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**PRESS RELEASE**

## **Aliens on YOUR river**

Aliens are invading our rivers and making life tough for the locals. Himalayan balsam and Japanese knotweed were introduced to grand estate gardens by the Victorians and giant hogweed arrived from central Asia. These plants have now escaped and are spreading along our waterways.

As in all the best science fiction stories, aliens can be overcome. **On Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> May the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust is giving people the chance to learn about these invasive species and discover more about how to overcome them. The event will be held at Rose Cottage, Harnham Water Meadows (near Salisbury) from 12-3pm. You can get directions from [www.salisburywatermeadows.org.uk](http://www.salisburywatermeadows.org.uk)**

Participants in the day will also learn about two more aggressive aliens; the signal crayfish and American mink. The crayfish, which has already invaded most of Wiltshire's rivers has pushed out our native white-clawed crayfish and spread a fungal plague throughout their population in the process. The American mink was transported to this country at the start of the last century for fur farming and is now indiscriminately eating its way through much of our native wildlife.

The event ties in with the **International Day for Biological Diversity on May 22<sup>nd</sup>**. This year's theme is focussing on invasive alien species as "one of the greatest threats to biodiversity, and to the ecological and economic well-being of society and the planet" ([www.cbd.int/ibd/2009](http://www.cbd.int/ibd/2009)).

*"These invasive alien plants are bad news for native wildlife and, in the case of giant hogweed, can cause problems for humans with blistering of the skin on contact,"* says Ruth Clarricoates, the Trust's Wessex Chalk Streams Project Officer.

She adds: *"Fortunately for the Salisbury Avon, invasive plants have not yet completely taken over – if we act now we can prevent the problem from getting out of control."*

*“Rivers in other areas of Britain are not in such a privileged position. The Lower Wye, for instance, is a sea of pink and the invasion is probably irreversible.”*

### **What can you do to help?**

Himalayan balsam grows up to two metres in height, but despite this it is easy to pull up by the roots. People attending the event will be given the opportunity to sign up as ‘balsam bashers’. They will then be part of a team going out twice a week to track down and destroy balsam the length of the Salisbury Avon and its tributaries.

Himalayan balsam produces purplish-pink flowers from June to August and according to Ruth *“it is vital that balsam is pulled up before it can set seed. It can produce up to 800 seeds which can remain viable for up to two years.”*

Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed cannot be tackled by the public – only by someone with a license. They are so tough they can only be destroyed with a herbicide injected directly into them, and this will be demonstrated on the day too.

Once any of these invasive plants have got a stranglehold on river banks, native plants stand very little chance of surviving as they are shaded and squeezed out by dense thickets.

When native plants disappear, so too do important food sources for invertebrates so that the whole food chain of the river system can break down. And an additional problem happens in winter when Himalayan balsam dies back, leaving the banks bare and vulnerable to erosion by changing water levels.

For more information contact either Ruth (Wessex Chalk Streams Project Officer) on (01380) 725670, mobile 07522 061369, or [ruthc@wiltshirewildlife.org](mailto:ruthc@wiltshirewildlife.org), or Tom Hayek, Wiltshire Invasive Plants Project Officer on (01380) 725670 or [tomh@wiltshirewildlife.org](mailto:tomh@wiltshirewildlife.org).

- **Japanese knotweed *Fallopia japonica***

It is a perennial, grows up to 3m tall with stiff bamboo-like stems, produces large masses of white flowers in summer, and colonises riverbanks and wasteland. It can spread through tiny pieces of stem or rhizome dispersed in soil, or by water movement. Its roots can tunnel up to seven metres into the earth and penetrate concrete.

- **Giant hogweed *Heracleum mantegazzianum***

It is a biennial, grows up to 5m tall and has large head of white flowers from which it produces 30-50,000 viable seeds every year, that can remain active for up to 15 years. It colonises wasteland and river banks.

- **Himalayan balsam *Impatiens glandulifera***

Annual, grows to 2m with purplish-pink flower from June-August. When seedpods mature they explode when touched, scattering seed, which are spread by water movement.

### **Notes to editors**

**For more information about the International Day on Biological Diversity visit [www.cbd.int/ibd/2009](http://www.cbd.int/ibd/2009)**

The Wiltshire Wildlife Trust is one of the UK's leading environmental charities, which recognises that the conservation of wildlife and preservation of the planet are inextricably linked, and works to promote a sustainable future for wildlife and people.

The Trust has more than 19,000 members and supporters, and more than a thousand volunteers working on a range of projects from promoting energy efficiency in the home as a step towards slowing climate change, to waste prevention programmes that reduce the rubbish going to landfill sites, to working on one of the Trust's nature reserves to conserve the Wiltshire countryside and the rich variety of plants and animals that live there.

The Trust owns or manages 2,000 acres of nature reserves that provide havens for plants and animals. It advises landowners on how to manage their land with wildlife in mind, and comments on planning applications that affect sites of wildlife interest. The Trust also actively promotes community wildlife programmes and environmental education.

For more information contact the communications team on (01380) 725670. or email Sue Litherland [suel@wiltshirewildlife.org](mailto:suel@wiltshirewildlife.org), or Melanie Vincent [melaniev@wiltshirewildlife.org](mailto:melaniev@wiltshirewildlife.org).