

HIMALAYAN BALSAM INVADES THE AVON VALLEY!

Have you seen this weed?

HELP NEEDED!

You probably think of it as a pretty, sweet-smelling, flowering plant decorating many of the waterways and damp areas of the Avon valley but in reality Himalayan Balsam is an invasive weed, clogging our rivers and reducing the number and variety of organisms found by competing for space and nutrients. The biodiversity of plant and animal life and free flow of water in the creeks and tributaries in the Avon valley are at risk.

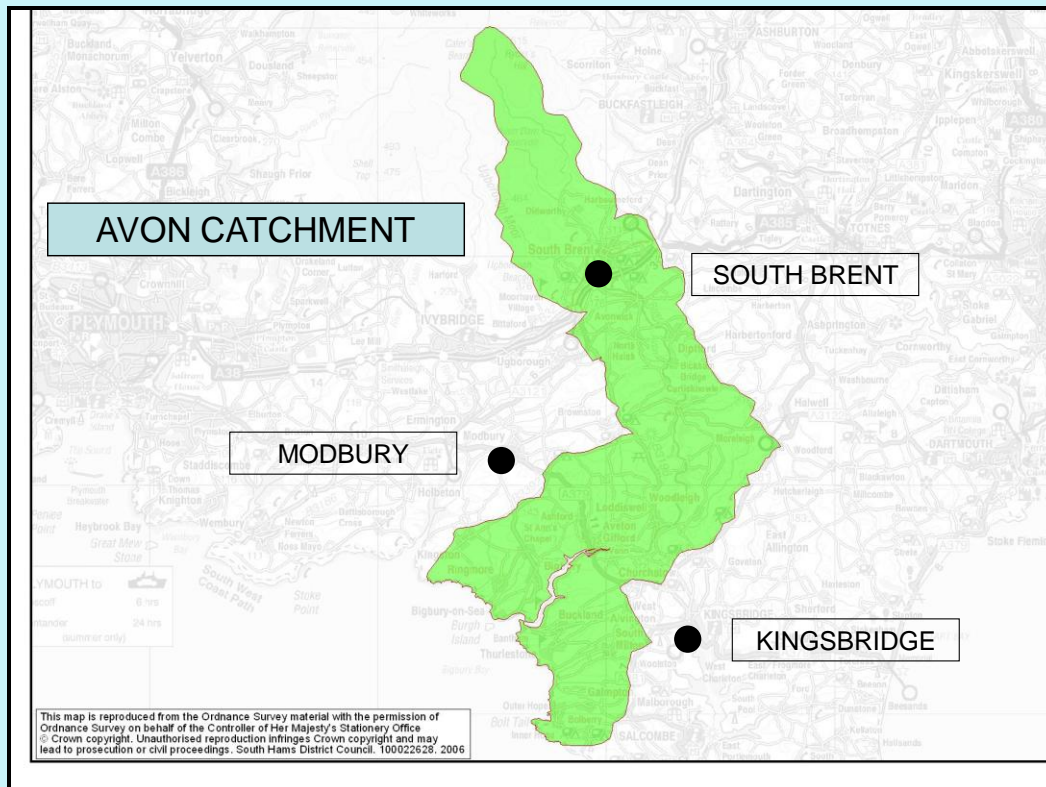


Like so many biological introductions from abroad, the move to bring a foreign species into Britain as a garden plant has backfired spectacularly and is damaging our eco-systems. However, this nationwide problem has at last been recognised and the plant has recently been included in the revised official list of species threatening biodiversity (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981) that

will come into force on 6th April 2010. As a result of this revision, the sale or introduction of balsam into the wild is now prohibited - just like another troublesome foreign invader, Japanese Knotweed. Obviously, the consent and cooperation of landowners is paramount in weed management but the development of effective control strategies depends upon the collaboration of numerous interest groups. Effective control and limitation of spreading needs to be carried out on a catchment-wide basis. Specifically, the Aune Conservation Association (ACA) can help in the identification of infestation sites because of our strong local membership and our combined knowledge of the Avon's catchment. The ACA, in collaboration with the South Devon AONB Unit, has started to compile a list of the worst affected sites in the Avon valley and will be organising a series of balsam clearance and control days in the early summer months, prior to seed formation. It is time to control this weed and restore our river valley to its original state. For this, we need your help!

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

- If you have seen Himalayan Balsam hotspots around the Avon when out and about, please let us know. We are not advocating un-neighbourly behaviour but if we are to help landowners address the weed problem, we need to know what you saw together with where and when you saw it – the more detailed your information, the more useful it becomes. Please try to provide a full map or GPS reference or, alternatively, a precise location with reference to the proximity of local features.



- Register your interest in volunteering for working parties to restrict and control the plant. Importantly, small infestations can be controlled easily by hand-pulling as the plant is shallow rooted and grows in moist soil. The seedbank lasts for approximately 18 months, so two years control should eradicate the plant if there is no further infestation from upstream.

WHOM SHOULD YOU CONTACT?

To report infestations of balsam hotspots or to volunteer to help on an ACA working party, contact us at chairman@auneconservation.org.uk. Details about working party opportunities will be sent to anybody expressing interest and will be available on the website at www.auneconservation.org.uk

SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION*

Himalayan Balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*) was introduced into Britain as a garden plant and 'escaped' into the wild in the early 20th century. Countless miles of river banks and hundreds of acres of damp countryside are now in danger of being overgrown by balsam. The plant forms dense stands which suppress the growth of grasses and native plants leaving bare river banks liable to erosion in autumn and winter. Conversely, during the period of active growth in spring and summer, the plant root systems obstruct water flow resulting in the progressive accumulation of silt and much reduced flushing by the river. Balsam is so strong and invasive it can even overpower vast beds of native plants like stinging nettles and bramble bushes. Balsam grows to 2m in height, stopping sunlight reaching other plants which wither and die. The flowers produce a large amount of nectar over a long period of time and are attractive to many insects - particularly bumblebees; this can cause reduced local pollination of native plants.

The plant is an annual with scented, purplish-pink, slipper shaped flowers in June - August. When the large green seed pods are mature they explode when touched, scattering the seed far and wide to start new beds next year. Popping the seed heads is a popular children's game! The seeds float and are spread further by water movements.



Himalayan Balsam regrows annually from seed, so any form of control carried out after the seed pods have formed will have no long-term benefit. The plant is easy to cut, either by hand or machine - provided there is adequate access. However, it often grows amongst bushes and brambles and in inaccessible locations on river banks. Unless the plant is cut below the lowest node, it will regrow and flower later in the season. Thus, a single cut is only effective if made very close to the soil level. Regular mowing will also control this plant even if the cutting level is above the lowest node, provided the frequency is sufficient to prevent the formation of flowers and seeds. Mechanical control is likely to be effective only in those locations where good access is available to ground smooth enough for close mowing and free of shrubs or bushes.

Chemical control by operators fully-trained in the careful application of glyphosate and other agents is possible, with the permission of the Environment Agency, but needs to be carried out with great care near water because of the danger to other species.

* Much of the information contained in this leaflet was taken from either The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology's Information Leaflet 3 on Himalayan Balsam (www.nerc-wallingford.ac.uk) or the Environment Agency's fact file :- 'Protecting our native wildlife - guidance for the control of non-native invasive weeds in or near fresh water ' available at www.environment-agency.gov.uk. The leaflet was produced and distributed by the ACA with the aid of a Sustainable Development Fund award from South Devon AONB.