

Wyre Forest Study Group

BATTLE OF THE BALSAM! - UP DATE YEAR TWO

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Himalayan Balsam, (*Impatiens glandulifera*), has become one of our most invasive of alien species. It has spread up most of our "waterways", out competing many of our less competitive native plants. The sea of pink along many of our canals and rivers in summer is very attractive - but to the detriment of other species.

It is not, unfortunately confined to just the wet areas. It has managed to adapt in many places – spreading quickly from river banks to dry land, using its amazing "springs" to disperse up to 500 seeds per plant over a 5 metre radius! (Plate 1 seed head before "explosion" and plate 2 after!)



Plate 1



Plate 2

This plant has been recorded in Shrawley wood for many years, spreading up from the river Severn, Dick Brook and into the light sandy soils of the woodland. It now occurs in just about every open

area of the wood and even manages to thrive beneath the canopy of Small-Leaved Lime.

This is the second year of experimental control measures within Shrawley. In June 2002 the larger, more accessible areas of Balsam were rolled using an ATV (All Terrain Vehicle) and roller. This method effectively crushed the plant, causing it to dry out and die. Some areas were also hand pulled, using volunteers, to remove plants which could not be crushed by machine – eg close to trees or areas where the ATV could not go.

2003 would give us the first chance to see how effective this method was. Results? Well - mixed actually – nothing in this line of management is black and white after all!

In the areas where the plant grew beneath the canopy (where only Bluebells flower in the spring) the control was very successful. Not in the whole area however – in some cases just a handful of plants needed to be hand pulled this year. In most cases, however, it needed rolling and hand pulling again. In these cases, though the density of plants was much diminished, it was assumed that it was the seed bank from previous years that had germinated. The experts tell us that the seed is viable for up to 3 years so this was to be expected. The reduction of plants is exciting though and maybe one more year's hard work and it could be all but eradicated from these areas.

The more open areas were not so successful. There was more competition here from bramble, bracken and grass. Although plant density was reduced in most cases it was certainly not as effective as within the tree crop. The reason appears simple – the other species act as a "cushion" not allowing the roller to crush the plant - just push it over. From this position it is able to continue growing. (The plant is able to grow back upwards towards the light – although not straight it still flowers well) If the plant was broken at the root it produces new roots from the nodes up its stem and although it is stunted it still produces flowers later in the season. It also regrows from the root!

In one particular site, with mainly bracken cover, seedlings appeared in July and again in August, after rolling, – taking advantage of the sudden extra light. I'm sure these would have flowered and set seed if they had been allowed to grow.

It's early days yet, but so far the signs are very encouraging. The "crushing" definitely has a dramatic effect beneath the understory. (Plate 3 taken in August after rolling in June – note the plants remaining around the trees where the machine cannot get to. Without follow-up hand pulling this is a waste of time).



Plate 3

It is important to note that this method of control alone will not work. Even on level open sites the roller will not kill every plant. Hand pulling after rolling is essential to remove ALL plants before the seeds set.

Any control of this species is labour intensive. This year the rolling took 39 man-hours and the hand pulling took 135 man-hours! I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Wyre Forest Watch Group Work Party who spent two hot, sticky days pulling for the second year. (Especially “slightly mad Suzanne” who also spent a number of her days off pulling on her own and being bitten half to death!) Without this dedicated team of volunteers I would now be sinking in a sea of pink!!!

Balsam in Wyre

The length of Dowles Brook (FC ownership) was again monitored this year. The numbers of plants have definitely reduced, with very few flowering. Pulling here by hand has been effective, although I have heard of large areas of “flowering aliens” down stream so vigilance and continued pulling will have to be maintained indefinitely.

Control has also taken place in Hawkbatch. Rolling and then hand pulling was undertaken by a team from Bewdley High School around Clay Pit Cottage and along the river Severn. This will hopefully stop the plant from creeping further into the woodland in the future. Unfortunately much of the bank of the River Severn is inaccessible and is too dangerous to work on.

Some plants are still flowering in Hawkbatch carpark and although it has been pulled it is difficult to control fully as the bracken and the bramble are as tall as the Balsam. Small Balsam (*impatiens parviflora*) has also been found in the same carpark - not so invasive I understand – we shall see!

I have continued to pull the plant along Gladder Brook in Ribbesford wood. However, although it seemed to be reducing in numbers, later in the year I found a large garden upstream with a pretty pink haze!

Defeated? No way – the battle continues!