

EDGMOND WILDLIFE GROUP - HIMALAYAN BALSAM CONTROL 2023 - THE STORY SO FAR!

Himalayan Balsam is a non-native invasive plant which is becoming increasingly widely spread across the whole country. You might spot it in the wilds of Wales or along the banks of beautiful streams in The Lake District. It is a problem. It can grow up to about 2.5m tall in a season, with a seed-dispersal potential into the hundreds across several metres. It can swamp out our native vegetation and is especially problematic along the banks of water courses where it will then die back over the winter leaving bare soil that is more easily washed away. It spreads via these water courses and ditches where it flourishes.



It loves sunshine but can grow well enough in the shade to keep on flowering and spreading. Because it is non-native, it has no natural controls. Slugs quite like the young stems, but apart from that there is little that grows on it or eats it. Himalayan Balsam is an annual, so the key to control is to stop it flowering and therefore setting seed.

The presence of Himalayan Balsam along the Strine had been observed for several years, but by 2020 it had spread from the banks of the stream, across a narrow strip of Harper Adams University (HAU) land, across the old canal and beyond, threatening areas of native vegetation managed by Edgmond Hall.



The Harper Adams University strip of land next to the Strine, quite recently planted with trees, had a heavy infestation along the whole length west of the bridge.



The spread of Himalayan Balsam at Edgmond Hall was harder to deal with because the areas of infestation were spread more widely over some extremely difficult terrain. Scouring the soggy sunken depths of the old canal and wading through nettles and rushes 6ft high became normal for our hardened volunteers.



Fighting through banks of brambles 5ft high to reach one plant reflected the dedication needed to control this invader.



It all began in June 2020 when 6 volunteers undertook 2 hours of Himalayan balsam pulling. Five further visits in June culminated in the best day when 13 volunteers did 3 hours of work! Work continued through until 18 October. At the end of the season, we had clocked up 199 hours on Edmond Hall land and 34 hours on HAU land.

We did try to control the plants in the Strine by wading (thick clinging mud made this impossible) and then by lowering our lightest volunteer over the bank! In the end we did 12 hours of work on the Strine – but as the infestation was spreading from higher up the watercourse, we decided that it just wasn't practical to try to control it in the stream and on the banks. The best solution here was to reach out and top the plants as best we could to prevent the seeds from being flicked back onto the previously cleared areas.

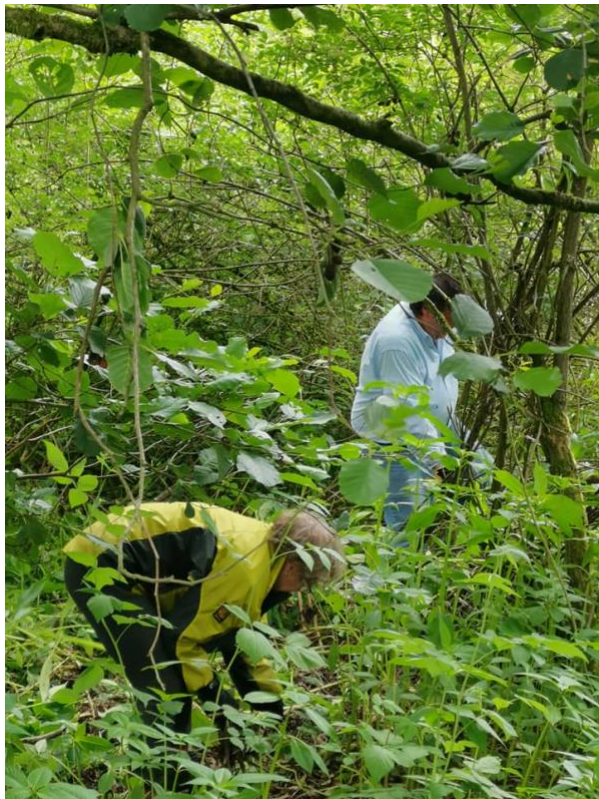


We'd love to call it 'Balsam bashing' but in general the best approach is to pull; a 'bashed' plant will just throw up more side shoots and flower a little later! Plants that are partially dislodged will often re-root via apical roots from the nodes along the stem. A 'pulled' plant has little future especially if the stem is snapped and left out to dry! Early in the year was the best time to organise work parties as the soil was softer and the plants were easier to tease out of the ground with their roots intact.

The following year (2021) we began a little earlier on 21 May and the season ran through until 24 Sept. We spent 55 hours on Edgmond Hall land and 14 hours on HAU land.

By 2022 volunteer numbers were down to single figures. The season started on 22 May and finished on 30 October. Edgmond Hall hours totalled 65, whilst time spent on HAU land was down to 9.5 hours. This was the year that we found two previously undiscovered outlying infestations – both on the far side of the meadow area at Edgmond Hall.

In 2023, initial recce visits seemed to indicate that plants were so few in number that it just wasn't worth getting work parties organised as there would be so little to do. The project leader first inspected on 30 May and continued through until 08 Oct. By now it was possible to quantify the numbers of plants discovered. A total of 59 plants were pulled from HAU land and there were less than 350 plants pulled on Edgmond Hall land. These figures are astonishing considering that plant numbers were in the thousands when this project began.



The successful control of Himalayan Balsam has been due to the attention to detail displayed by our dedicated volunteers and the mildly obsessive satisfaction gained from pulling the plants out. Plants were often piled high into rotting heaps or hung in the branches of trees like hunting trophies! Flowering plants were decapitated to prevent further development into seeds, and plants with seed pods were carefully laid to rest under other plants or on dry earth beneath trees to prevent successful seed dispersal.

We can never say that the area is free from plants – the difficulty is partly due to the incredibly difficult terrain at Edgmond Hall. Early inspection is all well and good (at least the nettles haven't got going), but then neither have the Himalayan Balsam plants!



In 2024 the Group will undertake thorough inspections of the whole area, probably in June, July and August. The plants are so much easier to spot if they are flowering!

We could not have achieved this level of success if it hadn't been for our amazing volunteers. You all know who you are, but special thanks must go to Sarah, James, Gill, David, and Keith who have all gone above and beyond!

Many thanks also to Edgmond Hall and Harper Adams University for allowing access.

Thank you to everyone!



Paula Doherty
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