Mitchell, Director of Conservation Land Services Ltd, specialists in invasive weed control

robert@conservationlandservices.co.uk
www.conservationlandservices.co.uk

Upper Thames Protection Society - Registered Charity 299418

Please send contributions, letters, comments to Editor: helengoody@talk21.com